

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Long time listeners to this podcast might have noticed that I bring up the Cold War from time to time. It wasn't just the defining global conflict of my childhood, but it's also an interest that I picked up from my father.

Are you there?

DAD: Can you hear me?

I can here you. I'm in the studio now, do I sound very professional or do I sound like I'm just on the phone?

DAD: Oh no, you're always professional sounding.

Okay! (Laughs)

DAD: Even when you're not sounding professional you're professional!

That's my father, Professor Steve Molinsky of Boston University. He studied Slavic languages when he was in grad school, and he took two trips to the Soviet Union.

DAD: The night I landed in Moscow, it was probably one of the most exciting experiences I can remember, just landing in this mysterious place, and I remember going from the airport into city, into Moscow, and I couldn't believe people were living there, I saw lights on in apartments, it was in the evening time, and it was so exciting for me, I still can remember what it was like, this was behind the Iron Curtain, and I couldn't believe I was there as a 21 year old kid.

I remember had all these anecdotes that I used to love hearing as a kid, and one of them was about socialist realism. I think I was the only kid who said, "Dad tell me that joke about socialist realism again."

DAD (laughs)

But it's actually a really important concept to understand to understand about the standard that all of Soviet culture was supposed to aspire to.

DAD: Well, it was a one-eyed, one legged general – this was a story I was told. A one-eyed, one-legged general commissioned a painting. And so the realist came and painted him with one eye and one leg, and he was shot. And then the romanticist came in and painted him with two eyes and two legs, and he was shot. And then they brought in the socialist realist and the socialist realist painted him sideways on a horse. That's socialist realism.

It's just a great explanation – like I feel like I understand Soviet propaganda perfectly from that one anecdote.

DAD: Absolutely! Just put on a positive look on everything.

So what were some of the other surprises for you there, things you didn't expect to see?

DAD: Well, the Russians at the time were extremely friendly towards me. And they used to – their propaganda was interesting. They used to talk about the American people vs. “ruling circles.” That the ruling circles were the bad people, and so I, as an ordinary American kid I was very welcomed, and people were extremely friendly. Although some people were some people were very nervous about talking to a Westerner on the street. At the time they had these people, they were “guarriors of the public morals.” They would walk the streets to make sure that people were not fraternizing with Westerners.

Hmm, interesting. Now I know, you're not a big science-fiction fan, but I've been looking into the history of Soviet science fiction, and I think you'll find this really interesting.

DAD: Yeah?

Now I can't cover an entire genre throughout an empire that spanned the 20th century – so I'm going to focus on two films that I really like. I think each one says a lot about the era they were created, and the dreams and anxieties of people living behind the Iron Curtain.

An obvious place to start would be Russia, but the Cold War was global. Every country had to choose which side they were on - or that choice would be made for them. India tilted towards the USSR. That's where Cornell University Professor Anindita Banerjee grew up.

AB: I grew up in coal mining town in Eastern India. I grew up working class, not money to buy books, went to book store Western books for children that I loved but those were more expensive to buy than Soviet books which were heavily subsidized by Soviet government. So I ended up buying book translated from Russian language, also sci-fi.

Today she's now one the premiere scholars of Soviet science fiction outside of Russia.

The funny thing is, Soviet sci-fi existed before the Soviet Union did. It began with Alexander Bogdanov, who was one of Lenin's rivals. In 1908, Bogdanov wrote a novel called Red Star, which imagined a Communist society on Mars.

AB: Red Star was a best seller, it was a super hit, it sold so well Lenin actually got annoyed at phenomenon it was becoming among party workers and he wrote about it in a treaty, Lenin wrote a lot of pamphlets as you know, and more famous is materialism and imperial criticism, he lambasts Bogdonov, however at the end he puts in bar about how well Red Star is selling and how fictional utopia is a disservice to the mission of the party, workers are not supposed to be carried away by emotions dreaming of future, that's bourgeois thing to do.

