

Ikarie XB 1 and Sci-Fi Aesthetics under the Cold War

By TAN Tang-mo

As a manifestation of imagination, science fiction as a literary genre constructs a fantasy world that intimates a society's culture and ideology with people's curiosity about uncontrollable things like future, time, universe, and life. Science-fiction films and horror films are both supernatural. While the supernatural in horror films is out of the irrational, the supernatural in science-fiction films belongs to a kind of "rational fantasy" that is based on a set of rules in (natural) science, logic, and causal necessity.

Due to different ideologies, different facets in the science-fiction text may be developed. For instance, the hypothesis of extraterrestrial life originates from people's gaze into the starry sky and also the unknown about life. The British Empire at the end of the nineteenth century was the strongest colonial and maritime superpower in the world. In the classic sci-fi novel published during this time *The War of the Worlds* (1898)¹ by H. G. Wells (1866-1946), Martians were described as a group of atrocious invaders. The Martians that launched genocide attacks to the Earth people in the novel was actually a metaphor for the terror of colonialism and imperialism then. And ten years after the publication of *The War of the Worlds* (1908), the Russian writer Alexander Bogdanov (1873-1928) offered an alternative perspective on the presentation of Martians with his *Red Star*.

In *Red Star*, the planet of Mars was seen as a Utopia, or an ideal Communist society. The protagonist of the novel, a scientist, philosopher, and also revolutionist, was assigned to observe and emulate the social system of Mars. The socialist Martian society, described as the most advanced among all species and planetary civilizations, was truly classless and equal. At the end of the book, nonetheless, the protagonist failed to complete the task on his journey to Mars and hopelessly returned to the Earth. Bogdanov himself was not only a physician and scientist, but he was also a revolutionist firmly believing in socialism, yet his ideas were in conflict with Leninism then. From this point, *Red Star* is clearly a transformation of Bogdanov's personal experience as well as an articulation of his personal ideals.

Eastern European Sci-Fi Literature and the Futuristic Paradise

In fact, the two early sci-fi novels by the authors from two different worlds, *The War of the Worlds* and *Red Star*, share a same basic imagination—the belief in other forms of life out there in the outer space that are completely different from those of the human world. They could be perfect or dangerous. It is from this basic concept that develops all the dazzling sci-fi texts.

In Russian sci-fi novels, the Future is often connected to Utopia, that is, an ideal world. For Russian authors, the capitalism from the West is the barbaric Present; through revolution, the future world will be led to the ideal and perfect Communist society. That is to say, the Communist society is the beautiful future and redemption of all mankind. Since the establishment of the Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, USSR) in 1922, science fiction was regarded as a degenerate genre of the West. It is not until the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and later the de-Stalinization when Nikita Khrushchev was in power that Stalin's system of social surveillance and suppression could be dismantled and the politics and culture in the Soviet Union unfrozen. The ban on sci-fi literature was lifted then, but it was not without any restrictions. Even though the ban was completely removed in 1956, the Soviet sci-fi writers still had to face implicit and explicit constraints.

Due to the long-term political suppression in the USSR, most of the Eastern European sci-fi books tended to depict the future world as a spotless paradise, lacking in dramatic quality. All things go well and smoothly in every story and the characters are not able to deal with their setbacks. For the authors of sci-fi novels, such a formulaic arrangement of the plot was in fact more of a hindrance than a help. And with the coming of the Cold War and the USSR holding the constant lead in the Space Race with the USA, this situation became even worse. The bright and beautiful future of Communism was typically interpreted as a fact that was happening here and now.

Despite the condition of the Soviet sci-fi genre in literature during the period of the Cold War, sci-fi films display rather different features and styles. In the 1950s and 1960s, while not many major sci-fi feature films were made in the USA, an explosion of lousy, low-budget sci-fi films came out as B movies or were screened in drive-in theaters. One of the most prominent examples is Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), arguably the worst film in the history of cinema. The U.S. sci-fi movies made in this period often reflected the country's anxieties about the Cold War. Take the TV series *Star Trek* for example. The setting of the series is a perfect, peaceful, and free new world—possibly led by the USA—in the near future called "the United Federation of Planets" (UFP, set in the twenty-third century). In the Federation, the USS *Enterprise* is just an exploration vessel, but every crew member aboard the spacecraft has a military rank. Throughout

¹Three years after the Russian Revolution of 1905, which is the historical background of the Soviet silent film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)

the *Enterprise's* interstellar adventures, the crew will encounter many different alien species possessing more advanced technology, and they are usually terrifying violent killers. The *Enterprise* is always in opposition to these "alien strangers;" these "high-tech alien strangers" obviously allude to the USSR.

