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Science Fiction Film and Television, Volume 3, Issue 1, Spring 2010, pp. 121-130  
(Review)

Published by Liverpool University Press



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# DEFA's floating islands

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr

***The DEFA Sci-Fi Collection.*** First Run Features. NTSC region 1. 16:9. US \$44.95. Contains *Silent Star* (*Der schweigende Stern/Milczastra Gwiazda*; Kurt Maetzig East Germany/Poland 1960), *Eolomea* (Hermann Zschoche East Germany/USSR/Bulgaria 1972) and *In the Dust of the Stars* (*Im Staub der Sterne*; Gottfried Kolditz East Germany/Romania 1976).

Despite the vaunted respect for sf – or rather its official socialist form, the ‘utopian adventure’ – in the USSR and its satellite states, few sf films were made in the Eastern bloc. The Russians produced about a dozen, the Czechs perhaps another half-dozen, the Poles perhaps three. The German Democratic Republic’s state-run DEFA studios made four. First Run Features has released three of these – *Silent Star* (1960), *Eolomea* (1972) and *In the Dust of the Stars* (1976) – in a DVD package, produced from the prints housed in the University of Massachusetts’ DEFA collection. Some of these films have attained legendary status. For some viewers, *Silent Star* and *Eolomea* represent the most concerted effort by the Eastern bloc to present alternative socialist sf to international audiences. For others, who grew up in the region under Soviet domination, they were powerful childhood experiences and spurs for ‘ostalgie’. For most, they are the most accessible examples of sf film under Communism.

The three films in the collection are a very mixed bag. It is not clear why the fourth DEFA sf film, *Signals: A Space Adventure* (*Signale – Ein Weltraumabenteuer/Sygnally MMXX*; Kolditz East Germany/Poland 1970), was not included. I have not seen it, and it is not highly regarded by those who have, but historians attest to its importance as the first step in ‘DEFA 70’, the effort by the studio to produce and distribute 70mm film on a regular basis (see Vonau). Even if *Signale* had been included, I doubt we would be able to trace a distinctive DEFA style of sf. Unlike romances, musicals and even westerns (of the Karl May type), DEFA did not produce enough examples of the genre to establish a style. Sf proved to be prohibitively expensive to make for the always cash-and-credit-strapped bloc states. And the clear value of utopian adventure as a vehicle for Marxist–Leninist ideology actually hindered its production, as the various bureau-heads and Ministers of Culture, and indeed even Party First Secretaries, insisted on having their say about the films’ messages. Nonetheless, DEFA’s

sf films do share an aesthetic-political purpose: to negotiate between western commercial sf adventure and the Soviet model of socialist romanticism.

At first glance, it is surprising that a studio as endowed with experienced filmmakers as DEFA would have produced so little sf. Officially chartered in 1946, the Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft was the reconstituted heir of the great Babelsberg Ufa studios that played such a dominant role in European filmmaking before World War II, and which had produced Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (Germany 1927) and *Die Frau im Mond* (Germany 1929) and the fascist sf films of Harry Piel (on the history of DEFA, see Bergahn; on Harry Piel and Nazi sf film, see Strzelczyk). East German cinema represented a confluence point where the powerful traditions of Soviet and National Socialist propaganda cinema met with its cross-border counterpart-antagonist, the postwar entertainment cinema of US-backed Western Europe. Under other circumstances, this might have led to the emergence of a powerful, reflective sf cinema. In fact, it contributed to its stifling. Burdened by being the main frontline state of the Warsaw Pact, and to Soviet eyes having the most suspect population, East German culture was kept on the shortest leash in the bloc.

Not all of the Soviet bloc cultures were equally interested in the genre. Sf in Russia constituted a true literary tradition, both dangerous and uplifting, the stuff of cultural adventure. Extending from pre-Revolutionary times, through a period of high experimentalism, criticism and utopian vision in the 1920s, it was stifled brutally under Stalin, when it became the occasion for the persecution of scientists in the 1930s, and settled into a form of imperial propaganda until the breakout period of Thaw after Stalin's death. Through all these zigs and zags, sf remained a beloved aspect of Russian modernism. Even in the USSR, however, there is a noticeable gap between the popularity of literary sf and the rarity of sf films. While even under Stalin a popular large-scale sf film was made by the central film studio Mosfilm, *Kosmicheskij Reys: Fantasticheskaya novella* (*Cosmic Journey*; Zhuravlyov USSR 1936), the film was quickly withdrawn from circulation by censors. Despite the fact that Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the revered father-figure of Russian Cosmism, wrote and consulted closely on the making of the film, the use of cartoon animation to illustrate a moonwalk was judged to be toxically trivialising.<sup>1</sup>

