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AELITA (1924, 35mm, 90 mins)

Directed by Yakov Protazanov. Adapted from the novel by Alexei Tolstoy. Designed by Sergei Kozlovsky, Alexandra Exter, Isaac Rabinovich, and Victor Simov.

With Valentina Kuinzh', Nikolai Tseretelli, Konstantin Eggert, Yulia Solntseva, Yuri Zavadsky, Igor Ilinsky, and Nikolai Batalov.

In the aftermath of the civil war, and with new solvency achieved through NEP economic experiments, the Soviet film industry was prepared, in 1924, to undertake a production that would rival the foreign films that were arriving in Moscow in the 20's. The film artists collective Russ decided to film Alexei Tolstoy's story of three Russians -- an engineer, a red army soldier, and a detective -- who fly to Mars and become involved in a revolutionary uprising among the Martian people: while there, one of them -- the engineer -- has a love affair with Aelita, Queen of Mars. To direct this monumental story, Russ induced the most experienced director of the pre-Revolutionary period -- Yakov Protazanov -- to return from exile in Paris. When the film appeared, it received a great deal of publicity and a cool reception from the critics, who expected a more "artistic" picture. But the people loved it, identifying strongly with the soldier Gussev, a man of the people, and with the amateur detective Kravtsov (wonderfully played by the comic actor Ilinsky) -- rather than with the petty bourgeois engineer, who the scenarists had designated the hero. The film is not well paced, but the acting is good, as is Protazanov's handling of the crowd scenes, and the scenes of Moscow daily life. The art direction is the most famous attribute of AELITA: the sets and costumes reveal in the fantastic Martian landscape a cubist design that resulted from Protazanov's experience in the French art world as well as from the direct participation of artists from the Russian constructivist movement.