Female Aliens in (Post-)Soviet
Sci-Fi Cinema: Technology, Sacrifice
and Morality Feminism

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Abstract: In this article I will discuss a number of (post-) Soviet sci-fi films, stretching over a hundred years or so, to look into what function (post-) Soviet female superhuman characters have, and what they might tell us about fundamental discussions of humanity and its relation to technology, identity and gender. By looking into the traditional function of women in Russian and Soviet culture, the Marxist and Soviet attitude to technology and with a particular attention given to how notions of verticality in film is a metaphor for hierarchies, this article will shed new light on (post-) Soviet sci-fi cinema, and provide a comparison to the Western/Hollywood trope of the female cyborg. The superhuman's origin and material composition is unknown, she does not seem to be a critique of technology, instead she seems to have a moral and pedagogical function.

Keywords: Alien, Space exploration, Soviet cinema, post-Soviet cinema, cyborg, Russian culture, gender, female aliens, science fiction

The science fiction genre explores future scientific and technological advances, and how humans relate to and interact with this advanced technology. However, sci-fi is not only concerned with science and technology, but also with imagining worlds different from ours. The worlds we imagine, whether utopian or dystopian, are shaped by the worlds we live in. Sci-fi is particularly focused on the dilemmas and opportunities brought about by science and technology—issues that are particularly important in societies that continue to invest in scientific and technological development—as well as the portrayal of human contact with 'others' (e.g. aliens, artificial intelligence and cyborgs).

Through a critical reading of the female alien and superhuman characters in post-Soviet sci-fi films, this article aims to fill a gap in research into Russian sci-fi cinema from a feminist perspective. There are a few scholarly works discussing female characters in (post-)Soviet sci-fi cinema, primarily focusing on individual or a small selection of films, rather than the phenomena as it occurs in cinema over time.[1] However, works dedicated to a compari-

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[1] E.g. Peter G. Christensen's work 'Women as Princesses or Comrades' (2000) cited in this article, and Alexey Golubev's work 'Affective machines or the inner self? Drawing the boundaries of the female body in the so-

son of different representations of the female alien and the superhuman are lacking. Such a comparison will contribute to our understanding of the function of female characters in (post-)Soviet culture, representations of women and technology in the sci-fi genre, and hopefully inspire further research on female characters in (post-)Soviet cinema in general.

When the roles of women in Russian and Soviet culture are discussed by scholars, a common conclusion is the characterisation of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia as highly patriarchal cultures wherein women are not afforded equal opportunities for actualisation in various spheres of society (see Gillespie 2003: 85, 99; Heldt 1987: 2-5). These views can be seen as essentialising, as if there is such a thing as a universally shared female experience based on biology. However, while scholars such as Barbara Heldt and David Gillespie viewed the traditional role of women in Russian culture as an object of oppression, the film critic Maya Turovskaya and the filmmaker Larisa Shepitko viewed the role of women as quite empowered (see Khrenova et al. 1999; Turovskaya 1993).

Heldt and Shepitko argue that women in Russian culture are represented as morally superior to men: 'It was the insistence on female superiority in fiction that set the standard for the Russian novelistic heroine. It was a "natural" superiority, untutored and virgin' (Heldt 1987: 4). [2] Heldt goes on to describe this female role as 'terribly perfect', frightening for men and unattainable (and unattractive) for real women (1987: 2, 4-5). Shepitko, one of the most celebrated Soviet directors, actively discussed gender and filmmaking in interviews and essays (see Attwood 1993; Khrenova et al. 1999; Shepitko 1975). According to her, 'no man can so intuitively discern some phenomena in the human psyche, in nature, as a woman can' (Larisa Shepitko in *Larisa* [1981, Klimov]).[3] The discrepancy between Heldt's more negative and Shepitko's more positive views of women's function seems symptomatic of the difference between dominant feminist ideas in Western discourse—deconstructing essentialising views of gender— and Russian discourse—arguing that binaries are natural and that some female traits are superior.

However, both Heldt's and Shepitko's descriptions of women's function in Russian culture come very close to the concept of 'the Eternal Feminine'. The term was first used by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the final lines of the second part of *Faust* (1832): 'The Eternal Feminine // Beckons Us Upward'. [4] The idea of the feminine as something eternal and morally superior became a cultural archetype in Europe in the 19th century. It is not unlikely, then, that the classical works analysed by Heldt were in part inspired by, as well as contributed to, contemporary ideas of femininity. The concept was also discussed by the feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, who notes:

> Man feminizes the ideal he sets up before him as the essential Other, because woman is the material representation of alterity; that is why almost all allegories, in language as in pictorial representation, are women. Woman is Soul and Idea, but she is also a mediatrix

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cialist romantic imagination' (2016). Golubev explores the aesthetics of the female body in post-Stalinist Soviet sci-fi cinema and literature. He does not make any distinction between cosmonauts, humanoid aliens and other female bodies.

[2] Heldt's book *Terrible Perfection* (1987) examines female characters in Russian literature, with a primary focus on 19th and early 20th century writers.

[3] Shepitko does not specify which phenomena she thinks women are better at describing, but judging by her own films, it seems moral dilemmas is one.

[4] 'Das Ewig-Weibliche // Zieht uns hinan'

between them: she is the divine Grace, leading Christian towards God, she is Beatrice guiding Dante in the beyond, Laura summoning Petrarch to the lofty summits of poetry. In all the doctrines that unify Nature and Spirit she appears as Harmony, Reason, Truth. (Beauvoir 1972: 211)

The 'Us' in Goethe's quote refers to men and the Eternal Feminine is the ideal Other—or, in Heldt's words, 'the heroines of male fiction serve a purpose that ultimately has little to do with women: these heroines are used lavishly in a discourse of male self-definition' (Heldt 1987: 2). While Beauvoir's essentialising arguments of the existence of a universally shared female experience and connection between sex and gender have been rightly criticised by such feminist scholars as Judith Butler, the concept of the Eternal Feminine still makes for a cultural archetype that can be engaged when analysing women's function in cinema (Butler 2006: 12-17). However, Butler's theory of gender performativity—which, in her own words, 'sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body' (Butler 2006: xv) —is important for the following analysis of how the female superhuman performs gender and embodies the Eternal Feminine. The relationship between the technological fantasies offered by the sci-fi genre and the stereotype of the Eternal Feminine offers a productive ground for feminist inquiries into how representations of women and technology are constructed and how they evolve in different cultural spheres.

Based on this conceptual background, my article aims to answer the following questions: How can these gender concepts be related to the cinematic female superhuman; what function do (post-)Soviet female superhuman characters have and what might they tell us about the fundamental discussions of humanity and its relation to technology, identity and gender? Carmen Scheide and Monica Rüthers argue in *Soviet Space Culture* that 'connecting woman to advancement and technology therefore functioned as a propagandistic superlative, but in doing so stipulated the implicit backwardness and inferiority of women' (Maurer et al. 2011: 83). Although technology is often considered culturally a masculine sphere, my hypothesis is that the ideal embodiment of the man-machine in (post-)Soviet sci-fi cinema is the female superhuman. Rather than implying that women were backwards and inferior, the presentation of female superhumans can be connected to the specific cultural tradition of the Eternal Feminine. Based on the concepts outlined above; previous research on the function of women and femininity in Russian and Soviet culture and sci-fi cinema; and the combination of gender, technology and spatial dimension, we can assume that the female superhuman represents an embodiment of the Eternal Feminine. However, because the films analysed in the following passages are diverse in terms of time period and subgenre, there are discernible developments and nuances in how the trope of the female superhuman is presented.

Methodology

Many of the cinematic female characters of (post-)Soviet sci-fi that will be discussed in this article can be seen as superhumans, i.e. humanoid aliens with extraordinary abilities, such as exceptionally fast healing, respawning after dying, teleporting, telepathy, psychokinesis (moving objects with mind power) and eternal or exceptionally long lives. Also, as will be

shown, there are important differences between the true superhumans and the false ones. It is typically unclear to the viewer whether the superhuman abilities are a result of evolution under different living conditions on other planets or in a distant future (or a combination of the two), or if they are a result of technology unknown or unavailable to humans in the time and space imagined in the film. The films analysed in this article cover a period of one hundred years or so, from the 1920s to the 2010s: *Aelita* [1924, Protazanov], *Solaris* [Soliaris, 1972, Tarkovsky], *Dr. Ivens' Silence* [Molchanie doktora Ivensa, 1973, Metal'nikov], *Per Aspera ad Astra* [Cherez ternii k zvezdam, 1980, Viktorov], *The Alien Woman* [Inoplanetianka, 1984, Segel'], *Are We Going Crazy?* [S uma soiti!, 1994, Kuchkov] and *Star Worms* [Zvezdnyi vors, 2011, Kagadeev and Nikolai Kopeikin]. They represent different sci-fi subgenres, from the more existential ones, to adventure, thriller and comedy. A common feature of these films is the significant presence of a female alien, either in terms of screen time or plot function. In addition, I will discuss relevant material from the films *Star Inspector* [Zvezdnyi inspektor, 1980, Kovalev and Polin], *Orion's Loop* [Petlia Oriona, 1980, Levin], *Seven Elements* [Sem' stikhi, 1984, Ivanov] and *Attraction* [Pritiazhenie, 2017, Bondarchuk]. The latter films will only be briefly mentioned, either because there is no prominent female alien (*Star Inspector* and *Attraction*), other films are seen as more representative of a particular decade, or because they do not represent a sufficient breadth in terms of subgenres (*Per Aspera* and *The Alien Woman* instead of *Orion's Loop* and *Seven Elements*).

