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Writing Other Futures: A Conversation about Science Fiction

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Writing Other Futures: A Conversation about Science Fiction

Abstract
Central to The Other Trans-Atlantic is the contention that kinetic art was a species of realism, reflecting the new socioeconomic realities emerging in the geographies considered by our project. In seeking to test the hypothesis that the pervasive curiosity, if not enthusiasm, for science and technology, as refracted through the lens of innovative artistic practices, led to the embrace of optical and kinetic forms, we, the editors, wondered if we might find correlating interests in other artistic languages and cultural forms. In trying to understand the way in which these forces (industrialization, scientific discovery, etc.) changed everyday life and therefore shaped visual culture, we happened upon two books, We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity by Anindita Banerjee and The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction by Rachel Haywood Ferreira. It became clear that kinetic and Op artists were applying in the visual field what Science fiction writers were doing in the literary field, namely reflecting the present and imagining the future. We invited Banerjee and Rachel Haywood-Ferreira to help us understand the complexities of the cultural moment using science fiction as a lens.-Eds.

Disciplines
Creative Writing | Film and Media Studies | Technical and Professional Writing | Visual Studies

Comments
Central to *The Other Trans-Atlantic* is the contention that kinetic art was a species of realism, reflecting the new socioeconomic realities emerging in the geographies considered by our project. In seeking to test the hypothesis that the pervasive curiosity, if not enthusiasm, for science and technology, as refracted through the lens of innovative artistic practices, led to the embrace of optical and kinetic forms, we, the editors, wondered if we might find correlating interests in other artistic languages and cultural forms. In trying to understand the way in which these forces (industrialization, scientific discovery, etc.) changed everyday life and therefore shaped visual culture, we happened upon two books, *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* by Anindita Banerjee and *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction* by Rachel Haywood Ferreira. It became clear that kinetic and Op artists were applying in the visual field what science fiction writers were doing in the literary field, namely reflecting the present and imagining the future. We invited Banerjee and Haywood Ferreira to help us understand the complexities of the cultural moment using science fiction as a lens.—Eds.
“Science fiction is the literature of change” is one of the most oft-repeated attempts at a definition of the genre. Though broad and vague, it serves as a useful reminder of the genre’s valuable function as a barometer for modern times. The most definitive origins of SF are found during the Industrial Revolution. SF is associated with a “consciousness of the scientific outlook,” and it is an ideal vehicle for exploring how advances in science and technology affect all aspects of life. SF is often used to contemplate our current scientific, sociopolitical, and cultural trajectories—such as global warming, drug-resistant bacteria, globalization, the refugee crisis, election decisions in favor of Brexit and Trump—or to consider what might happen if a new element, or novum, were introduced into the mix (a new clean energy source, an alien invasion, faster-than-light travel, a sentient machine...).

The history of SF is often described in waves, with a wave pattern influenced by scientific discoveries, world events, or even a single publication, author, or work. The emphasis of the genre has often oscillated between the hard sciences and the social or “soft” sciences, and also between utopia and dystopia, technophilia and technophobia, and an optimistic view of the future and pessimistic warnings of apocalypse.

Twelve years after the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union took the world by storm. On October 4, 1957, it launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite to break free of the Earth’s atmosphere and orbit the planet. Sputnik, meaning “companion” in Russian, was the realization of a dream nurtured by SF writers and technological visionaries ever since Jules Verne penned *From the Earth to the Moon*, in 1865. Launched almost a century after the publication of Verne’s novel and just a month before the fortieth anniversary of the great utopian experiment of the 1917 Revolution in Russia, the satellite signaled humanity breaking free of the shackles of the shackles of the shackles...
les of its ravaged home planet, still recovering from the apocalyptic trauma of war and, in the case of the Soviet Union, from three decades of domestic repression that had recently ended with the death of Josef Stalin, in 1953. Though locked in a new Cold War, the country was nevertheless entering a radical phase of political, economic, and cultural liberalization at home and a new principle of “coexistence” in international relations under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev. This period, called the Thaw (significantly, named after a novel written by Ilya Ehrenburg, a prominent public intellectual who had himself experimented with writing SF in the 1920s soon after the October Revolution), converged with the Sputnik launch to constitute perhaps the most symbolically freighted moment of the post-war period. Sputnik was only the beginning of a series of space “firsts” in the ensuing decade, which included the dog Laika’s first flight a mere month later on Sputnik II; the successful return journey of the canine twins Belka and Strelka, in 1960; Yuri Gagarin’s first manned flight in 1961; and in 1963, Valentina Tereshkova’s voyage as the first female cosmonaut. [FIG. 1–2]

