The Decline of Atlantis and the Rise of the East: The "Revival in Flames" in A. N. Tolstoy's *Aelita*

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Before the official adoption of socialist realism, Soviet science fiction was characterized by a greater degree of flexibility. Therefore, its authors experimented with various thought-provoking cultural concepts. Such can be said about A. N. Tolstoy's novel Aelita*, initially published in 1923 with the subtitle* The Decline of Mars*. The novel undoubtedly belongs to the very top of the Soviet SF canon, although it achieved such fame only after the author redacted it to fit the official literary dogma. Tolstoy's multi-layered modernist work concealed commentary on the contemporary socio-political situation in Europe and Russia—"a non-political apologetics of Russia," as E. Tolstaya writes. The ideological background of the novel revolves around the ideas of the "Skifstvo" and "Smenovekhovstvo" movements. The idea of new "hot blood" from the East, from newly-formed Soviet Russia, meant to revive the declining Western civilization, is embodied both in the novel's mystical and occult story about the revival of "softened" Martian civilization, and in typical SF-adventure plot where Soviet space travelers try to revitalize the dying planet—in the crucible of the Martian workers' revolution. The goal of this article is to put the novel's narrative pattern of "civilization's apocalyptic revival" in the context of recurring mythologems and ideologemes of European and Russian culture, but also in the context of Tolstoy's own personal and literary journey.*

Keywords: Russian literature / science fiction / Tolstoy, Alexey Nikolayevich: *Aelita* / Smenovekhovstvo / Skifstvo / Atlantis / Mars / Western civilization / Soviet civilization

Introduction

Aleksey Nikolayevich Tolstoy's novel *Aelita*, first published in Moscow "thick" literary magazine *Krasnaya Nov* (1922–23), with the subtitle *The Decline of Mars*, is, according to Darko Suvin, "the first universally accepted masterpiece of Soviet science fiction" (Suvin 17). More

than that, over time, in a period when the genre's position in relation to "revolutionary literary principles" was still unclear, *Aelita* secured a firm spot in the Soviet science fiction canon, but only after Tolstoy redacted the initial version to fit the official literary dogma in 1937. Precisely because of that intervention, the novel started to be referred to as "science fiction for children and youth" by both literary critics and readers. That is why I will focus on the first version of the novel, which Hadil Halil considers a "philosophical and ideological panorama of the era from a certain angle" (Halil 55),[1] comparing it to other important works of the same period, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920) and Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924). Halil emphasizes the complex structure and "intellectual spirit" of those works that appeared in "times of crisis for the West" (45). The initial subtitle of Tolstoy's novel, *The Decline of Mars*, points out precisely to such civilizational crisis, and is derived from the famous two-volume work by Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (1918, 1922). The novel thus enters into a polemic with Spengler's theory of civilization collapse. However, that is just one way the novel can fit in the "end of the world" paradigm. The novel itself is, at the same time, a landmark work that presents a turning point—a Change of Landmarks (Smena Vekh)—in Tolstoy's personal and literary life. It can thus be interpreted as the death of the old Tolstoy and the birth of the new one. By analyzing the novel itself, along with the author's other significant writings from the same period, I will try to reconstruct his "reckoning with the past" and shaping of his new literary image—an official one. This was a process which unfolded on the background of a broader process of "death of the old and birth of the new, Soviet Russia."

Change of Landmarks

At the end of 1921, Tolstoy wrote to his wife Natalya Krandievskaya: "I'm burning everything behind me—I need to be reborn" (Krandievskaja-Tolstaja 193). This dramatic sentence can symbolically be considered the beginning of Tolstoy's own "revival in flames," his own existential and creative transformation. The world he was leaving behind—Paris, then home to most of the Russian anti-Bolshevik intelligentsia—kept Tolstoy on the social periphery. He lacked prosperity, comfort, and appreciation. He again turned his head towards the East, where he came

[1] All the translations from Russian to English are mine.

from in 1919, escaping the Russian Civil War. In his novel *Aelita*, a melancholic and idealistic engineer Los is building a spaceship primarily for personal reasons—to escape from Earth to Mars:

> It's not right for me to be the first to fly to Mars. It's not I who should penetrate the mysteries of the heavens. What will I find there? The horror within myself. My reason burns like a smoky flame over the blackest of abysses, where the body of love lies prostrate. The earth is poisoned by hatred and drenched in blood. There's not long to wait until even reason is shaken—the only restraints on the monster. … I am not a gifted designer, a new conquistador, not a bold man, not a daredevil: I am a coward, a fugitive, I am driven by hopeless despair. (Tolstoi 41)

After meeting the Martians, they fly him and his soldier companion, Gusev, across their land. The idyllic land of Azora opens up before their eyes:

> The aircraft rose slightly. Moist sweet air blew against their faces and sounded in their ears. Azora spread out before them as a broad, shining plain. Divided by broad canals, covered with orange clumps of vegetation and bright yellow plains, Azora—the name means "Happiness"—seemed like those miniature springtime meadows which we saw in our dreams in our distant childhood. … A marvelous land was Azora. (68–69)

However, not long after that, upon returning from the Martian capital, Los falls into despair:

> "Yes, yes, yes," said Los, "I am no longer on the earth. The earth has remained behind. Icy wastes, endless space. So far to go! I am in a new world. Well, certainly, but I am dead. That I know. My soul is still there. … This is neither life nor death. My brain is alive, my body is alive. But I am cast out. This is it, this is it—hell." (76)

After escaping war-ridden Russia, Tolstoy, for a moment, found himself in heaven in the beautiful land of Azora, that is—in Paris. However, that feeling did not last for long. Deprived of everything he got used to as a promising writer, deprived of the warmth of his homeland, he slowly faded out. The world around him, the Western civilization, looked like the land of the dead—like hell. Something had to be done.

In 1921, Berlin became a new center of Russian typography. That is where Tolstoy moved from Paris and found almost everything he had wished for, albeit in a very controversial manner. The beginning of his "revival" was marked by the establishment of the Soviet-financed Berlin newspaper *Nakanune* (*On the Eve*) in March 1922. The newspaper,

although it was primarily meant for businessmen, "actively conducted pro-Soviet propaganda, contributed to the disintegration of the white emigration, and defended the interests of the Soviet Republic in the international arena" (Škarenkov 73). The newspaper's fortnightly "Literary Supplement" redactor was no other than Tolstoy, who by that time became close to the Russian émigré political movement Smenovekhovstvo (Change of Landmarks). Supporters of the movement (Smenovekhovtsy) abandoned their former conservative stances in favor of emerging Bolshevik authority, which, for them at the time, presented the only force capable of reviving the collapsing Russian great state:

> Before asking to become "allies" of the Bolsheviks, almost all these people tried their luck in the camp of the White Guard counterrevolution. The defeat of the "White movement" and disappointment in it led them to an ideological crisis, which ended in a "change of landmarks." They saw that there was no other choice and were forced to place all their hopes for the revival of Russia's former might on the Bolsheviks. Life forced them to believe that only new forces emerging from the revolution could solve this problem. (Škarenkov 65)

At the beginning of 1920, while still in Paris, Tolstoy already showed signs of sympathy for this new Russian "fate." In a letter to his old friend Aleksandr Yaschenko, he writes that he realized "something grandiose is happening—Russia is becoming formidable and strong again." In the end, he adds: "But the only good thing is that now we have all already passed the time of pure destruction … and we are entering a destructive-creative period of history. We will live to see the creative one" (qtd. in Flejšman et al. 106). We often encounter this kind of mystical thought in Tolstoy's writings of this period, and most researchers agree that *Aelita* represents a sort of apotheosis of his mystical vision of "Changing Landmarks." The space theme also fitted well with Smenovekhovstvo, as Elena Tolstaya points out:

> The plot: a flight to Mars carried out from Soviet Russia would allow him to carry out (by the original idea of Smenovekhovstvo as a non-political movement) a non-political apologetics of Russia; a country with such a height of utopian dreams deserved a new, more serious attitude. This is how *Aelita*, his main Berlin project, was born. (Tolstaja, "Berlinskaja lazur'")

Smenovekhovtsy did not shy away from mysticism and utopian dreams either. As Leonid Shkarenkov puts it: "Discussions about the special mission of Russia, its providential role, mystical ideas about the Russian revolution, and commitment to the 'historical idea of great

power' brought the right-wing Smenovekhovtsy closer to the ideologists of Eurasianism—a new émigré religious and philosophical movement" (Škarenkov 66).