A large proportion of (post-)Soviet superhumans are presented as female, played by female actors and display typical feminine traits, looks and behaviour, although all of the films are directed by men.[5] Thus, these female superhumans can be seen as the ultimate Other. Their alterity lies in their gender, as well as in their origin, as 'men's feminized ideal'. A crucial detail of this ideal, according to Goethe, is the upward direction, adding a spatial dimension to the Eternal Feminine. The female superhuman in (post-)Soviet films represents the same spatial aspect: verticality. With this spatial aspect, the metaphor of superiority is strengthened. In the female superhuman, there is no distinct border between biology and technology. Thus, she also represents the Soviet ideal of man(sic!)-machine as a feminized ideal—the ultimate ideal.

The spatial aspect is an important part of what differentiates the representation of female superhumans from those of female cosmonauts in (post-)Soviet cinema.[6] The cosmonauts do not embody the Eternal Feminine in the way that the superhumans do, because their origin is known (they are *homines sapientes*) and their spatial home is Earth. The female cosmonauts

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[5] There are some male superhumans in (post-)Soviet films. In fact, they are found in most of the films discussed in this article. For the most part they play less significant roles in these films (measured in terms of screen time, plot function, or both), the most notable exception being *Attraction*. *Attraction*, to my knowledge, is also the only film presenting a relationship between an Earth woman and alien man, as opposed to the recurrent theme of a relationship between an Earth man and a female alien.

[6] The female superhuman plays a central role, in terms of screen time and plot function, in 9 (post-)Soviet films (*Aelita, Solaris, Dr. Ivens' Silence, Star Inspector, Per Aspera ad Astra, The Alien Woman, Seven Elements, Are We Going Crazy?*, and *Star Worms*), while the female cosmonaut plays a central role in 10 films (*Cosmic Voyage* [Kosmicheskii Reis, 1936, Zhuravlev], *Planet of Storm* [Planeta Bur', 1961, Klushantsev], *Towards a Dream* [Mechte navstrechu, 1963, Kariukov and Otar Koberidze], *The Andromeda Nebula* [Tumannost' Andromedy, 1967, Sherstobitov], *Moscow-Cassiopeia* [Moskva-Kassiopeia, 1973, Viktorov], *Teens in Space* [Otroki vo vselennoi, 1974, Viktorov], *A Great Space Voyage* [Bol'shoe kosmicheskoe puteshestvie, 1974, Selivanov] *Orion's Loop, Seven Elements*, and *Secrets of the Third Planet* [Taina tret'ei planety, 1981, Kachanov]). They do occur in additional films, but in smaller, less significant roles.

feature heavily in several films (see footnote 5 for titles). Although they are performing gender, this performance is not a central part of the films. Whereas the female superhuman raises existential questions of what it means to be human, the female cosmonaut instead seems to function as a love interest and a role model to encourage young women to become scientists. It is therefore unsurprising that the female superhuman films and the female cosmonaut films represent different moods in their contemporary societies. The 1917 revolution and the following civil war, the disillusionment brought about by the Apollo 11 expedition, the decline and mounting dismay of the 1980s and the existential crisis caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union serve as backdrops for the superhumans. And while the female cosmonaut is a grown, ambitious woman in the films of the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s, she becomes progressively younger throughout the 1970s and 1980s. After 1990, she is virtually non-existent as a contemporary or future character, perhaps not yet born, or a remnant of the past. This possibly suggests that the utopian space age presented in these films gradually seemed more and more distant from reality, before disappearing altogether.

In Western sci-fi discourse, the concept of the posthuman has proven fruitful for discussions about humans and technology.[7] As Dónal O'Mathúna notes: 'Movies with posthuman(ist) and transhuman(ist) themes raise many issues but are unified in asking questions about human nature and technology…They question the distinctiveness of humans and human value' (2014: 295). And while this suggests that there are existential similarities between the various posthuman characters appearing in Western cinema and the (post-)Soviet superhuman, there are fundamental differences too. One of the posthuman cinematic incarnations is the female cyborg, a combination of biology and technology in a female form. Scholars discussing the female cyborg's function tend to agree that she is a creature that represents two large threats to masculinity: advanced technology (which may replace most of men's functions) and female sexuality (which simultaneously intimidates and provokes many men and/or causes in them the urge to drive women into submission). Thus, the femininity of the cyborg presents a dual threat (see Anthony 2004; Doane 2000; Faithful 2016). Another fixation of sci-fi, according to Mary Ann Doane, is the fetishisation of reproduction and motherhood associated with female aliens, cyborgs and androids in Hollywood sci-fi, presenting these women with a very specific function and often bringing a natalist aspect into the binary theme of biology vs. technology (Doane 2000). According to Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, the posthumanist ideas' function is to challenge the binary mentality in the West: 'While there is certainly not one humanism, which could be identified as a common target of posthumanist criticisms, there are persistent concepts and dualities in Western culture, such as nature/culture, man/woman, subject/object, human/animal, or body/mind, which are deeply rooted in the Western tradition and which get challenged by posthumanist thinkers' (Ranisch and Sorgner 2014: 8). In Soviet sci-fi cinema, there seems to be less trace of the conflict between humans and technology, the conflict between masculinity and female sexuality and the fetishisation of reproduction and motherhood. Even a cursory examination of (post-)Soviet sci-fi cinema suggests that the philosophical discussion of the cyborg is different from the West. In fact, there seems to be only one explicit mention of cyborgs, no ex-

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[7] The majority of non-Soviet/Russian films mentioned in this article are produced in Hollywood, yet, because the German *Metropolis* [1927, Lang] is seen as such a key film, mentioned explicitly in the sources used (Anthony 2004; Balsamo 2000) to exemplify the non-Soviet/Russian presentation, the broad term 'Western' is used more often than the specific 'Hollywood'.

plicit reference to reproduction, no actual mothers and hardly any characters who match the description of an organic/synthetic creature.[8]

Is it possible that the organic/synthetic divide and the idea of humanness inevitability stemming from biology were less important in the USSR? During the industrialisation of the 1930s in particular, the ideal of the man-machine was communicated through art and political propaganda. This was not merely conveyed through an image of the industrial worker, but to a high degree through that of the industrialised farmer, typically pictured as a woman on a tractor (see image 1). The Soviet view of nature was also highly instrumental: nature had a low value in and of itself and was considered something available for exploitation and human industrialisation.[9]

Image 1. 'Peasant woman, collectivize the village. Join the ranks of Red Female Tractor Operators'

Source: Artist unknown (1930)

This view of technology, machine and nature can be traced back to Marxism. For Marx, technology (as a product of human intellectual labour) in itself was neutral, in the sense that it could serve capitalism and socialism equally. Furthermore, machines, as means of produc-

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[8] Cyborgs are explicitly mentioned in *Orion's Loop*. The entire crew of a spaceship is copied into a duplicate crew of cyborgs who accompany the human crew on their expedition. The cyborgs function as the human crew members' autopilots of sorts when the humans need to rest. The cyborgs of *Orion's Loop* do not seem to have much will of their own, suggesting that they are closer to humanoid robots than cyborgs. It is also unclear whether they actually are organic/synthetic creatures. The cyborgs as such do not play a large enough role to be thoroughly analysed in this article.

[9] The most extreme examples of this policy are the virgin lands projects and the alterations of rivers, in particular those connected to the Aral lake, these days considered to be the world's largest man-made ecological catastrophe.

tion, suppress and alienate the working class under capitalism, but will eventually contribute to liberating workers in a revolution and serve humanity in the classless society. Paradoxically, according to this vision, humanity—and masculinity in particular—is not threatened but enhanced by technology and machines. Within this context, the cyborg emerges as a product of a *natural* development of both technology and the human race.[10] So, near the end of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), workers symbolically destroy the machines as part of their anti-capitalist revolt, while in various Soviet films from around this period (e.g. *Man with a Movie Camera* [Chelovek s kinoapparatom, 1929, Vertov]) the cult of the man-machine is in fact celebrated. Consequently the function of the cyborg—as a character to test out and confront the perceived threat of advanced technology—has not been dominant in Soviet discourse. One should add that, throughout most of the USSR's history, Soviet society was technologically inferior to the U.S. This can also provide an explanation as to why, in the Soviet context, a future utopia was primarily represented by technology, the potentially threatening and problematic sides of which were not emphasised. The level of technology in the USSR was neither advanced enough, nor embedded into different spheres of society intimately enough, for it to pose an obvious threat.

Using the term 'superhuman', rather than 'posthuman', allows for a more accurate description of the (post-)Soviet female alien, because it avoids the challenge of the binary inherent in the latter concept, while still emphasising the superhuman's connection to the human and her extraordinary abilities.

