

Document Citation

Title	Aelita, queen of Mars
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1991 Sep 10
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Public relations -- Motion picture industry -- Soviet Union Motion picture industry -- Soviet Union Expressionism (Art) Constructivism (Art) Advertising -- Motion pictures -- Soviet Union Public relations -- Motion picture industry -- Soviet Union Motion picture industry -- Soviet Union Expressionism (Art) Constructivism (Art) Advertising -- Motion pictures -- Soviet Union

Film Subjects

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Aelita, Protazanov, Iakov Aleksandrovich, 1924

By J. Hoberman

Chinese Ghost Story III

Directed by Ching Siutung

Written by Tsui Hark

and Seto Waichuo

Produced by Hark

Released by Golden Princess

At the Sun Sing Theatre

Opening September 5

Aelita—Queen of Mars

Directed by Yakov Protazanov

Written by Fyodor Otsep and

Alexei Faiko from the

novel by Alexei Tolstoi

Produced by Mezhrabpom-Russ

Distributed by Kino International

At Film Forum

September 9 through 10

Although observers more knowledgeable than I have detected a nascent political allegory in the *Ghost Story* trilogy, perhaps extrapolating the mountain devil to Tiananmen Square, such concerns are invisible to the uninitiated. Not so the social significance of the equally delirious *Aelita*, which, first released in Moscow 67 years ago this month, reaches its giddy climax with a proletarian revolution on the planet Mars.

Aelita, showing Monday and Tuesday as part of Film Forum's annual fantasy/horror/sci-fi summerfest, was the first blockbuster of the infant Soviet movie industry. Loosely based on Alexei Tolstoi's bestseller, it was 18 months in the making and, supported by an influx of German capital, shot at a prodigal ratio of 8:1. The film grandly deployed a cast of thousands and employed a number of well-known prerevolutionary talents—including Tolstoi and director Yakov Protazanov, returned émigrés both.

Like many subsequent science fictions, *Aelita* opens with a cryptic transmission from outer space. The scientific excitement, however, is quickly subsumed in soap opera. The engineer Loss suspects his wife, Natasha, of carrying on with the sleazy official Erlich—the erotic intrigue played out in a distinctive milieu of committees, communal apartments, and ration tickets. Meanwhile, as a title informs us, "Jealousy Was No Stranger to the Martians." Studying Earth through a high-powered telescope, the princess Aelita, much to the disgust of her consort, has fallen in love with Loss, little realizing that, to escape from his increasingly sordid domestic melodrama, Loss will soon commandeer a rocket headed for her planet.

Aelita set out to be the Soviet equivalent of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—the 1920 thriller that put post-World War I German cinema on the map. Where *Caligari* popularized an already passé expressionism, *Aelita* made use of a particularly Soviet modernism, including a heavy infusion of Meyerholdian avant-vaudeville. Dressed in geometric aluminum and glass tutus, the female Martians more than match the curved stairs and translucent columns of the ultraconstructivist sets (which, as in *Caligari*, turn out to be a subjective hallucination). Mars is total delirium; its denizens would be the best-dressed nightclubbers in New York. "Touch my lips with your lips as those Earth people did," Aelita—a sensuous pixie with bobbed hair and a slinky metallic evening gown—commands Loss. In the finale, everything gets mixed up—Loss imagines that Aelita is his unfaithful wife and incites the local proletariat to "unite into a family of workers in a Martian Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," the set suddenly crammed with battling soldiers firing flashlight ray-guns.

Aelita may have been the most elaborately realized space opera since Méliès's 1902 *Voyage to the Moon*. (The vision of slave workers in Cubo-Futurist helmets sweating over star-shaped gears anticipates Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, even as the mixing of conjugal paranoia with delusions of revolutionary grandeur oddly forecasts *Total Recall*.) Still, just as evocative as the Martian sets are those scenes shot in the streets of Moscow during the winters of '23 and '24. The bundled-up extras, the steam shovels and scaffolding, the interpolated footage of peoples' nurseries and revolutionary pageants, the semidocumentary plot devices hinging upon food shortages, housing problems, queues, the cast of opportunistic speculators and nostalgic bourgeois are bizarrely juxtaposed against the constructivist extravagances. Although the old Soviet Union now seems like science fiction itself, for the Moscow of 1924, the future was Now.

Like *Caligari*, *Aelita*'s release was preceded by a carefully orchestrated, deliberately enigmatic ad campaign. Moscow was plastered with the Martian message "ANTA . . . ODELI . . . UTA"; other cities were leafleted from the sky. Abroad, *Aelita* was the most publicized Soviet film before *Potemkin* (1925); at home, it was



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at once a popular success and the most reviled movie of the mid-'20s—a target for vanguard film critics and doctrinaire politicians alike. One caveat: Film Forum's promotion of *Aelita*'s "NEW RESTORED PRINT!" is a bit overstated—the 16mm print being shown is several minutes shorter and several generations older than the version that barnstormed this country's media centers earlier this year. ■



Mars needs Lenin: Before *Potemkin* there was *Aelita*.