Eurasianism developed on the fundaments of Skifstvo (Scythianism), a Russian philosophical and political movement built around a mystical perception of the October Revolution, in which they saw the manifestation of a cleansing "Eastern" element and the beginning of the spiritual transformation of humanity. In Smenovekhovstvo circles, these ideas fell on particularly fertile ground and thus mixed with National Bolshevik ideology. Tolstaya writes that "[w]hile still in Berlin, Tolstoy became one of the main exponents of the National Bolshevik idea, embodying—sometimes in beautiful prose, as in *Aelita*—many of the 'Scythian' and 'Eurasian' sentiments that rejected European civilization" (Tolstaja, *Dëgot'* 437).[2] Mikhail Agursky in his *Ideology of National Bolshevism* also points out that "profound mysticism of Tolstoy himself" served as the "spiritual basis of his National Bolshevism" (Agurskij 90). The main question here is how were these mystical sentiments reflected in *Aelita*? Agursky sums up the novel's "hidden meaning" very well:

> [Tolstoy] transfers the plot to Mars, although everything he writes about it points out that it symbolizes the West, while Earth symbolizes Russia. Engineer Los (Tolstoy) flees to Mars in despair (he emigrates from Soviet Russia to the West). A typical Scythian, former Red Army soldier Gusev accompanies him. Los finds Mars-West in a state of decline, wrapped in a feeling of impending doom. The leader of the Martians, Tuskub (Spengler), tells the Martians: "[W]e will not save civilization, we will not even postpone its destruction, but we will give the world an opportunity to die calmly and with dignity" (120). Tuskub's opponent, Gor (a Western communist), believes that Mars (the West) can be saved by Earth (Russia). For him, "men from the earth" (Russians) are "a healthy, young race … with hot blood" (121). However, Tolstoy does not believe in Western communists. He believes that they, too, lack the will to live. … He attributes the following words to the dying Gor: "Oh,

[2] Tolstoy thus represents a sort of focal point through which different movements I mention here, precisely National Bolshevism, Smenovekhovstvo, and Skifstvo, shed their "curative" rays of light on uncertain Russian fate after the October Revolution. Like Nikolai Ustryalov, one of the pioneers of National Bolshevism and main ideologists of Smenovekhovstvo, Tolstoy tried to practically contribute to the revival of collapsed Russian state, i.e., through his editorial work in *Nakanune*, which at the same time meant that he took part in realization of political program with the same goal, supporting the Bolsheviks. The third hypostasis of this revival, and the one which opposed *the West* the most, was the spiritual and mystical one—Skifstvo. Tolstoy, as a writer, was not immune to it, which is best evidenced by his connection with Andrei Bely, one of the main literary proponents of the movement (see Tolstaja, "Berlinskaja lazur'").

> we missed our time, … we should have loved life passionately and mercifully" (152). However, only Russians can love life like that. Scythian Gusev thinks only of annexing Mars to the RSFSR. (90)

Death and rebirth

To examine the complex structure of Tolstoy's novel more closely, we should look at two longer chapters in the middle of the novel, "Aelita's First" and "Second Narrative," which represent its ideological and polemic core. In them, Aelita tells Los and Gusev the story of her planet's legendary history. The whole story openly alludes to the aforementioned Spengler's theories, which, with their pessimism and fatalism, contested the prevailing progressivism of nineteenth-century Western society. Halil sums up Spengler's cyclical model of history—a "life cycle of civilizations"—in the following way:[3]