Even so, the conditions were far more favourable for sf cinema in the USSR than in the satellites. Although most of the early classics were excised from collective memory, and all forms of near-future sf were proscribed until the 1960s, the legacy of Cosmism and the linking of fairytale elements with cosmic

1. Claude Mettavant has constructed an excellent website in French devoted to *Kosmicheskij Reys* at <http://project.mettavant.fr/kosmicfilm.htm>.

adventures remained strong. The Stalinist state strove to claim every important technological discovery for Russian science, which gave (politically correct) scientific adventure an imperial allure. A form of Communist pop sf developed over many years, producing numerous boys' adventures in magazines and inexpensive books. Pseudo-scientific ideas with science-fictional dimensions (such as the role of aliens in the Tunguska meteor explosion or the existence of an archaic, pure Slav race in Siberia) gained considerable popularity. Writing mainly for youth, authors such as Vladimir Obruchev, Alexander Kazantsev and, the master of them all, Alexander Belyaev, produced a constant supply of ideologically correct adventures, jammed to the gills with Vernean virtues. If Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (USSR 1972) is the cinematic pinnacle of the art-sf tradition in the Soviet bloc, the other indisputable masterpiece of Soviet sf film, Pavel Klushantsev's *Planeta Bur* (USSR 1962), co-written by Kazantsev, emerged from this pop milieu.

For Czechoslovakian filmmakers, long practice at linking comic grotesques with science-fictional satires allowed for a steady, if slow, series of sf fantasies. In Poland, a similar tradition, and the presence of Stanislaw Lem, had a similar effect, attracting even Andrzej Wajda to make a short film based on a Lem script.<sup>2</sup> East German filmmakers faced entirely different problems. Compared with the long and relatively continuous tradition of Russian-language sf, the German sf tradition was fatally compromised. Much of the early sf was either cosmic *revanchisme* against the Entente during the Weimar period or imperial fantasies of the Nazi regime (until it too discouraged sf). Furthermore, action spectacle and folk-adventure, staples of pulp sf, were irreversibly associated with Nazi techniques of audience manipulation. Most of all, the GDR regime's adherence to the doctrine of socialist realism stood in the way of both popular and artistic sf cinema. De-Nazification and de-bourgeoisification, along with the very real pressures of rebuilding the war-shattered country, left little room for space fantasies and none for near-future critique.

In the late 1950s, the successes of the Soviet space programme inspired a new confidence among the Soviet-bloc ideologues about the possibilities of using technological development as a propaganda tool. Suddenly, Soviet-style socialism could be presented to nonaligned peoples as the leader in the peaceful uses of high technology. The 'Scientific-Technological Revolution' became a central concept in Khrushchev's reform of Stalinism (see Buccholz). The ideological conditions for Soviet-style space opera, replete with noble sacrifices for the international human family in the quest for an interplanetary utopia, were

2. Wajda directed *Przekladowiec* for Polish television in 1968.

in place. In 1957, the same year as the *Sputnik* launch, Klushanstev's visionary space-exploration documentary, *Doroga k zvezdam* (*Road to the Stars*; USSR), was released; two years later, *Nebo zovyot* (*The Heavens Call*; Karzhukov and Kozyr USSR 1960), the lamentably underappreciated precursor of *Planeta Bur*, was completed in Kiev.

It was under these conditions that DEFA produced its first, most ambitious and most expensive sf film, *Der schweigende Stern*. The project had actually begun in 1956, when DEFA was approached by the Polish state film studio with a proposal to collaborate on a blockbuster-scale adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's first sf novel, *The Astronauts* (1951). A German version of the novel had been translated as *Der Planet des Todes* (*The Planet of Death*) in 1954, and was reprinted many times. For DEFA, the project addressed directly the feeling, as one internal memo states it, that there was a 'painfully conspicuous absence of futuristic films and adventure stories in our studio's production schedule' (Soldovieri 383). Kurt Maetzig, one of the most accomplished and politically powerful directors in the studio, headed the project, and indeed was required to use his friendship with the First Secretary, Walter Ulbricht, to keep the enormously expensive and ideologically dubious project alive (on the film's long development, see Soldovieri).

