

Ukrainian Science Fiction

Historical and Thematic Perspectives



Walter Smyrniw

Peter Lang

fiction. At present there are no major studies or monographs on the international scope of science fiction. Science fiction handbooks and encyclopedias either avoid this subject or deal with it superficially.⁷ The sole exception is *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls. In its 1979 edition it had 9 entries under “science fiction in various countries,” whereas in the updated version of 1995 it listed a total of 27 countries. This is not an exhaustive list. Clute and Nicholls acknowledge that they “have not attempted to contact scholars from every country” and conclude “while we might not have done full justice to sf in non-English-speaking countries, then at least we have outlined, on a scale not previously attempted in an English-language sf reference work, the extraordinary scope of what has now become a truly international literature.” It is regrettable, however, that Clute and Nicholls “have not attempted to contact scholars from every country,” because they “did not have the necessary contacts” to obtain the relevant information.⁸

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Although Clute and Nicholls did not list Ukrainian science fiction as an entry in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, they were certainly aware of its existence. They mention it in passing by stating that “a small amount of Soviet sf exists in the various languages other than

7 James Gunn ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (New York: Viking, 1988). See also David Seed ed., *A Companion to Science Fiction*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005); in the former there are no entries on international science fiction and in the latter the chapter on “International Scene” is confined to Canadian, Japanese, Asian and Australian science fiction. See also Marshall B. Tymn, *The Science Fiction Reference Book: A Comprehensive Handbook and Guide to the History, Literature, Scholarship, and Related Activities of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Fields* (Mercer Island, Wash.: Starmon House, 1981). This handbook also contains no references to international science fiction.

8 John Clute and Peter Nicholls eds., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, p. xvi.

Russian, notably Ukrainian, in which the dissident writer Oles Berdnyk writes. Little of this material has been translated into Russian, let alone English.”⁹ Evidently, this is the first allusion to Ukrainian science fiction in a reference work published in the West. Previously, Western readers and scholars were not aware of its existence, because no major Ukrainian science fiction work was translated into English and the history of Ukrainian science fiction was virtually unknown in the West.

Since its emergence in the beginning of the twentieth century, Ukrainian science fiction continually grew in popularity until it became the most popular literary genre during the 1960s and 1970s. To some extent this vogue emanated from new developments in space technology and the launching of the first Earth satellite on 4 October 1957. But a no less significant factor was the decrease in Soviet political repression and censorship which yielded greater freedom of expression in arts and culture. As a result, many Ukrainian authors made their debut in the science fiction genre. This led to an expansion of the thematic range of Ukrainian science fiction after the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the context of its history, this was obviously an unprecedented renaissance of Ukrainian science fiction, but it was an ideologically-controlled renaissance. The writers were obliged to adhere to the Party line and subscribe to Soviet ideology. Most Ukrainian science fiction authors complied with the literary dogma of the Soviet regime. However, the deviant writers were censured in the press, harassed and persecuted by KGB agents. A case in point are the tribulations of Oles Berdnyk. In May 1973, Berdnyk was expelled from the Ukrainian Writers Union, ostensibly, “for his antisocial acts and deviations from the principles and tasks outlined in the charter of the Writers’ Union of USSR.”¹⁰ However, the gist of the matter was not Berdnyk’s antisocial behavior, but his ideological deviations, inasmuch as Berdnyk was reprimanded for “forgetting our materialistic philosophy and indulging in ‘mysticism’

9 Ibid., p. 1134.

10 *Literaturna Ukraina*, 15 May 1973.

and ‘spiritualism’,” and for the writing of “a murky and an erroneous work in the ideological sense.”¹¹

Political interference with the development of Ukrainian science fiction was not a new phenomenon. It began in the 1920s with the consolidation of the Soviet regime in Ukraine. Under Soviet rule it was not feasible to circulate or republish the Ukrainian science fiction works which appeared in print outside of the Soviet Union. Moreover, political authorities also held up the publication of the first Ukrainian science fiction best-seller for over four years. Thus Volodymyr Vynnychenko’s science fiction novel *Soniashna mashyna* (The Solar Machine) appeared only when the Commissar of Education in Ukraine personally authorized its publication in 1928. After the novel was republished in three editions, the political authorities decided in 1930 to withdraw it from circulation, because they realized that the work contained no mention of a future Soviet state.

From 1930 to the late 1950s the political authorities demanded that science fiction authors adhere to a literary formula, the so-called “science fiction of close aims,” which had to exalt Soviet ideology and the scientific achievements in the near future. By the same token, literary scholars also had to toe the line imposed by the State. Consequently, they complied by penning repeatedly theoretical articles on “reality and science fiction” (*fantastyka i realnist*), intended to remind the authors to link the contents of their science fiction works with the Soviet reality and current ideology. The political directives from the Soviet regime entailed not only an ideological formula for science fiction authors, but also a prohibition of references to Ukrainian science fiction published abroad and to the works that were first published and then proscribed for Soviet readers, such as Vynnychenko’s *Soniashna mashyna*. Obviously, under such political controls comprehensive studies of the history of Ukrainian science fiction were quite impossible.

The brief periods of reprieve from political control which occurred during the so-called Krushchev’s Thaw lasting from the mid 1950s to

11 G. Did’ko, “Belaia i chornaia magiia,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 12 October 1965; see also *Literaturna Ukraina*, 20 October 1972.

the early 1960s and during Gorbachev's Glasnost and Perestroika from 1985 to 1991 gave way to renewed hope and a revitalization of Ukrainian cultural and literary activities. However, at present it is evident that the independence of Ukraine, attained in August 1991, did not provide the desired and anticipated political and economic climate for further growth of culture and literature.

The shift from a socialist mode of governance to a profit driven economy did not prove advantageous either for Ukrainian writers or readers. Overall, the number of published works was reduced, but some authors managed to have their writings published. Although these developments provided also a debilitating impact on science fiction, several established authors of the genre managed to have some of their works published or reissued. Some new authors were also able to make their literary debut and attain popularity among readers. Thus it remains to be seen how Ukrainian science fiction shall fare in the twenty-first century. Be that as it may, these developments are beyond the scope of the present study inasmuch as it is confined to the twentieth century.