

Nuts and Bolts, Golden Orbs, and Concrete Walls: Things in *Roadside Picnic*

by

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Abstract

This paper seeks to discuss the representational objects of Boris and Arkady Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* through Bill Brown's idea of thing theory, which creates a distinction between an object and a thing based on the functionalities and relationships between individuals and their possessions, both through their semiotic nature and the ritualistic practices which encompass the creation and possession of a 'thing'.

Doing so allows *Roadside Picnic*'s first contact narrative to be read through an understanding of the reflective and introspective qualities of things, and the ways in which things reflect cultural values and realities of twentieth century life in the Soviet Union. Within the discussion of the objects of the text, the landscapes which define the text will be observed as equally important representations of humanity's struggle with knowledge and control. The things of *Roadside Picnic* will also be discussed under the context of their representations of human intelligence, and the difficulties that surface in the attempt to recognize intelligence in a first contact situation.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“Best of all you can write in this field without anyone calling you a Communist.”

–Ray Bradbury

1.1: Motivations, and Critical Responses to *Roadside Picnic*

This paper exists as the inevitable result of my long running fascination with dystopia and, unsurprisingly, the history of the Soviet Union. Both of these obsessions started when I was a teenager, and existed for me as my private adolescent rebellions against the things in my proximity which frustrated me. Dystopia for me is the counterculture of stories which depict the dysfunction of the world, and the Soviet Union was a counter to various Americentric attitudes. There’s a great moment in the film *War Games* when the main character boots up a primitive twentieth-century computer and starts to play a nuclear exchange simulator. The computer asks him what side he would like to play as, the USA or the USSR. He chooses the USSR without hesitation, a moment that struck me in the film, because I knew I would have made the same choice.

There’s something ironic in how, for an empire defined so much by its isolation from the West, the former Soviet Union has become a thing of fascination to many, perhaps for no better reason than its direct opposition to an American way of life. Time has cooled down some of my attitudes about the Second World; it’s hard to think anything positive about Russia after reading Vasily Grossman’s *Everything Flows*, given its brutal depictions of the country’s censorship and fatal political persecutions. The

realities of a brutal century have created hurdles for the appreciation of works which deserve not to be overlooked, because of the misconceptions of Soviet writers.

This was a concern for American science fiction author Ursula Le Guinn, who discussed in *Roadside Picnic*'s foreword what she saw as blindness in some her American contemporaries to the limiting attitudes which emerged in the Cold War: "Part of the American science fiction community has undertaken to fight the Cold War by assuming every writer who lived under the Iron Curtain was an enemy ideologue. These reactionaries preserved their moral purity (as reactionaries often do) by not reading" (v-vi). Her disdain for the dismissal of the east suggests that she sees her community of writers as transcending state boundaries, and those who she opposes as the individuals which refuse to entertain or experiment with the reading of works which they have pre-judged to be unworthy.

Roadside Picnic is a novel about an alien first contact which is never fully realized. Aliens visit earth and subsequently leave, with no formal introduction, forcing humanity to interpret events through various speculative claims which aren't backed by anything solid in the narrative. In some ways it takes a cynical approach to the event, suggesting that humanity is under-evolved, not intelligent enough to communicate with the visitors, but the novel's goal, throughout its various ambiguities and speculations, is to introduce a science fiction world devoid of propaganda.

Le Guinn's praise for *Roadside Picnic* focuses on the ways in which she sees this absence as evidence that the text is ideologically free, one that was never critical of, nor directly praised the administration under which the writers lived: "What they did, which I found most admirable then and still do now, was to write as if they were indifferent to

ideology...They wrote as free men write” (vi). Though the Strugatsky’s themselves told a different story on this account, one bogged with publisher censorship and creative oppression, Le Guinn is right to say that the novel, a Soviet story about Americans, resists the pressure to make an ideological critique. According to her the struggle is more with genre than nationality.

Le Guinn marks how the novel shifts away from typical conventions of science fiction which all too often idolize extroversion and progress:

In a traditional first contact story, communication is achieved by courageous and dedicated spacemen, and an exchange of knowledge, or a military triumph, or a big business deal ensues. Here the aliens were utterly indifferent to us if they noticed our existence at all; there has been no communication, there can be no understanding; we are scarcely even savages or packrats—we are just garbage (157).

There’s an insecurity in humanity around how first contact would change things, and often fiction works hard to reassure its audience of the *greatness* of the speculated event. When we listen to the opening music of *2001: A Space Odyssey* it’s near impossible to think of first contact as anything but the most important and uplifting moment in human history, that all human progress has been directed towards one moment of ultimate progress. The study of this paper is on a work that rejects the assumption that technology or discovery fixes us, or that first contact would be a mutually beneficial exchange. What’s at stake in a first contact story is a personal understanding of self, because the ability to communicate with intelligent life (or inability) is one of the mirrors through which a civilization’s assumption of their own intelligence is threatened.

The greatest personal threats surface with first-contact. In the Pilot episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* for example, titled “Encounter at Farpoint” first contact is neither uplifting nor beneficial to humanity—but occurs only to offer an alien life a chance to mock humanity’s self-image. In the episode Captain Picard of the USS Enterprise is harassed by an obdurate life form calling itself “The Q.” The entity uses its powers of shape shifting to mock Picard by dressing as several figures embarrassing to human history, including a United States Marine Corps Captain, saying “You must return to your world and put an end to the commies. All it takes are a few good men...”

To which Captain Picard retorts “What? That nonsense is centuries behind us!” The subversion of ideology in this scene comes from the separated position that the fiction offers the audience to the realities of 1987 America. The utopian future of *Star Trek* has seen past the hypocrisies of a global struggle based on national identities, and the alien’s mocking approach to human history suggests a general disdain for economic absolutism. The image of the American Military Man is that threatening mirror of first contact which forces an examination of our qualities, a single framed display of the Cold War. In part what this suggests is that the threat comes largely from the outside perspective offered by the strangers; they show up and clearly see the weaknesses which we have become blindly accustomed to. All the while *Star Trek* and its writers have managed to pivot away from a confrontation with a character directly representing the United States military, as they would if the ‘nonsense’ Picard spoke of was directed to a member of the nonsense. The only insult is to the history of the uniform, not the uniform itself.

Like *Star Trek*'s subversion of traditional notions of first contact, much of the criticism on *Roadside Picnic* focuses on the genre bending choices of the novel. For contemporaries of the Strugatskys, such as Stanislaw Lem, the novel also serves the purpose of correcting missteps of the genre concerning the portrayal of aliens in first contact narratives. Lem sees a creative freedom in the ambiguity of a work which never depicts an alien, which he discusses in an article titled: "About the Strugatskys Roadside Picnic". Various similar ambiguities, Lem argues, open the novel's potential:

[The premise] is not, as it might perhaps appear to be, something made up, like a fantasy novel's ad hoc inventions; for our knowledge of the world is acquired in just this way: perceiving some of its laws and peculiarities does not lessen the number of problems left to be solved; on the contrary, while making these discoveries, we begin to realize that there are further mysteries and dilemmas of whose existence we hitherto had no presentiment (321).

Lem here is toying with some of the obstacles that come with writing about nonhuman intelligence. Old writing strategies, such as the creation of a kind of theological parallel which places the alien in a seat of divinity one would expect in a fantasy novel, don't fit with the expectations of a genre which is traditionally defined by its attempt to depict worlds which follow semi-familiar rules. To clarify, science fiction aims for objectivity in the sense that the world must provide, if not direct explanations, some grounding within plausible reality. Also unhelpful in Lem's eyes to this goal of depicting reality is the physical depiction of aliens, as he addresses in the antagonists from Well's *War of the Worlds*, where the invaders take on a grotesque, demonic appearance in the story. It's not just the issue of antagonism either, he argues, which create issues, but the difficulty of

creating something nonhuman: “How can a human author describe a being which is definitely gifted with reason, but which, with equally categorical certainty, is not human?” (317).

What the Strugatskys do differently, according to Lem, is an escape from that theological trapping by leaving the aliens absent from the story altogether. There are no laboratory setting autopsies, no direct interaction of any sort, which allows the book’s characters to move through their own moments of discovery and doubt without the looming presence of a living intelligent omniscient or oppositional force. Non sentient forces work against the characters, but only through the lifeless environments they face.

