

Aelita

YAKOV PROTAPANOV

1924

Yakov Protapanov's *Aelita*, sometimes suffixed in English as *The Queen of Mars*, has proven remarkably timeless for a film that is in so many ways a product of its age. Certainly, its position as one of silent cinema's great oddities and landmarks is justified. The "first Soviet sci-fi blockbuster", it was the departure point for the nation's long and diverse tradition of extraterrestrial filmmaking; in international terms, Aleksandra Ekster's production design has proven hugely influential, borrowing on and expanding the German Expressionist school and providing the Constructivist avant-garde with one of its greatest monuments. And yet, despite its futuristic outlook, it is also a time capsule from the Soviet 1920s, with all their experimentation, speculation, and agitation.

Protapanov's career tells its own story of the early years of Soviet filmmaking. Often overshadowed by the achievements of the great montage revolutionaries who came to cinema after 1917 – Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Kuleshov, Vertov – Protapanov deserves greater attention. The son of a merchant family, he began his career in film in 1906, ultimately going on to become one of pre-revolutionary Russia's most prominent and innovative directors: the "Russian D. W. Griffiths", as scholar Denise Youngblood has described him. Protapanov left Russia in 1920 but returned a few years later; *Aelita* was his first fully Soviet film, and he made a number of other minor classics before his death in 1945, including *The Case of the Three Million* (1926), *The Forty-first* (1927), and *Without a Dowry* (1937).

The Russia that Protapanov returned to was embarking on the New Economic Policy or NEP, Lenin's final gambit to stabilise the fledgling revolutionary state after the chaos of the Civil War. The NEP reintroduced limited private enterprise and loosened cultural controls while attempting to embed revolutionary values into society. The resulting hybridity, speculation, and experimentation in art and society produced some of the most influential avant-garde movements of the revolution, most notably the Constructivism of Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimír Tatlin, et al. Much of the cultural emphasis of the period was on construction and human transformation, the messy material of everyday life; Protapanov makes sure to ground his engineer protagonist Los' daydreaming in bustling, contemporary Moscow. We see some of the material

difficulties of the period – housing and food shortages – and the racketeering antagonist Erlich is an example of the so-called 'nepman', unscrupulous hangovers from the capitalist past who flourished under NEP's indulgences.

Los, who suspects his wife of adultery and believes he has killed her in a dispute, is unable to reconcile his private emotions with his public duty. The result of this cognitive dissonance is his spectacular fantasy of a voyage to Mars to decipher the meaning of a cryptic wireless broadcast: "Ante Odeli Uta". Los' discovery on the Red Planet of a brutal aristocratic society; his courtship of the puppet ruler Aelita (ferociously portrayed by Yuliya Solntseva, wife of Aleksandr Dovzhenko and later a brilliant director in her own right); his fomenting of an uprising amongst the downtrodden Martians; his eventual murder of Aelita and return to Earth – all this is rendered otherworldly by the stunning production design of artist Aleksandra Ekster, alongside Isaak Rabinovich and Viktor Simov. Their angular, deconstructed costumes and Expressionist-inspired set pieces, combined with the uncanny rigidity of the performances, produce a convincingly unearthly effect. In theoretical terms, Russian Constructivism was one of the most influential of all the early-twentieth-century artistic movements, but it produced few concrete artefacts. *Aelita's* Mars is arguably its material apotheosis.

Los ultimately returns to his wife and to his duties as a Soviet citizen. But Protapanov's vision is far from straightforwardly optimistic. It is striking that the narrative is structured around two acts of femicide on the part of the nominal hero – that both are revealed to be illusory is rather cold comfort. That obsession and jealousy remain such powerful impulses post-revolution is one aspect of Protapanov's portrait of a transitional decade. In a survey of Soviet sci-fi, Natalija Majsova notes that Protapanov's film, "which oscillates between post-revolutionary Moscow, a world-in-becoming, a world-in-flux, and rigid, black-and-white Martian society plagued by a tyrant and collectively incapable of spiritual transformation — monumentalized the October Revolution. At the same time, it openly ridiculed attempts to subject it to one mandatory, final interpretation." The Moscow that Los returns to may be anachronistic, melodramatic, falling short of its own Soviet standards – but it is ultimately the only place that matters. For now, Mars must remain a fantasy.