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Casting for a Socialist Earth: Multicultural Whiteness in the East German/Polish Science Fiction Film *Silent Star*

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses East German/Polish science-fiction co-production *Silent Star* (*Der schweigende Stern*, 1960), the world's first film to feature a mixed-racial spaceship crew, in terms of socialist conceptions of race and gender. Director Kurt Maetzig conceptualized the expensive film, based on Stanislaw Lem novel *Astronautci* (1951), as an anti-racist epic leveled against nuclear war. Yet the resultant production made only tokenist attempts at integrating its multi-racial, multicultural cast into a believable, agentic space crew, remaining otherwise firmly entrenched in a German film tradition of racial performance and asymmetrical gender relations. The chapter uses new archival and press research to address the depiction of racial and international unities in this utopian film. It examines the ideology behind socialist multiculturalism, and how the production and aesthetics of the film itself model such a worldview with all its dilemmas intact.

Keywords: East German film, multiculturalism, racism, science fiction, *Silent Star*, socialism, spaceship, whiteness

Contrary to popular belief, the first multiracial, multicultural starship crew to be seen on film or television was not Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* (1966–69), but the science fiction feature *Der schweigende Stern* (*Silent Star*, 1960). A co-production between Film Polski and the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) film studios *Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft* (DEFA) and directed by Kurt Maetzig, the film tells the story of a global astronaut mission to Venus that reveals the ruins of an extraterrestrial civilization

annihilated by its own volatile nuclear technology. When the mission's presence accidentally reactivates some of that technology, three of the eight astronauts sacrifice themselves so that the remaining crew can return to Earth. Internationalist solidarity manifests itself in a crew comprised of Soviet captain Arsenyev (Russian actor Michael N. Postnikov), American nuclear physicist Professor Hawling (Czech actor Oldrich Lukes), Japanese physician Sumiko (French-Japanese cabaret singer Yoko Tani), East German pilot Brinkmann (GDR star Günther Simon), Indian mathematician Sikarna (GDR actor Kurt Rackelmann in brownface), Chinese biologist/linguist Chen-Yu (Shanghai stage actor Tang Hua-Ta), Polish engineer Solytk (Czech actor Ignacy Machovski) and—the world's first black astronaut on film or television—African communications specialist Talua (Kenyan medical student Julius Ongewe). The film's opening credits even foreground each crew member's national heritage in turn—the Japanese doctor, 'the African communications officer'—boasting that the film contains 'many actors from many countries, and Omega the Robot.'

Even in its pacifist internationalism, *Silent Star* marks a moment of **(p.119)**

1950s Eastern Bloc cultural hubris: Sputnik had proven the Soviets' dominance in aerospace engineering, East Germans had recast themselves as 'worker-scientists,' and national liberation movements in the Global South projected a postcolonial world order. Despite white Eurocentric ideologies in circulation at the time, the casting of *Silent Star* posits that cosmonauts could be white or non-white, male or female. Yet this expensive production also showcases the East German Socialist Unity Party's (SED) ambivalent position on race, a position that proves an object lesson in what Dale Hudson calls *multicultural whiteness* in the media, which 'negotiates contradictions between an overstated racially blind inclusiveness of multiculturalism and an understated racial exclusiveness of whiteness' (Hudson 2008, 130). While several studies of *Silent Star* have already explored its transnational creation and international distribution history,¹ this article interrogates the extent to which *Silent Star* can be considered 'anti-racist,' and qualifies its first-ever implementation of the 'multiracial starship crew' trope with its production history and aesthetic strategies.

(p.120) Science Fiction and its East German Iteration

From the 1870s through the 1970s, science fiction's primary function within European society was to elicit fascination and curiosity from audiences by projecting temporally, culturally specific values and aesthetics on a future world to come. Such projections exaggerate and mitigate present dilemmas with



Top far left: Ignacy Machovski, Julius Ongewe, Günther Simon, Oldrich Lukes; bottom left: Tang Hua-Ta, Yoko Tani, Kurt Rackelmann from Kurt Maetzig's *Der schweigende Stern* (The Silent Star, 1960). Source: German State Film Archive/Bundesfilmarchiv.

protagonists' journeys through alien worlds, inhuman situations (i.e., time travel, rapid mutation), utopias, and dystopias. The genre infers a plausible telos from the present. Yet for the sake of brevity and coherence, science fiction frequently neglects the process that would theoretically bring about such imaginary futures, instead focusing on only the future itself. The 'what if?' question driving these narratives since the stories of H.G. Wells becomes overshadowed by the question of just *who* exactly is permitted in the future (Suvin 1991, 27). If contingent concepts such as 'whiteness'—a master subject position for the allocation of social privilege—are carried over to the future, then the techno-scientific fantasy becomes the inadvertent site of present-day social antagonisms.

