



Published in the Slovak Republic
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)
Has been issued since 2005
ISSN 1994-4160
E-ISSN 2729-8132
2021. 17(2): 391-394

DOI: 10.13187/me.2021.2.391
www.ejournal53.com



Soviet Science Fiction in the Mirror of Film Criticism and Viewers' Opinions: A 21st Century View

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Abstract

In 2021 the Publishing House SM "Information for All" published a book by Professor Alexander Fedorov "Soviet science fiction movies in the mirror of film criticism and viewers' opinions". In this interview with Professor Marina Tselykh, Alexander Fedorov discussed the topic of Soviet science fiction films.

Marina Tselykh thinks that the author have done a lot of work on the collection and systematization of Soviet fiction films (including television), from the 1920s to the 1990s. The result is a mini-encyclopedia that contains information about the release dates of films, their directors, fragments of reviews from critics and viewers. The author's expert opinion sounds especially interesting.

Keywords: Soviet cinema, science fiction movies, film studies, film criticism, book, Alexander Fedorov.

Marina Tselykh: This year you published a monograph "Soviet science fiction movies in the mirror of film criticism and viewers' opinions" (Fedorov, 2021), which complements your other book series on the history of Soviet cinema (Fedorov, 2021).

You have done a lot of work on the collection and systematization of Soviet fiction films (including television), from the 1920s to the 1990s. The result is a mini-encyclopedia, which contains information about the release dates of films, their directors, fragments of reviews from critics and viewers. Your author's expert opinion sounds particularly interesting. Would you be so kind to tell me, when you became interested in the sci-fi genre? What's so remarkable about this genre? What is its peculiarity and attractiveness for the audience?

Alexander Fedorov: Science fiction has fascinated me since childhood. And, of course, I'm not alone in this. Science fiction has a multimillion audience, since in its best examples it attracts viewers with entertainment, unusual situations, ideas about the world of the future, about the possibilities of the human mind...

In my book, I made an attempt to give a broad panorama of Soviet fiction films (including television ones) in the mirror of the opinions of film critics and viewers. The book does not include science fiction cartoons, and special science films are only mentioned if they include feature episodes. Certain parts of the text of the book were pre-tested on Yandex platforms, the portals Kino-pressa.ru, Kino-teater.ru, and on Facebook.

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The selection of feature films was not always easy. So, as a rule, films in the genres of fairy tales and mysticism were not taken into account (*Old Man Hottabych, The Tale of Lost Time, Snow Tale, Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors, Magic Robe, Above the Rainbow, Viy, The Mystery of the Iron Door, Flight to the Land of Monsters, Hotel Eden, Dina, Family of Ghouls, Revolt the City, Count!, Lumi*, etc.). The book did not include adventure films (for example, *Sannikov's Land, The Island of Dead Ships*), dramas, parables, detective stories and comedies (for example, *Return from Orbit, The Ladder, Dogs, Medicine Against Fear, Entrance to the Labyrinth, Gray Disease, Thirty Three*), where the fantastic line was manifested very conditionally. Not included in the book and Soviet films of the 1920s – 1930s, which represent on the screen a hypothetical response of the USSR to the military aggression of Western opponents (*If there is war tomorrow*, etc.). I hope that the material of this book may be of interest to higher education teachers, students, researchers, film critics and historians, journalists, as well as a wide range of readers interested in the history of cinematography, the problems of cinema, film criticism and film sociology.

Marina Tselykh: How the evolution of science fiction films in the Soviet Union was going on? Which science fiction films most vividly illustrate the historical stages of this development?

Alexander Fedorov: The results of my analysis of the content of Soviet films and TV series of the fantastic genre showed that in total from 1919 to 1991 at least 158 of them were filmed, of which 29 (18.3%) were short films, and 32 (20.2%) television films.

The resulting filmography convincingly refutes the popular assertion that the bulk of Soviet science fiction films were shot for children. In fact, only 24 films and series of the fantastic genre were designed specifically for the children's audience, which is only 15.5 % of the total number of films shot from 1919 to 1991. The bulk of Soviet science fiction films (84.5 %) were films for an adult and family audience. At the same time, due to the fact that the action of many science fiction films did not take place in the USSR, in 39 such films (24.7 %) Baltic actors with "Western appearance" were filmed, that is, in almost every fourth Soviet science fiction film, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian actors.

Of all Soviet science fiction films with the theme of space and aliens, 59 movies were associated, which is 37.3 %.

The release of Soviet science fiction films on screens was uneven. For example, from 1919 to 1949 only 6 fantastic films were shot (the most notable films here, of course, *Aelita* and *Space Flight*), from 1950 to 1960 – 5 (here the most striking film was *The Sky Calls* projecting the achievements of Soviet space successes into the future). In the 1960s, 19 science fiction films were already shot, among which the most striking were *Planet of Storms* and *Amphibian Man*.

In the 1970s, the number of Soviet science fiction films reached 30. And here, first of all, I would single out the philosophical cinematography of Andrei Tarkovsky (*Solaris* and *Stalker*), although the mass audience, primarily children, watched, of course, such films as *Captain Nemo, Moscow – Cassiopeia, Teens in the Universe* and *The Adventures of Electronics*.

In the 1980s, 78 science fiction films were released, of which the maximum number of science fiction films fell on the years of perestroika. A total of 58 films were released from 1985 to 1991, which is about the same as for the entire period from 1919 to 1979. The most notable science fiction films of the 1980s are *Through Thorns to the Stars, Sorcerers, Guest from the Future, Letters from a Dead Man, Kin-dza-dza* and *Heart of a Dog...*

It is curious that at the time of the peak of the USSR's space achievements (the second half of the 1950s – the first half of the 1960s), the number of science fiction films (including films about space), contrary to logic, was at a low level (1-3 films per year), while in 1984-1991 it increased sharply to 7-11 films a year.