> [T]he constructive, cultural, and creative process is replaced by a civilizational, decadent one; science is useless and destructive; culture is religious, civilization is irreligious; the post-civilizational future will be the beginning of a new prehistory, a movement from scratch. There is no single humanity, no single history, no progress, there is only a mournful cycle from culture to civilization, from life to death. (Halil 75)

One of the most controversial parts of Spengler's teaching is the theory that civilizations are completely isolated, each possessing its own unique, unchanging "soul." Aelita's "narratives" present the history of Mars precisely as a history of civilizational blending, and Los' and Gusev's journey to Mars is also evidence of a possible contact between civilizations. The same can be said about Tolstoy's variation of the myth about Atlantis. Tolstaya points out that Tolstoy "made the legend of the death of Atlantis, supposedly the ancestral home of the Martian elite, the intermediary part of the comparison between the modern West and the dying Mars" (Tolstaja, "Berlinskaja lazur'"). The most obvious connection of the given story with the ideological and political context of the time, concretely with Scythianism and Eurasianism, is the fragment about a "storm from the east" that "advanced over Atlantis":

[3] In *The Decline of the West*, Spengler presents a cyclical view of world history based on biological analogies. He argues that cultures are similar to organic entities that follow predictable life cycles (childhood, youth, maturity, and aging). All cultures thereby inevitably end in a final phase called "civilization," which represents both their most artificial state and their death.

> On the high plains of Eastern Asia lived the powerful tribe of the Uchkurs, yellow-skinned and slant-eyed. … The Uchkurs were sullen, truculent, and mad. (Tolstoi 107)

> The Atlantians, effete and beautiful to see, were attired in gold with multicolored feathers. The Uchkurs' cavalry annihilated them. … The war began. Its outcome was foregone: the Atlantians only wished to defend their overflowing wealth, while the nomads were possessed of a sacred greed and belief in their promised heritage. (109)

> And so began the third and highest wave of civilization in Atlantis. Into the blood of numerous tribes—black, red, olive, and white—poured the dreamy, restless, intoxicated blood of the Asiatic nomads, star-worshippers, the descendants of Su Khutam Lu, the possessed. (110)

At the end of Aelita's story about Atlantis, as in the myth, the civilization came to its catastrophic ending, sinking to the bottom of the sea. The "end of the world" came after a final clash between "Blacks" and "Whites," two forces that arose from conflicting views of humanity's "original sin":

> The original sin was that existence—the life of earth and its creatures—was comprehended as something which arose in the reason of man. Knowing the world, man knew only himself. Man was the essence, while the world was the fruit of his reason, his will, his dream, his ravings. Existence was only the consciousness of man, the Real, the I.
>
> Such a conception of existence must lead to a situation where every man would assert that he is the only real, essential, authentic I, and that the rest of the world, and men, are his idea. The consequence was inevitable: a struggle for the real I, for the private personality, and the extermination of mankind as the product of one man's dream—and contempt and loathing for existence as an evil apparition. (112)

The "Blacks" remained loyal to abstract "reason," "wisdom," and "knowledge." They are the ones who eventually used it to destroy Atlantis and escape from Earth to Mars, where they violently planted their rotten seed into Martian civilization. However, "Whites" taught the following:

> A sun's ray falls on the earth, perishes, and is resurrected as the fruit of the earth—this is the fundamental law of life. The movement of the earth's reason is the same—descent, sacrificial destruction, and resurrection in the flesh. The original sin—the isolation of Reason—may be destroyed by descent into sin, Reason must fall into flesh and pass through the living gates of death. These

> gates are sex. The fall of Reason must be consummated through the power of Eros. (112–113)

The conflict between "Blacks" and "Whites" might lead the reader to see a connection with Russian civil war in it. Tolstoy's departure from direct ideological and political allusions, however, might be seen through an interesting lens of its relation to two novels that "set the tradition for left-wing Russian science fiction" (Suvin 9)—*Red Star* (*Krasnaja zvezda*, 1908) and *Engineer Menni* (*Inžener Menni*, 1913) by Aleksandr Bogdanov. Both set on Mars, they portray the Martian society as an advanced, utopian one. Bogdanov, however, makes it a "red" utopia,[4] while Tolstoy's protagonists abandon the initial revolutionary dreams and leave the planet to die. We might even postulate that making the Earth a "Red Star," instead of faraway, abstract Mars, reflects the shift from early "utopian dreams" of Russian science fiction to its later, more "down to earth" stage—a process in some way also reflected in literary fate of both authors, as Bogdanov's novels "fell into disgrace and oblivion at the end of the 1920s when the author became *persona non grata* because of his role in the Proletkult organization and his proximity to Nikolai Bukharin" (Schwartz 418).