In the 1960s, products such as *Silent Star* and *Star Trek* employed multiracial, gender-diverse casts to portray, as William Fischer argues,\par

a liberal 'one-world' consciousness ... [envisioning] the elimination of national boundaries, the creation of unified planetary or even galactic governments, and the obsolescence of contemporary social problems and ideological disputes in the face of larger issues affecting the fate of entire species, worlds or perhaps the Universe itself. (Fischer 1984, 22–23)

This consciousness also contains a political mandate, namely consent to a hegemonic vision of universality and cosmopolitanism at the behest of the state. The science fiction consumer has a choice: either affirm a dominant-but-inadequate future-imaginary of the present for escapist pleasure, or remain skeptical of this dominant imaginary as the present continues to fail to live up to its promises.² Specific future projections omit the discourses that do not coincide with their thematic content, and it is in these omissions that a science fiction work codifies its cultural presumptions about 'progress.'

East Germany's science fiction, manifest in literature, comics, and film between 1949 and 1989, did not even bear the Anglophone moniker 'science fiction.' The films were 'utopian adventure films,' the books 'scientific fantasies' (Rottensteiner 1981, 91). To ensure their work could be distributed, writers and directors worked largely within the scope (**p.121**) of those Marxist-Leninist 'certainties' about the future permitted by the SED.³ These certainties followed György Lukács's idea of socialism's Enlightenment roots, and Sonja Fritzsche describes it depicting 'socialism as an ideal yet closed system,' shielded from Romanticism and suspense (2006, 69). This 'utopian realism,' as Fritzsche calls it, encouraged an optimistic identification with the proletarian reality in the years to come (2010, 87). Socialism would be implemented around the world, with global technological progress guided by Soviet Moscow and its white European allies. The contrary futurities of other non-capitalist economic systems, from that of Charles Fourier to Mao Zedong, were not considered. German Democratic Republic authors in this system found productive inspiration in two 1950s Eastern Bloc hard science fiction works. These were Stanislaw Lem's 1951 Polish novel *Astronaucci* (The Astronauts—published in the GDR as *Planet des Todes*, or Planet of Death), of which *Silent Star* is an adaptation, and Ivan Efremov's Russian novel *Andromeda* (GDR title *Das Mädchen aus dem All*, The Girl from Space, 1957), a novel which Fredric Jameson claims 'served the

positive and utopian function of keeping the basic goals of socialism alive' (Reynolds, Rottensteiner, and Jameson 1974, 273). Lem's popular novel laid the ideological groundwork, which let GDR authors assert that it was possible to explore multiple socialist realist futures (Fritzsche 2010, 83), while *Andromeda* proved that a socialist utopia completely realized 1,000 years in the future could entertain its reader through the sheer surrealist alienation of its premise (Jameson 1982, 154). Both novels opened up creative horizons for other authors within a cultural field otherwise constrained to support the visions of the current political elite.

In terms of the cinema, *Silent Star* was the first of seven DEFA science fiction productions over the course of twenty-five years.⁴ It established not only the audio-visual precedent for the space-faring GDR future, but also foreshadowed these films' production difficulties: restrictive screenwriting and censorship processes helped conceive films that were little more than ill-timed special effects vehicles.⁵ I have noted elsewhere that the genre's presence in DEFA production schedules was always considered an experiment, a hedged bet against Western science fiction imports that eventually lost its way.⁶