Lem is also trying to reconcile, with his analysis of the novel’s ambiguities, one of the issues of the book. The text does devolve at a certain point into fantasy, an almost fable-like story of a quest for a magical orb inside the Zone which can grant any wish, a part of the narrative which feels weak. It’s easy to reassure ourselves in reading that the various ambiguities of the text fall in line with that odd shift into a fable; *Where did the Aliens come from? What was their purpose? What is the magic golden orb?* But there’s still a feeling that it doesn’t fit, that the novel last lost track of some of its purpose. Still, it’s fairly reasonable to forgive the fable-shift in the latter half in the novel as a thing which, whether it works or not—still doesn’t need to be speculated on. More interesting is the reflection it causes on the individuals who come into contact with it.

And that’s part of what Lem misses out on in his analysis. A lot of his speculations toward the ambiguities of *Roadside Picnic* aren’t necessary, because they will never be objectively fulfilling. Rather than examine the novel for the ways in which it reinvents the fiction of first contact, or it’s back and forth discussions of God, power,

and miracles, the ideas of this paper will be focused on the objects of the text which open relationships between the characters, environments, and artifacts. The stuff in the narrative which encircles the characters are those lens through which the first contact threat appears, in the ways in which humanity looks at its own position through objects.

The hope is that, with a look at the signifying objects within the text, the things can be seen as extensions of individuals. Doing so suggests that *Roadside Picnic* is not a novel about first contact with aliens, but intimate contact with the self.

1.2 Statement of Intent

In his discourses on Optics René Descartes states “What we know for certain is that it is the soul which has sensory awareness, and not the body. For when the soul is distracted by an ecstasy or deep contemplation, we see that the whole body remains without sensation, even though it has various objects touching it (*The Visual Culture Reader*, 336).

Though Descartes’ statements in Optics work with certain apocryphal assumptions about the nature of objects and how their features are transmitted into a human’s perception, through the ‘soul’ of the object as it was once believed, there’s an idea here which becomes valuable to the study of objects and the human ritualization of them. Descartes hints at a change, originating in the mind, which offers a weight to the world which is not physically attributable. When objects become centered in our attention, through their distinction, or dysfunction, some representational move occurs which creates an association, a connection. That representation, like the ‘soul’ of the object, is not fixated on our sensory input but on an association of consciousness.

In my study of the things and places in *Roadside Picnic* I will stay open to the idea of Descartes’ antiquated notion of the ‘soul’ of stuff, at the very least as an analogy of the value of referential relationships between humanity and objects. When his postulation is assumed, of a consciousness which interacts not with the primordial matter of materials but of the souls within, interactions with the world become dialogues of a spiritual nature.

Throughout the Strugatsky brothers’ novel there appear many significant things which invoke a kind of ritualization; artifacts, possessions, and domestic props which

operate as parts of a psychological struggle; a search for meaning is attempted through the creation of meaning on these objects. Their use, misuse and the intimacy of the characters' relationships with things suggest a manifestation of consciousness inside the thing, a 'soul' of the thing. In the drama of *Roadside Picnic*'s dystopian world, one where people are desperate to possess unattainable knowledge, the Zone and its artifacts, the Zone's wall, and its fablelike golden sphere all exist as idols of the novel's central study; the effects of crossing cultural boundaries when mutual understanding is absent.

Chapter Two: Thing Theory

“All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features—” Herman Melville, Moby Dick

2.1: The Factual Object and the Conscious Thing

In early October 2017 I was housesitting for a friend. I drove back from a midnight showing of *Blade Runner* and the wind was doing this strange thing where it would gust hard and angry, like a sharp exhaled breaths, then remain still for a few seconds. You could clearly see the wind every time it blew because it took the form of a million torn fragments of dried, crispy leaves. I drove up to the house and saw that the horizon was orange and the air smelled like burning wood, so I left, and within a few hours the house was gone.

4,500 homes in Santa Rosa were destroyed and 40 people were dead. All the next day the gas lines were still burning, flames shot up out of the ground like massive blowtorch heads, just burning in scattered spots around flat ashen fields. When I could, I went back to the property where the house had been, and looked around for surviving animals. A few chickens did survive. My friend had a car parked in the front driveway. It was torched, and I took a chunk of aluminum off the ground that had melted and solidified under one of the wheels. I put it in the glove box of my car.

Something was wrong in the act. It suggested some idiosyncrasy, some degeneration of my reasoning skills, for it was completely purposeless as a possession,

and to someone who didn't know better they might have seen a kind of fetishism implied in the act. The material of the molten aluminum had once been part of a car, a friend of mine's car, and it wasn't that anymore. It was no trophy though; I didn't take possession of the thing to stick on my fireplace mantle like the protagonist in Woolf's *Solid Objects*, a short story about a man who quits his day job to spend time collecting pebbles on a beach. It was a thing I didn't want to see, but wanted to have, a connection to the fire, to the destroyed house, and it felt like leaving the thing behind would have been close to leaving behind a part of myself.

The things which we become attached to serve not as ordinary objects but as mediators for an internal struggle which places the deepest patterns of our psyche into a kind of physical reality. There is a thought, attached to the object, and through a fascination with the *artifact* of the thing there is both a history and a personality, in the thing, of a human reality. Perhaps this is just an association to the past, many of these things are weighted for us by the memories they are attached to, mementos which work for us as artifacts because they are often the only physical connection we have with moments that are otherwise inaccessible to us. If so then the mystery of the thing, the fascination I have for it, is where to place and how to think about these mementos, and how they come into being.

This is the foundation for Bill Brown's Thing Theory, in which he extends the distinction between things and objects posited by Heidegger into an exploration of the American literary tradition. In *A Sense of Things* (2003) Brown explores the thing in numerous ways, including as an anthropological artifact and a collection of furniture in a house. Brown's work is, in his own explanation, motivated by a desire to revitalize

something in criticism through a new mode of idiomatic thought. “I wanted to turn attention to things—the objects that are materialized from and in the physical world that is, or had been, at hand.” For Brown the thing is alluring in part due to the ways in which the thing holds the thought within itself. The difference between the thing and the object is explained by Brown as relating to both a human inattention to the object and a fixation on the thing, as he elaborates in a YouTube interview of his work: “I understand objects to be in some sense what we don’t notice...the thingness of objects becomes palpable, or visible, or in some sense knowable when there’s an interruption...when objects become excessive one way or another” (Big Think Interview With Bill Brown).

The interruption occurs in the breaking of an object, when it can no longer serve its original purpose, or when that purpose has been warped past recognition. In an article on Thing Theory in *Critical Inquiry* he posits the thing as between the subject and object, such as a dirty window, which obstructs the view of something outside, and forces a human attention on the window itself and its qualities. The window is an important visualization of the thing, because it suggests that things have become what they are through some form of warping, neglect, mutation, or other change. The focus shouldn’t be on the negative connotation with these kinds of change though—things aren’t dirty windows because they have hampered our ability to see, but rather because they show us something we haven’t before noticed, and create some fresh association in our mind. The broken nature of the thing calls our attention to it, as Brown states in the article:

We look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things...We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for

us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation (4).

A few clarifications will be useful. My molten chunk of car, as a thing which does not function *as* a car, is an extreme example of a thing because of its extreme damage, but it is not the damage of the thing which defines it as such but *my* perception and relationship with that damage. Nor do things have to have physical scars to hold signification. Brown's things are complicated by the ways that some things are temporary, such as an object, which elicits a certain response before returning to normal, broken only in a person's perception of the object, (What Igor Kopytoff calls singularization in the context of commodity valuation in *The Cultural Biography of Things*.) or are damaged in their misuse or ritualization. Objects, as Brown tells us in *A Sense of Things* (2003), carry a certain meaning and value through their objectivity; they are usable as facts. Things can't be used as facts, they are never devoid of an embedded emotion (15).

Brown toys with the notion of the thought—or idea, within a thing as a literal characteristic which becomes embedded within the material fiber of the thing in question; “This idea of there being an ideas in things (literally in them) could actually be when it became a part of daily life” (6). The daily usage, the binding of a thing to a person suggests an extension of the person's consciousness through the thing, but it's a notion that Brown doesn't carry very far; “the effort to redeem things results in a kind of

subjectification of objects that in turn results in a kind of objectification of subjects” (17). The *thought-in-the-object* isn’t tactile, but exists *only* as an extension of the owner’s consciousness, so that in examining things we are only truly examining people.