The 1920s: *Aelita* challenges the established trope

In the early Soviet Union, the discussion of what was art and its function in the changing society acquired the importance of hitherto unknown proportions. Artists had to adapt their works to the rapid changes in official policy in order not to end up on the losing side of political controversy. The revolution meant that existing norms and narratives were challenged by art. *Aelita*, the first ever Russian language sci-fi film (based on the 1923 eponymous novel by Aleksei Tolstoi), is an excellent example of such a challenge: 'Aelita can surely lay claim to being *the* key film of the early NEP period, born of a unique moment in post-Revolutionary Soviet society, reflecting its realities as well as its aspirations in a complex and original form and linking its hitherto isolated cinema with important currents in world cinema' (Christie 1994: 102).

The film's plotline is complex, following several characters with more or less connected stories. The main story revolves around the engineer Los (Nikolai Tseretelli), who is obsessed with interplanetary travel and gets so caught up in a mysterious radio message from Mars (and his jealousy towards his wife, whom he apparently murders) that he builds a space

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[10] A striking example of this is how one of the important heroes of the Soviet Union, Aleksei Mares'iev (1916-2001), became a kind of cyborg. Mares'iev was a fighter pilot shot down by the Nazis during a raid in 1942. He narrowly escaped captivity, made it back to the home side alive but lost both of his legs. He then got prosthetic legs and was so determined to return to the air that he trained for a year and then resumed active service as a fighter pilot. He was awarded several medals and became the inspiration for a novel, a film and an opera (composed by Prokofiev), all named *The Story of a Real Man* [Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke]. His prosthetic legs made him no less a real human being. On the contrary, without those legs there would have probably been no 'real man' story.

rocket and travels to Mars. There he gets to meet Aelita the Queen of Mars (Iulia Solntseva). Aelita does not possess any obvious superhuman abilities. However, her access to advanced technology, her political influence and power, her function in the story and *Aelita*'s position as the original Soviet sci-fi film, necessitate the following analysis and discussion.

The film is composed of scenes and stories from the early 1920s Moscow, during the chaos of the Civil War and NEP and sequences set on Mars, where Aelita circumvents her father Tuskub by using the telescope technology to spy on Earth. More specifically, she spies on Los, whom she falls in love with. After Los's arrival on Mars, the suppressed slaves of Mars revolt against their rulers. In the ensuing turmoil Aelita attempts a coup, but in the end Los kills her. At this point it is revealed that Los has only dreamt this, although it is unclear what exactly has and has not been a dream, apart from the events on Mars. Los is able to return to his wife, whom he did not kill after all. At the end, he throws his sketches of a rocket in the fire and declares: 'Enough daydreaming! We have other work to worry about', suggesting that one should put one's talents to the implementation of more practical Soviet construction projects, rather than fantasies about interplanetary travel.

The year 1924, when the film was released, marks the point when Soviet film production really kicked off, both in terms of quantity and quality (Youngblood 1993: 94). *Aelita* obviously tries to present a politically correct story by making villains of speculators, people nostalgic of the pre-revolutionary times, and of course dictators supressing the masses. However, the film's message concerning the spread of the revolution to other civilisations is more ambiguous: 'The question of *Aelita*'s ideological conformity has been a vexing one, and there has been no agreement about its political implications' (Christensen 2000: 109). In a short piece in *Sovetskii ekran*, in connection with the film's 40th anniversary, the commentator notes the unfortunate deviation the filmmakers made from the original book by turning the great Martian revolution into a daydream (Dautova 1964). This ambiguity towards the revolution can be seen as a symptom of the political situation at the time, when official policy was transitioning from the idea that the Bolshevik revolution should be spread throughout the world, to the policy of building communism in one country.[11] The film is often remembered because of its legendary visual presentation of Mars (the futuristic sets and costumes were designed by Isaak Rabinovich and Aleksandra Ekster) and for its on-location footage of early 1920s Moscow.[12] Still, the film, and in particular the character of Aelita, makes for interesting discussion about the genders and the relationship between them: '*Aelita: Queen of Mars* is the prototype film of the relationship between human male and alien female, that is, of first contact' (Lathers 2010: 198). Aelita is an Other, who at first resembles the Eternal Feminine, virtually drawing Los upward. However, Los is tricked by her spatial and cultural placement, as she turns out to be far from the idealised Other.

In his Aesopian interpretation of *Aelita*, Peter G. Christensen argues that, 'the famous costumes and sets which may have been alluring to Soviet audiences in the 1920s really have only a stylistic novelty value rather than a value related to comfort or use' (2000: 115). The Martian aesthetic accentuates verticality almost to the extreme with its columns, stairs, straight lines, spirals and lighting. This extreme verticality underscores the hierarchical struc-

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[11] The Soviet policy of building communism in one country was officially adopted in late 1925 but was presented already in 1924.
[12] In *Inside the Film Factory* Ian Christie presents a thorough and intriguing history of *Aelita*'s production (Christie 1994).

ture of Martian society. Whether the Martian architecture and costumes are comfortable and useful, is irrelevant to my analysis. Rather, they suggest that the society Los dreams about is hierarchical to its very core and cannot simply be changed. It is possible that he dreams about this strict authoritarian society because it seems easier to navigate in comparison to his confusing everyday earthly surroundings: Los is 'a 'bourgeois specialist' ostensibly committed to building communism, but still emotionally—perhaps unconsciously—unadjusted to the new order' (Christie 1994: 92). The film's lesson, however, seems to be that such hierarchical societies are fragile and just as easily thrown into turmoil. Los has to wholeheartedly reject the idea of such a society and rather put his energy into constructing the new Soviet society.

This interpretation of the vertical aesthetics of the film reflecting hierarchical structures (a recurrent device in sci-fi dystopia, found in *Metropolis* and *High Rise* [2015, Wheatley], to mention but a few), also has implications for the understanding of Aelita, as it is not the society per se that Los dreams about, it is Aelita, who does not exist apart from the Martian society. Not only is she a part of the hierarchical Martian society, she is in a hierarchical relation to Los and her Martian subjects. She is looking down at him from Mars and when they finally meet, he throws himself at her feet (see image 2). Aelita is superior to Los in terms of class and by virtue of belonging to a more technologically advanced civilisation. However, she is not morally superior, thus breaking with the 19th-century trope, as described by Heldt and the idea of the Eternal Feminine.

Image 2. Los throws himself to the floor upon his first meeting with Aelita.

Source: Iakov Protazanov's *Aelita* (1924)

Aelita can briefly be summed up as a powerful, sexual, evil, technologically advanced, female alien. She fights for herself and her death is not a tragedy—on the contrary, Los's murder of her appears justified. Throughout the film, Aelita and Los's wife Natasha mirror each other. When Los becomes jealous towards his wife, he turns to Aelita. First he (believes) he kills his wife. Then he kills Aelita. While he is killing Aelita, he sees his wife in her place, highlighting the connection. Both murders are justified as necessary steps towards

a new and better society: 'Killing the fantasy of Aelita, as well as his distorted image of Natasha…is the necessary prelude to her 'rebirth' as a true Soviet woman and to Los's regeneration as a 'good' Soviet engineer' (Christie 1994: 100). *Aelita* suggests that the important question of gender roles in the new Soviet society was engaged cinematically (especially women's moral function, but also their sexuality). Aelita's ultimate failure to reaffirm the Eternal Feminine trope may also explain why she is not a true superhuman, in that she does not possess any superhuman abilities.

Subsequent Soviet presentations of female superhumans confirm the exceptionality of Aelita and her murder, as she does not seem to have any direct descendants in later films. Even though *Aelita* greatly influenced Soviet sci-fi cinema visually, structurally (i.e. the dream structure) and thematically (i.e. the romance between a human male and an alien female), the challenge to the gender stereotype gained less traction. As such, Aelita seems to be one of the mothers of later Hollywood and non-Russian presentations of female aliens, as well as female aliens in post-Soviet sci-fi cinema.

The 1970s: high-tech communism

By the 1960s, space travel was no longer a figment of a daydreamer's imagination or simply dismissed as escapism. The future became a reality. Whereas *Aelita*'s moral lesson had been to stop dreaming about somewhere other than the USSR, by the 1960s space travel and contact with alien civilisations was presented in a different light. In most sci-fi films of this period, both the high-tech future and high-tech aliens represent a communist ideal worth striving for. However, as mentioned in the introduction, there is a transition after the 1969 U.S. Moon landing by the Apollo 11 expedition, with a turn towards more existential topics. And with this turn, the female superhuman returned to the screen with a larger presence than she had in the 1950s and 1960s. This is exemplified by one of the best known Soviet sci-fi films, *Solaris*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky and based on the eponymous novel written by the Polish writer Stanislav Lem.

Solaris received substantial attention both in the Soviet Union and internationally.[13] The superhuman Hari (Natal'ia Bondarchuk) plays a vital role in this deeply philosophical drama, set in an unspecified future, where human scientists have been preoccupied with exploring a mysterious planet called Solaris. The psychotherapist Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) is sent to the space station orbiting Solaris. There he learns of the mysterious happenings that the other scientists do not like to talk about with outsiders: the humans receive 'guests' on the station. Solaris, an oceanic planet with no known landmass, somehow produces humanoid beings—'guests'. The most prominent of these guests is Hari, Kris's ex-wife, who killed herself years earlier. Hari and the other humanoid aliens on the spaceship are the planet's materialised version of traumatic memories of the humans on that spaceship. This raises practical questions, of how the scientists are to interact with their guests, philosophical questions regarding humanity and how to deal with traumas. There is a clearly gendered presentation of these topics, with all the scientists being men and the most important guest, a woman.