The story fit the demands of the times. The original script remained relatively faithful to Lem's plot, but added a female protagonist. *The Astronauts* tells of an international group of scientific geniuses commissioned by their unified Communist Earth – after the discovery of a nearly indecipherable message from what is presumed to be the remains of an exploded spaceship – to investigate a mysterious civilisation on Venus. While exploring the planet's alien landscape, the scientist-astronauts discover that its inhabitants were planning to launch an atomic barrage against Earth, but apparently destroyed themselves before they could put their plan into action. A Vernean youth-novel related in socialist realist mode, *The Astronauts*'s style is stiff, its characters flat and its infodumps interminable. However, some glimpses of the later Lem are evident in the descriptions of the incomprehensible Venusian terrain, the Venusians' artefacts and, most of all, a river of black, electrogenic plasma that is the novel's most exciting and disorienting character, presaging in some ways the plasmic ocean of *Solaris*. *Planet of Death* was perfect for DEFA's position. It provided sense of wonder and an internationalist anti-nuclear message as thick as a brick.

DEFA's plans were ambitious from the outset. An abortive collaboration was begun with the French studio Pathé, and there were fantasies of casting Marcello Mastroianni, Ingrid Bergman and Harry Belafonte (in the end, the only western actor procured was the B-list Japanese-French actress Yoko Tani, playing the

ship's physician and Hiroshima survivor, Sumiko Ogimura). The attempt fell foul of both Studio Polski, who objected vehemently to the punched-up script approved by the French, with its frothy erotic dalliance and slapstick humour, and the Culture Ministry, who objected just as vehemently to the 'unauthorized transactions with foreign entities' in such a utopian-socialist project (Soldovieri 389–90). Indeed, in political terms, *Der schweigende Stern* is unusual. It lacks the hectoring anti-western tone of the Stalinist leadership of the GDR, and presents the achieved terrestrial utopia without paeans to Communism (in marked contrast to Lem's novel).<sup>3</sup>

The film that was finally released, after three and a half years and three teams of scriptwriters, was a handsome, colourful answer to the dominant western style of sf cinema – and also in some respects to the Soviet style. It was filmed in Totalvision, a CinemaScope clone, and resembles the best CinemaScope sf from the US, *Forbidden Planet* (Wilcox 1956).<sup>4</sup> The sets representing the clean high-tech of the utopian future were plausibly impressive for the time, although they strike many commentators as reminiscent of *Star Trek* (1966–9) and sometimes verge on the Tatiesque. The putatively unintelligible Venusian technoscape was perhaps beyond DEFA's capabilities – the black electric river appears as a species of conscious asphalt and the giant crystal power sources as crude sculptural versions of Richard Powers' Daliesque paperback covers. The *Cosmostrator*, the 'largest rocket ever constructed' and pride of the Communist future, resembles a Mormon temple more than an aerodynamic machine. There is a cute robot with a permanent smile of coloured light bulbs embedded in its head – perhaps the first instance of a cutebot in sf film, predating Huey and Dewey of *Silent Running* (Douglas Trumbull US 1972) by more than a decade. It was in fact a constant concern of the Culture Ministry that futuristic technology not be presented in a 'pessimistic' way that might demoralise a socialist audience. The acting in *Der schweigende Stern* is wooden, which is understandable since the

3. This was one of the main critiques of the first revised script by Minister of Culture Erich Wendt: 'The script avoids all social aspects. Peace on Earth has been established in 1978. How? What social transformations played a role? What is the dominant social order? This remains open. At one point there is passing reference to intellectuals having helped to create peace and that this is why they want to initiate peaceful relations with Venus's inhabitants. The fact that there can be no peace without socialism – this remains unsaid. What's more, the word socialism does not even occur. This is inconceivable in 1957 or 1958, during a bitter struggle for peace. Perhaps the authors mean that by 1978 the principle of peaceful coexistence will have established itself. Then they have misunderstood the principle and the conditions on which it is based. Coexistence is founded on the strength of socialism' (qtd in Soldovieri 391). The 'openness' of 1978's Peace of Earth survived into the final script.

4. Soldovieri mistakenly states that the film was made in 70mm. The first DEFA film in that format, Werner Bergmann's thirty-three-minute *DEFA 70* (East Germany 1967) was not made until later in the decade.

characters are all national and professional types, and the lack of antagonists (since the Earth is beyond political struggle and the Venusians have annihilated themselves before the action even begins) precludes interesting personal conflicts. Indeed, this stricture to present Earthly utopias that have ended petty human evils was cited by GDR filmmakers as a reason why DEFA lost interest in making sf films.