Gregory Afinogenov is a lecturer at Harvard, and he was born in the USSR. He says Lenin may not have liked science fiction, but Lenin was still dabbling in science fiction, even if he didn't realize it.

GA: Communism, Marxism sees itself as scientific theory of history, and the formula Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country, which at the time for Russia was very much a sci-fi project.

Anindita Banerjee says the new government wanted this technological revolution to come from the ground up. So they encouraged everyone to become amateur scientists.

AB: There was huge enthusiasm I have written about, magazines for and by amateur people who got together, experimented with jet propulsion before it was a reality and obsessed with conquering outer space.

So the groundwork was laid for the Golden Age of Soviet science fiction. It began with the publication of Aelita in 1923. The novel is about a scientist who hears radio signals from Mars and travels there to meet the Martian queen Aelita. He also finds that Martian society is on the brink of collapse, ripe for socialism.

The plot is similar to Red Star, but the writing was much better. The author, Alexei Tolstoy, was essentially literary royalty.

SF: And Tolstoy was from famous Tolstoy, he's related to Leo Tolstoy and a 19th century poet who was most famous poet in the Russian world.

Sibbelan Forrester teaches Soviet sci-fi at Swarthmore College.

SF: It went through different editions, every time Tolstoy good little Soviet collaborator he was, would re-write it and take out things inappropriate. In the

first edition there is character in Red Army, bored, he goes to the moon with an inventor and this guy is looting corpses, he's talking gold and gems, in the later versions he becomes a more straight up revolutionary figure.

In 1924, Aelita was turned into a film. The director Yakov Protazanov made even more changes, like the trip to Mars turned out to be just a dream.

AS: This was one of the first mega blockbusters in SU.

Asif Siddiqi is a professor at Fordham University.

AS: There was a massive publicity preceding the opening of the movie, they produced flyers dropped from airplanes, even on opening there was a huge crowd outside theater, the director himself couldn't get into the movie theater because the crowds were so big.

The movie was silent with a piano score, but it was visually stunning.

SF: Also it intercuts images of Moscow and other Russia in 1920s, you're seeing something traditional Russia and this amazing Martian scene with amazing constructive sets, designed by X and Y two constructivist artists, who also designed costumes, it's amazing, soldiers look like Lego mini-figs, the ruling class wears Roman-ish outfits, Aelita herself wears strapless and ball gown and headdress only describe as head dress that I can only describe as a craft project made of pipe cleaners.

During this time, the Soviet Union was reeling from a civil war and economic hardship. So Aelita was perfect escapist entertainment. That made the government nervous. Was science fiction another opium for masses?

And the main character, Los – he was not a flattering portrait of the kind of intellectuals who lead the Revolution. Audiences were way more into his sidekick, a Red Army veteran named Gustav.

AB: The swashbuckling Red Army guy had time of life, gives speeches, and he frees Martian slaves from dungeons and they sing a rousing song and swashbuckles back to Earth and isn't devastated. Then there is intellectual scientist engineer hero loses everything in that same journey and in the end is really kind of lost.

The Soviet intelligencia much preferred avant guard filmmakers, like Sergei Eisenstein.

AG: This newer generation of art filmmakers and from perspective of film historians they take over the scene even though their films didn't make much money.

You know who else didn't like science fiction? Stalin.

AS: Once Stalin consolidated his power in the 1930s, a lot of films if 1920s get sucked into black hole of censorship, so Aelita wasn't exceptional, but the movie ambivalent image of revolution, the revolution is supposed to be for proletariat, working class, rah rah, but shown to be a dream not even clear what's going on, divisions between reality, it provokes thinking more than clear answers, ambiguity played a part in eliminate from public showings.

From there, socialist realism becomes the officially sanctioned art form of the Soviet Union. Science fiction went underground. It popped up in children's literature, and a few random films, but that was about it.

Are you still with me, Dad?

DAD: Yeah, I'm with you. It's interesting. I can see why someone like Stalin would not approve of science fiction. It's not grounded in the reality of the workers, and so forth.

