

Document Citation

Title	Soviet cinema in the silent era, 1918-1935 -- excerpt
Author(s)	Denise J. Youngblood
Source	<i>UMI Research Press</i>
Date	1985
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	30-33
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Mezhrabpom-film, Soviet Union Protazanov, Iakov Aleksandrovich (1881-1945), Moscow, Soviet Union Motion picture industry -- Soviet Union
Film Subjects	Aelita, Protazanov, Iakov Aleksandrovich, 1924

[Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era]

Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935

by

Denise J. Youngblood

Assistant to the Executive Director
American Association for the
Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS)
Stanford, California



UMI RESEARCH PRESS

Ann Arbor, Michigan

separated in photography, he thought that ideology could be gracefully inserted in the film.⁴⁰

Dziga Vertov and the cinema constructivists had a vision of Soviet style—the complete abolition of the fiction film with total rejection of art in cinema. Voznesenskii was offering a more man-centered approach—the actor and the story would have the central place, and *after* that, technique and propaganda.

Political leftists, represented by Vladimir Erofeev and Nikolai Lebedev (and *Cinema Gazette* as long as it was under their editorship, through 1924), were in an unenviable position. While they adamantly rejected what they thought of as “bourgeois” art, they recognized that Vertov’s radical aesthetics were incomprehensible to the masses—and they were sincerely dedicated to the principle of bringing cinema to the people. More and more, such people were drawn to Voznesenskii’s view of cinema.

Consequently, the earliest statement of a realistic aesthetic for Soviet cinema appeared in a *Cinema Gazette* editorial. In all areas of the arts, it said,

... the worker and worker-intellectual consumer demands *intelligibility, simplicity, logic, lifelikeness, orderliness, way of life [byt]*. The worker does not suffer... affectation, idiosyncrasy, mysticism. The world view of the working class, Marxism, is the most well-defined and harmonious of existing world views. Only one style, realism, corresponds most to this world view.⁴¹

What genre best corresponded to realism? For the time being it seemed that “contemporary revolutionary-detective stories full of heroism, struggles, the reality of the present day and of contemporary life” would be ideal. (The comedy-adventure *Little Red Devils* was touted as an example.)⁴² Because of the ease with which the historical film could turn into a costume drama,⁴³ contemporary subjects were strongly preferred. Unfortunately for the development of Soviet cinema, ideas on the “realistic” treatment of contemporary life were peculiarly Soviet and, in the end, not very realistic.

Films

“Export” Films

Although activity in the film industry had greatly increased in 1924, very few movies were made. The film of the season was without a doubt prerevolutionary director Iakov Protazanov’s first Soviet production, *Aelita*. Produced by Mezhrabpom, *Aelita* was promoted with unusual flair for the Soviets: advertising leaflets were dropped from airplanes, and a slick, Western-style program bragged about the 3,000 workers and 22,000 meters of film shot.⁴⁴ (Such extravagance would not long be a boasting matter.)

Aelita is remembered in film history for being the rare science fiction silent movie and for the constructivist sets and costumes designed by the well-known artist Aleksandra Ekster. There was nothing else innovative about it. Based on Aleksei Tolstoi’s popular novel, *Aelita* is the tale of a Soviet engineer who during the Civil War builds a spaceship, travels to Mars, and becomes involved in a proletarian revolution. Obvious concessions to Soviet power in the film include a shot of women putting on shoes at a ball cut to peasant women putting on bast shoes, to name one example. Titles about the joys of building a revolution are tendentious and the ending is pious: dreams are fun (the adventure was, after all, only a dream), but Soviet citizens must remember the “real work” that lay ahead. Yet Soviet life seems so drab by comparison—there are hints in the film of food shortages—that we may easily accept that Soviet earthlings prefer fantasizing about Mars to thinking about “real work.”

The appeal of *Aelita* is an unabashedly romantic one, with the very young, plumply sensuous, and scantily clad Iuliia Solntseva (a major film star and later director) in the title role of the Martian princess. Typical of prerevolutionary directors, Protazanov relied heavily on theatrical talent, and most of the principals—Solntseva, V. E. Kuindzhi, N. M. Tseretelli, Konstantin Eggert, and Igor Ilinskii—were theater actors. In short, *Aelita* was an old-fashioned entertainment movie using theater actors, exotic glamour, and a certain amount of bare flesh to good purpose.

Dissatisfaction with *Aelita* centered on its budget, but the polemics surrounding it indicate the attitude toward both “fellow travellers” like Protazanov and toward entertainment films. The charge of “commercialism” was directed not only at *Aelita* but at the films of Mezhrabpom in general.⁴⁵ Mezhrabpom was an important *independent* production company founded in 1921 with foreign capital; the name is an acronym for International Workers Aid.⁴⁶

It was alleged that Mezhrabpom deliberately produced films to be “hits” (that is, financially successful) for *Western*, not Soviet, audiences. In other words, Mezhrabpom was accused of making what came to be known as the “export” film. The proof of this indictment was *Aelita*, but the brouhaha over *Aelita* was a two-pronged attack, directed not only against policies of a particular studio but also against “old” specialists working in Soviet cinema. At forty-three, Protazanov could not of course really be considered “old,” but he already had a long history in the movies. From 1907 to 1917, he had directed eighty movies, so even considering the short length of these early films, he was an experienced director by any standards. Protazanov had been in self-imposed exile from 1920 to 1923, and his return to the Soviet Union was of great importance in providing his countrymen an example both of solid professionalism and dedication to the entertainment film.