Conceptions embodied in the novel's "Blacks" and "Whites" can also be put in the context of Tolstoy's inner struggles and his "death and rebirth" in the early 1920s. Tolstaya thus writes that "[i]n *Aelita* the hypertrophy of reason and ancient culture is contrasted with the pressure of chaotic living life, but here the dead reason acts as a guardian, and the disastrous forces of life as the desired destroyer of the old world, promising rebirth" (Tolstaja, *Dëgot'* 437). In her later book, she adds that "Tolstoy's main idea in *Aelita* is the sterility of pure knowledge or spirit, the need for its descent into the flesh," which in turn represents a "polemic with the fanatical rejection of everything that is not pure spirituality in the ideological work and life attitudes of Andrei Bely" (Tolstaja, "Berlinskaja lazur'").

Andrei Bely, a Russian symbolist poet, played a substantial role in Tolstoy's existential and creative transformation and can be thought of as a representative of the "old world" that Tolstoy left behind, the one marked by literary experiments, cosmopolitanism, and "spirit." Nevertheless, Tolstaya points out that "[d]espite his personal disagreement with Bely, his concept of Russia as the highest spiritual ascent in the midst of desperate poverty and devastation was … one of the

[4] It's interesting that the Earth is the one called a "Red Star" in *Aelita* (Tolstoi 59, 93, 101, 165).

ideological impulses embodied in *Aelita*" (Tolstaja, "Berlinskaja lazur'"). The fight between the spiritual and material (corporal, living life) already raged during Tolstoy's Smenovekhovstvo period in Berlin, and one episode with Bely describes it perfectly. At the gathering of Russian emigrants organized in honor of Vladimir Nabokov in Berlin's House of Arts, Tolstoy and Bely clashed over the movement's influence on Russian emigrants:

> "For God's sake," [Bely] said, shrugging his shoulders and gesticulating, "earlier they bared their teeth at us on the white fronts, they were going to shoot me, and now, when marauders are starting to adapt in Russia, they are singing praises! One of two things [will happen]: either the spirit will triumph, or matter; and here they want to take three-quarters of the matter, a quarter of the spirit, and create some kind of Homunculus in a retort …"
>
> "Boris Nikolayevich," A. N. Tolstoy reassured him in a good-natured bass voice, "what does spirit have to do with it, when people are dying of hunger? Wagons with bread must be sent to the Samara province, and you [tell us]: 'Spirit!'" (qtd. in Tolstaja, "Berlinskaja lazur'")

The whole episode was described and published in the newspaper *Nakanune* on 3 April 1922. Not long after that, on 14 April, Tolstoy published his famous "Open Letter to N. V. Tchaikovsky" ("Otkrytoe pis'mo N. V. Čajkovskomu"), the leader of Russian émigré anti-Bolshevik circles. The letter "had an extraordinary impact" (Tolstaja, *Dëgot'* 476), especially since it was published on Easter Day, thus creating another associative string connected with the author's "death" and "rebirth." In it, Tolstoy brings forth arguments in defense of the Smenovekhovstvo movement and calls for accepting the only true Russian government—the Bolsheviks. He ends his letter with the following paragraph:

> As for the desired political life in Russia, I can say absolutely nothing about it: what is better for my homeland—a constituent assembly, a king, or something else? I am sure of only one thing, that the form of state power in Russia must now, after four years of revolution, grow from the Earth, from the very roots, be created by empirical, practical means. And in this, in the practical choice, both the wisdom of the people and their aspirations must be expressed. However, to begin again by applying to the gaping Russian wounds an abstract idea, nurtured in offices, is impossible. There has been too much blood, experiments, and vivisection. (Tolstoj 50)