As the "high-tech alien strangers," the Soviet Union has their own artistic tradition in sci-fi films. Adapted from the novel by Aleksey Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1883-1945), Yakov Protazanov's *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (1924), is one of the earliest Russian silent films. It describes a man daydreaming about going to Mars and leading the enslaved Martians to fight against the totalitarian regime. In Vasilii Zhuravlov's *Cosmic Voyage* (1936), a spaceship named after Joseph Stalin succeeds in making a landing on the moon, as if suggesting that Stalin himself leads people to a better, Communist future. (By the way, both films can be found on YouTube.) These early Soviet sci-fi films are well-known for their artistic highness in their art design and humanistic depth. With his two sci-fi films of rich verbal and visual symbols and metaphors in the 1970s, *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979), Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986) inherited the Russian "film poetry" tradition in the 1920s to 1950s and thereafter has raised science-fiction films to an even higher level.

Right on the eve of the Space Race between the USSR and the USA, the Czech director Jindřich Polák (1925-2003) completed a film that influenced the sci-fi film genre, *Ikarie XB 1* (1961), which is adapted from the novel *The Magellanic Cloud* (1966) by Stanisław Lem (1921-2006), the same Polish author of the 1961 novel that Tarkovsky's *Solaris* is based on. *Ikarie XB 1* can be regarded as a classic masterpiece of the Soviet arthouse science-fiction films.

Ikarie XB 1: Flipping the Hollywood Sci-Fi Films' Logic

Shot in black and white with an impressive production design, *Ikarie XB 1* sets on the human world after two hundred years (in the year 2163), and the Earth at that time is already a Communist Utopia, or so-called in the past, the world "after Communization." A spacecraft, the *Ikarie*, is navigating between galaxies in order to discover possible life in the outer space. The first quarter of the movie uses a strange visual imagination to present what an "ideal society" and its quotidian look like. On the spacecraft there are forty crew members, men and women of different nationalities (all whites, anyway). They all appear healthy and robust. Those working out in the gym are doing advanced, difficult moves. When off duty, the crew members put on their Western suits and swaying dresses, performing the peculiar social dance to a bizarre jazz groove. These people have brought activities in the human civilization to the outer space, like planting flowers, keeping pets, playing chess and music, courting the opposite sex, and practicing all the etiquette of human beings.

Apparently, everyone on the spacecraft is hung up on the Earth.

The future world as presented in the film is infused with a futuristic yet black-and-white vintage atmosphere. The spaceship's system design and labyrinthine corridors seem to be the inspiration for the *Enterprise* bridge in *Star Trek*, and later, another U.S. Cold War satire film, *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is probably influenced by the *Ikarie's* whole wall of the big viewscreen. In the past, the imagination about a spacecraft was merely a winged cylinder, and the amount of room to move in it was exactly the length of the cylinder. In *Ikarie XB 1*, however, Polák builds a sophisticated, organic, and "three-dimensional" prototype of a spacecraft; the audience can spontaneously picture in mind its plan or even its sectional plan drawing. The concept of a spacecraft based on the *Ikarie* has a profound influence on later generations, such as some sci-fi elements that are familiar to modern audiences like robots and surveillance camera lens on a spacecraft.

Another important issue that *Ikarie XB 1* deals with is, of course, the glorification of the Communist ideal world. As previously mentioned in this article, the connection of the Future and Utopia in Russian sci-fi literature makes it difficult for the sci-fi writers to introduce conflicts in the text. As for *Ikarie XB 1*, either in the novel or film version, the conflicts in the story—that is, the frustrations experienced in the crew members' space adventures—are all blamed on history (the twentieth-century human history, history of capitalism, history of the U.S. hegemony, etc.). When the exploration vessel meets a satellite and lands on it, the crew come upon a scene of horrible death. This satellite is a relic from the twentieth century, and it preserves the ugly history of the human/capitalist world as well as the ghastly killing forces (nuclear weapons). In other words, what the *Ikarie* finds is the history of the fall of the West. The villains in the future world are conceived as a metaphor for the "evil" USSR in the U.S. Cold War sci-fi films; the villain in *Ikarie XB 1*, without doubt, is the then (and also present) U.S. Empire.

For the audience accustomed to the U.S. sci-fi movies, *Ikarie XB 1* produced by the Czechoslovakia under the Iron Curtain in the Cold War period might seem a culture shock that flips some part of sci-fi films' logic that we have recognized. Nevertheless, the sci-fi art design and elements as developed in the film are something we are vaguely familiar with. Even though it is a film over fifty years old, that filmic texture of *Ikarie XB 1* that blends together art, humanity, and fantasy still promises us a brand new viewing experience.

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