The thingness of objects in *Roadside Picnic* is clearly seen in every instance of an alien artifact. The novel is full of them, objects left behind after a visitation by extra-terrestrials, stuff which could be considered trash for how the aliens left them behind. The Zones within which the artifacts are found become analogous to a field of trash left after a picnic:

Imagine: a forest, a country road, a meadow. A car pulls off the road into the meadow and unloads young men, bottles, picnic baskets, girls, transistor radios, cameras...A fire is lit, tents are pitched, music is played. And in the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that were watching the whole night in horror crawl out of their shelters. And what do they see? An oil spill, a gasoline puddle, old spark plugs and oil filters strewn about...Scattered rags, burnt-out bulbs, someone has dropped a monkey wrench. The wheels have tracked mud from some godforsaken swamp...and, of course, there are the remains of a campfire, apple cores, candy wrappers, tins, bottles, someone’s handkerchief, someone’s penknife, old ragged newspapers, coins, wilted flowers from another meadow... (132).

The above passage is seminal in the novel, spoken by Dr. Pilman when pressed to give his theory of the visitation by Mr. Noonan. His answer is a rejection of some of the grander notions of what first contact could (and should) be according to other scientists. The visitation for him is just an occurrence of one civilization digging through another’s

trash, misusing the artifacts, calling them by the wrong names and applying the wrong notions of value to them.

The analogy of the picnic centers itself in the transition of an object to a thing. The various utensils of the picnickers are devoid of meaning for them, in their use. When they are abandoned something happens to the individual pieces of trash, they transition to things when their original purpose is unavailable to the new discoverers. The absence present forces a new type of meaning to be created, to fill in the gaps where knowledge cannot reach. The scientist sees this focus when a misappropriation is made. The attempts at progress in the novel, when humans begin digging the alien leavings up and trying to make something both useful and human out of them, break the objects away from their creators, their function, even identity as trash. The things which humanity becomes attached to, as extensions of human consciousness are only a certain understanding away from being trash, and that understanding stems from human intelligence—the examination of the metaphorical dirty window requires a consciousness which lesser animals lack.

In another way, what Pilman speaks of in his picnic analogy is related to problems of intelligent communication. He states first: “Intelligence is the ability of a living creature to perform pointless or unnatural acts” (130). Going off of this definition places intelligence at odds with nature. However any lesser life form reacts when they come across the picnic will be detached from the reality of it, making any interaction ‘intelligent’ by Pilman’s reasoning, but incapable of direct contact or communication with the litterer. Noonan then asks: “A man meets an alien. How does each figure out that the other is intelligent?” (131). What Pilman says is that it’s impossible, that both sides of

the attempted conversation would gage intelligence based on their understanding of their own intelligence.

There's a connection between Pilman's explanation of intelligent communication and Brown's thing. Just as two distinct intelligent life forms have no way of seeing the other as intelligent, a person's connection with a thing is isolated to them alone, even when communally accepted as such. That which makes the thing for a person is a process of their mind, sometimes trying to sort or categorize something related to the object in question, sometimes simply seeing it in a context that can't be broached without the shared experience. The artifacts in the Zones are different for any person to another, and certainly different for their alien creators, even if the thing in question shares the same qualities, because no two individuals are looking for or seeing the thing in the same way or for the same reason.

2.2 The Death of Things

In order to work with the referential artifacts present in *Roadside Picnic* a few thoughts have to be laid out concerning the problems with representation. Brown's ideas of the thing break down when representation breaks down, when the thing exists in a world which is devoid of a human connection to meaning. The thing exists under its own weight as a connective artifact, but that existence is neither reliant nor supportive of the types of representation which seem both inherent and vital in fiction. Representation also creates a paradox—as the observation of a thing, as a thing, removes the thing.

The death of the thing is for Mary K. Holland the event which brings forth a crisis of representation. In *Succeeding Postmodernism* she lays a heavy distrust for the practices of Lacan and Derrida, and by extension Heidegger, referring to their work as 'murderous logic' which limits itself to a perception that the "idea, the word, and the name depends solely on the existence of the thing itself" (134).

In her reading of *The Road* it is the world which kills the thing. The entropy of detail in the landscape, and the withering of life are conditions in which signification ceases. Though *The Road* is an extreme example it helps bring forward the problem of absence to the significance of things and landscapes. If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it, is it possible for the tree to signify? In *Roadside Picnic* the symbols are made by humanity, but without the presence of the extra-terrestrials something of the quality of their artifacts is dead, to *their* understanding, and if the aliens have symbols at all, to their symbols too.

With *The Road* the death of the thing goes as far as to remove signification with the very word, "the idea of the sacred inhabiting the things that express them" (135). The

words of things are part of their nature, part of the representation of the thought within the thing, and words are lost without language, without people. The thing, importantly, is still there, it exists, just as a corpse in a world which cannot perceive it—the hard drive of a computer which can no longer boot up, but without language, or a translator, the thing is absent from understanding. Holland’s thoughts on this are nihilistic—she poses that semiotics becomes utterly useless once the thing is killed:

If representation is entirely dependent on the thing, and the thing can die, what is the point of representation? Who is to say there is any truth in it? Certainly the immortality of the representation over the thing was part of the *jouissance* that swept early postmodernism and helped produce the giddy, carefree tone of so much written in the 1960’s and 1970s. But underneath the play and the gags lies a bitter dread—laughter in the face of the abyss, or of the bomb— (136).

Holland here eludes to, among other things, the relationship between speculative fiction and the darker realities which they mirror, realities that are forced to cling to their signs as a way of escaping the imminent doom of the Arm’s Race. The death of the thing then, for those modes of storytelling sinks into fatalism as the semiotics break down.

In her own discussion on Brown’s work Holland explains in broad strokes his theory as follows “art converts the material...into the signifying object that, once read, becomes the sign-indebted thing. The thing is the object read.” Her takeaway on Brown is: “we are not capable of theorizing things in themselves, only in theorizing our readings of things.” Which is to say that having, and encountering a thing is entirely different from defining a thing as such, and that as soon as something is represented as a thing the connection to the original thing is lost (143).

The question posed is this: if the thing cannot be depicted with language (based on language's tendency to only have the capability to depict itself), or observed as what it is without changing the focus from the thing, to the representation of the thing, then how are these objects supposed to be discussed?

The only real answer is that *something* can be accomplished by following the experiences of the characters who have become attached to objects, but have no cognizance of that relationship. Things can be examined referentially when the characters of the text aren't aware of the effort.

2.3: Thing Theory and Science Fiction

If we believe for a moment that fiction is the lie of circumstance which ferries the audience to a truth of perspective, then we can take science fiction as the genre which lies in such a way as to give us the truth of our own being. What I mean by this is that, within the ‘lie of circumstance’ of fiction; those parts of the narrative which aren’t true to reality, there are intentional maneuvers by the writer to create moments of great insight, experience, and emotion. Science fiction does this in an extreme way, by giving us those moments in settings which force us to grapple with vast landscapes of difference, so that the connections made are always tied to the allegorical underpinnings of the world of the fiction, such as the commentary of *Star Trek*, for example, in speaking of anti-communistic sentiments in America through the tool of an advanced alien.

The premise of science fiction then is the tool of a heightened reality which clings to a notion of quasi-plausibility through its *toys*; the lightsaber, phaser gun, and those artifacts of power, those props of the genre demand a mental exercise from the audience to be convinced of their existence. The audience has to refer back to reality just enough to believe in the toy’s existability. The *lightsaber*, for instance, is only believable as a *sword*, and the only work for the viewer is in placing the sword within the speculative past of *Star Wars*.

The mental exercise of belief separates science fiction from its sister-genre Fantasy. Fantasy is similarly defined by its ‘toys’ but requires an existential acceptance, not in the construction of a thing but in the divinity of it. In Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber one sees the same *thought-in-the-object* which defines Brown’s thing; Luke’s weapon is a family artifact, but is also constrained to the strict definition of science fiction by the

technology it implies, its constructability. Postmodern works however, *Roadside Picnic* included, often provide its artifacts as icons of inherent properties of reality—when the artifacts are more powerful than the human capability of understanding them. They exist before knowledge and they exist despite ignorance.

This defiant mode of storytelling, of showing an impossibility and saying only “it just is” came at a time when modernism was becoming an inherently flawed lens through which to represent the realities of a dysfunctional society. In his essay “*1966 Nervous Breakdown; or, When Did Postmodernism Begin?*” Brian McHale explores the going theories of the start of postmodernism, musing that the variety of theories (everything from Watergate to the demolition of a non-functional modernist apartment complex in Saint Louis) suggests that the start of postmodernism was safest defined as a gradual transition encompassing the long extent of modernism’s degradation in the mid-twentieth century. One aspect of this degradation, which McHale cites as Andreas Killen’s notion of America’s realizations of the “deficits of reality” leans on the idea that the spheres of domestic life had to realize, in the images of civil unrest and the global catastrophes which defined the century, that there was a terrible, existential lie in their way of living. The picket fence, border-collie, and Sunday afternoon barbecues couldn’t mask the destructive realities of the world (392).