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[13] *Solaris* was covered in several articles in the Soviet film magazines *Sovetskii ekran* and *Soviet Film*. It also won the Grand Prix Spécial du Jury at the 1972 Cannes film festival (see 'Prognozy khudozhnika—Soliaris' 1971; 'Zagadka "Soliarisa"' 1973; Revich 1971; Sheetova 1973; Smelkov 1973; Yurenev 1973; Zorkaia 1973).

Different possible answers to these questions are represented in the various ways the researchers treat their guests. On the one hand, there is the researcher Sartorius who has no sympathy for the guests and who conducts grotesque vivisecting experiments on them. On the other, there is Kris who cannot get past the obvious display of emotions by the aliens and therefore thinks they should be treated like humans.

The scholar Vladimir Tumanov argues that Sartorius represents a reductionist understanding of humanity and the mind (based on biology), while Kris displays a functionalist approach (based on human function and experience) (2016: 368, 372). Kris's position is partly explained by the fact that his alien guest is his deceased wife. For Hari, her own existence is a source of confusion and trauma, as she has a clear idea of herself as Kris's wife, while at the same time being aware that she is not human. This identity crisis is convincingly portrayed. There are things she cannot remember, because they did not happen to her, at least not in a corporeal sense. This raises questions of where a person begins and ends, both spatially and temporally. In the case of Hari, one also gets the feeling that this is what she was like when she was human, i.e. confused by her own existence, with symptoms of depression, ultimately leading her to the decision to end her life. The same decision is taken by Hari the superhuman. She convinces Sartorius to destroy her, without Kris's knowledge, which suggests that this might be a self-sacrifice for moral reasons. Her sense of empathy makes her feel guilty for Kris's suffering. Tumanov reaches a similar conclusion: 'That Christ-like act [of self-sacrifice] paradoxically seals Hari's status as unambiguously human and resolves the question of her personhood. Tarkovsky's final answer to the film's central question [of what humanity is] is tragically uplifting' (2016: 374).

Hari's development throughout the film, where she connects with Kris on an emotional level and makes difficult decisions related to morality (based on how she feels for Kris and how he feels for her), underscores her humanness despite her unhuman origin. Hari's gestures and facial expressions, her display of emotions, play an important role in convincing us, or at least strongly suggesting, that she deserves to be treated as a human. Based on Hilary Putnam's functionalist ideas and the 'duck test' of inductive reasoning,[14] Tumanov argues that Hari's material composition of unstable neutrons (that is definitely non-human) is not as important as her humanoid exterior and emotional capacity. As a viewer, it is nearly impossible not to see her humanity, Tumanov argues, because of *our* human reaction to other humans. We know the actor Natal'ia Bondarchuk is human and this also transfers to the character she plays (Tumanov 2016: 370, 372). Interestingly, this could be seen as a confirmation of Butler's theory of gender performativity: it is not sex as biology that is the foundation of Hari's womanliness, but her 'sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body' (Butler 2006: xv).

The superhumans' bodies in *Solaris* heal quickly, they respawn if destroyed, yet they seem to have the same experience of pain and similar impulses as ordinary humans. Although this healing and respawning could be seen as a powerful ability, Hari seems troubled by it and has no apparent control over it. It is unclear how much the memory of the prototype person (e.g. the actual Hari, Kris' wife), shapes their version as an alien. It is likely that Hari is particularly complex because Kris knew her so well and therefore has a very complex

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[14] 'If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.' Some attribute this aphorism to the poet James Withcomb Riley, but the origin is disputed.

memory of her and because of his own confusion about why she chose to commit suicide. Hari is reminiscent of Aelita in that they are both products of a man's mind. Even though Hari is a reconstruction of a real human, the Hari we meet in *Solaris* is an alien, based on Kris's memory of her. Hari is Kris's idealised Other through the Eternal Feminine. Yet Hari cannot accept this kind of existence. Both Aelita and Hari owe their existence to men (made not of their rib but of their mind), but neither man seems in total control of his fantasy. Los kills his Aelita and Kris's Hari runs away from him by having herself annihilated. This suggests that even though the two female characters are subordinate to their male creators, they cannot always be controlled by them. In Hari's case, it perhaps also suggests a refusal to be limited to the status of Object and idealized Other.

The destruction of Hari, like that of Aelita, can be interpreted as a Soviet version of the destruction of the cyborg presented by Anthony: 'The three films discussed above [*Eve of Destruction* 1991, Gibbins, *Metropolis* and *Star Trek First Contact*, 1996, Frakes] demonstrate that sci-fi cinema tends to resolve historical crises involving the relationship between humanity and technology through the creation and destruction of the female cyborg' (Anthony 2004: 8). However, Hari does not fit the description of a female sexual predator or a cyborg. When she is destroyed in the end, this is presented not as a victory but rather as a tragedy. Instead of being a critique of technology, *Solaris* seems to be more concerned with existential questions of self, such as what it is to be human and the limitations of scientific research (not to mention that humans can become extremely violent and aggressive when answers to these questions cannot be found). The gender aspect is not discussed by Tumanov. He considers Hari a manifestation of Kris's moral superiority over Sartorius but does not offer a definite conclusion to this discussion (2016: 366). Thus, the discussion centres around the two men, leaving Hari with little, if any, agency.

As a superhuman, Hari is not without powers, yet she is tied to Kris and his emotions and through him to his dead wife. She is constantly confronted with her own strange existence—strange to the people around her, and especially strange to herself. Her character comes close to the so-called 'blank slate' trope of television: 'A Blank Slate is an empty character with absolutely no beliefs, no opinions and no experience, ready to be shaped by the outside world.' (*Blank Slate*)[15] The TV trope is related to the concept of *tabula rasa*, which refers to the idea that humans are born as blank slates and all knowledge therefore is based on experience. Hari does seem to know certain key facts, e.g. she knows that she was Kris's wife. Still, her overall memory is very limited and, most importantly, so is her agency. Hari's self-annihilation can therefore be interpreted as an agency-regaining attempt to break free from this unfulfilling existence and gain integrity: she cannot become a complete human because she is based on Kris's memory and depends on him and she rejects the incomplete existence of serving Kris's emotional needs (see image 3).

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[15] I am grateful to Dr Holger Pötzsch for pointing out the term 'blank slate' to me in relation to the material presented in this article.

Image 3. Kris kneels with his head in Hari's lap

Source: Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972)

Iulii Smelkov and Neia Zorkaia discuss *Solaris* in *Sovetskii ekran*. Smelkov is critical of the adaptation for not staying true to the book and Zorkaia defends it as an independent work of art (Smelkov 1973; Zorkaia 1973). The core of the discussion is concerned with how Tarkovsky presented the theme of the film, i.e. humanity's encounter with the unknown. 'The Earth in space, the melody of the Earth, are the main themes in the picture *Solaris*; this, of course, is typical for Tarkovsky' (Zorkaia 1973). Zorkaia attributes the particular philosophical discussions of *Solaris* to Tarkovsky's trademark, yet the absence of the critique of technology is not typical of Tarkovsky. In his adaptation, Tarkovsky was more concerned with human psychology and identity than Lem's epistemological discussions and astrobiological theories—to Lem's frustration (Bereś 1987).[16] Tarkovsky's choice of thematic focus strengthens the theory of the function of the female superhuman as a vehicle for existential self-reflection in Soviet sci-fi cinema.

Released the year after *Solaris*, *Dr. Ivens' Silence* (1973) is film lesser known by non-Russian speaking audiences. The story is a philosophical allegory of human morality and identity. The human-alien encounter, however, is set in the contemporary capitalist West. The female alien Orante (Zhanna Bolotova) is a member of a larger alien crew in search of intelligent companionship on other planets. She establishes a particularly strong relationship with Dr. Ivens (Sergei Bondarchuk), a researcher of life prolongation. Part of the aliens' advanced technology gives them precisely the possibility to prolong life. The film presents a rather simplified message of how the (capitalist) world, divided by borders and competing

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[16] Two sections from Bereś' book with Lem's thoughts on Tarkovsky's adaptation are translated into English and available on the official webpage of Stanislaw Lem (lem.pl). This webpage, accessed 14.05.2018, is the source used in this article.

states, is morally underdeveloped and that advanced technology should go hand in hand with (communist) moral superiority.

