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# Ivan Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula*: The Turning Point of Soviet Science-Fiction Literature

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## KEY WORDS:

Soviet science-fiction, Ivan Efremov, *Andromeda Nebula*, utopian, future, the Earth, communist, the Soviet Union, late 1950s.

## KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

Sovětská science fiction, Ivan Jefremov, *Mlhovina v Andromedě*, utopie, budoucnost, Země, komunismus, Sovětský svaz, pozdní padesátá léta.

## ABSTRACT:

This paper studies the influence of the publication of the novel *Andromeda Nebula* (1957) written by Ivan Efremov on the development of Soviet science-fiction literature and particularly of its Future perception. In this novel, Efremov, for the first time, places the events of the story in the far-away future and gives a detailed description of the Future society of the Earth and especially of its inhabitants. The novel's publication brought about debates on the role and goals of science-fiction literature in the Soviet Union. The paper examines the social and cultural situation in the Soviet Union at the moment of novel's publication, describes distinctive features of Efremov's Future World drawn in the novel and attempts to explain a revolutionary effect of *Andromeda Nebula* on Soviet science-fiction.

## ABSTRAKT:

### **Mlhovina v Andromedě Ivana Jefremova: bod zlomu sovětské science fiction**

Tato práce analyzuje vliv vydání románu *Mlhovina v Andromedě* (1957) Ivana Antonoviče Jefremova na vývoj sovětské science fiction a zejména na její zobrazení budoucnosti. V představeném románu Jefremov poprvé umístil příběh do vzdálené budoucnosti a poskytl podrobný popis budoucí

společnosti Země a jejích obyvatel. Publikování románu inspirovalo diskuzi o úloze a cílech science fiction v SSSR. Studie mapuje sociální a kulturní situaci v SSSR v okamžiku zveřejnění románu, označuje charakteristické rysy Jefremovova budoucího světa a pokouší se vysvětlit revoluční vliv *Mlhoviny v Andromedě* na sovětskou science fiction.

## Soviet science-fiction literature: a journey from ten to thousand years to the future

The history of Soviet science-fiction literature is officially divided into two periods of popularity: the 1920s and the end of the 1950s – beginning of the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> The novels which were published during these two periods are different in many aspects, such as their goals, narrative styles, descriptions of characters and events. These novels also take place in different times. In other words, these novels from two different periods represent differently the future perspective. From the 1920s to the end of the 1950s Soviet science-fiction writers described the very near future following the concept of socialist realism. Stories of incredible technical inventions published during this period take place not more than hundred years later from the moment they were written. Events of science-fiction stories since the end of 1950s take place in the far-away future.

Why and how did perspectives of the future in Soviet science-fiction literature change? What did this change bring to Soviet science-fiction? And why is it important to talk about it for a better understanding of science-fiction production in the Soviet Union? In order to answer these questions, first of all we have to understand the main goals of science-fiction literature in the USSR and its relation to the political ideas and social situation of the country. These two periods of popularity of science-fiction literature refer to two important periods of USSR history: the 1920s is the very beginning of the construction of a new soviet society, and the 1950s and 1960s is the time of The Thaw that brought a new relative liberty for Soviet citizens. Culture and literature, on the one hand, contributed to successful promotion of official ideas and ideals, and on the other hand, tried to analyse the social and political situation in the country. In these conditions science-fiction had its own precise role to play.

Science-fiction – or *naučnaja fantastika* (научная фантастика, scientific fantastic) as it is called in Russian – appeared in Russia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> cen-

1) These two periods are called “golden age” of Soviet science-fiction (SUVIN 1973: 32).

ture. It was one of the main instruments of the vulgarization of science and familiarization of the Russian public with technological progress. It attracted scientists, such as one of the first Russian science-fiction writers, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. This literature gave detailed descriptions of industrial and technological inventions, but did not pay any attention to the human being. As the communist government set up in Russia, it also became an instrument of promotion for Five-year plans for the National Economy and the project of a soon-to-be ideal communist society. This type of science-fiction literature is called Near Future literature. Authors of this type of fiction were required not to place an ideal society more than ten to a hundred years in the future. Thus during the first decades of Soviet history it was considered a part of socialist realism, a style that glorified everyday communist life according to official ideology.