McHale marks Science Fiction as unique in the shift for its ability to, as he says “infiltrate avant-garde literature in 1966—one of the early symptoms of the erosion of hierarchical distinctions between high and low strata of culture that came to characterize postmodernism” but to comment on this crisis which created those “deficits of reality” (404). So if postmodernism is seen as a necessary rebellion against the dysfunctional

nature of society, than the dual-realities of both postmodernism and science fiction become aligned with the Thing Theory's dual identity of object and thing, based on the thing's unsettled, ambiguous nature. The thing is always stuck in that representational limbo of being both itself and not itself—because of the presence of its associated consciousness (the brain which made it a thing) and the lack of a universal understanding of it as such. My lump of aluminum, for instance, is only a thing for me—and save for other signifying associations, the only thing keeping the thing from not being a thing is the possession—or perception of its dysfunction. Throw the chunk of metal out in a field and it's trash, place it on a mantelpiece, it's an artifact, singularized, focused.

Twentieth Century science fiction was, as was every aspect of life in the century, divided between being postmodern and rejecting postmodernism based on its willingness to employ this fantasy in place of concrete detail. The fantasy of postmodernism was the divide which separated *Bradbury* and *Vonnegut* from *Wells* and *Heinlein*, the latter of which focused on the hyper-reality of speculative technologies, dedicated to the tradition of telling a believable work of fiction. The former focused on stories with individualistic experiences surrounding archetypical situations which deconstructed the genre. Bradbury's 'Martians' for instance followed the general aesthetics of Martian fiction of the 1940s and 1950's, with its Percival Lowell inspired canal systems and short, stunted Martian men, but the twisted image of the Martian in Bradbury was one of manifest destiny and genocide. A series of stories that refused to be purely about human experiences with Martians or Martian experiences with humans, *Martian Chronicles* was, like *Picnic*, an exploration of the ambiguity of first contact.

Chapter 3: *Roadside Picnic*

“This wasn’t another world—this was his same world turning an unfamiliar side toward him.” – Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic

3.1 What is *Roadside Picnic*?

Roadside Picnic starts with an interview with a Dr. Pillman, an esteemed scientist and member of the *International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures*. He briefly goes over the Pillman Radiant, his discovery of the rough position in space where the ‘Visitations’ are theorized to have originated.

The Visitations are the premise of *Picnic* through which the major problems of the novel emerge. Thirteen years before the novel’s opening six locations on Earth are visited by extraterrestrials, for only a brief few hours. Some of the locations are listed; Siberia, Uganda, the South Atlantic, as well as the novel’s primary location of interest, around a town called Harmont situated somewhere in North America.

These Visitations, and particularly the one around the town of Harmont create their own sequences of plague, destruction, and chaos, the kind which mimics the discovery of the Americas in the ways in which it depicts the destructive power of first-contact.

The technology offered by the Zones is both transcendent to human scientific understanding and existential in consequences it brings. The analogy of the ‘picnic’ discussed in the previous chapter stems from this situation, of humans attempting to understand the technology and culture of a species that is far removed from a human

reality. Though one might assume that the ‘roadside picnic’ theory holds some special legitimacy in the novel given that it makes the title, nothing suggests nor encourages a reading of *Roadside Picnic* which assumes that the aliens have operated in this way, simply leaving behind their trash without any motive for humanity. The book uses the idea instead as a way of moving beyond the assumption of purpose in the Visitation, and in doing so directs the reader not to pay attention to speculations of the Zone’s creation, but to focus on the Zone’s reality and effect on the characters.

The Zones gather substantial interest from militaries, governments, and scientific institutions. The Zones themselves are pseudo-apocalyptic landscapes where undetectable energies create labyrinths of physical paradoxes, floating cars and pits of eternally burning fire dot a territory that in Harmont is secured by a post-visitation wall, constructed by the government, guarding against thieves trying to enter and escape with loot.

The science offered by the visitations comes in two forms; material and physical. The material discoveries of the Zones are found in whatever pieces of junk the aliens left behind, presumably spaceship-parts, devices with unknown functions, and the waste of those devices. The physical discoveries, those that cannot be categorized into materials or collectable items include all aspects of the Zone which deviated from any normal function of physical law; anomalies of gravity, density, temperature, and space.

The materials are called in the novel ‘artifacts,’ which creates a minor confusion when using Thing Theory. In *A Sense of Things* artifacts are defined in accordance with their relationship with colonial history, referring to the ways in which cultural artifacts are blended into or brought forward from historical landscapes (120). Though there are

connections with Brown's ideas about the artifacts of Native Americans and the alien artifacts of the Zone, this paper will stick with the text's definition of an artifact, simply as an alien object taken out of the Zone.

Something *is* strange about the use of the word 'artifact' in relation to scraps and objects which have barely been around for more than a single decade after the Visitation. The word suggests either that the objects in question have some longer history, dating back farther than the Visitation, or that the Visitation warped some conventional notion of time—in the sense that the time of the Visitation, however brief, carried such a significant historical weight that objects from it, even when only a few hours old, were already deemed as 'relics' to be unearthed. This seems plausible—the dramatic event of the Visitation if it happened today would in my mind be the single most significant event of the last thousand years of human history. Given the importance placed on these artifacts of the Zone, it's fitting that the protagonist of the novel makes a profession of stealing them. Redrick Schuhart is a man who, unlike the scientists which speculate over the reasons and details of the Visitation—focuses his attention on the realities which he can interact with directly. In the Harmont Zone he is known as a *stalker*, an outlaw prospector who harvests the artifacts of the Zone and sells them to the black market.

Stalkers are described as “desperate young men who, despite the grave risks, sneak into the Zone and smuggle out whatever they find” (5). They are in the Strugatsky's world a class which functions between the scientist and the soldier, but operate socially under both.

Stalker (Сталкер as it appears in Cyrillic, pronounced 'stullker') is an English-language word which the Strugatsky brothers used to place a western familiarity on a

Russian novel; the characters and setting required an identity which matched their place. Early manuscripts called the Zone hunters ‘prospectors’ and it was, according to Arkady Strugatsky in the afterward one of the last details to be included before the novel was proofed (196). The word stalker found its way into common use in Russia, mainly, as Arkady admits, for Andrei Tarkovsky’s celebrated film adaptation of the text which uses the English word for its title. The word has fallen under an identity in Russia of alienation, class-independence, and holds contemporary nihilistic overtones in Russian counter-culture. The use of the word stalker was inspired by a Rudyard Kipling text *Stalky & Co.* (1899.) which applied the name to a troupe of English 19th century schoolboys.

One would be right to think that Arkady and Boris Strugatsky were in their professional lives fascinated by the west and its literature, and this connection is worth looking into in terms of the larger cultural exchanges of the novel between people and the aliens. Arkady worked for many years as a text-translator. Arkady mentions in the novel’s afterward how he would often make translation requests to his brother for English-to-Cyrillic works of interest (197). That fact alone placed them at a proximity to the notions of the west and its approaches to science fiction. A mention of Vonnegut within *Roadside Picnic* stands with particular significance, given its position at a central conversation about human intelligence: “In general: if an alien creature has the honor of being psychologically human, then it is intelligent. Read Vonnegut?” (131). This is most likely a reference to *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) which plays with the ideas of an alien race which shares ironic similarities with humanity, such putting humans in zoos and treating them as a human would treat a zoo animal. Without going too far into why this

relation to the American writer is important, it gives a sense of the important value placed in the novel of the interactions between cultures. Just as the writers have constructed an American setting which tries in various ways to connect to the west, the narrative itself is concerned with human attempts of connecting culturally with the aliens. Though none of the other sites of Visitation are ever examined, the locations listed, such as Uganda and the South Atlantic suggest that the Strugatskys wanted the world to have a diverse range of interactions with the Visitation. The Siberian site, for instance, is only mentioned in passing, and is apparently so isolated that the Russian government doesn't need security to contain it (120). Though the aliens have come and left, we know that at the very least the Americans are still chasing some version of first contact with them.

The novel is structured around the passing of time for Redrick, moving in and out of prison for his illegal activities. Every setback for Red skips the story forward several years, to new developments in Harmont. The novel's progression sees Redrick's career as a stalker wax and wane around his freedom, and his issues around substance dependency and his duties as a husband and father weigh on him up to the point of the completion of his journey at the end of the novel. Something of the Zone calls to him, and an addiction forms for the man to that alien territory which in turn alienates him from the areas of his normal life. His journey brings Redrick into contact with a quasi-mythical anomaly in the Zone, a golden sphere which is rumored by stalkers to provide a wish to any who find it. The sphere is the apotheosis of the Zone, that artifact which isolates him fully from his own culture. Whether the sphere truly offers him anything in return is a mystery which the novel never answers, but there's the implication that the sphere is a non offering—it cannot be translated, nor understood.

