Of Utopias and Dystopias: Ten Russian Science Fiction Movies from the 1920s to the Present

The pursuit of a technological utopia occupied an important, perhaps even central, space in the Soviet political and ideological imaginary. An epitome of high modernity itself, the Soviet Union pioneered and advanced technocratic solutions in many domains, including Arctic exploration, the nuclear arms race, and the conquest of outer space. This semester, the Soviet and Post-Soviet Club at the Polonsky Academy revisits Russian science fiction movies made between the 1920s and 2010s to explore how they reflected specifically local ideological preoccupations about the future and at the same time posed important ethical questions about the role of technology in the society that are still of great relevance and general interest in our world today.

Aelita: Queen of Mars

The enduring importance of Aelita, based on Aleksei Tolstoi’s novel of the same name, derives from its early science fiction elements. The film portrays a young man traveling in a rocket ship to Mars, where he leads a popular uprising against the ruling group of Elders, with the support of Queen Aelita who has fallen in love with him after watching him through a telescope.

The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin

Based on Aleksei Tolstoi’s novel The Garin Death Ray, this film tells of a talented inventor who has created a machine of unprecedented destructive power and is obsessed with world domination. In his manic quest he commits one crime after another, without considering the dreadful potential consequences.

The Sannikov Land

Loosely based on the novel of the same name by Vladimir Obruchev, The Sannikov Land tells the story of an exiled settler, Alexander Ilyin, who persuades Trifon Perfilyev, the owner of gold mines, to sponsor an expedition in search of Sannikov Land, a legendary warm land beyond the Arctic Circle.

Heart of a Dog

Old Prof. Preobrazhensky and his young colleague, Dr. Bormental, have inserted a human pituitary gland into a dog’s brain. Soon after, the dog starts to look human. The main question raised is whether someone who looks human is really human. Based on Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel.

Solaris

A psychologist is sent to a space station orbiting a planet called Solaris to investigate the death of a doctor and the mental problems of cosmonauts at the station. He soon discovers that the water on the planet is a type of brain that brings to the surface repressed memories and obsessions. Solaris is often cited as one of the greatest science fiction films in the history of cinema.
**Stalker**
Near a gray and unnamed city is the Zone, a place guarded by barbed wire and soldiers, where the normal laws of physics are subject to frequent anomalies. A mysterious figure known as the “Stalker” guides two men into the Zone, specifically to an area in which deep-seated desires are granted. Repeatedly called one of the best cinematic dramas of the twentieth century.

**Dead Mountaineer’s Hotel**
Police are called to a lonely hotel in the Alps. When an officer gets to the hotel everything seems to be alright. Suddenly an avalanche cuts them off from the rest of the world and strange things start happening. Brilliant soundtrack by Sven Grünberg and costume design by Moscow fashion designer Slava Zaitsev.

**Hard to Be a God**
A group of thirty scientists travel from Earth to a nearly identical alien planet that is culturally and technologically centuries behind. The inhabitants of this planet have brutally suppressed a Renaissance-like movement, murdering anybody they consider an intellectual, and thus the planet is stuck in the Middle Ages. Filming began in 2000 and continued on-and-off for a period of thirteen years, and the movie was completed only after the director’s death.

**Kin-dza-dza!**
A dystopian black comedy cult film of the Perestroika period, *Kin-dza-dza!* tells the story of two Russians who push the wrong button on a strange device and end up on the telepathic planet Pluke with its strange societal norms, depleted resources, extreme inequality, and oppression.

**Attraction**
An alien spaceship crash-lands in Moscow’s Chertanovo district. The Russian government immediately introduces martial law, as the locals grow increasingly angry at the unwelcome guest. Replete with expensive special effects, the movie can also be read as an allegory of social relations and tensions in contemporary Russia.

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The screenings will take place at the Polonsky Auditorium on Mondays at 18.00, starting with a brief introduction by Dr. Pavel Vasilyev. All movies will be screened in the Russian original with English subtitles. After each screening, there will be an opportunity for informal discussion.

By invitation only
If you would like to join the Movie Club, please contact Dr. Pavel Vasilyev at pavelv@vanleer.org.il