Sputnik granted SF a privileged claim to reality, and Russian SF in particular a special place in the wondrous spectacle of spaceflight that held the world riveted for a decade, until the United States caught up with its Cold War rival with its very own moon landing, in 1969. Although Russian authors and filmmakers of the early twentieth century—among them Alexander Bogdanov, who imagined “the first Bolshevik utopia” on Mars in his 1908 novel Red Star, and Yakov Protazanov, who visualized a spacecraft landing on the red planet in the remarkable silent movie Aelita as early as 1924—were as fascinated by the prospects of entering outer space as their European and North American counterparts, it was the writings of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, an obscure rural teacher of mathematics, that gave a unique national flavor to the longstanding dream of interplanetary travel. Tsiolkovsky, who designed jet-propulsion engines as a hobby and popularized the term cosmos, the Russian name for outer space, was a prolific writer of SF, using it as a platform to disseminate his bold ideas at the turn of the twentieth century when aviation and spaceflight were but fanciful conjectures. Soon after
FIG. 1-2
POSTAGE STAMP ISSUED IN THE USSR, COMMEMORATING THE SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH OF SPUTNIK III, 1958
POSTAGE STAMP ISSUED IN ROMANIA, COMMEMORATING THE USSR'S CONQUEST OF SPACE, 1959
Cagarin's flight in 1961, Khrushchev ceremonially recognized Tsiolkovsky as the new beloved "grandfather of the Soviet Space Program" on the Red Square.

**SCIENCE AND POPULAR CULTURE**

Sputnik inaugurated a whole new era of democratizing future-thinking and future-making, a turn toward what I call a "participatory culture of science fiction." Steeped in the World Wide Web's information-exchange systems, the digital realms of participatory gaming, and the international networks of social media, we tend to forget that the breakthrough to outer space was perhaps the earliest catalyst of transmedia storytelling across a global landscape. Each breathtaking space "first," from Yuri Gagarin's first manned flight, in 1961, through Neil Armstrong's 1969 moon landing, was instantly transformed into a futuristic narrative unfolding in real time on radios and television networks, not just in the USSR and the United States, but in every corner of the globe. Spurred on by commentators and supplemented by a near-universal obsession across print, radio, and television, people felt deeply involved in a rare convergence between SF and technological reality.

The Space Age set the stage for much deeper public interest in technology, from futuristic horizons of robotics and artificial intelligence, cybernetics and systems engineering, to smaller-scale technological marvels that could transform everyday life right in the home. A famous example of public interest in the latter is the side-by-side American and Soviet exhibitions of consumer technologies—transistor radios, dishwashers, color televisions, cars—in 1959, two years after the Sputnik launch. Inaugurated by Khrushchev and then-Vice President of the United States, Richard Nixon, it drew more than three million visitors. Access to technology on a day-to-day level was an integral part of the optimism that resulted from the convergence of Sputnik and the Thaw.

The perspective of young children and the material culture of everyday life provide perhaps the most vivid prisms for viewing the participatory culture of science fiction thinking, making, and acting during this period. While McDonald's restaurants in the United
States gave out miniature models of the latest spaceships with their Happy Meals, Soviet youth were arguably recruited much more aggressively into what the historian Asif Siddiqi has called “cosmic enthusiasm.” The contemporary writer and SF enthusiast Victor Pelevin put it best:

“A man is half of what he is, and half of what he wants to be,” said Oscar Wilde. If that is the case, then Soviet children of the sixties and seventies were all half cosmonauts. [...] The cosmos was everywhere, in school textbooks, on the walls of houses, on the mosaics in the Moscow metro. [...] Under the window of every five-story Khrushchev apartment stood miniature models of satellites. On the tear-off wall calendars, one spaceship followed another.

This portrait of every citizen living with the cosmos dovetails with the condition that Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has eloquently called “the science fictionality of everyday life.”