Something happens however, both in the last moments of the novel and throughout, time and time again. People attempt to understand, and control, that which they have no way of even correctly perceiving. Instead of encouraging readers to attempt to understand the Zone, *Roadside Picnic* would have us understand those individuals who try for that impossible understanding.

3.2: Empties

The artifacts of the Harmont Zone become important to the novel virtually within the first page given in Red's perspective—as the idea of the empty is introduced. I want to look at the empty as the first example of an object being signified in *Roadside Picnic*, an artifact which ignites the obsession of one of the Zone's scientists.

The first expedition into the Zone within the novel is also the most costly one. Redrick is employed as a lab assistant, in part for his notoriety amongst scientists as a skilled stalker. Here the relationship between the legal work of the scientists and the black market work of the stalker, which the scientists participate in by patronizing their findings, is blurred. It is hinted that Red was hired as stalker and made into a kind of assistant, while asked to do the same kind of work over the table. Red leads the first expedition legally, on a laboratory payroll, and takes charge over two others, another greenhorn lab worker and Kirill, a scientist who studies 'empties': "It's just these two copper disks" Red explains of the empty, "the size of a saucer, a quarter inch thick, about eighteen inches apart, and not a thing between the two. I mean, nothing whatsoever...you can stick your hand between them—maybe even your head, if the thing has unhinged you enough—nothing but empty space" (8). The empty is a device which cannot be pulled apart into two pieces nor altered or broken in any way, and for all purposes it is useless. There's no utility for it, nor can scientists replicate its absolute force field, but it carries a value because of its anomalous nature. In the context of *Roadside Picnic*, those things which have impossible qualities, such as an empty which cannot be replicated nor effectively studied, become Bill Brownesque 'things' when the scientist finds an irrational value in them.

There is something surprisingly perfect, about the idea of the empty as a thing. The empty is missing something. That much is given with the name applied to it by the scientists. For the scientists the focus is on the vacancy between the disks, and destroying that vacancy. Red notes of Kirill's experiments: "He's absolutely determined to dismantle the empty, dissolve it in acid, crush it under a press, or melt it in an oven. And then he'll finally get it, he'll be covered in glory, and the entire scientific world will simply shudder in pleasure" (8). The passage suggests that at some level, the scientific community is more interested in their conquest of the empty than in finding qualities of it which elevates the empties' importance or contribution to science. The object in question isn't important to them, rather the frustrating way in which the empty represents yet another quality of the Zone which science has yet to understand. Even destroying the empty would, as noted by Red in the above passage, bring satisfaction to Kirill. The impossibility of the object is seen in its broken nature, which he can only fix (as ironic as this sounds) through its destruction.

Thinking about the empty through Bill Brown's analogy of the dirty window, (a window which forces attention not on the scene outside but on the window itself becomes significant to the viewer) Kirill is drawing attention not to the artifact's material substance but its absence, the space between the discs is the portal through which Kirill's vision of the laws of science is blocked. He has to reckon with that absent space on the personal level of a scientist who is failing to conquer an illogical object. He wants to destroy the contradiction of it; and assure himself of his own power.

Kirill catches wind of the possibility that there is a 'full' empty in the Zone, which has a conductive gelatinous mass suspended inside between the spheres, suggesting that

the empties were once a sort of battery. The full empty becomes his new obsession. If he can't destroy the empty, maybe he can find a way to fill it, and clean the 'dirty window' through which his understanding of reality has been threatened.

Kirill asks Red how much it would cost to purchase a 'full empty.' Red's reaction is as follows: "I didn't get it at first, thinking he wants to buy one somewhere else, except good luck finding another one—it might be the only one in the world, and besides, he wouldn't have enough money." The artifacts exist in two different economies; within a global black market and through legitimate enterprises, but there are issues with the values set up in both systems which point to Kirill's relationship with the empty. Priceless artifacts which cannot be bought and useless artifacts which have no value share the commonality of humanity's desire to use them to fix the problems created by the Zone and its existential reality. Through both legitimate enterprises and under the table deals artifacts are exchanged in an attempt to integrate the alien culture with humanity—the artifacts are like bits and pieces of an ancient civilization of which nothing is known, anomalies which humanity fixates on because there's nothing to see which they can correctly comprehend. As examples of this the 'empty' version of the empty, and the 'full empty' both point to a personal attachment and a singularization of these artifacts in the story—however a person looks at an artifact, whatever questions they ask, they are coming into an understanding of their own place, like Kirill, frustrated by the anomalous empties, the individual desires and methods of observation over the thing are direct reflections of that individual's qualities.

Singularization is a method through which Igor Kopytoff discusses the paradoxes of value in his cultural anthropological work on commodity systems in his essay "The

Cultural Biography of Things” found within the larger work *The Social life of Things*, which was credited by Brown as being an influence on his work. Kopytoff fills in details about the ‘thing’ within commodity structures in his essay. Through looking at this approach we can start to get an idea about the effect that these alien artifacts have through their transactions, as Kopytoff says:

The only time when the commodity status of a thing is beyond question is the moment of actual exchange. Most of the time, when the commodity is effectively out of the commodity sphere, its status is inevitably ambiguous and open to the push and pull of events and desires, as it is shuffled around in the flux of social life...There is a kind of singularizing black market here that is the mirror image of, and as inevitable as, the more familiar commoditizing black market that accompanies regulated singularizing economies (83).

An understanding of singularization is helped when we assume that anything which as a monetary value only has value at the exact *moment* of transaction. Fluctuations of price and varying markets aside, what’s suggested is that the *decision* to sell or buy is the decision which gives something its actual value. Singularized commodities are simply those commodities which have become signifying things through their transaction, or through the refusal of a transaction. When something like Kirill’s empty is worth anything more than the value of two copper discs and one vacant space between, then we assume that the difference between the value of those discs and whatever Kirill is spending on these artifacts is an amount of worth which Kirill attributes to something greater than the discs alone. When people have signifying need for a commodity—or

alternatively, when the individual in possession of a commodity deems it unsellable, the commodity is singularized.

The relationship between a Brown *thing* and a Kopytoff *singularized commodity* is that of squares and rectangles. When singularized any object is a thing by the nature of the fixation and price dysfunction of the object. The singularized object has its attention drawn to its removal from a typical market value, and significance emerges. Some things, however, never start as commodities and are never singularized because of this—the difference between something that can't be sold because it's worthless and something that refuses to be sold because it's priceless.

Singularization is a way of seeing goods through obsession, in the case of ritualized cultural artifacts, and shifts in monetary value, as Kopytoff explains in “The Cultural Biography of Things”: “To be a non-commodity is to be “priceless” in the full possible sense of the term, ranging from the uniquely valuable to the uniquely worthless” (75). Kirill's full empty is inherently singularized because, as a one of a kind artifact it would be worth almost any price, but Kirill has additionally singularized the artifact by drawing undue financial attention to it, giving it a price based on his desires.

Kopytoff applies special consideration to the singularization of objects as they pass from one culture to another; “what is significant about the adoption of alien [foreign] objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use” (67). He uses the example of the introduction of the car to the African continent, and the ways in which the inherent culture of the car was shaped by, and shaped the culture of the people using it. The same relationship exists between people in *Picnic* and the aliens, with the added difficulty that the aliens left no

car manuals. Commodities that cross cultural divides sometimes become singularized when its rarity outranks its value. If a small community has one car shared by many people the car becomes singularized because of the necessity of its existence and the difficulty of replacement, a price cannot be named.

When Kopytoff speaks of the singularizing black market as a mirror of a literal black market, he means that the objects pass through singularization in a kind of chaos or value deception (he cites diamonds as an example of the latter) and are “endowed with a fetishlike ‘power’ that is unrelated to its true worth.” He paraphrases Marx’s notion of the commodity as being related to the misperceived production processes of goods. This is not, however, Kopytoff’s interest. He places more focus on those elements of commodities which manifest after their creation, the ways in which their existence in the world shapes and allows its singularization.