Well, you know science fiction does make a huge comeback. It changes the world in ways that Lenin could only dream of.

DAD: Really?!

Yes, but that's coming just ahead, after my capitalist break. (Laughs)

BREAK

After Stalin died in 1953, his successor Nikita Khrushchev loosened things up a bit. Soviet culture began to thaw.

A few adult sci-fi novels made their way through the censors, but it was two brothers -- Arkady and Boris Strugatsky -- who made the genre popular again.

When Greg Afinogenov was a kid, he loved reading the Strugatsky brothers. When he'd visit his grandparents in Russia, Greg would stock up on their novels and bring them back to America.

GA: Their most famous novel is Monday starts on Saturday, about scientific research institute full of various fairy tale animals. The sequel about people from this institute who go out and confront evil monster who is actually a bureaucratic committee.

The Strugatsky brothers also discovered something other writers were figuring out at the time. They could satirize the system in science fiction because the censors did not exactly have rich imaginations. In fact, the Strugatskys didn't even have to write about socialist utopias anymore.

SF: They could get dystopian as long as writing about the West.

Or another galaxy, says Sibbelan Forrester.

SF: Then they became more concerned about human freedom, issues of morality, their first great work is Hard to be a God, they write about a planet that's in a late medieval state, inquisition, corrupt government, several observers from Earth from scientific research have to stand back and not intervene in the fate of the planet, one of them becomes so incensed when woman he loves killed by mob, he goes out and wipes out a whole bunch, taken to custody, and really leaves the question what do you do in a situation that looks like beginnings of fascist system.

Although Greg wants to make a disclaimer.

GA: There is a tendency to read all Soviet literature as a hidden critique and that's dangerous, a lot of people and Soviet sci-fi writers very much identified with values of the culture and the regime.

Greg's grandfather worked on the Soviet space program, and his bookshelf was full of sci-fi novels. And many of those writers were working scientists.

Asif Siddiqui says that generation grew up in the 1920s, when Aelita was all the rage.

AS: It deeply, deeply affects the way think of space travel state run program, they set goals they imagined in their youth.

Same with NASA, Buck Rogers. Compare?

AS: That's an interesting question, other people looked at proliferation of sci-fi in US in 1920s you have Buck Rogers pulp fiction, it was already not a respected field of literature, this is for kids in that sense there was always sense among rocket designers in the US they were laboring in field didn't have much respect from intellectuals. In SU different, legit form of artistic expression, I think that encultures a more serious attitude towards attitude towards space.

Ironic, Sputnik made most people in the US take it seriously.

AS: Yeah, Sputnik was a shock not only SU but it was a shock brought space firmly into population imagination in the US.

Soviet satellite named Aelita?

AS: Well, there was a program in 1969 to send Cosmonauts to Mars and project named Aelita, but man in charge of project was clearly had seen the movie as a kid must have been 10 or 12 at the time, this stuck with him so when he finally proposed project to Politburo a telling piece of information kept influences through entire life.

But the story that fascinates me most from this era is Solaris.

Solaris began as a novel in 1961. The writer Stanislav Lem was Polish, but the book was circulated widely throughout the Soviet empire.

In the novel, Solaris is the name of a planet, covered by a mysterious ocean. A crew of Cosmonauts bombards the ocean with X-rays to figure out what it's made of. But the ocean is a sentient being. It responds by hitting the Cosmonauts with its own energy field so it can figure out what makes the humans tick.

Soon, the Cosmonauts are visited by alien beings that are exact replicas of their lost loved ones. The main character is a psychologist who spends most of the book conversing with his wife, who committed suicide years ago. He knows she's not really wife – but that doesn't stop him from being tortured by guilt and love.

In 1972, the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky made an adaptation that became the most internationally acclaimed Soviet science film in the West. In fact, it was called the Soviet answer to the film 2001.

I loved Solaris. It's slow, but intense, and haunting. And it's refreshing to see a sci-fi film where the hero is not a very good problem solver. He's grappling with something much bigger than himself and humanity.