The early SF of the nineteenth century helped people consider the implications of rapid and life-changing advances in science and technology, for example in technologies of transportation and communication such as the steam engine and the telegraph. Following upon this period of generally positivistic technophilia, the subsequent generation was decidedly more pessimistic about the capacity of science and technology to improve lives and to lead humanity toward larger truths. In the period following the Second World War, humanity faced drastic changes in the scientific landscape on both ends of the spectrum, with atomic bombs and ballistic missiles threatening apocalypse, while at the same time the race to space made the promises of Disney’s Tomorrowland seem imminent. In SF, as in the world, although technophilia and technophobia coexisted in the decades following the Second World War, the former predominated in the 1950s, and the latter gained the upper hand in the ’60s and ’70s.

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During the early years of the Cold War the potential of both nuclear power and nuclear holocaust dominated the front pages of the popular press, while technology was also increasingly present in the daily lives of many, from the automobile and telephone to home appliances, radio, and television. This was also true in Latin America, though uneven modernity among and within Latin American nations affected both the degree to which scientific and technological advances permeated the lives of Latin Americans, and also the speed with which they did so. At the same time, the worldviews of Latin Americans were formed and informed by the consciousness that Latin American countries were in the global periphery, and that all of the launch buttons were located in the nations of the center.

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND SF

From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, developmentalist economic policies such as import substitution industrialization were popular in many Latin American countries. Local industrialization efforts were promoted in an attempt to reduce dependency on central nations for manufactured products. While interest in scientific advances in nuclear physics and the race for space in central nations was a major factor in Latin American interest in SF during this time period, rapid industrialization at home also undoubtedly had an impact on the increasing publication and readership of SF in the region.

The Golden Age of SF in the United States emerged from the pulp tradition of the early twentieth century and is usually associated with John W. Campbell’s assumption of the editorship of Astounding Science-Fiction in the late 1930s. By contrast, Latin America did not have a significant pulp tradition and did not experience its own SF Golden Age until the decades following the Second World War, beginning in the mid- to late 1950s. This was the first time SF was an identifiable movement in the region, with the emergence of genre magazines, local fan communities, and the publication of Northern SF in translation, as well as collections and novels by national writers. This wave of Latin American SF, then, grew out of a confluence of events: the continued rise of SF in the United States;
global, political, and scientific events; and industrialization and the increasing presence of technology at home. It is no accident, for example, that the protagonist of one of the first breakout SF works in Argentina, *El Eternauta* (The Eternaut, Héctor Germán Oesterheld and Francisco Solano López, 1957–59), was an example of the new Argentine man: a small industrialist who owned a transformer factory that contributed to national development.

Sputnik opened the floodgates for SF itself to once again become a credible mode of writing and filmmaking in the Soviet Union after a gap of nearly three decades. The genre had been driven underground in the early 1930s after socialist realism was endorsed by the state as the only viable kind of art in a society oriented toward the revolutionary future (according to an apocryphal but frequently cited account, Stalin himself forbade speculation beyond the realistic horizons of a human lifespan). Under the twin signs of the Space Age and the Thaw, *nauchnaya fantastika* or scientific fantasy, a term that had first emerged in the 1890s and became tremendously popular through the 1920s, returned with a vengeance to Russian life. A new magazine named *Fantastika* was launched, in 1962, that published contemporary SF alongside rediscovered classics of the genre from the early twentieth century. Also in 1962, *The Amphibian Man*, a lavish film set in Argentina and shot mostly underwater, recovered Alexander Belyaev's biotechnological SF novel from 1928, in the process adapting it for the new postwar audience fascinated by Jacques Cousteau's oceanographic expeditions as broadcast on television.

The body of SF produced and consumed in the Soviet Union between Sputnik and the 1970s was truly formidable. Moreover, this period produced some of the best-known literary and cinematic works in the genre that continue to be venerated as classics to this day by fans and critics alike around the world. They include Ivan Efremov's *The Andromeda Nebula*, published almost simultaneously with the Sputnik launch in 1957, and the numerous novels and stories written over the next two decades by the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, one of whom was an astrophysicist and the other, a specialist in Japanese literature. Andrei Tarkovsky's cinematic masterpieces *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979) are also gener-
ally described as SF classics from the era, despite the director’s pro-
tests to the contrary.