Orante's fate in *Dr. Ivens' Silence* is tragic, as she leaves her kin to stay on Earth, to be close to Dr. Ivens and to try to help humanity develop their backwards society, but is hunted down by (paranoid) intelligence services and shot. Ivens keeps his contact with Orante secret from the world, even from his wife. In one scene, his wife confronts Ivens about talking to someone in a room in the family household—something Ivens denies. The relationship between Ivens and Orante reminds us of that between Aelita and Los, and Hari and Kris, with the woman being highly dependent on the man for her very existence. Like Aelita, Orante also has an important father, but they are not enemies. Still, the presence of a father figure and not a mother, further establishes male authority. The tragic denouement of *Dr. Ivens' Silence* happens in the capitalist West, hence the resemblance with Anthony's point about the necessary destruction of the female cyborg because she is a threat. We know little of how Orante came to be, other than that her society is peaceful and communist and that it has technology allowing for a prolonged life, telepathy and teleportation, among other things, that Earth could benefit from. Orante embodies the Eternal Feminine, by virtue, gender and spatial origin, an idea that is too utopian for the capitalist West. She is also a blank slate and relies on Ivens to understand the earthly world (see image 4). Yet, where Hari seems troubled by this dependency and revolts against it, there does not seem to be any such urge to resist in Orante. This is explained in part by the film's rather different ideological emphasis.

Image 4. Behind Orante hangs a figure of an angel, contributing to notions of verticality and morality

Source: Budimir Metal'nikov's *Dr. Ivens's Silence* (1973)

In a rare publication for *Sovetskii ekran*, the journal printed readers' letters about *Dr. Ivens' Silence*. Opinions varied. Some criticised the pessimistic message of the film, arguing that this was not how sci-fi was supposed to be. A longer reader's review, written by A. Vladimov, states: 'Sci-fi always discusses the challenges of contact between humans and other worlds' ('Gotovy li my?' 1974). He continues to describe how the film, by highlighting moral issues, places itself in a tradition of social-philosophical sci-fi. Vladimov does not mention gender explicitly. However, Orante's gender is crucial for conveying the moral message and for exemplifying the man-machine ideal—an ideal not just of technical progress but of moral progress.

The 1980s: new concerns, old tropes

By the 1980s, it was clear that the Soviet Union was lagging behind in the space race and political currents in society were changing. 'Viewed alongside the dystopian pictures [e.g. *Kin-dza-dza*, 1986, Daneliia], these later space films [e.g. *Per Aspera* and *Orion's Loop*] tell a similar story of decline, signposting the road to perestroika and a new era of capitalist democracy.' (Blackford 2011: 48) This is particularly evident in the ecological theme of *Per Aspera* (Sal'nikova 2017). Still, the presentations of the female alien in the Soviet sci-fi films of the 1980s seem to be in line with the dominant tendency of the previous decades.

Per Aspera's director, Richard Viktorov, was responsible for some of the more successful Soviet sci-fi works of the 1970s and 1980s, and *Per Aspera* was one of the top ten most popular films in 1981, according to a poll conducted by *Sovetskii ekran* ('Konkurs "SE 81"' 1982). The story of the film is set in the year 2222, yet the style of dress, people's appearance and names and architecture on Earth look more familiar than in several other futuristic sci-fi movies (this choice of familiar appearance is perhaps in the tradition of *Solaris* and even *Star Wars*, rather than *Aelita*).

A group of cosmonauts from Earth come across an abandoned spaceship orbiting the heavily polluted, dying planet Dessa. Inside they find one survivor, the humanoid alien Niia (Elena Metelkina). She is brought back to Earth and adopted into the caring family of the researcher Lebedev (Uldis Lieldidzh), who willingly take upon themselves the challenge of teaching Niia all she needs to know about life on communist Earth. Some of Earth's authorities would prefer to keep Niia isolated and treated like a prisoner, but Lebedev's humane approach prevails. In turn Niia becomes scared that the technology built into her body makes her a simple tool for evil forces to exploit. Lebedev's soon-to-be cosmonaut son Stepan (Vadim Ledogorov) and Niia develop a strong relationship. Stepan even prefers the less sexual Niia over the sexual Selena (Liudmila Nil'skaia), suggesting that sexualised behaviour is ultimately less attractive. A rescue spaceship is sent to Dessa. Niia sneaks on board this ship, while Stepan finds himself there too, working as a trainee. On Dessa they have to fight cynical villains with no regard for the environment, engaged in capitalist exploitation. Still, in *Per Aspera* there is no contradiction between using advanced technology and saving the environment, suggesting that the two can coexist harmoniously, if their use is governed by moral integrity (see image 5). Niia chooses to stay on the recovering planet Dessa, while Stepan leaves. Instead of following Stepan to continue their relationship, Niia commits herself to saving the planet of her origin—sacrificing her own personal happiness for the greater good.

Image 5. The camera angel and the decapitation of Niia enhance the notion of verticality, and Niia's superiority over Turanchoks.

Source: Richard Viktorov's *Per Aspera Ad Astra* (1980)

Through Niia, the potential threat of technology is introduced. Her origin is traced back to the experiment of the scientist Glan (Gleb Strizhenov). Whether the scientist found, grew or created the children he experimented with is unknown. Once again, the creator of the female superhuman is a man. The scientist Nadezhda Ivanova (Nadezhda Sementsova) is able to locate a technical device inside Niia's brain. The device allows someone with the right tools to control Niia remotely. Niia also has powers of her own: the ability to acquire knowledge incredibly quickly, hover and fly over short distances, teleportation and psychokinesis. The threat remains that advanced technology in the wrong hands can be used against the common good, but there is no motif that the technology can go haywire by itself. Niia's development, mainly through socialising, shows that high moral standards and confidence will check any potential threat posed by technology in the wrong hands. From the very beginning (when she hesitates stepping on the grass for fear of crushing a beetle), Niia is presented as having high emotional sensitivity, but she is otherwise a blank slate and needs to learn social norms (such as not getting naked in front of people) and to regulate her emotional impulses. As long as she is ready to learn these skills, the environment around her is ready to accept her as a creature entitled to respect from other intelligent creatures (including humans). The way in which the Lebedevs teach Niia self-control recalls the way Kris tries to teach Hari the same ability in *Solaris*—however, with a different result. Niia's self-sacrifice does not seem like an attempt to break free of a man's control and does not involve self-destruction. Niia's decision to stay on Dessa in the end and not pursue a further relationship with Stepan (Vadim Ledo-

gorov) could be seen as a way of liberating herself from his possible control over her, Niia is not primarily Stepan's fantasy. Rather, Niia embodies the struggle between the men Turanchoks (Vladimir Federov) and Glan: Glan created her to help save Dessa, while Turanchoks wishes to use her as a powerful weapon. Her choice to stay on Dessa to further its recovery is in line with Glan's intention of creating her in the first place. Thus it is not an attempt to break free from a man's fantasy, but to adhere to it. The possible threat of Niia being controlled from the outside is framed as something she needs help against, rather than viewing Niia herself a threat. Through her careful upbringing by the Lebedevs, Niia reaches her potential, which is that of the Eternal Feminine. When she decides to stay on Dessa she is also signalling to Stepan—as a representative of earthly teenagers—that sacrificing one's own happiness for the greater good is the right choice.

Per Aspera was covered in various Soviet media in the years following its release.[17] Both Istratova and Revich note the theme of 'coming of age' and connect this to patriotism—how cinema is important for educating the younger generation in moral and patriotic issues. Plakhov in *Sovetskii ekran* writes that Niia is a humanoid, artificial creature: 'The problem of the artificial humanoid creature is embodied in her adaptation to various everyday details' (1981: 3).[18] Plakhov does not connect this to technology, however. Instead, he goes on to describe the film's exploration of what the future will look like. This suggests that Plakhov rather sees the 'artificial humanoid' Niia as fulfilling a pedagogical function of presenting the future to the viewers. It is through Niia that the communist utopia is presented. She is beckoning us upward. However, in this context 'us' refers to society at large, not exclusively to men. Through her mediating function Niia transcends the temporal division between the viewers and the future utopia, thus, in a sense, becoming eternal.

The Alien Woman (1984) is closer to a romantic comedy than a sci-fi film in terms of plot structure, special effects and action, as it focuses on the love story between the alien O (Liliana Aleshkina) and Igor Blinkov (Vladimir Nosik). The film was not covered in either *Sovetskii ekran* or *Soviet Film* and there are, to the best of my knowledge, no substantial readings of the film available elsewhere (including online).

O is sent to Earth to capture a fellow alien who has integrated himself as an earthling with a wife and children and does not wish to leave. The aliens' home planet and civilisation are highly advanced technologically and they send out scouts to different planets in the universe to monitor and discover potential threats against their civilisation—but defecting is forbidden. In addition to the ability to teleport, they live exceptionally long lives, can fly or hover in the air and communicate through telepathy. However, their civilisation does not value emotions, such as sadness because of a loss or love between friends and family. On Earth O meets the attractive bachelor Igor, who has been dreaming of a woman who looks like O, saving himself for her and not attaching himself to any other woman in the meantime. This is similar to the male fantasy trope in *Aelita*, *Solaris*, *Dr. Ivens' Silence* and *Per Aspera* (see image 6). Although intrinsic to the male fantasy trope, the male gaze becomes very explicit, as Igor's idea of the ideal woman is based on vision—in his own dreams and drawings by his hand. When O arrives, she is a blank slate onto whom Igor can continue to draw his vision.

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[17] 'Rezhisser predstavliaet fil'm…' 1981; Abdrashitov 1982; Istratova 1983; Kichin 1981; Kuznetsov 1984; Pavlenok 1980; Plakhov 1981; Revich 1985; Zlotnik 1980.