From the second half of 1950s science-fiction followed a general stream of literature liberalization from official dogmas. This period is called ‘The Thaw’ (in Russian *Otтеpel’*, *Оттепель*) named after the title of Ilya Ehrenburg’s novel published in April 1954. The Thaw, coming after Stalin’s winter, symbolized a hope for more freedom of expression in art and in everyday life. The second half of the 1950s and the beginning of 1960s brought a relative freedom to the Soviet society, and started a wave of changes in Soviet culture and literature. In December 1953, the magazine *Novyj Mir* (*Новый Мир*) published Vladimir Pomerantsev’s article *Ob iskrennosti v literature* (*Об искренности в литературе*, On Sincerity in Literature). Pomerantsev criticized the recent Soviet literature for being of low quality and lacking in sincerity, assuming that the writer necessarily lied while living under literary dogmas imposed by the government (POMERANTSEV 1953). This article provoked debates and strong criticism, but at the same time started a revision of literary values in the Soviet Union and gave rise to Ehrenburg’s aforementioned *The Thaw*.

A hope for changes became real two years later, in February 1956, during the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of The Communist Party when Nikita Khrushchev pronounced the Secret Rapport denouncing Stalin’s Cult of Personality. This event changed the political and social climate, starting literature’s thaw that allowed writers to address and delve into some social problems. Hence, novels about camp realities, new peasant prose, and new poetry appeared on the Soviet literary scene. One of the events at the beginning of the Thaw was the 1956 publishing of Vladimir Dudintsev’s *Ne hlebom edinyum* (*Не хлебом единым*, Not by Bread Alone) a novel that showed the inner workings of the Soviet bureaucracy system and analysed

its faults. The novel gave a new focus on literary discussion for the possibility of social and systemic criticism.

At the end of 1950s the publication of Ivan Efremov's *Tumannost' Andromedy* (*Туманность Андромеды*, *Andromeda Nebula*) also called in the official English translation *Andromeda: A Space-Age Tale*, the first novel whose story takes place in the far-away future, started a reformation of the status and conditions of science-fiction literature in Soviet Russia.<sup>2</sup> Several years later most of the critics considered this particular event the beginning of the renaissance of Soviet science-fiction literature.

## Ivan Efremov, writer and palaeontologist, and publication of *Andromeda Nebula*

*Andromeda Nebula* was first serialized in magazine *Tehnika-Molodeži* (*Техника-Молодёжи*) from January to November 1957 and it was edited in a book-format by the publishing house *Molodaja Gvardija* the following year. At the moment of its publication Efremov was a recognized palaeontologist who was awarded in 1952 the Stalin prize for the invention of a new discipline called taphonomy.<sup>3</sup>

He was also a well-known science-fiction writer who published in 1940s two volumes of short stories based on his paleontological and geological ideas and experience, as well as a historical fiction novel *Na kraju Ojkumeny* (*На краю Ойкумены*, *At the Edge of Oikoumene*) which took place in Ancient Egypt. Most of his short stories were written following the official style of science-fiction literature; events described in them took place at the time they were written and Efremov used them to promote some of his own scientific theories. The only short story that tells us about the possible visit to the Earth by a civilization from another planet is *Zvjozdnye korabli* (*Звёздные корабли*, *Stellar Ships*) published in 1948. In this short story Efremov thinks about possible marks that this visit could leave on the Earth's surface. In *Andromeda Nebula* he dreams about contact and an exchange of information with other civilizations of the Universe.

2) It is necessary to mention that *Andromeda Nebula* was not actually the very first novel that tried to look into the far-away future, but it was the first to describe the whole Universe and not only some small part of the Earth in the Future, and to do it from the position of the future humanity and not a time-traveller from the modern time (ZVANCEVA 1969).

3) "Taphonomy is the study of flora and fauna as processes of creating palaeontological documents in historical processes of changing of the Earth surface" (EFREMOV 1950: 163).