**(GEO)POLITICAL CONTEXT**

Latin American SF authors shed new light on geopolitical tensions and alliances by providing perspective from the military, political, and scientific periphery. They viewed the arms race, the space race, and the race for greater global hegemony from an outsider position, away from the centers of—but not the impact of—power. Much Latin American SF from the Cold War era takes a particular interest in where the future center and future periphery will be and how they will come about. Latin American SF considers present and future implications of the Cold War from a variety of perspectives. To cite examples from some of the landmark works of the period: Hugo Correa’s *Los Altisimos* (The Superior Ones, Chile, 1959) reflects the contemporary Soviet scientific dominance and includes a dystopian portrait of a future socialist utopia along with anti-nuclear arms race sentiments;⁵ the book also posits the existence of more advanced civilizations, including one so advanced that the entire Earth is moved into the periphery category. Correa also wrote a well-known short story, “Cuando Pilato se opuso” (“When Pilate Said No,” Chile, c. 1961), that contemplates how Latin American humanistic values and skills in the social sciences might lead to the downfall of the current center and replace the hard sciences with new measures of superiority.⁶ Written nearly a decade later, *Mexicanos en el espacio* (Mexicans in Space, Mexico, 1968), by Carlos Olvera, extrapolates a future reality in which contemporary global power dynamics have become the universal power dynamics of the future, as the superpowers have gone to space first and staked claim to all the best territory and resources, leaving the less desirable parts for Mexico and other peripheral powers. The representation of Cold War

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⁶ This story has been translated by Andrea Bell as “When Pilate Said No,” in *Cosmos Latinos* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 140–52.
tensions and alliances change from the 1950s to the ’60s and ’70s in Latin America, even within the work of a single writer. In the first *Eternauta* written by Héctor Germán Oesterheld and drawn by Francisco Solano López (Argentina, 1957–59), Oesterheld depicts Argentina as an ally of the Northern power centers in a fight against alien invaders, while ten years later, in a rewritten version of the same story, this time drawn by Alberto Breccia (*El Eternauta*, Argentina, 1969), Oesterheld portrays Northern powers that betray Argentina and other peripheral nations to the aliens in order to save their own skins.

The Stagnation era under Brezhnev, which coincided with the pessimism of 1970s SF, definitely had its wider effects on international relations as well. The depressing ossification of quasi-authoritarian values at home left its imprint, as described in the previous response, on the very chronotopes of SF.

### POSTWAR ANXIETIES

Anxiety with regard to military applications of technology is prevalent in Latin American SF, but in the 1950s this anxiety is generally directed outward. Big science was in the service of nuclear weaponry in central nations, not at home or in other nations of the periphery. Therefore much Latin American SF—including all of the texts mentioned earlier—expressed anxiety about military technologies in the hands of Northern military powers specifically, in the hands of the powerful in general, and/or concentrated in the hands of a few. In the 1960s and ’70s we see increasing representation of oppressive national military regimes in Latin American SF, reflecting contemporary situations in a number of Latin American countries. One well-known example of this is Eduardo Coligorsky’s short story “En el último reducto” (“The Last Refuge,” Argentina, 1967).  

Because of the implicit official mandate that all visions of the socialist future be optimistic, there was relatively little room in Soviet SF to express anxieties about technological development. There is certainly no dearth of SF that coded the fear of technology run amok, especially as it pertained to the nuclear arms race. From the very dawn of the Space Age through the 1970s, Soviet SF seemed

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Translated by Andrea Bell as “The Last Refuge” in *Cosmos Latinos*, 109–15.
to tacitly acknowledge what US President Jimmy Carter, using the words of the astrophysicist Carl Sagan, emphasized in his farewell speech of 1981: Rocketry, which works on the same principles as missiles that deliver nuclear warheads, was joined at the hip with the greatest threat to our “small and fragile and beautiful blue globe, the only home we have.” The specter of nuclear apocalypse haunts the ostentatiously peaceful mission of conquering the cosmos in Efremov’s 1957 novel Andromeda Nebula. A corner of the galaxy that is being brought into the path of socialism is discovered to be a wasteland incinerated by an unknown form of energy in some previous war.

