



Aelita, The Queen of Mars

Essay by David Shepard

"It has interplanetary travel, romance, murder, theft and fraud, a comic detective, thoughts about mankind's future in space (also comic) and political comment (ditto). Its scenes here on Earth are, well, earthbound; the acting is naturalistic (looking forward to Lee Strasberg). Its Mars, by contrast, is out of this world." — Ben Sonnenberg in *The Nation*, March 9, 1992

AELITA, THE QUEEN OF MARS is a Socialist science fiction spectacle and in 1924 was the first big-budget movie from Soviet Russia. A year and a half in the making, it was intended as ideologically correct mass entertainment which could compete both in Russia and abroad with the Hollywood films that dominated Soviet and world screens while also earning plaudits for artistic innovation such as had greeted *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and other German expressionist films.

AELITA is a fantastic adventure about Los, an engineer living in Moscow, who dreams of Aelita, the Queen of Mars, and builds a spaceship to take him to her. They fall in love, but Los soon finds himself embroiled in a proletarian uprising to establish a Martian Union of Soviet Socialist Republics! This story is based loosely upon a novella by Alexei Tolstoy, a distant relative of Lev Tolstoy, who had established a reputation for popular novels, poetry and drama before 1917 and who had just returned to Moscow after emigrating during the Revolution. The director, Yakov Protazanov, was a pre-Revolutionary Russian film giant who was persuaded to give up a successful new career in France and Germany to offer his skill and prestige to the untried Soviet film industry.

The return of the artist whom Denise Youngblood has called "the king of Russian silent cinema" energized Protazanov's collaborators and many others who were trying to build a new film industry out of practically nothing. "Work on the screenplay was neither fast nor smooth," recalled co-writer Alexei Faiko. "Protazanov had all sorts of demands...always searching and striving for something new and more interesting."

The most interesting element in this film — the basis for its enduring fame — is its design: amazing "Martian" costumes and sets by the distinguished abstract painter Alexandra Exter and her accomplished protégé, Isaak Rabinovich. Informed by cubism and other design trends in France, Italy and Germany, they are executed in the distinctively Russian avant-garde style of the day, known as "constructivism." The producers struggled to provide scarce resources: 70,000 feet of negative film that had to be purchased abroad for precious hard currency, aluminum and celluloid to build Mars, a cast and crew which Ms. Youngblood calls "one of the most impressive ever assembled in the 1920s for a single picture," and literally thousands of extras.

For all the notoriety of the Martian sequences, the main body of the film is set in Moscow. It captures a great deal of the feeling and detail of early Soviet life and has been described by Ian Christie as "the key film of the early NEP (New Economic Policy) period,



born of a unique moment in post-Revolutionary Soviet society, reflecting its realities as well as its aspirations in a complex and original form and linking its hitherto isolated cinema with important currents in world cinema.”

The Soviet opening of AELITA was accomplished by ballyhoo unprecedented for a Russian film. We are told that in Moscow, the theatre facade was decorated with “giant figures of Aelita and Tuskub, the princess and king of Mars, surrounded by illuminated columns and geometric shapes approximating to the film’s ‘Martian’ decor and illuminated by flashing lights.” The stampede for entry to the theatre apparently kept Protazanov himself from seeing the premiere! In provincial cities, airplanes dropped thousands of leaflets advertising AELITA. It was indeed a popular sensation, but its very success fueled a strong critical and political backlash. It was attacked for its Western-style escapism, commercialism and ideological compromise. It was criticized for everything from having cost too much to employing artists “alien to the working class.” And after the emergence of quite a different revolutionary Soviet film style typified by the work of Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Vertov, AELITA was withdrawn from circulation.

Only still photographs recalled the memories of the movie’s beautiful design. Winifred Bryher, the first English-language historian of Soviet film, was unable to obtain a screening in 1928, and by 1948 British film director and scholar Thorold Dickinson wrote wistfully that “it would be interesting to meet someone who can recall having seen AELITA.”

Stung by the drubbing given this work he had made with his whole heart, Protazanov never again risked a movie with grand sets or elaborate special effects, but he enjoyed a far more productive career than the more experimental Soviet directors, making sixteen popular and successful films prior to his retirement in the early 1940s.

Despite its long inaccessibility, AELITA has survived in excellent condition. This bizarre and haunting work has at last been restored to view in a first class edition with new English intertitles (set in Futura, the most modern typeface of the 1920s) and a new piano score by Alexander Rannie based upon vintage themes by Sergei Prokofiev.

[Buy AELITA, THE QUEEN OF MARS on Manufactured-On-Demand \(MOD\) DVD.](#)

**From the Blackhawk Films® Collection
Presented by Flicker Alley**