## *Andromeda Nebula* and Ivan Efremov's ideal society

The novel includes two main story lines: one analyses the relations between the members of a space-craft during a long travel across the Universe; the other describes life on the Earth. The Space line of the novel is a story of a space-craft called Tantra which is coming back to the Earth from a trip to another planet; when, due to an accident with the equipment, it has to make a stop on one of the planets of the so-called Iron Star. There the ship's crew find a long-lost space craft of an Earth expedition, a mysterious space-craft of an unusual disk form and impossible to explore neither inside nor outside, and an unknown and dangerous form of life. This precious information has to be shared with the Earth as well as with other civilizations of *The Great Circle*; this is the name of Efremov's Future World which signifies the union of several planets including the Earth. It is necessary to point out that this union is not a political or commercial one, but a union of scientific and cultural exchange; planets share knowledge and discoveries, historical and artistic dates in order to understand each other better.

It is one of these exchanges that starts the Earth story line of the novel. A film about life on a far-away planet is shown in the Global Space Agency. The future director, Mven Maas, is charmed by the image and dreams to find a way to realize a long-distance space flight in order to visit this planet. But his research, too quick to give good results, leads to an experiment which turns out to be a disaster. At the same time the ancient director of the Agency, Dar Veter, is travelling around the planet trying different professional activities. Following his adventures we discover life in the society of the Earth created by Efremov. During one of his activities he helps historian Veda Kong, another major character of *Andromeda Nebula*, in her archaeological research. The role of the character of Veda Kong, as well as the role of historian, is maybe one of the most important, not only in story of *Andromeda Nebula*, but in the whole *The Great Circles Series* written by Efremov.<sup>4</sup> Her function is to tell the history of Earth civilization from 20<sup>th</sup> century till the moment in the future when the events of the novel take place and explain how the actual society of the novel was built. Through these

4) *The Great Circle Series* includes the novel *Andromeda Nebula*, the short stories *Serdce Zmei* (*Сердце Змеи*, The Heart of the Serpent) also called *Cor Serpentis* (1958) and *Pjat' Kartin* (*Пять картин*, Five Paintings, 1965), and the novel *Čas Vyka* (*Час Быка*, The Bull's Hour, 1968). In *The Bull's Hour* historian Fai Rodis is the main character who leads the story of the novel; it is mostly through her eyes that the public discovers the world created by Efremov. Veda Kong is the only character of *Andromeda Nebula* who appears briefly in *The Bull's Hour* in memory sequence of Fai Rodis who considers Veda as her spiritual mentor.

two lines, spatial and terrestrial, presented in parallel and especially through its multiple characters and their everyday personal and professional life, Efremov creates a complex image of the society of the Earth of the Future.

In some aspects the Future Earth World described in Ivan Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula* is a realization of a utopian vision of the ideal future, popular during this period in the Soviet Union. The society of this world is just a single nation that occupies the whole planet and all of its members speak the same language. The nature of the entire planet is transformed according to communist ideas of the better world which were widespread in the 1920s. Every square meter of the ground and the ocean has its own function in order to make human life more comfortable. Residential zones are situated along the thirty parallel North and South so people of the Future can live in the best climate conditions. Thanks to this type of life space organization people do not need to wear winter clothes or to use energy to heat up their houses any more. Other parts of the Earth are changed in order to ensure better industrial and agricultural production. For example, ancient deserts are transformed into gardens; in new deserts energy stations cumulating solar energy are installed. All the industrial factories are situated in the tropics, far outside the residential zone. There is almost no human personal working in these future factories; the production process is run by machines. The few people in these factories responsible for machine technical support take turns frequently so no one stays for a long time doing hard work.

It is important to mention that this transformation of the Earth into an ideal planet for human beings would be impossible without the transformation of nature and climate. So they are changed in order to make life more comfortable and agricultural production more fruitful. With the objective of moving the limits of climate zones to the poles, and so making wider a comfortable habitable zone, and eliminating natural disasters, polar ice was partially melted and the level of the world ocean increased.