The analogy of the black market is very useful, given the literal black markets of *Roadside Picnic*. The stalker’s relationship with the artifact is unique, as we will see, because of a spiritual connection that seems to be present between the stalker and the Zone. The artifacts themselves aren’t coveted in the same way by the stalkers as by the scientists. The benefits of exchanging these artifacts for money, for the stalkers, seems to be secondary to the experience of their collection. Redrick realizes he can sell a full empty under the table for a small fortune, but something in Kirill’s passion for the artifact stops him from seriously considering it; “For an empty empty, Ernest would give me four hundred bucks in cash, and I could bleed the bastard dry for a full one; but believe it or not, that doesn’t even cross my mind, because in my hands Kirill has come to life again—he’s buzzing with energy” (9).

This passage suggests that even when the empty eludes Kirill its presence invokes something in him which activates his passion. Even if he cannot break the empty Kirill is enthralled to open the interface again, to delve back into it. I believe that this is a quality of things which suggests that they are comforting, and also have the potential to be emotionally safer ways of examining ourselves through stuff which we have associated with, put some stake into. Redrick sees this. He acknowledges it enough that he's not interested in placing a value on Kirill's thing over the scientist's value—Red appreciates the value of signifying artifacts and considers them sacred.

Part of the unique charm of the *stalker* as a black market profession is their willingness to think and act in accordance with their personal feelings on a variety of topics. The novel has many instances of stalkers acting against their own interests for the purpose of integrity, and for a suggested piety they have to the Zone. Redrick's relationship with the Zone is important to seeing the ways that the cultural boundaries of humanity and the aliens plays out—the Zone is the only way to attempt communication with the aliens, even if that communication is the one-sided dialogue of the stalkers trying to make significance of the territory, or of the scientists trying to find reason inside it.

3.3: Nuts and Bolts

Empties are one of the things which stalkers take out of the zone—but what they put *into* the Zone is also depictive of their relationship with the site of the Visitation. In this section the nuts and bolts of the stalker will be examined both for their immediate function and for the allusion that they create to realities in Russia—which suggests that the stalker’s interaction with the Zone is an allegory for life in the Soviet Union.

Red, Kirill and an assistant venture into the Zone, intent on finding the full empty. The Zone blends in with both the countryside and industrial landscape of the North American city, occupying space in both. It is surrounded by a wall that is guarded by the state military who seek to keep unauthorized looters out of the valuable and sensitive territory.

Red’s in charge of the expedition, and makes it clear to the others that his word is law. He reminds himself as they enter: “You come back with swag, a miracle; come back with a patrol bullet in your ass, good luck; and everything else—that’s fate” (17). Red’s identity more closely resembles a mystic than a scientist, for how he approaches the activity of being inside the Zone.

The stalker’s way of moving through the Zone appears almost neurotic, he moves with a kind of randomness and instinct, avoiding the deadly traps inside, which they soon encounter. “Over the pile of ancient trash, over the colorful rags and broken glass, drifts a tremor, a vibration, just like the hot air above a tin roof at noon; it floats over the mound and continues, cuts across our path right beside a marker, lingers over the road, waits for half a second—or am I just imagining that?—and slithers onto the field.” (24). The Strugatsky’s have a strong willingness to shift their tone in line with the zoomorphic

associations that their characters make with the anomalies of the Zone. The anomaly goes from being described as a “tremor, a vibration” to a thing that “slithers” as Red imagines a sentience within the anomaly. His self-doubt creates the snakelike entity and the writers adhere to his perception. The Zone is devoid of life until the foolhardy stalkers enter, and then they prescribe life to it, giving the sense that the Zone’s omniscience *does* exist, when it is encountered. To survive and navigate the Zone Red keeps some trash in his pocket.

Redrick always scoops up a handful of nuts and bolts to take with him into the Zone: “We pull on our specsuits, I pour some nuts and bolts from a bag into my hip pocket, and we plod across the Institute yard toward the Zone entrance” (18). Red uses the bolts to chart his path through the Zone, throwing them ahead of him to test the surroundings for invisible anomalies or traps. He describes the process as being the reverse of a Hansel and Gretel crumb trail, because they lay out a path deeper into an unknown, rather than a route back. As the expedition ventures deeper into the Zone: “I take the fifth nut and throw it farther and higher. There it is, the bug trap! The nut goes up all right and starts going down fine, but halfway down it looks like someone tugged it off to the side, pulling it so hard that it goes right into the clay and disappears” (27). Putting the nuts and bolts in conversation with what Bill Brown refers to as ‘misuse value’ we see a reversal of the everyday trash that defines many things. In his discussion of the dislocating elements of modernist paintings and literature, Brown writes: “Forced to use a knife as a screwdriver, you achieve a new recognition of its thinness, its hardness, the shape and size of the handle” (78). Red’s attention is drawn to the small pieces of metal as he pockets and throws them, and each piece passes through his mind as a small marker

of the moment in time, and place where he lets it go. It's almost as if the nuts and bolts are a cataloguing of sorts, Red's way of mentally organizing the layout of a territory which he doesn't have sure knowledge of.

Bill Brown goes on to discuss the transformative effect this has on things. "Part of the point of such dislocations [focusing on trash]...is to interrupt the habits with which we view the world... finding a new place for detritus, recycling it into some new scene, [conferring] new value on it" (78). For Red the new value of the nuts and bolts is the place that they have in his ritual with the Zone. There's a quiet exchange at work here. Each bit of metal Red throws is in a sense like a small projection of fate, testing the territory for its mortal danger.

Discussing the nuts and bolts of the novel is helped along with a small discussion of the relevant aspects of the *Stalker* film, because interpretations have been made to the nuts and bolts in the film and Soviet society. In Mark Le Fanu's *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky* he cites a conversation he had with a Soviet film critic concerning the nuts and bolts in the film:

When the film was shown in front of a native audience, no aspect of it was perceived as more allegorical than stalker's whirling of the bolts in different oblique directions. The making of a detour of several miles to progress a mere hundred paces. 'Of course,' said my friend, 'that's exactly what life is like in the Soviet Union!' (103).

What Red refers to as the Zone's 'fate' then, in the critic's analysis, is a representation of the difficulties of Soviet life. Perhaps, for the Strugatskys, the nuts and bolts, if seen as a representation of navigating through the Soviet Union are not to be taken fully

negatively, but as the growing pains of cultural progress. In an interview with Vladimir Gopman titled *Science Fiction Teaches the Civic Virtues* Arkady Strugatsky spoke of the destalinization of Russia as a period which allowed writers to emerge into a global sense of science: “People stopped being little cogwheels, began to have a sense of themselves as personalities, as people, and not just as parts of some grey mass. Their spiritual upsurge joined with a romantic faith in science, in the omnipotence of science and technology (2).” It’s interesting to note his use of the word ‘cogwheels’ because it gives a sense of his dissatisfaction with a society that didn’t see itself as individuals, but as parts of a larger machine. Redrick navigates through the Zone with loose nuts and bolts, objects he tosses away to chart a path forward, as if he is shedding the chunks of some great machine he was once attached to. Each little thing in his pocket is for him an extension of that oppressive reality, and as he discards them, and navigates forward that reality breaks little by little.

There are other connections with Soviet life as well. The benefit of looking at this connection, in relation to thing theory and questions of cultural understanding is to think of the Strugatsky text as their examination of their own country, a landscape through which there’s a consciousness of the history of its destruction. Redrick’s journey is through the same bleak, urban decay environment which has defined Russia all through the twentieth century, from the physical devastations of the Second World War to the evacuations in areas of the Ukraine and Belarus brought on by the Chernobyl Disaster. The outskirts of the Zone are described thusly: “If you take a quick look at it everything seems OK. The sun shines there just like it’s supposed to, and it seems as if nothing’s changed...there isn’t smoke coming from the factories—*is there a strike on?*...except

there's no one around: no one living, no one dead" (16). *Roadside Picnic* predates the Chernobyl disaster by a decade, but it is often called prophetic to that moment in history, the dangerous areas around the destroyed power plant are in fact coincidentally referred to as the 'Zone of Alienation'. In truth they needed no foresight, because Strugatskys tapped into the deeply embedded civilian consciousness to the destruction of Russia's urban environments.