*Der schweigende Stern* might best be considered a film trapped between the desire to produce a truly contemporary socialist sf film and to compete with the capitalist state-of-the-art in the genre. The crew embodies heroic sacrifice for the future of humanity, a theme relentlessly reiterated in Lem's novel, but the anti-nuclear message takes precedence. In sharp contrast with most western sf films, intimate friendships and the holy family – from the most nuclear (which in the East is often just mother and son) to the 'family of man' – trump individuality. In a striking scene before the *Cosmostrator*'s launch, the audience witnesses a great variety of intimate farewells.<sup>5</sup> The film's internationalism is sincere – *Der schweigende Stern* is the first film to feature a black astronaut (the African engineer Talua, played by Julius Ongewe, a Kenyan medical student from Leipzig) and the Japanese Sumiko's references to Hiroshima border on the obsessive. Even the Americans are represented in a relatively complex way – divided between evil, whisky-identified corporate masters of war and conscientious idealists such as Oppenheimer-like atomic physicist and co-captain, Professor Hawling (Oldrich Lukes), who joins the Venus mission in order to prevent future Hiroshimas.

The film was eventually sold to Crown International Pictures in the US, which cut fifteen minutes and released it in 1962 as *The First Spaceship on Venus*. This version became a staple of US Saturday television. A comparison of the two versions is instructive of the different approaches to sf film on the two sides of the Iron Curtain in the early 1960s. The US distributor removed all references to Hiroshima, changed the nationalities to more acceptable ones (the Polish engineer becomes French) and disappeared the evil American capitalists, along with the pre-mission goodbyes (it was impossible to remove the African astro-

5. Such scenes have a remarkable basis in fact. Anyone who has watched the recovery of a returning Soviet space capsule in Central Asia has noted the stark difference between the affectionate and decidedly non-sterile greetings given to the cosmonauts, compared with the careful, sterile handling of US astronauts by NASA and the Navy. In 1974, I observed on Philippines television the descent of *Soyuz 14* (I have never seen a Soviet recovery broadcast on US television). After the capsule parachuted to a landing in an explosion of dust, a distant helicopter recorded a crowd of officials running to the scene. When the dust cleared, the capsule, surrounded by the crowd, was opened, the cosmonauts were lifted out, and then subjected to enthusiastic embraces and good wishes by a mass of joyous, funky well-wishers. The scene might have been from a film by Georges Méliès.

naut). A stock score replaced the complex and engaging original music by the Polish composer Andrzej Markowski. *The First Spaceship on Venus* was eventually parodied by *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988–99) in 1990.

Although *Der schweigende Stern* was considered a success, it was enormously expensive and DEFA did not undertake another sf film until 1970. The catalyst for its renewed effort was the Kubrick effect. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick UK/US 1968) made a powerful impression on the East German and Soviet film communities, and it stimulated DEFA producers to attempt a major sf project that would dovetail with the ambitious plan to make and distribute films in 70mm format. One of the first of these was *Signale*, which according to some who have seen the film is an inept rip-off of *2001*. There were many good reasons for *2001*'s allure. It was clearly one of the first treatments of sf in the medium of the art-film, and its philosophical concerns seemed closer to those of European art-sf than to pulp sf. It was also uncannily familiar. As Mark Wade has demonstrated, many shots and compositions in *2001* imitate those of *Road to the Stars*, and Kubrick apparently studied Klushantsev's space cinema closely as he prepared his own space epic.<sup>6</sup> In some respects, *2001* addresses the Tsiolkovskyan Cosmist vision of humanity's destiny in space (indeed, co-author Arthur C. Clarke's many debts to Tsiolkovsky have yet to be adequately addressed in sf studies). Many commentators have noted the resemblance of the film's monoliths to Malevich's suprematist black square, which goes a long way to aligning the film with the early Soviet avant-garde's project of embodying metaphysical transcendence in art and technology.<sup>7</sup>

DEFA producers took *2001* as a challenge to produce an appropriate socialist utopian counterpart to Kubrick's cold and inhuman vision. *Eolomea* bears signs of the thaw of the early 1970s. Its plot revolves around the inexplicable disappearance of several spaceships on the outer rings of colonised space. The scientific director of the colonial settlements, Professor Maria Scholl (played by the Dutch actress Cox Habbema), perhaps the first female scientist-protagonist in sf film presented utterly without apology or critique, investigates. She discovers that two of her mentors had in the past received a message from a distant planet, which they named Eolomea. It turns out that the spaceships were not destroyed, but instead went dark as they prepared to launch en masse on an irreversible journey to the mysterious utopian planet. The main plot is intercut with flashbacks and asides of Scholl's romantic relationship with Daniel 'Singing Dan'

6. See Wade's site, 'Road to the Stars', at [www.astronautix.com/articles/roastars.htm](http://www.astronautix.com/articles/roastars.htm). See also <http://zoppy.blogspot.com/2008/09/road-to-stars-1957-doroga-k-zvezdam.html>.