This early strategy of displacing the potential threat of nuclear holocaust to the far frontiers of the cosmos recurs, in ever more complex permutations, through a distinct subgenre of the Strugatsky brothers’ SF that may be called histories of the future. Their 1963 cult classic, Far Rainbow, stages the first open rupture between the project of constructing a cosmos-wide utopia and the threat of a “black wave” of energy, recalling the “black rain” of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, unleashed from a closed research facility on a remote planet. The Inhabited Island, published in 1969 and made into a blockbuster film in 2009 by Fedor Bondarchuk, has the Strugatskys’ stock character of a “progressor”—a terrestrial agent of change sent out from planet Earth across ever more daring distances—encounter a community of mutants whose physiological and psychological deviations mirror contemporaneous scientific projections of the intergenerational effects of radiation.

I would argue that Tarkovsky’s 1972 film Solaris, loosely adapted from Stanisław Lem’s novel and hailed widely as a Soviet response to Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), subtly embeds the same trope in its uniquely critical approach to looking for humankind’s future salvation in the unfathomable depths of outer space. In response to “being massively radiated,” the amorphous entity called Solaris, which scientists had previously thought to be an intriguing but passive body, seems to demonstrate a consciousness and agency of its own. Its response is to infiltrate the earthlings’ fragile space station with physical embodiments of the cosmonauts’ own traumatic pasts. Tarkovsky’s second SF film, Stalker (1979),
adapted from the Strugatsky brothers’ acclaimed novel *Roadside Picnic*, from 1971, brings the nuclear cosmos home to an uncanny “Zone” somewhere on our very own planet—a highly militarized post-apocalyptic landscape that could exist in a number of real locations. Like Solaris, the Zone seems to transcend the laws of physics, as well as the ontological boundaries between life and death, or matter and spirit; within it, human intruders encounter a wholly inhuman yet profoundly familiar logic that supersedes our own cognitive faculties and technological prowess.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

While the Holocaust and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had a profound effect around the world and contributed to many dystopic representations of the future, still, the idea of utopia was not beyond reach in the years following the Second World War. Particularly in the 1950s, advances in science and the newly minted global peace lent impetus to positive visions of the future as well as to full-blown utopias. While, for example, stories by Latin American writers published in the influential Argentine SF magazine *Más Allá* (1953–57, FIC. 3) do include tales of invasion and nuclear-inspired disaster, there are also at least two clear-cut utopias among them. “Morir solo” (“Dying Alone”) by Adolfo Pérez Zelaschi (*Más Allá*, July 1954) warns against the potential for a dystopian future in which the overuse of technology might cause us to lose our humanity; but in the end a utopian, humanistic vision of the future governed by values such as education and solidarity prevails. “Las fantasías de Rino” (“Rino’s Fantasies”) by Julián de Córdoba (*Más Allá*, April 1957) also envisions a path to utopia, this time via the invention of some rather unlikely technologies and the reformation and revitalization of the United Nations by taking power from partisan politicians and giving it to scientists capable of prioritizing the universal good.

Deeply interwoven in the technological nexus of rockets and missiles was an unspoken thread of trauma that belonged uniquely to the Soviet Union, and whose significance in the science-fictional imagination of the Space Age has been noted but not
FIG. 3
MÁS ALLÁ VOL. 1, NO. 1, 1953

apasionantes aventuras
de fantasía científica
explored in sufficient detail. This was the four-decades-long institution of state repression known as the Gulag, the largest network of prison camps in human history, which was set up in 1918–23 and continued to expand well after the Second World War. Inmates of the camps were granted large-scale amnesty only after Stalin’s death, in 1953. De-Stalinization and the first moves to dismantle the Gulag were potent subtexts of the twin metaphors of liberation and liberalization attached to Sputnik and the Thaw.

Writing about life in the 1960s, Peter Vail and Alexander Genis make a point of exposing this continuum: “For the Soviet person, the cosmos was also the symbol of total liberation. Stalin had been unmasked, Solzhenitsyn had been printed, transistor radios were finally available, there was talk of initiative and critique.”

It is notable that the freedom of information associated with the prospect of a media revolution, embodied in the form of portable radios in every home, is framed by the invocation of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn, who would go on to win the Nobel Prize in 1970, made his debut in 1962 with the harrowing novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The emergence of Gulag literature marked another dimension of the Thaw: freedom to confront the ghosts of the past and begin a process of collective reckoning. Significantly, the euphemism for prison camps was *Zona*, the Zone—a correlation that has not escaped fans and scholars of the Strugatsky brothers’ SF and Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* in particular.