And I noticed a few similarities to Aelita. Anindita Banerjee says both films play with the contrast between gritty life on Earth and the ethereal possibilities of space.

AB: The spaceship in Solaris astounds me because on one hand it is very futuristic but periodically it slips in and out, your cruddy Soviet apartment.

Which makes sense. Soviet ideology was about tolerating discomfort in the present because a glorious socialist utopia awaited everyone in the future.

And both stories are about intellectuals that fall in love with alien women who are not what they seem.

AB: P's Aelita starts with something in novel but dramatized amazingly on the screen, receiving of radio signals that are received on Earth, in some ways you could argue it's that radio signal the hero falls in love with before he becomes face to face with the Martian princess. Solaris is also a story of communication but with an entity that is beyond human.

That international acclaim that Aelita and Solaris earned became a source of pride and angst for the Politburo. On one hand, the Soviets wanted to compete on every front from rocketry to chess to ballet. But a new interest in promoting Soviet science fiction meant more scrutiny of the content itself.

The director of Solaris, Andrei Tarkovsky, became so frustrated; he eventually defected to Western Europe, and he died soon after. Documents emerged later suggesting he may have poisoned by the KGB.

Sibbelan Forrester says even the beloved Strugatsky brothers were being micromanaged in the 1970s.

SF: There were a few years they weren't allowed to publish anything and there's a strong suggestion drawn in for conversations with KGB modified writing somewhat, changed their themes somewhat, and many people argue writing wasn't as good after that.

The Strugatskys are still read today, particularly among Russian intellectuals who feel stifled in Putin's Russia. But Gregory Afinogenov says, Soviet-style science fiction – with its existential angst – is not in vogue anymore. These days, fantasy and mysticism are more popular – or time travel back to the glory days of World War II.

GA: You know, the horizons of political utopianism or anticipation of future are narrow, we're not talking about end of capitalism, it's hard to imagine the end of Putinism.

So why should we read science fiction from an empire that doesn't exist anymore, whose ideology has been discredited?

First of all, Sibbelan Forrester says it's great stuff.

SF: If you wanted to say anything interesting you had to hide it under the surface, and therefore the work rewards repeated reading is to say it's so good piece of literature so it's a good quality.

Asif Siddiqui agrees.

AS: Dissent, in a repressive society isn't just throwing rock, you can do other things. I think if one is unhappy what's going on, good time to think about these kinds of works,

Anindita Banerjee and Greg Afinogenov say that Soviet science fiction can also give you a new perspective on the future.

AB: American sci-fi is all about externalization, the outward manifestation of conflict. Russian and Soviet sci-fi, I think they're turned inwards, they are always journeys through the psyche at some level.

GA: I think Soviet sci-fi imagine what if that wasn't the case, where the conflicts in Western sci-fi boil down to structuring assumed in capitalism, where as if you imagine future society that profit and private corporate gain isn't overriding principle, it's possible to think utopia not just blank white color that lacks any conflict any relief.

So, Dad, what do you think? Did learning about Soviet science fiction give you a new perspective?

DAD: What fascinated me the most is that it was considered good literature, and it's an outlet for people to talk about serious issues.

Was there other Soviet stuff you know about or other ways in which people could express their views through coded metaphor?

DAD: Uh, a lot of humor and cartoons, political type cartoons were circulated around but you had to be careful about who you were humorous with.

All right, well thank you so much. Spasibo, right?

DAD: Spasibo, yep. Pozhaluysta, you're welcome.

That is it for this week, thank you for listening.

DAD (Translate to Russian)

What is the literal translation for that?

DAD: I think I said, thank you very much for your attention.

Okay, you didn't just accidentally order a ham sandwich?

DAD: No, I did not (laughs) order a bowl of borscht!

Special thanks to Anindita Banerjee Sibbelan Forrester, Asif Siddiqui and Gregory Afinogenov.

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. You can like the show on Facebook. Eric tweets at emolinsky. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot com.