[18] 'Problema iskusstvennogo chelovekopodobnogo sushchestva voploshchena s privlecheniem mnozhestva bytovykh, zhiteiskikh podrobnostei.'

Her emotional and moral growth is shown through her interaction with her new environment, including emotional involvement with Igor, much of which is captured through facial expressions. At the beginning, her facial expression is mainly static, but as she learns empathy this manifests itself in smiles, laughter and sadness. One consequence of O's emotional growth is her self-sacrifice, as she tells her fellow alien that he can stay with his Earth family and that it is her who will leave Earth permanently instead. Before she does so, she interrupts a TV programme to give a public message of love and against war. Then she says an emotional farewell to Igor. Her actions seem to indicate that when she sees how strong her feelings are for Igor after only a few days, she understands the emotional bonds that the other alien harbours towards his earthly family after years of staying together.
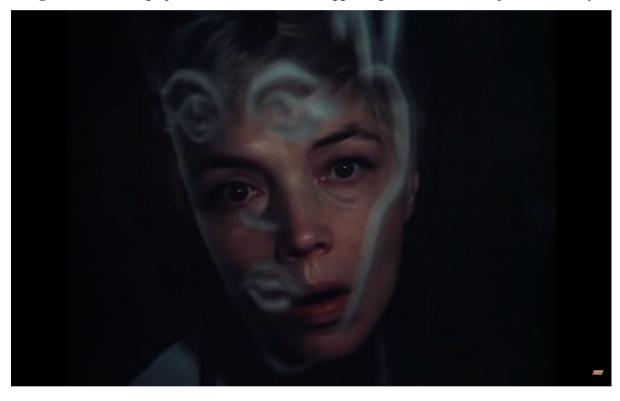
Image 6. O is looking up at a sketch of herself, suggesting she cannot live up to the fantasy

Source: Iakov Segel's' *The Alien Woman* (1984)

The motivation for the self-sacrifice is not entirely convincing. It could be motivated by a wish to provoke certain reactions in the audience: by not letting O and Igor get together in the end, her moral message to the world is enhanced by the feeling of tragedy. Had the film had a happy ending, this might have overshadowed its anti-war message. The emotional development that O goes through is similar to her predecessors Orante and Niia, although O starts out as the most cynical of them by far. Like Niia, she is not an embodiment of the Eternal Feminine when she arrives. At that point she only has the components of an exceptionally long life, spatial origin and gender, but Igor—having dreamed of this woman his entire adult life—is able to shape her into an idealised Other. In this Igor is following the already estab-

lished male authority over female existence, noted in *Aelita*, *Solaris*, *Dr. Ivens' Silence* and *Per Aspera*.

The way the ideal of the (wo)man-machine is communicated through the female superhumans Orante, Niia and O can be seen as a transhuman approach, i.e. an optimistic vision of how advanced civilisations combine technology and morality. However, the emphasis on the emotional over the rational points toward a posthumanist approach. According to O'Mathúna, it is not uncommon for films to include both approaches in a complex mix, as they 'present a complicated (and sometimes contradictory) picture of technology and its impact on humans' (O'Mathúna 2014: 287-289). However, it seems that the core of the concepts of both transhumanism and posthumanism, and the starting point of the films with these themes in Western sci-fi, still originate in the conceived contradiction between humanity and technology. There is no such core in the Soviet superhuman films, not even in *Per Aspera*. Even though Niia's composition of biology and technology is a concern, it is resolved in the end. The technological component is less important than the emphasis on moral education and maturity. A further analysis of transhumanist or posthumanist ideas in these films could prove fruitful, particularly in mapping the outer borders of these concepts. However, by using the term 'superhuman', the tradition of (post-)Soviet sci-fi cinema, with its lack of technophobia or binary division between the human/machine, on the one hand, and the embodiment of the Eternal Feminine, on the other, is emphasised. And there does not seem to be much room for a challenge of the binary (and often essentialising) opposition between man and woman within the concept of the Eternal Feminine.

The post-Soviet era: comedy, irony and new directions

With the abrupt dissolution of the Soviet Union, the sci-fi genre also had to change. In the Soviet period the genre functioned as a way of imagining an idealised communist future, where advances in technology and moral development went hand-in-hand. In the 1990s, communism no longer served as an ideal and the relatively low-tech post-Soviet society was evident to everyone. Film production plummeted both in quantity and quality, as the low budget sci-fi *Are We Going Crazy?* illustrates, and a satirical and parodic treatment of everything Soviet flourished. As for the female superhuman, she does not seem to have gone through any radical changes in the post-Soviet period, even though film production has grown steadily over the last two decades. The 2017 introduction of a male superhuman in the blockbuster *Attraction* might promise an interesting future for the superhuman trope. The satirical aspect of post-Soviet sci-fi does present interesting cases for challenging some parts of the stereotype while confirming others. There are far fewer cinematic representations of the female superhuman, however, just as there are fewer sci-fi films involving interplanetary travel and contact. The space-related films of the post-Soviet era are primarily about the Soviet space programs, depicting either purely fictional stories (e.g. *First on the Moon* [Pervye na lune, 2005, Fedorchenko])[19] or those based on historical events (e.g *Gagarin. The First in*

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[19] In the mockumentary *First on the Moon*, the pre-war Soviet space programme is investigated and a conspiracy involving the alleged Soviet priority of the moon landing is exposed. In the team training for space travel there is a woman, Nadezhda Svetlaia (meaning Bright Hope; played by Viktoriia Ilinskaia). Her function seems to be that of presenting an authentic image of the Soviet scheme where women were included in

Space [*Gagarin. Pervyi v kosmose*, 2013, Parkhomenko]). From this perspective, *Are We Going Crazy?* better fits a description of a late Soviet sci-fi rather than an early post-Soviet sci-fi. However, the film makes gentle fun of the idea of space travel, thus placing itself within an emerging post-Soviet cultural context, wherein it becomes possible to laugh at heroes and heroic endeavours. *Star Worms* confirms Soviet sci-fi tropes and the post-Soviet nostalgic treatment of the Soviet era, ostensibly poking fun at both of them. The obvious ridicule of space travel places it firmly within a post-Soviet paradigm.

Are We Going Crazy? features the unnamed female alien (Marina Kuchkova), who needs help to get back to, and save, her home planet. The alien arrives in a Russian secondary school (see image 7), where she convinces three members of the school staff—the history teacher (Ella Safari), the chemistry teacher (Georgii Nikolaenko) and the director (Boris Shcherbakov)—to help her procure a crystal. Parts of the crystal, which would solve the energy deficiency of both the alien herself and her planet, are scattered throughout Earth's time and space. The rescue crew uses a device that looks like an old cassette recorder, but is actually a time machine and universal language adapter. They travel through time and space to a pre-historic environment (possibly the Stone Age), to a Middle Eastern harem and lastly to Western Europe during the Holy Inquisition, where they get into all sorts of ridiculous situations (thankfully, everyone abroad, whatever the time period, speaks Russian because of the language adapter). The crew recovers the crystal pieces, of course, and returns to contemporary Moscow. While waiting for the crew to fulfil its mission, the alien enjoys leisure time activities in a snowy Moscow park, playing with dogs, smiling and laughing. She is grateful to the school's staff members and leaves happily for her home planet, while the staff members are left to deal with vengeful visitors from the different epochs they visited during their time travels.

The film seems primarily to be intended as light-hearted entertainment. The way the alien learns about human interactions and emotions indicates a development of her emotional intelligence—starting out as a blank slate—and communicates a message of standing up for what is right and taking care of one another. Again, this development manifests itself in her facial expressions, whereby she goes from a solemn look in the beginning of the film to laughing and smiling near the end. This is not unlike how her predecessors Orante, Niia and O were taught human values. However, the alien does not get involved with a human man and does not seem to be directly under a man's control. This is possibly because she is not a very central character in the film—she is not even named! The film is hardly philosophical or deep, which might provide an explanation as to why there is no prominent superhuman.

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progressive plans as part of the official ideology of equal rights and emancipation. This indicates nostalgia for the 1930s, rather than post-Soviet progressive gender policies.

Image 7. The alien travels by the means of a flying orb

Source: Sergei Kuchkov's *Are We Going Crazy?* (1994)

As with the previous aliens discussed, the origin of the alien in *Are We Going Crazy?* is unclear. She uses multilingual communication, advanced technology to travel in time and space and is capable of psychokinesis (she uses her gaze to stop some bullies at the school, making one of them wet himself). This places the female alien from *Are We Going Crazy?* in the Soviet superhuman tradition, even though by 1994 Russian filmmakers had easy access to Western and Hollywood representations of cyborgs. This suggests that the superhuman remained more readily at hand for an early post-Soviet director than the cyborg. The nameless superhuman's ability to transcend temporality, her spatial origin above the Earth (in a geocentric perspective where the ground is below us, with the sky and universe above us) and her moral superiority continue to tie the superhuman to the Eternal Feminine. Interestingly, there is no mention of the female superhuman's romantic relations with men, a father figure, or other connections to the male fantasy motif. However, this might be explained by her limited screen time and underdeveloped character. Considering that *Are We Going Crazy?* seems constricted in terms of resources and plot development, it is possible that the filmmakers drew upon the established trope of the female superhuman as an easily recognisable cliché, without exploring it in depth. Yet this could also be explained by the lack of clear moral ideals in Russia in the 1990s: it was uncertain what sort of ideal society the female alien was supposed to represent, now that communism had been abandoned. Thus the ideal society motif was left out of the film and she remained largely an opaque character.