Andreas Schönle counts the varied and extreme responses by Russian artists and poets to urban ruination in *Architecture of Oblivion: Ruins and Historical Consciousness in Modern Russia*. Though it would be an entire undertaking to move through the many optimistic, bleak, and pragmatic approaches which Russian artists employed to the problem of the destruction of their nation, the point of bringing this into a discussion of the stalker's relationship with the Zone is to look at the many ways in which Redrick operates as a representation of a Soviet civilian. One passage from Schönle reflects the reality of life in the Soviet Union in such a way as to emphasize the importance of the civilians consciousness (or unconsciousness) to their surroundings: "[The virulence of ruin] reflected a propensity to become indifferent to the external world, to develop numbness to sensory impressions, caused by the single-minded focus on basic survival needs" (182). For many, as stated above, survival required a dissonance from the devastation. Another perspective Schönle gives, however, argued that ruins were something that placed an individual firmly in reality and offered a kind of potential within the destruction: "Poking among ruins, one collects odd surviving objects—albums and clocks—but also, it seems, a means of rekindling one's feelings and reawakening to the future" (185).

It seems in the novel that Redrick takes neither approach fully, of pragmatism or dissonance. In doing so his ventures become a spiritual journey, and the artifacts relics of that movement. If thing theory defines the thing as an object which has become broken, and has gained some sense of a person's consciousness within its broken nature, then the idea of the ruin, the Wasteland, and the Zone should be, by their broken nature, seen as the heartlands of humanities things—entire abysses of significance which carry the embedded memories of their pasts on the shoulders of their broken landscapes. Redrick's reaction to the Zone is religious but bitter, he reacts to its twisted notion of ruin value.

There's something personal out there, in the entire wrecked urban wilderness, and its ability to overload with signification invokes his worship and his disdain. When Red returns to safety after the expedition: "My soul is empty...Alive. I got out. The Zone let me out. The damned hag. My lifeblood. Traitorous bitch. Alive" (33). For Red the Zone is an inflation of everything human; all his weaknesses, feelings of betrayal by a higher power, and his ideas of faith and life.

Red wants some escape from the Zone, even when it wears him down, because he sees the potential in it to move away from the human ignorance surrounding it—attempting to penetrate it. He is looking for an immersion, with which he can know the place by becoming a facet of its existence.

3.4 Paraworlds and Walls

As Redrick moves between the Zone and the world outside his attempts at reconciling the Zone with humanity's ignorance is threatened by two forces; the security system set up around the Zone itself, and the presence of existential phenomena which blurs his reality between the two settings. These two forces work in opposite ways to define the cultural crossings of the aliens and humanity. The security attempts to block that exchange from happening, while the existential phenomena—visions of death which come to Red—seem less associated with communication or understanding, but on inexplicable chaos.

The blurred reality first appears to Red in the form of vision that comes to him as his party collects the full empty in the first expedition. He sees, in the Zone, some terrible alternate reality dominated by strange strands of silvery thread: "There really is something sparkling there, silver threads are stretching from the canisters to the floor—looks just like a cobweb" (30). The vision comes to him alone, and the scientist Kirill passes through one of the strands before Red can warn him. The thread sparks, the alternate reality interacts with the original, and then the vision disappears.

Several hours later, when Red and the party have returned to base, Red sits at a bar, conversing with an aspiring stalker. Someone comes to Red with bad news, Kirill has been found dead of a heart attack: "'Kirill!' [Red yells.] And the silver cobweb is in front of me, and again I hear it crackle as it tears...I see nothing but the silver cobweb. The whole bar is tangled in the cobweb, people are moving around, and the web crackles softly as they touch it" (51). The reappearance of the vision on news of Kirill's death removes any doubt of the link between the two, with the added torment of seeing patrons

in the bar touching the deadly threads. The Zone is known to have unexplainable consequences of this nature, killing individuals who enter, or even come in contact with stalkers, long after they have left the Zone.

The world of silvery threads is, in one respect, Red's vision of the doom of all humanity through the corruption of the Zone and its technologies. Kirill has died from his desire for a rare artifact, and the bar patrons, all linked to Harmont's economy structured around the zone seem destined to meet a similar fate. As Red spends more time in the Zone and becomes further and further attached to it he loses his ability to see the outside world without the hellish determinism of the silvery threads. The threads are some alternate dimension of fate—which is either causing or cataloguing the deaths of people around him. His experiences in the Zone; “everything else—that's fate” make him familiar with the control that the Zone has over people's lives. As Valentine points out later in the novel, the effects of the Visitation are far reaching:

We don't know what happened to the poor people of Harmont at the very moment of the Visit. But now one of them has decided to emigrate. Some ordinary resident. A barber...he moves to, say, Detroit. Opens a barbershop, and all hell breaks loose. More than ninety percent of his clients die in the course of a year; they die in car accidents, fall out of windows...And the same cataclysms happen in any town, any region, where an emigrant from the neighborhood of a Zone settles down (139-140).

As just one element of the overarching mysteries surrounding the Visitation, the correlation between contact with someone from Harmont and eventual random death gives a sense that the aliens have left behind a plague. Whether this is contagious or

somehow linked to the power that fate seems to have in the Zone is unknowable, but it strengthens Pilman's picnic analogy. Humanity faces a threat of extinction past its ability to comprehend, save for Red, who in his visions is beginning to see the patterns as they emerge. Red is starting to see the framework of the Zone's chaos and destruction, as it appears under the surface. The vision occurs again later, as Red sits at a café in a city:

He had never felt this outside of the Zone, and even in the Zone it had only happened two or three times. Suddenly, he seemed to be in another world...The air turned hard, it appeared to have surfaces, corners, edges, as if space had been filled with huge coarse spheres, polished pyramids—it was his same old world, turning an unfamiliar side toward him, revealing it for an instant, then immediately sealing it off (83).

Now there are elements in Red's visions of a different structure to the alternate reality he sees, the air in front of him is becoming physical—and he realizes that the vision is only showing him his world—his reality with heightened senses. This change in his perceptive ability goes back to the question of intelligence in communication. Red is starting to be able to breach those barriers which isolate him from the Zone's reality, by experiencing his own reality (which is 'turning an unfamiliar side toward him') through that alien perspective.

Brian McHale's theory of the paraworld from *When Did Postmodernism Begin?* fits in with an understanding of the 'silver-thread' reality as a narrative loop, one where Redrick is entering a reality past his normal life. McHale uses paraworlds in order to discuss mid-twentieth century postmodern science fiction: "The folding of form back on itself, instead of closing the loop and sealing the fictional world off in a hermetic space of

endless recirculation, has the paradoxical effect of opening the fictional world to other worlds: worlds within worlds, alternative universes, paraworlds...” (410). Though McHale’s use of the paraworld seems limited to a textual loop, narratives within narratives, he uses paraworlds to discuss fiction which deals with inter dimensional travel and communication. The ‘folding of form back on itself’ is his way of describing something of the *insanity* of fiction, of the vicious cycle which exists between the text of the work and the text of the conscious interpretation of it, one which then reinterprets, then reasserts itself through the loop of the reader mind’s eye. The reader reads, then adjusts their vision of the narrative according to the emerging details. Redrick is forced through a similar process with the thread, constantly shifting between a Zone altered perception and his own as he begins to make the connections to the Zone’s causative nature—dooming everything it touches.

Roadside Picnic employs the paraworld as a way of constructing Redrick’s mystical relationship with the Zone, but it also influences the way we read the physical landscapes separating the normal world *from* that Zone. To attempt to figure the Zone or it’s artifacts out is to become entangled in this infinite loop, because if the Zone is a territory constructed of things, where each artifact represents the interested parties’ desire for understanding, then the perception will always be caught between the examination of the self and the examination of the Zone—as impossible as trying to look at the surface of a mirror without seeing the reflection it casts.

Even as the paraworld of Red’s visions creates an infinite loop of self-perception the walls surrounding the Zone try to escape that same mirror, by putting a curtain over it, made of Iron. The Berlin Wall inevitably comes to mind when the security encircling the

Harmont Zone is depicted; a perimeter attempting to both isolate a different culture and keep a panoptic surveillance on it. The Berlin Wall ultimately became a mockery of itself as it tore through the standing works of Berlin, ultimately becoming torn apart in its own right when the image of its collapse was more powerful than the image of its oppression. The wall which encircles the Zone in *Roadside Picnic* belongs to neither the territory of the Zone nor the outside; it is trapped in its own space between the mixing of those two cultures, stemming both from the scientists and stalkers. The image conjured by statesmen and security forces of the wall, as described by Noonan, “Impenetrable police lines. A belt of empty land fifty miles wide. Scientists and soldiers, no one else. A hideous sore on the face of the planet permanently sealed off...” is far too optimistic, given that a place with the potential to unlock new advancements in human progress only needs one slip up to change (or destroy) the world. These attempts at containing the wall are mocked not only by the figure of the Stalker, subverting that boundary, but by the failure of the oppressors to understand the nature of the Zone, “Now no one has a clue what it is—a sore, a treasure trove, an evil temptation, Pandora’s box, a monster, a demon... We’re using it bit by bit. We’ve struggled for twenty years... The hell with it! One way or another, I won’t live till the end” (110). Whatever the Zone is, it’s impossible to contain.