Any place on the planet is easily accessible thanks to high velocity transport. All the parts of the Earth are connected by the high speed train system called *The Spiral Road*. This Road was created in order to facilitate Earthlings voyages because traveling and discovering the World is one of the favourite ways of spending time in the Future. Despite the complete adaptation of the planet for human living there are still unknown places on the Earth, often situated faraway from zones of regular human activity. Exploration of these distant places, according to Efremov's Future humanity, helps people to understand the evolution of the Earth and its peoples. In order to do so, a lot of archaeological

expeditions are set up; other expeditions are sent to the space to search for and explore still unknown planets.

In other aspects Efremov's ideas about the future were new to the Soviet utopian tradition. It concerns those who live in this utopian world. In this novel Efremov for the first time focused on the humans of the Future and gave their detailed description.<sup>5</sup> People of the *Andromeda Nebula's* Future represent the ideal humans. All of them are handsome, strong and intelligent. Their lives are two or three times longer than ours; respectively to this life time they stay young much longer and they become old much later than we do. Their physical and psychological conditions are better. All of them are gifted in sport and art. Their capacities are not equal; Efremov suggests that even in an ideal society there will still be some more intelligent and more talented people than others. Nevertheless this is never a cause for jealousy but rather for respect and admiration. All of them show a high level of morality. It is impossible for them to lie, they do not know hate or jealousy; they are always ready to help each other and so on. According to Efremov, moral qualities like respect of others or personal responsibility towards society would be the basis of an ideal society. In his opinion an ideal society is above all a society composed by ideal members.

That is the reason why education has such an important place in this society and is well organized. Right after birth, babies are taken away from their parents and sent to a boarding school. During the first 17 years of their life, children change the boarding school four times; every school corresponds to a specific age and therefore to a specific period of education. These schools are situated in different parts of the planet. Every time a student changes school to reach the next educational stage, he or she has to move to a new place. This helps the children to succeed in studying and to acquaint with all possible life conditions and prepares them to face their future professional life. Despite the fact of leading a separate life to their parents, all children keep contact with their family and can meet the family members whenever they want. After the schooling and before the beginning of professional life every member of Efremov's ideal society has to perform the so-called Labours of Heracles, i.e. a cycle of important social activities such as working in a hospital, hunting down dangerous animals before they attack someone, converting wild zones for future scientific exploration etc.

5) This focus on characters of the novel made Efremov change its name to *Andromeda Nebula* which gives more freedom of interpretation. The original title of the novel was *The Great Circle* and it was meant as a story of a contact of different civilizations of the Universe (EFREMOV 1961: 144–145).



The main purpose of these labours is to help young people choose their future professional domain; even if it will not be a definitive one.

Work itself has an important place in everyone's life without being troublesome. For ideal people there is no professional activity that is boring or demeaning; they accept with pleasure high responsibility positions as well as hard physical work. Everyone changes profession four or five times in life, switching between intellectual and manual activities. They can change their job or take a break whenever they want to, no matter for how long. However, no one abuses this possibility. Professions mentioned in the novel are astronauts who explore the Universe, and researchers of all kinds, physicians and mathematicians, but also historians and archaeologists.

Thanks to the almost non-stop professional activity of society the process of development and the improvement of life conditions never stops. Through the speech of Veda Kong, Efremov compares this working society theory to other theories that we can find in classical utopian novels in which working time is reduced to a necessary minimum so that people are free from work for the rest of the time. Members of such a utopian society may spend their free time in amusement or 'doing nothing' (EFREMOV 2007: 99). In *Andromeda Nebula* we can find quite the opposite image of work – the hard work time is also reduced but all the free time is dedicated to sport, intellectual and artistic activities which are considered as another type of work because of their production of paintings, music, technical inventions and so on. This attitude to work is a representation of the Soviet utopian vision of the ideal society where work occupies an essential place in the life of every person.