We can again notice the dichotomy between practical and abstract. The letter can thus be considered a source of what Tolstaya calls "Tolstoy's underlying myth," the one which fully unveils itself in the novel:

"'[T]he weight of life,' the thirst for life—earth, matter, nature, concreteness, personality—are divine. On the contrary, the idea, spirit, hypertrophied mind, logical abstraction, syllogism, mechanical civilization—are agents of Satan" (Tolstaja, "Berlinskaja lazur'"). However, this "myth" can be seen through the lens of another pair of characters in the novel, which in turn sheds new light on Tolstoy's transformation as a writer and intellectual.

A thinker and a man of action

When queen Aelita asks Los, "Why did you leave the earth?" he answers with a reiteration of his previously mentioned thoughts: "The woman I loved died. … Life for me became unbearable. I was alone, alone with myself. I had no strength to battle with despair and no desire to live. It takes courage to live on earth because everything is poisoned with hate. I'm a runaway and a coward" (Tolstoi 85).

Los, a melancholic engineer and dreamer, once again repents and realizes that the only way to love and happiness is through suffering. He has to abandon the "wise thoughts," the ones that are deeply embedded in Aelita's mind, in Martian, or should we say—Western civilization: "Longing in the blood, clouded reason, an unnecessary return to the old, old past. Longing in the blood—return to the gorges, to the flocks, to rear creatures so they can die, to bury them—then once more—longing, and a mother's pains. Stupid, blind perpetuation of life" (Tolstoi 98).

Halil points out that "[i]t has been noted more than once that the ancient type of double hero is used in *Aelita*, and that heroes complement each other according to a principle that is also deeply traditional: contemplation and action" (Halil 92). Unsurprisingly, Halil and earlier researchers had Los and Gusev in mind. While Los is a great mind prone to melancholy and individualism, which are to some degree connected with "original sins" of Atlantic "Blacks," current Martians and, of course, the West, Gusev is enthusiastic, active and unburdened by "big thoughts." Halil adds that Gusev's "ability to reflect the world in oneself simply, soundly and crudely, even in a reduced material way, is somehow connected with the integrity and happiness of a person" (94–95). Los confirms this:

> Los leaped from the craft and crawled into the hatch next to the snoring Gusev. He felt better. This simple man had not betrayed his homeland, he had only flown over hill and dale to this seventh heaven where his only concern

> was what he could seize to take home to Masha. He slept calmly, his conscience clear. (Tolstoi 62)

By introducing the motif of betrayal, Tolstoy once again underlines the repentant nature of the novel. That is why Los himself, as the plot advances, shows increasing sympathy towards Gusev—"an image of the Russian revolution" and a hero through which Tolstoy "conceptualizes Bolshevism" (Halil 99–100). A fragment from the beginning of the chapter "Los is Left Alone," in my opinion, perfectly sums up the novel's "Change of Landmarks" tone:

> "It's revolution, Mstislav Sergeevich. The whole city has been turned upside down. It's wonderful!"
>
> Gusev was standing in the library. In his usually sleepy eyes flickered bright and happy sparks. His nose was up, his mustache bristling. He thrust his hands deep into his belt.
>
> "I have everything packed in the airship, food, and weapons. I got one of their guns. Get ready, throw away that book, and let's go." (Tolstoi 123–124)

"Throwing away the book and going," acting, is exactly what new times and new world demanded from the Russian intellectual elite. Their guiding star was a Gusev-like character—a "real hero of his time" (qtd. in Baranov 104), as Dmitry Furmanov, author of one of the most famous Soviet novels *Chapaev* (1923), wrote in his review of *Aelita*. Korney Chukovsky, a writer and literary critic, sums up this new literary type perfectly:

> And yet, *Aelita* is a superb work because it serves as a pedestal for Gusev. You don't notice the plot or the other characters, you see only this monumental, enormous figure, blocking the entire horizon. Gusev is an image of the broadest generalizations brought to the dimensions of a national type. If a foreigner wants to understand what kind of people made our revolution, he should first of all be given this book. (Čukovskij 566)

On the other hand, Vsevolod Revich, a literary and film critic and the author of one of the most comprehensive works about Soviet science fiction *The Crossroads of Utopias* (*Perekrëstok utopij*, 1998), offers a completely opposite view. For him, "Gusev is a lumpen, a marginal." "The revolution won thanks to the support of the Gusevs," he adds, comparing Gusev to Bulgakov's Sharikov from his famous anti-Bolshevik satire *Heart of the Dog* (*Sobache serdtse*, 1925): "In a certain sense, Gusev is also a new man, a homunculus of the revolution. The reactions of the Gusevs are predetermined and completely predictable, … the reactions

of people brainwashed by class terminology." Revič writes about Tolstoy primarily in a negative tone, calling him "an opportunist who quite consciously supported the crimes of the Stalinist regime." He also agrees that *Aelita* represents his literary turning point, "the transition from pre-revolutionary Tolstoy to Soviet Tolstoy" (Revič).

Ian Christie, in his analysis of Iakov Protazanov's very loose film adaptation of *Aelita* (1924), which he calls "more a critique than an adaptation" (Christie 82), comes to the conclusion that it "anticipated the direction of the novelist's more serious and personal work, culminating in the third volume of *The Road to Calvary* [*Khozhdenie po mukam*, 1922–1941]" (91). In other words, the movie, whose plot is set primarily in Moscow, in the present time of "building a new society," is a direct negation of everything experimental and "out of the box" that the novel itself offered. Although it is usually remembered for its incredible constructivist Martian sets by Isaac Rabinovich and Martian costumes by Aleksandra Ekster, which at the time sparked controversies (84), the movie, on the conceptual and content level, departed from everything that avant-garde art wanted to achieve within the emerging Soviet culture. The movie's ending, as Andrew Horton sums it up, makes that perfectly clear: "Los rejects his bourgeois and individualistic personal project of building a spacecraft and decisively realizes he has to engage with social duty. Tearing the plans from their secret hiding place and thrusting them into the fire, he announces to Natasha, 'We have different work to do'" (Horton 169).

Figure 1: Scene from the movie *Aelita*, "Enough fantasizing. Another real job awaits us all."

Aelita—an incredibly layered and complex novel, disguised in the schematic and seductive dress of science fiction—can indeed be read as a metacommentary of Tolstoy's "death and rebirth," a paradigmatic individual fate shaped by the death of the old world and the birth of the new one. In the novel, the old world is represented by Atlantis, Mars, or "the West," a civilization supposedly "dying" because of its "original sin"—relying on abstract thought, individualism, and "spirit." However, *Aelita* was actually Tolstoy's last breath of fresh air, the last goodbye to this old world of individual freedom. The old world he will soon crush, together with the whole pyramid of Soviet society—from the most ordinary citizen to Stalin himself—was the world of initial revolutionary dreams, of experimental enthusiasm of Russian avant-garde, of building a new world from the ashes of the old one. The new world will be a world of "Gusevs," of crude corporality, of agency, and of building. However, it will not be built on ashes of the "old world," but on ashes of each passing day, and each man and woman passed away in the struggle for a "bright future." Tolstoy returned from the old world to this new one, as Los returned from Mars to Earth, but he probably knew that his love for his homeland would bring him suffering, inner suffering, because he knowingly gave up "the book" in order to help rebuild its former power, this time as an "empire of collective agency":

> Los worked at an industrial installation where he was constructing a universal power plant of the Martian type. It was assumed that his plant would revolutionize all the principles of Mechanics and solve all the problems of the world's economic system.
>
> Los worked incessantly without sparing himself, although he had little confidence in solving the tragedy of universal happiness, no matter what kind of machines could be invented. (Tolstoi 173)

Martian dreams

Slavoj Žižek writes that "[p]erhaps the most elementary hermeneutic test of the greatness of a work of art is its ability to survive being torn from its original context. In the case of truly great art, each epoch reinvents and rediscovers it" (Žižek 152). *Aelita*, in my opinion, is one such work.