**OPTIMISM / PESSIMISM**

It is not easy to trace a linear shift, but something similar did happen in the transition from the heady first decade of the Space Age to the 1970s. There was a regime change in the background that reinforced the gradual shading of SF in the direction of subtle critique and political dissent, if not downright pessimism: Khrushchev’s succession by his former deputy, Leonid Brezhnev, under whose leadership the vibrant openness of the Thaw imperceptibly gave way to a “stagnation” in both national public life and

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international relations. Although SF had a firm place in Russian life by this time, particularly as a prized medium for popularizing and cultivating young people’s interests in cutting-edge science and technology, the changing contours of the figure of the “progressor” in the Strugatsky brothers’ fiction provide an illustrative index of how serious SF changed in its mood and message during the transition from the Thaw to the Era of Stagnation.

As Patrick McGuire noted in his pioneering study of the political nuances of Soviet SF, over the course of the last three novels of the Strugatsky brothers’ histories of the future—*Inhabited Island* (1969), *The Beetle in the Anthill* (1979), and *The Waves Still the Wind* (1985)—the formerly well-intentioned agents of change called “progressors” metamorphose into a sinister set of secret-keepers acting on behalf of an authoritarian state. “The only object of this secrecy,” McCuire writes, “is to keep information out of the hands of the public—a public that has enjoyed two full decades of Communism.” The same oppressive elements of a state apparatus determined to stifle the fantasies of liberation appear in Tarkovsky’s films as well, whether as a military-style tribunal threatening to shutdown the Solaris mission or in maintaining the militarized zone in *Stalker*.

There is a general shift from a more optimistic view of the future in the 1950s to a more pessimistic one in the 1960s and ’70s. This shift takes place in the world as well as in Latin America, and in Northern as well as Latin American SF. Many movements arose around the world to express discontent with the status quo in areas such as civil rights, environmental protection, women’s rights, and the Vietnam War. Latin Americans shared in these discontents, and, in addition, their pessimism was also fed by events such as the Tlatelolco student massacre in Mexico (1968) and the rise of oppressive regimes in many Latin American countries.

Anglophone SF underwent a sea change beginning in the early 1960s with the New Wave writers. These writers tended to produce SF that focused on the soft sciences, emphasized literary complexity, and was more pessimistic and technophobic in nature.

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The era produced many near-future dystopias brought about by war, ecological disaster, nuclear accidents and intentions, overpopulation, etc. Latin American SF demonstrated these tendencies as well, with additional contributing factors such as the aforementioned deteriorating national political situations, local literary traditions, and movements from the Borgesian fantastic to the Boom that encouraged literary complexity and experimentation, and a political and economic climate that increasingly marginalized the region. If idealism about global power dynamics, a more universalist focus, and humanity-centric rhetoric predominated in 1950s Latin American SF, this changed in the 1960s, when social, political, and global inequalities were ever more pressing issues, particularly in the periphery.

**VISUAL AESTHETICS**

RHF  The visual aesthetic of Latin American SF also reflected this shift, focusing less on shiny rocket-driven visions of the future and becoming increasingly experimental and abstract. The evolution of this aesthetic can be seen, for example, in cover art, with Más Allá being fairly representative of the 1950s and the magazines Crononauta (Mexico, 1964) and Minotauro (Argentina, 1964–68) of the 1960s. The change of artists for the first Eternauta, from the realism of Solano López in the late 1950s to the more experimental style of Breccia in the late 1960s, is also likely indicative of the changes in the aesthetic of the genre.10

AB  The Space Age brought into existence whole new modes of visual representation, plastic arts, and architectural innovation. A classic example is the exhibition complex called VDNKh (abbreviation for Exposition of National Achievements of the People), which was erected next to a brand-new subway station with the same name, in 1958. Towering over the sprawling structure—which was recently repurposed into an amusement park—is a spacecraft veering away into the cosmos in full flight. To recall Pelevin’s words, “the cosmos was everywhere,” from New Year’s greeting cards to match-

10 Though it should be noted that, for a variety of reasons, the illustration for Oesterheld’s El Eternauta II in the late 1970s went back to Solano López.
ing Belka-and-Strelka salt and pepper shakers, from interstellar designs for children’s playgrounds to public murals and fountains. An interesting mode of visualization that often appeared on the pages of popular science magazines was a curious fusion of data graphics and monumental photography. Featuring both rocket design and individual cosmonaut-heroes, these illustrations sought to portray, on grand scales of history, the Soviet Union’s achievements in outer space and on terra firma.