The harsh criticism of *Aelita* may have caused Protazanov to reflect on the wisdom of his decision. Vladimir Erofeev called for making dozens of *Little Red Devils* rather than *Aelitas*, asserting that a story of love and intrigue on Mars made Soviet reality look prosaic in the extreme. The public, according to Erofeev, did not need "philistine dreams about bourgeois Mars . . . [since they] live on Soviet earth."⁴⁷ Another critic (identified as "N. L.," undoubtedly Nikolai Lebedev) felt that the film, although "technically well-enough done" was "pretentious." Lebedev pointedly noted that since Protazanov had been abroad during the Civil War, he did not understand its implications, and had therefore removed the ideological significance of Tolstoi's novel from the film. Significantly, Lebedev said that the film's chief fault was that it was "ideologically unprincipled."⁴⁸

Erofeev and Lebedev were right in rejecting the putative revolutionary aspects of the movie. The Martian revolution in *Aelita* was staged for entertainment value alone. They were also right that Protazanov's film could not be faulted technically, for his films were always professionally finished. The *Aelita* affair was definitely a blow to Lev Kuleshov's hopes of cultivating an atmosphere of mastery first, ideology second. It was unfair to say, as it was said, that because Protazanov had made a technically literate movie in *Aelita*, the problems of backwardness had already been overcome. Protazanov's technical expertise had been hard earned prior to the Revolution and reflected absolutely nothing about the state of Soviet cinema. Nonetheless, the struggle between the advocates of ideology and those of technical preparedness had begun. And it was not the last time the charge of "commercialism" would be hurled at Mezhrabpom.

Despite the disapprobation in the cinema press, others reacted to *Aelita* more positively. *Cinema Gazette* printed large advertisements for *Aelita*, quoting from favorable reviews in newspapers like the Party's organ *Pravda* and the military's *Red Star* (*Krasnaia zvezda*). Whether this was *Cinema Gazette's* sense of fair play or their own commercial deviation is impossible to judge.⁴⁹

Comedies

A more gifted film which received comparatively little notice was Lev Kuleshov's first full-length work, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (*Neobychainye prikliucheniia mistera Vesta v strane bolshevikov*). Kuleshov had directed Civil War agit-films which have not survived, but this was his first movie employing his specially trained collective. Vladimir Erofeev dryly noted that although *Mr. West* showed Kuleshov's mastery of American techniques and his collective's formidable acting ability, it was not a suitable demonstration of his talents.⁵⁰

Erofeev displayed a singular lack of humor, for *Mr. West* is a hit satirical romp. Mr. West (P. Podobed), the president of the YMCA, comes to Soviet Russia with his trusty bodyguard, the cowboy Jeddy Barnet), to protect him from the savage Bolsheviks. Jeddy dresses in cowboy regalia: wildly furry chaps, a ten-gallon hat, six-shooters. His shotgun on top of the car. West and Jeddy meet up with a gang of "people" (down-and-out aristocrats and other déclassé elements) and out adventurers: the countess (Aleksandra Khokhlova) and her cagily cohorts (Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Komarov). The hoax is implausible to bear repeating, but *Mr. West* is so high-spirited and natured that its narrative deficiencies make no difference. It pokes fun at American stereotypes, but also takes sly digs at the stock figures of films.

The physicality of the jokes—Jeddy's hijacking a sled and walking tightrope between buildings (which nearly killed Barnet and later caused a fight between him and Kuleshov)—are reminiscent of American slapstick comedy, but the sharpness of the satire and the high level of the acting make *Mr. West* a classic in its genre. The movie introduced the most improbable film star of the decade, Kuleshov's gangly and eccentric wife, Aleksandra Khokhlova. From a traditional silent film heroine, she was nonetheless a brilliant actress.

Mr. West's zaniness quite unexpectedly fizzles out at the end; after the villains come to justice, Mr. West tours the "true Soviet Russia" and sees evidence of the great new life. Was Kuleshov forced to end the movie this way? Some reviewers euphemistically noted the "slow-down in tempo" as unfortunate.⁵¹ Ironically enough, considering his later association with Kuleshov on another "American" picture (*By the Law* [*Po zakonu*], 1928), the formalist critic Viktor Shklovskii openly criticized *Mr. West* for not being "Russian." Asking why *Mr. West* "emigrated," Shklovskii said: "The Russian picture is more interesting than Mr. West against the background of the Kremlin."⁵² But *Cinema Week* reported that viewers liked the film because it was American in style, comments being that it was "witty, easy to watch . . . not a cine-opera."⁵³ Kuleshov wanted to entertain the viewers, and he succeeded, but he continued to be attacked for his fresh "American" approach.

Mr. West did not get the attention it deserved as the first step to Soviet comedy; nor did the other major comedy of the year, *The Cigarette Girl from Mosselpro*; (*Papirosnitsa iz Mosselproma*; Iurii Zheliabov director). *Cigarette Girl* was in fact criticized for not being a proper comedy, for lacking "class-consciousness" and being "typically sentimental." This is significant because like *Mr. West*, *Cigarette Girl* is a genuinely Russian film which satirizes NEP life and the making of movies. The cigarette girl (Solntseva) is "discovered" by a film crew; the plot revolves around the competition of her various admirers for her attention. These are an American



Left, Iakov Protazanov, upper right, Vladimir Gardin,
lower right, Iurii Zheliabuzhskii