The sci-fi comedy *Star Worms*[20] was made by the Russian music band NOM, a group known for elaborate use of irony and humour. The film looks as if it was made by amateurs and there is no reason to believe that this was not intended as a comment on both the Soviet low-tech space effort and Soviet low-tech sci-fi films. The most prominent of the two female alien characters in the film is Iadviga Barsukova (Svetlana Gumanovskaia), the doctor of a crew from Earth bound for an Odyssey-like expedition in year 2221. The other is an un-named female alien guiding the expedition crew on a tour around her home planet. The entire plot of the film is reminiscent of Faddei Bulgarin's 1825 short story *Unbelievable Fibs or the Journey to the Centre of the Earth* [Neveroiatnye nebylitsy, ili puteshestvie k sredotochiiu Zemli], a story of a concave hollow earth-expedition into the ground, visiting three alien planets. Iadviga reads about the planned expedition in a newspaper and infiltrates the crew, posing as a human doctor. It is not until Iadviga has led the expedition to her home planet, populated by looting space gypsies, that we understand that she is not actually an earthling but an alien. The expedition is led by the scientist Chashcharskii (Andrei Kagadeev), who has a theory about the universe, based on the idea that the Sun is located at the centre of the Earth.[21] His motivation for the expedition is purely scientific, but the rich German Riap (Nikolai Kopeikin) sees a commercial opportunity in mining meteors from other planets and therefore joins and supports the mission. They gather a motley crew and dig into the ground with a specially designed spaceship, the Scarab. On their adventure, they visit the home planet of another of the crew members, the alien Mozg ('mozg' meaning 'brain' in Russian), a creature who looks like a human head. On his planet (called Kolobok), a female alien (Tatiana Kolganova) of the same species as Mozg, gives them a tour and tells them the history of the planet's civilisation. The founder of the civilisation, a bodiless head called Tsefion, managed to instruct the gorilla-looking species of the planet to build everything based on his inventions, including robotic humanoid bodies to fit the bodiless heads. Kolobok is strictly hierarchical, with the heads enslaving the gorillas. The guide, in the function of being a talking head upon a humanoid body, represents the authoritarian, rational, exploiting civilisation.

The established sci-fi tropes, including verticality, and even science itself, are turned upside down in *Star Worms*. It is therefore hardly surprising that the two female aliens turn out to be bad moral role models, compared to their predecessors. Nor do they show any superhuman abilities. The guide is probably the only character described in this article that fits the description of a cyborg, with her organic brain and synthetic body. However, she hardly invites any critical discussions of what that entails. Rather than problematising technology, this part of the film problematises the exploitation of one type of creatures by another. Much like the Martian society in *Aelita* (which, in line with many other sci-fi films, is referred to in *Space Worms*), the society on planet Kolobok is technologically advanced but not morally superior (see image 8). As for Doctor Iadviga, forget superhuman abilities altogether: she is barely capable of helping patients by conventional medical means. Most of the time it is the guard Volchestai (Sergei Kagadeev) who rescues those in trouble and supplies urgent medical help to the rest of the crew. By posing as a doctor, Iadviga draws on the established role of the female alien as a caretaker and healer with selfless intentions (similar to Niia in *Per*

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[20] The original title of the film is *Zezvdnyi vors*, literally translated into *Star Fluff*. However, the title is supposed to be a pun on *Star Wars*, hence the filmmakers themselves advertise the film under the English translation *Star Worms* in order to try to preserve the pun.

[21] This theory also exists outside the film and is called 'concave hollow earth'.

Aspera and the female doctor in the expedition portrayed in *Orion's Loop*), yet none of this turns out to be true.[22] Neither is Iadviga working for herself. She is merely a tool for her husband and his (male) gang of bandits. In this manner she can be distinguished from Aelita, who acted on her own behalf with her own agenda. The other important thing that separates the two is that Iadviga is not tied to a man's imagination the same way as Aelita is. Towards the end of *Star Worms*, the spaceship, excluding Iadviga, is sneezed out of God's nose (God is pictured as a bearded old man, played by Artemii Troitskii), suggesting the whole universe is placed inside his body. As such, Iadviga is just a small particle within a man, but so is the rest of the universe. A similarity between Aelita and Iadviga, in addition to their lack of morals, is that neither of them display superhuman abilities and thus they are not true superhumans. The guide also takes on an established role of female aliens, that of a representative of a superior civilisation. Yet in contrast to the majority of civilisations presented by female aliens in earlier (post-)Soviet films, this one, as has already been mentioned, is not morally superior. Instead, it seems like a parody of the trope of female aliens with a utopian origin.

Image 8. A monument of the founder of the cyborg planet

Source: Andrei Kagadeev and Nikolai Kopeikin's *Star Worms* (2011)

The superhuman's function

The sci-fi films discussed in this article should be understood in the context of how technology and space exploration were seen at the time of the films' release. Even though the origin of the Soviet space program can be traced back to the establishment of the Laboratory of Gas

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[22] Iadviga harbours feelings for the crew member Bogdan Sherstiuk (Sergei Mikhalok) and cares for him when he falls into a coma. Yet all of this is promptly forgotten when she returns home to her planet and her husband, the leader of the gypsy gang.

Dynamics (Gazodinamicheskaia laboratoriia) in Moscow in 1921, space travel at the time, judging by *Aelita*, was still regarded more as a fantasy than a future reality. By the 1950s and 1960s the thought of space exploration and interplanetary contact communicated optimism for the future of the Soviet project, legitimising and elevating contemporary Soviet society. However, this soon came to an abrupt end:

> In 1969 the Apollo moon-landing struck a devastating blow to the Soviet space pro-
> gramme, as a result of which the early 1970s saw Russian sci-fi turn to more thoughtful,
> highbrow concerns in films that even Roger Corman[23] wouldn't have been able to re-edit
> into B pictures for the drive-in audience: Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker*
> (1979). (Blackford 2011: 47)

The 1980s saw a decline in Soviet sci-fi filmmaking, manifested in less impressive special effects, as well as an increasing number of dystopic films (such as the 1986 classic *Kin-dza-dza*). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the ideas of a future communist utopia became a memory of the past, along with the stories of space exploration. In his analysis of the 2010 animated film *Space Dogs* [Belka i Strelka: Zvezdnye sobaki, 2010, Ushakov and Evlannikova], Vlad Strukov writes: 'for contemporary Russian society, aviation is no longer a reliable icon of an ideal future but rather a means of reconciliation with its often victorious and frequently troublesome past.'[24] (2017: 239) A recurrent theme that stretches all the way from *Aelita* (1924) to *Attraction* (2017) is how a society at a lower technological stage of development is capable of helping high-tech civilisations in ways that the high-techs are not capable of pursuing themselves. This presents a message of technological inferiority being an advantage. Although some of the post-Soviet cultural treatments of space flight and exploration can be seen as highly nostalgic, this is not always the case.

　　The majority of (post-)Soviet female aliens (unless they inhabit a reversed universe, like in *Star Worms*) are powerful and morally superior, a combination that, George Faithful argues, cannot be found in the Western sci-fi films he has analysed:

> Prior to the late 1960s, female characters in sci-fi, horror, and action films were generally
> relegated to the roles of damsels or villains. The expansion of their plausible roles coin-
> cided with—but failed to keep pace with—the progress of real women in society. Even
> the expanded functions of female characters defined them primarily as the objects of
> male desire. (Faithful 2016: 350-351)

The first and most important Soviet exception is *Aelita*, the second being doctor Marjorie Hume (Valentina Titova) in *Star Inspector*. This is a Soviet attempt to make 'tech noir', a sci-fi film with elements of the 'noir' genre. Marjorie is a doctor with superhuman healing skills, but is manipulated by an artificial brain into doing evil. The brain exploits her maternal instincts of protection. Here, the aspect of motherhood is used for the first and only time in connection with Soviet-imagined superhumans. Rather than a powerful threat, however,

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[23] Roger Corman (1926–) is an American director, producer and actor nicknamed 'The Pope of Pop Cinema', who in the 1950s and 1960s directed a large number of low budget sci-fi, horror, action and counterculture films. He also produced *Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet* [1965, Harrington] and *Voyage to the Planet of Prehistoric Women* [1968, Bogdanovich], both of which were adaptations of the 1961 Soviet film *Planet of Storms*.
[24] When Strukov here writes about aviation, this includes space flight.

Marjorie is portrayed as a (sexualised) victim of the evil brain.[25] The fact that Marjorie is an American (i.e. capitalist) character, can explain the exception. What this exception suggests is both that in the USSR there was some contact with a Western sci-fi tradition (at least some people, usually the film industry professionals, enjoyed limited access to certain films from the West) and that it was possible to present female superhumans differently from the Soviet tradition. The 2017 *Attraction* represents an important break from genre conventions in reversing the gender roles of the human-alien relationship, yet the conventions of moral superiority are still adhered to. The male superhuman Hakon (Rinal' Mukhametov) represents a superior civilisation, yet the human Iulia (Irina Starshenbaum) is still the morally superior individual. Despite her civilisation's moral deficiencies, she is capable of making, according to the alien's computer, extraordinary moral decisions, giving the aliens hope that humans can reach their moral level in the future.