For those who, for one or another reason, do not want to live according to the ideology of ideal society, there are in Efremov's Future places on the Earth where the life is organized differently. Those places are, on the one hand, isolated from the rest of the world and, on the other hand, are an essential part of it. Every member of the society can go to live there and to come back to the 'normal' life whenever he wants. For example, all the women who desire to raise their children by themselves can do it on the Mothers Island. There is also the Island of Oblivion where life is organized in an 'old-fashioned' mode and everyone works for his own good and not for the good of the society.

The Island of Oblivion is also a sort of exile for so-called 'criminals' who are not really criminals as we mean it nowadays. All the crimes of ideal future mentioned in the novel are tragic consequences of scientific experiments; criminals themselves are scientists who try to accelerate progress sometimes causing hu-

man victims and disasters. Since crimes are not frequent in the ideal society, a penitential system does not really exist in Efremov's Future. There is only the Judgment Committee which pronounces the verdict and defines sanctions to apply to every particular case.

A central political power is absent; society is managed by all its members. Political decisions are discussed and approved or disapproved by all the adult members of the ideal future society. When a unified decision is impossible, and to resolve some complicated issues, the population asks for help from the most experienced professionals of different trades unified in Academies and Committees specialized in one particular domain. For the most complex questions there is an artificial intelligence that can calculate and suggest the best solution, but it is always the people who have the last word to make a final decision.

The detailed description of the society of the Future and its inhabitants was a new step in the evolution of Soviet science-fiction literature.<sup>6</sup> Before *Andromeda Nebula* writers focused their stories on the explanation of technical inventions and the precise description of machines, and not humans and their life. This difference is crucial for the understanding of the revolutionary role of Efremov's novel because it explains why the ideal society of *Andromeda Nebula* is situated in the far-away future. To resume, the freedom to travel, to choose a profession, a place to live and a lifestyle, to give one's own opinion about social and political development of an entire society are the main characteristics of the life in the ideal world of Efremov's Future. In order to deserve it, every inhabitant of this world has a moral duty to work in a team within the society in order to guarantee a constant evolution of everything and everyone. As it has been already said, according to Efremov it is impossible to create a perfect society without the personal perfection of each of its members. And his main argument of the impossibility of a quick construction of perfect society is the impossibility for people to change their moral qualities that fast. Thus, in order to become better, perfect human beings who can live in and develop an ideal society, humanity would have to go through an important trial that takes thousands of years.

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6) Darko Suvin considers *Andromeda Nebula* as a first utopian experiment in the world literature that describes the psychological reciprocal influence between a new society and its inhabitants (SUVIN 1973: 35 and SUVIN 1977: 182).

## Effect of *Andromeda Nebula*, new age of Soviet science-fiction

Ivan Efremov was the first Soviet science-fiction writer to project a realization of an ideal society not ten or a hundred years in the future but thousands of years in the future. By doing this he questioned the possibility of building a perfect society in a few decades. The publication of *Andromeda Nebula* provoked many different criticisms and debates about the role of science-fiction literature. Some critics declared that it was not possible to dream as Efremov did and that science-fiction authors had to keep the near future position because only this kind of literature really helped to build an ideal society that is actually almost finished. Other critics applauded Efremov's courage and affirmed that one of the first duties of a writer, and of a science-fiction writer specifically, was to question social and moral change necessary for the construction of a better world.

The first and maybe the best-known example of the debates around *Andromeda Nebula* is the exchange between *Promyšlennno-ekonomičeskaja gazeta* (Промышленно-экономическая газета) and *Literaturnaja gazeta* (Литературная газета) during the summer of 1959.<sup>7</sup> Critical positions about the novel from these two newspapers were opposite. While *Promyšlennno-ekonomičeskaja gazeta* intended to show the failings of Efremov's Future World and its incompatibility with communist ideals, *Literaturnaja gazeta* took a position of *Andromeda Nebula*'s advocate. The authors of the articles published in *Promyšlennno-ekonomičeskaja gazeta* considered Efremov's imagination as 'excessively rich' and his vision of the historical and social evolution of the Earth as an unreal one justifying their stance by its complete disagreement with Marx's and Lenin's conception of the future man and future society as well as the communist concept of historical process. *Literaturnaja gazeta* explained to the public that the Earth drawn by Efremov in *Andromeda Nebula* could actually represent a possible way of developing the society because of its respect for the communist ideals but for the moment the