Most likely, this was due to the following factors: the leaders of Soviet cinematography in the 1950s – 1970s believed (and not without reason) that it was too expensive to mass produce high-quality science fiction related to space flights, whereas during perestroika, science fiction on the screen was often low-budget, parable-like, arthouse. In addition, one should not forget that in the late 1970s, the State Committee for Cinematography of the USSR officially set a course to increase the spectacularity of film production, therefore, perhaps for the first time in the history of Soviet cinema, the production of science fiction films (including for children) began to be encouraged.

I have no doubt that if the USSR had not collapsed in 1991, and, consequently, the state funding of the film industry would have continued, many films of the fantastic genre would have been filmed in the 1990s.

Marina Tselykh: Which film, in your opinion, can be considered the pinnacle of Soviet science film fiction? Which fantastic films have left the most visible mark in the history of cinema? Which of them were most warmly received by the audience?

Alexander Fedorov: In my subjective opinion, *Solaris*, *Stalker* and *Letters of a Dead Man* remain the pinnacles of Soviet philosophical cinematic fiction. Of the fantastic films designed for a mass audience, I would single out *Planet of Storms* and *Amphibian Man*. In terms of box office success, the most popular Soviet science fiction film was *Amphibian Man* (65.5 million viewers in its first year of screening). It is followed by Leonid Gaidai's fantastic comedy *Ivan Vasilyevich Changes His Profession* (64.7 million viewers) and *The Conjuring of the Valley of Snakes* (32.3 million). Of course, to these favorites of the audience should be added such popular science fiction films as *The Wizards*, *The Adventures of Electronics* and *Guest from the Future*.

Marina Tselykh: Is it possible to name at least some Soviet science fiction films that influenced the development of world cinema? Which films of the Soviet period stand out against the background of "typical" film fiction?

Alexander Fedorov: It is widely known that Hollywood liked the Soviet science fiction films *The Sky Calls*, *The Dream Towards* and *The Planet of Storms* so much that they made several adaptations of them (with remounting, additional filming and "Americanization" of the characters). And I wrote about this in some detail in my book. It is believed that these films influenced the visuals of space objects in Stanley Kubrick's famous film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Not so long ago, a remake of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* was made in the USA... And, of course, it was *Solaris* and *Stalker* that stood out against the background of other Soviet science fiction films.

Marina Tselykh: Are there differences in the interpretation of the genre of film fiction in Russia and abroad? Which interpretation is closer to you?

Alexander Fedorov: Of course, in Soviet times, the introduction of elements of horror films into the genre of science fiction was not encouraged. Such experiments began in the USSR only during the "perestroika" of the second half of the 1980s. But in the West, the synthesis of science fiction and horror films in cinema was practically the norm. For me, "purity" or synthesis in a fantasy genre does not matter, what matters is the artistic level of the work.

Marina Tselykh: It is obvious that within the genre of film fiction it is possible to distinguish special types of genre species and subspecies. How do they differ? Could you give examples that most vividly characterize these subspecies.

Alexander Fedorov: Of course, science fiction, for all its flight of imagination, includes traditional genre components. There is a fantastic drama (*Solaris*, *Letters of a Dead Man*), a fantastic comedy (*A Man From Nowhere*, *His Name Was Robert*, *Ivan Vasilyevich Changes His Profession*, *Kin-Dza-Dza*), a fantastic philosophical parable (*Stalker*, *Dominus*), a fantastic melodrama with adventure elements (*Amphibian Man*), a detective story with fantasy elements (*The Mystery of Two Oceans*), fantastic action (*Planet of Storms*, *The Curse of the Valley of Snakes*)...

Marina Tselykh: What distinctive features should be inherent in a film so that it can be confidently called science fiction, and not a cinematic fairy tale, parable, legend, mythologeme, horror film, etc. Or is science fiction a synthesis of genres?

Alexander Fedorov: I think the "purest" case is when we are dealing with dramatic (without an admixture of other genres) sci-fi films about human exploration of future space and other planets. However, as I have already noted, the fantasy genre is in many cases prone to synthesis...

Marina Tselykh: How were the main trends in the development of cinematography reflected in the history of Soviet science fiction?

Alexander Fedorov: Of course, the Soviet science fiction movies went from fairly simple subject models to much more complex ones, using the most modern technical capabilities of cinema for its time. There was even a period (late 1950s – early 1960s) when Soviet science fiction films surpassed Hollywood in its technical parameters.

Marina Tselykh: Often in fantastic stories stage directors try to demonstrate a flight of fantasy, technological advances or to show possible ways of developing science, society or human capabilities. But, as you know, it is always difficult to predict the future! Can film fiction have a long on-screen life, if life itself changes rapidly and exceeds even the most daring expectations?

Alexander Fedorov: Probably, we will not be able to name a single science fiction film, the authors of which would be able to predict the future in all details. However, the best science fiction films do not suffer from this at all and are still of interest to the public.

Marina Tselykh: What is the situation in the Russian film fiction industry today? What trends are there in its development? What is more in science fiction today: artistic depth, scientific foresight, or commercial calculation?

Alexander Fedorov: For the Russian period of science fiction, it seems to me, a commercial approach is more characteristic, when producers try to attract the attention of the audience with a sharp plot and the scale of computer special effects. However, for all that, we can also name examples of the opposite property – philosophical film science fiction (*The Ugly Swans* by K. Lopushansky, *It is difficult to be God* by A. Herman), not designed for a mass audience...

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