Challenges that the contemporary Western world faces may be conceptualized through the novel's underlying contrast, the one between abstract, logocentric, and individualistic thought, and the chaotic forces of "living life." "First-world" countries, the ones which mainly belong

to the "Western world," are faced with a sharp drop in birth rate, a consequence of highly-developed societies' focus on more abstract ways of contributing to society than "descent into sin"—giving birth to a new human, a new body. Spenglerian motifs of Western civilization's "decadent phase," which precedes its downfall, are once again tickling the imagination of people who see the inevitable establishment of so-called New World Order, the one built on the ashes of the "Western empire."

Thus, the new world is often imagined with its center somewhere in the East, mainly in China. China's mentality and culture are a mystery for Westerners even today, which contributes to the creation of many fears about its possible influence on Western "way of life." Russia, of course, also fits well in this contemporary "new hot blood from the East" scenario, more so as it represents a continuation of its messianic national mythology. This is only underscored by current military conflicts raging on the East–West line.

What is also incredibly similar to *Aelita*'s plot is a resurgence of "Martian dreams," a sudden emergence of powerful private space industry entities, which even formed their own "ideology," revolving around calls for multi-planetary humanity and "escaping the inevitable extinction on Earth." The main target of these commercial space projects is once again—Mars.

Can the current "real-world scenario" be thought of as a reversal of *Aelita*'s hidden meaning? Is Earth now "the West" (it indeed is dominated by Western civilization), and Mars humanity's new hope, a place that requires "building from scratch"—constructing the whole physical fundament of society, just like in 1920s Soviet Russia? Can this new "struggle" mean what returning from emigration meant for Tolstoy—putting away "the book," logocentric and "spiritual" foundations of Western civilization in favor of "the body," pure acting and "Eastern" collectivism, all in the name of the greater goal—a new society, a new humanity, its survival?

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Zaton Atlantide in vzpon Vzhoda: »preporod v plamenih« v romanu *Aelita* A. N. Tolstoja

Ključne besede: ruska književnost / znanstvena fantastika / Tolstoj, Aleksej Nikolajevič: *Aelita* / smenovehovstvo / skitstvo / Atlantida / Mars / zahodna civilizacija / sovjetska civilizacija

Pred razmahom socialističnega realizma je znanstvena fantastika v Sovjetski zvezi veljala za fleksibilen žanr, njeni predstavniki pa so eksperimentirali z različnimi kulturnimi koncepti, ki so spodbujali k razmisleku. To velja tudi za roman *Aelita* A. N. Tolstoja, ki je s podnaslovom *Zaton Marsa* prvič izšel leta 1923. Roman nedvomno sodi v sam vrh kanona sovjetske znanstvene fantastike, čeprav je zaslovel šele potem, ko ga je avtor priredil tako, da je ustrezal uradni literarni doktrini. V Tolstojevem večplastnem modernističnem delu se skriva komentar tedanje družbeno-politične situacije v Evropi in Rusiji – »nepolitična apologija Rusije«, kot je zapisala E. Tolstaja. Roman se v ideološkem smislu opira na ideje »skitstva« in »smenovehovstva«. Ideja nove »vroče krvi« z Vzhoda, iz novoustanovljene sovjetske Rusije, ki naj bi obudila propadajočo zahodno civilizacijo, se v romanu kaže tako skozi mistično in okultno pripoved o preporodu »zmehčane« marsovske civilizacije kot tudi skozi tipično znanstvenofantastično pustolovsko pripoved, v kateri sovjetski vesoljski popotniki poskušajo oživiti umirajoči planet – v žaru marsovske delavske revolucije. Cilj članka je umestiti narativni vzorec romana, ki temelji na »apokaliptičnem preporodu civilizacije«, v kontekst ponavljajočih se mitologemov in ideologemov evropske in ruske kulture, pa tudi v kontekst Tolstojeve osebne in literarne poti.

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