The powerful and morally superior women of Soviet sci-fi are not liberated from their roles as objects of male desire, but they are presented differently, with different functions than those possessed by the women described by Faithful. A function the Soviet superhumans do not seem to possess is having an agenda and they look rather naïve in their interaction with humans. As the agenda for the Eternal Feminine is to 'beckon us [i.e. men] upward', she does not have agency herself, as she seems to exist primarily vis-à-vis men. This seems to be the case for Orante, Niia and O, who all sacrifice their own happiness for a greater good and adhere to the concept of the Eternal Feminine through their performance. This sacrifice also strengthens their position as morally superior because, as Aleksandr Etkind notes with regard to female sacrifice in Russian culture in his book *Internal Colonization*, 'sacrifice is neither punishment nor revenge; actually, the least guilty are the better victims for a true sacrifice' (2011: 239). Furthermore, as discussed in relation to Hari in *Solaris*, her self-annihilation can be interpreted as either a sacrifice or an attempt to escape. Whether the former or the latter is the case, both interpretations relate to the Eternal Feminine, either by conforming to its traits (repeatedly reproducing them) or subversively challenging them. This challenge—or as Butler might put it, variation—is also where the possibility of agency is to be found: 'In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency', then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation of that repetition' (Butler 2006: 198).

Most female superhumans can, to a degree, be considered blank slates. Not only are they created by a largely male cohort of filmmakers, the female superhumans are often dependent on men in their stories—either as mere fantasies (in *Aelita* and *Solaris*), or in order to understand the society they are visiting (in *Dr. Ivens' Silence*, *Per Aspera*, *The Alien Woman* and *Are We Going Crazy?*). They are not completely helpless creatures, they do not necessarily need to be rescued, but they need guidance in order to use their powers correctly—in a morally superior way with an emphasis on emotions.

The female alien in the majority of the (post-)Soviet films mentioned in this article represents an Other, embodying the Eternal Feminine and a blank slate. These blank slates enable reflections about culture and society, e.g. how to take care of friends and family and live good moral lives. This is realised through the female superhuman's romantic and intimate

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[25] In Hollywood productions motherhood is often an essential part of women in sci-fi, with mother of the revolution Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *The Terminator* [1984, Cameron] and vengeful Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) of the *Alien*-franchise (e.g. *Aliens* [1986, Cameron]) being striking examples.

(but not necessarily sexual) interaction with a man in all the Soviet examples. This might provide an explanation as to why there is no relationship between an earthly woman and an alien man in Soviet cinema: according to its aesthetics, a man cannot be an Other or a blank slate. In *Attraction*, however, it is the male alien Hakon who is the blank slate, while Iulia is his teacher. An important message of the film is that aliens are not so different from humans (they can even receive blood transfusion from each other), emphasising kinship rather than Otherness and suggesting that presenting the alien as a male makes him less of an Other. Iulia, as a complex protagonist, might also be representing a shift in depicting women with agency in sci-fi cinema. Iulia acts independently and according to her own beliefs, rebelling against both her father and her initial lover.

The superhuman of (post-)Soviet sci-fi cinema prompts reflections about humanness and identity, not through a constructed binary opposition between human beings and technology, but through an outsider's view and an idealised Other. This outsider is primarily a female, reaffirming the traditional roles of men as the norm and women as the exception. Do these superhuman women of (post-)Soviet sci-fi cinema, then, affirm gender roles in the same way as (Balsamo argues) the cyborgs of Western sci-fi do?

> Donna Haraway claims [in 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' (1991)] that cyborgs stimulate the feminist imagination by rendering ambiguous the human/machine construct. My reading shows that the dominant representation of cyborgs reinserts us into dominant ideology by reaffirming bourgeois notions of human, machine and femininity. In fact, what look like provocative notions of human identity, are not; they reassert a distinct identity between machine and human in a post-technological world. (2000: 151)

The superhuman women in (post-)Soviet Russian cinema are all presented as feminine and heterosexual in their appearance and behaviour. Neither true nor quasi-superhumans seem to challenge the dominant gender roles. Rather, it seems, Beauvoir unknowingly described them when writing about the Eternal Feminine: 'She heals and strengthens; she is intermediary between man and life; life comes from God, therefore she is intermediary between humanity and God' (Beauvoir 1972: 212). Here Beauvoir refers to the existential aspect of the Eternal Feminine, as well as healing and strengthening, two of the heavily featured superhuman abilities in Soviet examples. However, in the Soviet context the ideal is represented by advanced technology and communism, not God. The Eternal Feminine thus becomes an intermediary between humanity and the communist utopia. As for the false superhumans, they do not challenge dominant gender roles, although they challenge the dominant function of female superhumans.

Since the female superhuman's origin, biology and possibly technology are unclear, they are still more complex and transgressive characters than they might seem at first glance. In *Seven Elements* the female alien Aria (Hanna Dunovska) actively defines herself as an ordinary woman. When the human male Gleb (Igor Starygin) makes a comment that Aria acts like a woman, in a scene where he sees tears of sadness running down her face, her reply is an insistence on being an ordinary woman. In other words, being a woman means conforming to a certain type of behaviour, i.e. performing gender. However, becoming a woman is more open in the sense that you do not have to be born a human (organic) woman on Earth in

order to identify yourself as a woman, suggesting that biology is not a prerequisite for gender. In the process of becoming womanly, the female superhuman characters are shown to be making an active choice of performance, suggesting that traditional gender roles are useful, attractive and in turn naturalised.[26]

Conclusion

The female superhuman in Soviet sci-fi serves two primary functions, that of a moral role model and that of an Other, representing a more advanced civilisation and acting as a mirror of our own society. She embodies the Eternal Feminine through her gender, spatial dimension, her agenda as a morally superior being and a mediator between man and the ideal and (lastly) through her willingness to sacrifice herself for this agenda. There is no trace of technophobia in these characters and they do not pose a threat—it is a tragedy when they die. The post-Soviet representations build on these established narratives, but use comedy to challenge the narratives concerning moral superiority in general and the connection between advanced technology and moral superiority in particular. Both Soviet and post-Soviet female aliens, predominately shaped by male filmmakers, ultimately conform to stereotypical gender roles in how they look and behave. However, Soviet female superhumans are more directly connected to a man's fantasy or imagination than their post-Soviet versions. Political changes —such as the abolition of overt censorship, greater access to foreign films and culture, as well as shifts in attitudes toward gender—provide possible explanations for the post-Soviet shift in the representation of female superhumans, but this should be further examined by looking beyond films about female aliens. To be human is a matter of moral behaviour, a human-looking appearance and an external display of emotions (gestures and facial expressions), rather than biology. Gender identity, or rather gender performance, does not depend upon biology and is not challenged in the way that biology and origin are in the (post-)Soviet sci-fi films discussed in this article. While disconnecting gender from sex could be seen as subversive, the insistence on stereotypical gender roles seems to suggest otherwise. Biology and origin will change through natural evolution, but the Eternal Feminine will not.

This article shows that the concept of the Eternal Feminine provides a worthwhile framework for examining the function of female aliens in (post-)Soviet sci-fi film. Still, this does not mean that all prominent cinematic presentations of female aliens embody this concept. The female aliens in the films discussed in this article can be placed in three different categories. Firstly, there are the characters who wholeheartedly embody the concept of the Eternal Feminine—Orante in *Dr. Ivens' Silence*, Niia in *Per Aspera*, O in *The Alien Woman* and the unnamed alien in *Are We Going Crazy?* Secondly, there is Hari in *Solaris*, who might be seen as resisting the restricting and confining concept by trying to escape it. Lastly, there are false superhumans—Aelita and Iadviga—who pose as embodiments of the Eternal Feminine but in the end are exposed as its opposite. The characters in the first two categories have superhuman abilities, while the false ones do not. This suggests that such abilities—in particular healing skills and eternal life—are central for the Eternal Feminine in sci-fi cinema. However, the Eternal Feminine could be used in further research on women's function in

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[26] The male superhuman Hakon also seems to confirm stereotypical gender roles, as well as insisting, like Aria, on his humanness when confronted about it by Iulia.

(post-)Soviet cinema, as the concept was not originally formulated on the basis of sci-fi cinema and seems to have influenced other genres of both cinema and literature.

In academic discourse on Western sci-fi cinema, the concepts of the 'transhuman' and 'cyborg' have played a central role. These concepts emphasise binaries between, for instance, nature and culture, human and machine, and male and female. There does not seem to be a similar discourse on binaries in (post-)Soviet sci-fi, thus the transhuman has only limited use in this context. The lack of binary themes can be explained, on the one hand, by communist ideology concerning the relationship between humans and technology, and on the other, by (post-)Soviet attitudes towards gender and feminism—where gender binaries are seen as natural and not necessary to criticise. The superhuman abilities are not easily explained by either biology or technology, the border between the two is blurred. As a result, the female superhuman embodies the ideal of the man-machine.

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