Harmont’s security forces are antagonistic to Red throughout the novel, even when he works legally as a lab assistant. They resent something about his ability to survive the Zone, a place that eventually kills other stalkers much more quickly. They try to hunt down and kill Redrick during a later expedition; “The car, motor rumbling steadily as it idled, stood in the same place and continued to probe with its searchlights,

combing the unkempt, neglected graves, the slanted rusty crosses, the overgrown ash trees, and the crest of the nine foot wall that ended to the left. The patrols are afraid of the Zone” (57). The security may watch over the territory, but they are disconnected from it, partly because enforcing a boundary removes an individual’s ability to be fully on either side of that boundary—always trapped in the middle. For the security the wall is a thing constructed out of its representation of their fear, it’s the fragile barrier against the unknown, fragile because it is so easily crossed by Red. For the stalkers the wall is a thing which symbolizes the dysfunction of societies attempt at control, past the brick and mortar is a structure which represents an unwillingness to see the Zone as a place of exchange.

3.5 The Golden Sphere

Though a discussion of the ending of *Roadside Picnic* is unavoidable, it comes with some dread, because of the issues concerning the golden sphere. *Picnic* has a problem, an element of the story which I'm not fond of, and that problem comes from the fact that it devolves into a fairy tale in its second half, gradually, as Redrick is introduced to the concept of the sphere. The 'golden sphere' a mythical orb hidden deep in the Zone which is said to grant a wish to any who find it.

The main issue with the Golden Sphere is that it distracts the narrative from its original purpose; the telling of the after effects of an alien visitation. There's no place for the fable of a wish granting sphere in the analogy of the picnic, unless the sphere itself is another misused artifact too complicated for humans to understand. The sphere just *doesn't make sense*, arguably in a different way than the other ambiguities of the novel, because it suggests some purpose which everything else in the novel lacks. The presence of the sphere suggests a creative design of the Zone itself, a consciousness which shifts the Zone away from a thing of nature, albeit an omniscient alien nature, to a living, acting entity.

Redrick travels to the golden sphere with another young stalker. When they reach the thing they find it to be dull, uninspired, appearing more copperlike than gold. It does, however invoke a comforting feeling in Red when he sees it "the longer Redrick looked at it, the clearer it became that looking at it was enjoyable" (189). Contrasting to the empties or even the nuts and bolts, the sphere has a strange quality of seeming to represent less than its reputation would have you believe. Though Red seems to have *some* connection to it, its dull appearance offers no assurance, and leaves Red feeling

unfulfilled. The empties and nuts and bolts were both seemingly ordinary things elevated by strangeness of either their nature or use, copper discs and loose chunks of metal meant something more for Kirill and Red respectively. The sphere *should* hold meaning with it, it should invoke some of Red's ritual with the Zone, but it doesn't. It comes at the place where the narrative stops, when the search for meaning has ended.

His companion approaches the sphere and chants his wish, "happiness for everyone" and then is immediately torn to pieces by a hidden anomaly.

The stalker then rages and wanders around the sphere, yelling out the closing words of the novel:

If you really are—all powerful, all knowing, all understanding—figure it out!

Look into my soul, I know—everything you need is in there. It has to be. Because

I've never sold my soul to anyone! It's mine, it's human! Figure it out for yourself

what I want—because I know it can't be bad! The hell with it all, I just can't think

of a thing other than those words of his—HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR

EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN! (193).

With these last words uttered the novel leaves us trapped eternally to a cliffhanger of Red's fate. His speech here is another kind of postmodern parareality, because though there are reasons to dislike the fairytale non-ending of *Roadside Picnic*, those reasons are shared with the stalker himself. When another stalker named Vulture claims to know the location of the golden sphere, he asks Red "You think it's a fairy tale?" (59). Red doesn't answer, likely because he is unsure, but the question is certainly on his mind. He goes along with the idea of it, and true to his nature romanticizes it in the bitter way in which he romanticizes the Zone, but, on the last pages he scoffs at the whole arrangement, his

unfair luck, and the cruelty of fate. Within the storytelling the subject is rejecting the story, rejecting his part in it.

If there's any takeaway here it's that Red knows all along that communication is impossible, that there are no answers, no ways of reaching understanding. His demand at the end of the novel, that the omniscient Zone read his own desires “—figure it out! Look into my soul, I know—everything you need is there” is also impossible. One form of intelligence can only see intelligence in a form it's already accustomed to.

Simonetta Salvestroni's essay “The Ambiguous Miracle in Three Novels by the Strugatsky Brothers” discusses the problematic end of *Roadside Picnic* as the culminating moment for Redrick, and, unlike me, takes it optimistically:

It is possible, on a first level, to be content with the degree of consciousness of the stalker-protagonist, to identify with his need for miracles, to leave aside the elements that remain unresolved in this interpretation, and to make his faith in a happy ending—something which the open-endedness of the book does not totally exclude (298).

Though Salvestroni is correct in saying that the unresolved elements of plot in *Roadside Picnic* weigh less heavily on the reader due to Red's lament at the end of the novel, a speech where he either mocks or begs a higher power for clemency to human suffering, it is strange to place Red's statement as positive, or faithful. Salvestroni goes on to say; “Much more than the grace which he awaits and which more likely than not will not come, the "miracle" produced by the exceptional situation in which he finds himself allows a sudden and fleeting insight into the possibilities and essence of humankind's own nature” (301). The ‘insight’ is true, Redrick's encounters with the Zone and his

visions of mortality display starkly the human situation, but his statement is not one of faith but of defiance. It's hardly a miracle for Red, or the reader, because there's no 'hope' in it, on that accord it's a non offering.

There's relief though, and catharsis. Red's concluding speech comes not from the supposed 'happy ending' which ultimately doesn't exist but in the Redrick's refusal to play the game of the wishing sphere, to give it an answer that he knows will always be flawed. He criticizes the sphere itself for not simply giving him whatever he *should* wish for, which in my mind is a reasonable complaint. He instead reiterates the other stalker's wish "happiness for everyone" with the bitterness of a man who has reached the limit of his willingness to exist in a world which uses people, to death, every time. Red's is the catharsis of pragmatism, of knowing that things will be bitter and embracing the bitterness.

Redrick's favorable qualities are seen the clearest from the resilience of his curmudgeon attitude. His bad fortune has failed to remove the endearing qualities of his bitter nature. He is like a man who never wants to leave his bed, never wants to stop smoking, has never even entertained the idea to quit drinking, but has such an inherent love for people that, despite his foul tongue, rough nature and disdain for authority—he sees, in that pragmatic way, the harshest and most honest form of the human condition—and yet he accepts humanity.

Conclusion

As a novel that reimagines the fiction of first contact, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* offers a dark look at humanity's desire to progress past its primitive nature. The artifacts of *Picnic's* Zone create moments of significance for the character Redrick and others in the novel, as their status, function, and value is called into question.

First contact is more of a mystery to a modern audience than it has any right to be, because at the core of any such event will be a crucial and existential examination of human nature. No matter how it could happen it would have some predictable effects, on both how people view their place in the universe and what they expect that universe to offer them. *Roadside Picnic's* version of first contact comes without communication, so that humanity is isolated in those first contact patterns, left to fend for itself in a world of dangerous potential.

To acknowledge another life as intelligent one can only look within, to understand what gives any individual their own consciousness. To be intelligent is to create something beyond the physical world, beyond mere objects, and to make souls in their surroundings which reflect their own qualities. It's unclear if the aliens of *Picnic* would be capable of such an act, of representing something as a symbol for something else—but if, in the Zone, Redrick found something greater than himself—if the way in which that world appeared to him came with something of a soul already embedded in its fibers, then that would be a way to see another life, another type of life—in a very human way.

In reading the Strugatsky novel one should pay attention to the ambiguities, but the ambiguous details of *Roadside Picnic* aren't the heart of what makes the story both

lasting and provoking. The heart of the novel is displayed in the stalker and the Zone, inventions which offer a way of thinking about the world, and our relationship to it.

The setting of *Picnic* is a universe of impossibilities, where transcendent technologies have made a labyrinth of the world, and in those strange details, the small mentions of various unexplainable curiosities, horrors, and marvels, the universe of the fiction becomes genuine. It feels like a place to be traveled through and explored, despite its deadliness and foreboding nature. This is what good fiction does. It offers us a kind of truth, in its attempt to create something honest.

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