7. Several bloggers have noted the connection. I was first introduced to the Malevich–Kubrick link in a 2004 seminar paper by Darren Parr, 'The Art of *2001*'.

Lagny (Ivan Andonov), a gifted, slacker-nonconformist space-navigator exiled to an outpost on a barren planetoid. The story's happy ending does not bring the lovers together, but rather has Dan join the fleet on its utopian journey, while Professor Scholl continues on Earth.

The film was clearly intended to be a light foray into socialist utopian romanticism. Compared with Kubrick and Tarkovsky (whose *Solaris* appeared in the same year), Hermann Zschoche's direction is committedly lowbrow and addressed to the hip youth that was beginning to dominate the Soviet bloc's popular culture. Throughout, seriousness is avoided. The music – made in the personal studio of successful rock composer Günther Fischer, which was far better appointed than DEFA's own studios – alternates between stereotypical weirdness and Europop banality. There is yet another cute robot, who carries tea-trays and overheats when faced with a contradiction in Asimov's Laws. The main plot is consistently intercut with silly prepubescent fun between the sexy-but-chaste lovers à la *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill US 1969), goofy speeded-up antics à la *Help!* (Lester UK 1965) and a slow-motion lovers-running-into-each-others'-arms-on-the-beach sequence so drawn out, so inept or perhaps so sarcastic, that it has been compared to a scene from *The Benny Hill Show* (1955–68, 1969–89).

For all its inconsistencies and awkwardness, *Eolomea* nonetheless remains an interesting artefact. While *Der schweigende Stern* and the Soviet space epics were concerned with the heroic struggle of universal humanity made one by expansion into space, *Eolomea* is concerned with the generation gap between the heroic old guard and the Young Turks searching for a role in the utopian adventure of socialism. While in the west this manifested itself in strong anti-technological and critical movements, in the Soviet bloc much of the youth rebellion in the early 1970s remained sympathetic to the use of high technology to achieve utopian goals. In *Eolomea*, the inevitable sacrificial deaths of earlier films have been replaced by secret plans of escape to a better world. There is no trace of critique of the establishment in the film. Indeed, the Earth seems to be a really fun place: Professor Scholl is a charming, self-confident babe-genius with really hot boots, the Space Council is dominated by people of colour and care is taken to show that New Year's Eve is a lovely carnival of togetherness – life after the revolution is still a party. As in the Strugatskys' *Noon: 22<sup>nd</sup> Century* stories (1967), the appeal of *Eolomea*'s sf is not in its attacks on evil cosmic adversaries but in 'the struggle of the good with the better'. The young questers set off for the planet Eolomea because they need new adventures and to befriend new beings. They are past striving for material perfection; they are the funky new generation 'going off', as Singing Dan notes at the end of the film, 'to find new

civilizations with socks full of holes'. The process is bittersweet: lovers must be separated and sons must leave their hero-fathers. But everyone knows it has to be that way. There is no real conflict, and we can only admire the noble desire to escape from the cordon of control, however benevolent it may be, to find other worlds.

DEFA's final sf project, a co-production with the Romanian state film studio, *Im Staub der Sterne*, has almost no redeeming qualities, and was not distributed in the west, even in mutilated form. It may have exceeded even *MST3000*'s capacities for parody. The crew of the spaceship *Cynro*, commanded again by a beautiful female genius, and consisting of three other attractive women and two strikingly unattractive middle-aged men, receives a distress signal from the planet Tem 4 and is obliged to investigate. Once on the planet, the crew is entertained by the inhabitants, who seem to be in no danger, deny sending the message, and indeed seem to enjoy a colourful, decadent culture of constant partying, expressionist disco, drugs, babes, boytoys and... pythons. (The ubiquitous pythons are accompanied on the soundtrack by rattles.) The crew are slipped an amnesia-producing 'fun drug' and return from a hard night of pleasure convinced that it has all been a mistake. The one crew member who remained behind proves to them that they have been duped, and the intrigue begins. It turns out that the inhabitants are not the natives, but an alien race that has occupied the planet and forces the natives to work as slaves in the mines. The alien Chief (played risibly by the theatrical actor Ekkehardt Scholle) is revealed to be a nasty mega-decadent tyrant. The crew helps the natives to rise up against their overlords, and... the end.

With the possible exception of the colour (the film was shot on East German ORWO stock, famous for its richness), *Im Staub der Sterne* is the epitome of cheesiness. It might best be viewed as an attempt to update the Lost Jungle City genre of serial adventures from the 1930s. It was not inexpensive to make, and it made demands on its makers. But it is safe to say that DEFA's last effort to negotiate between western and east-bloc sf cinema failed so ignominiously on all fronts that there was no point in continuing.

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