7) This exchange consists of four texts; the first is a reader's opinion about *Andromeda Nebula* published in *Promyšlennno-ekonomičeskaja gazeta* (ANTONOV 1959) to which *Literaturnaja gazeta* replied few days later (LITERATOR 1959). That in turn brought about an analytical article by *Promyšlennno-ekonomičeskaja gazeta* (VOEVODIN, ZVORYKIN, MAJSTROV, and RŽONSNICKIJ 1959) and as a consequence two new articles by *Literaturnaja gazeta* (AMBARCUMJAN 1959 and UNKNOWN AUTHOR 1959). It is hard to say in these cases whole names of all of authors just mentioned because as it often happened in soviet press a signature contains only a last name and the initial letter of first name and some times of a patronym; we prefer to keep it this way in bibliography. But sometimes we can find in the signature an academic grade of the author. Thanks to that we know that AMBARCUMJAN was in 1959 the president of Academy of Sciences of Social Republic of Armenia, so we can say that it is about Victor AMBARCUMJAN.

novel was almost the only real effort to imagine the Future. In this debate we find the opposition of two positions on science-fiction literature: the old one that followed socialist realism and did not look far into the future; and the new one that encouraged writers to dream beyond the limits of the official dogmas.

Debates around *Andromeda Nebula* were followed by debates around science-fiction literature in general and its role in Soviet culture and science. In all the newspapers and magazines, literary ones but also social and scientific, writers, critics, readers and scientists were discussing the duties and goals of science-fiction literature. The general view maintained that, as the majority of readers of science-fiction were teenagers, and science-fiction was actually considered to be the literature of a dream, it should first of all make teenagers dream about participation in the construction of the ideal future and in scientific progress. Another duty of science-fiction literature was to preview a possible development of science but also of society and humanity. Thus critics started to impose new rules on the science-fiction writers who offered in return to the public novels trying to examine the future, and sometimes the present, in all their aspects.

A new wave of popularity of science-fiction genre in the Soviet Union was started. The number of published science-fiction novels and short stories increased; around 140 million books, including 1266 works of Soviet and foreign authors, were published in the Soviet Union between 1959 and 1965 (HELLER 1983: 38). Within a few years a lot of new names appeared in science-fiction literature; both already established writers such as Gennady Gor who was trying out this new genre and young writers as Arkady and Boris Strugatsky who were a breath of fresh air in the Soviet science-fiction literature. And in almost all the stories appearing after *Andromeda Nebula* the events were placed in the far-away future. But most importantly, from this point forward science-fiction in the Soviet Union is not the literature of technology and science vulgarization any more but a literature of social analysis; characters occupied henceforth an important place in narration.

As for Efremov, his major place in Soviet science-fiction was from this moment incontestable and *Andromeda Nebula* was a critic's quality reference for the evaluation of new books. It is difficult to find a critic's review, in press or book format, which does not mention this novel. During the 1960s several university research texts on Efremov's fiction in general and on *Andromeda Nebula* in particular were published in the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> In 1967 director Evgeni Sherstobitov

8) For example NEIZVESTNYH gives a detailed study of *Andromeda Nebula*'s characters (NEIZVESTNYH 1962); ZVANCEVA analyzes the narration of the novel and the world of the Future created by Efremov (ZVANCEVA

made an eponymous science-fiction movie which was based on Efremov's novel; despite the novel's success the movie itself did not receive much attention from critics and the audiences. The book's literary sequel, the novel *The Bull's Hour* first published in *Tehnika-Molodeži* and *Molodaja Gvardija* magazine in 1968 and 1969, and in a book-format by the publishing house *Molodaja Gvardija* in 1970, sparked a new interest in the Soviet science-fiction community. In this novel Efremov compares a utopian society of the Earth of the Future with an anti-utopian society of another planet inhabited by human beings supposed to be descendants of Earthlings.

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