**LINES OF FRICTION / TRANSMISSIONS**

The most vivid examples of the USSR’s fascination with Latin America may be found in a fascinating cross-pollination between various media and platforms of the visual and performing arts. The legendary avant-garde filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein nurtured a long, and ultimately truncated, relationship with Mexico. It started in 1921, when he put on a theater production of Jack London’s story “The Mexican.” He met Diego Rivera, in 1927, when the artist was visiting Moscow for the tenth anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution. In 1930, Eisenstein visited the United States in the hopes of collaborating with Charlie Chaplin and others in Hollywood, but after an agreement with Paramount Studios fell through, he headed south to begin work on a project called *¡Que viva México!* whose producer was none other than Upton Sinclair. Although Eisenstein and his collaborators Grigori Alexandrov and Eduard Tisse shot enormous amounts of film—between thirty and fifty hours by many estimates—in Mexico, the project remained unfinished and has been reconstructed in a few different ways. Another aspect of Eisenstein’s love affair with Mexico has been recently visualized in the lush frames of Peter Greenaway’s 2015 film *Eisenstein in Guanajuato*.

The next phase of cinematic engagement across the “other transatlantic” occurred during the Thaw/Sputnik era, when Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization efforts led to a liberalization of the arts. This brought back a great appetite among Soviet audiences for colorful films from across the world. Stalin died in 1953; Moscow held its first international film festival in twenty years in 1954. In 1962, a lavishly shot film by Vladimir Chebotarev returned to Alexander
Belyaev's bestselling SF novel from 1928, *The Amphibian Man*. Set in Argentina (but filmed in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan), the romantic SF movie plunged the Space Age audience into another unfathomable, little-explored dimension: the depths of the ocean. *Amphibian Man* was also linked with another circuit of transatlantic transnationalism: Jacques Cousteau's oceanic cinematography from Cozumel was being broadcast on television.

Another amazing relic from the same period is Mikhail Kalatozov's *I am Cuba*, from 1964, a formally experimental drama about the Cuban revolution of 1959 which did not do well with either audiences or critics but was rediscovered by Western film-lovers in the 1990s, among them Martin Scorsese, who reportedly played an instrumental role in its restoration.

The influence of Soviet SF in Latin America during this time period appears to be significantly less than that of North American SF or of the enduring tradition of Western European SF (Verne, Wells, etc.). Where influence can be seen flowing from the USSR to Latin American writers is in the shifting, balancing, reevaluating of types of possible futures. This was largely dependent on who was perceived to be ahead in the space race at the time (Soviet-type futures were commented upon more in the years after Sputnik). Overall, influence on SF in Latin America remained largely US- and Western European-centric, rather than coming from the Soviet bloc.

Due to the Soviet presence in, and influence on, Cuba, one might expect the first period of Cuban genre SF to begin earlier; but in fact, it began in 1964, and the main influence on the widely-acknowledged fathers of Cuban SF writing in this era was the US Golden Age SF of the 1930s and '40s. From 1968–78, a revolutionary offensive in Cuba led to a restriction on publication of literature that described an altered reality, but in 1979, Cuban political policy changed, and SF from the European Communist bloc was permitted.

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11 Translations of some of the best-known works of Soviet SF from Russian into Spanish were carried out in Moscow and in Latin America (principally Cuba and Argentina) in the 1960s and '70s, but nothing like on the scale of translation of SF from the US and Europe.

Unlike in most of Latin America, in Cuba SF was now considered to be politically engaged and therefore it enjoyed more support both from the government and from the literary establishment, including the creation of an SF category for the famous David literary prize, in 1979. Cuban SF scholar Juan Carlos Toledano Redondo has noted that, while he knows of no study that gives precise numbers, the publication of translations of SF from the socialist world in Cuba in the 1970s was “impressive” (he mentions Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Vietnam).¹³

Latin American SF has emerged as a significant and extremely active field of study only in the last two decades; the synergies between Latin American and Eastern European literary arts, as well as visual arts, will be an important avenue for further research in the years to come.