Nevertheless, the DEFA Studio's take on the genre was undoubtedly marked by its admirable internationalism. The four major films—*Silent Star*, *Signale—Ein Weltraumabenteuer* (Signals—A Space Adventure, 1970), *Eolomea* (1972), and *Im Staub der Sterne* (In the Dust of the Stars, 1976)—were co-produced with countries such as Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania.⁷ Their export distributors targeted audiences in capitalist as well as socialist countries,⁸ and the cultural leadership saw such **(p.122)** 'audience-effective films' as a crucial part of the East German cultural mission.⁹ Their screenplays envisioned ambitious tableaux, such as *Silent Star*'s 'school class standing in the foreground ... almost all the races in the world represented among them, most prominently little Arabs and negroes' (Barckhausen, et al. 1958). The DEFA insisted on national, gender, and racial diversity in its space crews. African-American singer Aubrey Pankey and Yugoslav star Gojko Mitic both turn up on crews in *Signals*, Russian star Ivan Andonov plays the protagonist pilot of a secret mission to colonize another planet in *Eolomea*, and stars like Ingrid Bergman were considered for *Silent Star* before DEFA settled on the final cast. In this regard, GDR 'utopian films' use the cinematic medium to project genuine hopes about future global diversity and progressive forces (pacifism, labor solidarity) overcoming vestiges from the past (imperialism, racism). Unfortunately, such representations also reveal the GDR's own troubled domestic and foreign record of racial practices.

GDR and Race

Though its global project of anti-fascist solidarity clearly revolved around the unity of peoples and states throughout the world, the GDR itself proved a safe harbor for the discourse of whiteness and the racial presumptions toward non-whites that accompany it.¹⁰ This helped fuel and was fueled by a *structural racism* that delimited possibilities of and isolated foreign, non-white internationals within the GDR, as well as the *representational racialization* comfortably embedded within the discourse of multicultural whiteness.¹¹ Multicultural whiteness maintains white privilege during historical circumstances when an

anti-racist discourse otherwise reigns. It performs this by gathering multicultural ensembles around situations that, on the surface, appear to need a concerted, collective effort (i.e. resisting capitalism, exploration of new planets, etc.), but minorities within the collective are then tokenized or relegated to a position of minimal agency during key narrative moments. The message is twofold: white people ultimately possess greater knowledge and ‘humanity’ than non-whites, as well as the moral high ground for expressing ‘tolerance’ toward them. Space travel becomes a metonym for human civilization, and whites are portrayed as its leaders.

Silent Star director Maetzig fought hard to keep a racially mixed cast. He writes: ‘[The film] must not show white citizens and colored servants. Rather, the [crew] should be a peaceful mix of peoples including Europeans, but first and foremost, well-dressed Africans’ (1957). Nevertheless, the film’s production history bears the traces of **(p.123)**

structural racism of its time. Consider Ongewe’s casting and salary, for example. A student in Leipzig at the time, Ongewe describes how Maetzig and producer Hans Mahlich came to his university ‘looking for an African,’ received a half-dozen names, and invited Ongewe to audition (Salzer 1960). As with many other non-white extras in the film, he was selected based on his skin color and attractive physiognomy, rather than his acting chops or even his availability.¹² Thanks to his amateur status and foreign heritage, he came quite cheap. His student stipend was 7 marks a day for expenses, a paltry sum increased to 50 marks a day to at least match that of the other international actors. In a January 14, 1959

memo, Mahlich’s finance manager Günter Rost justifies Ongewe receiving an additional daily wage of 125 marks so that ‘he does not feel slighted as a person of color across from the other actors’ (Rost 1959). As magnanimous as it sounds, however, Ongewe’s 175 mark salary in those days amounted to only slightly more than what was paid to the extras brought onto the production (150 marks) and the same as Omani Mensa, ‘a negro waiter’ in the New York sequence.¹³ Given its eighth member’s **(p.124)** functional equivalence to an extra, the multicultural space crew also contained drastic salary disparities. Tani was the most expensive (46,500 marks total, paid in francs), followed by Lukes (50,000 marks), with Rackelmann the least-paid protagonist actor at 18,000 marks over forty days (Rost 1959). Nevertheless, even Rackelmann’s wage amounts to 450 marks a day *plus* expenses compared to Ongewe’s 175 marks a day *minus* expenses. Though DEFA had the best of intentions with regard to Ongewe, it was nevertheless able to leverage GDR systems of (white) labor control against his bargaining power as one of the few Africans in the country. These structural relations,



From the right, the four crewmen shown are: Julius Ongewe, Ignacy Machovski, unnamed ground personnel, and Günther Simon. The other figures are extras. Kurt Maetzig’s *Der Schweigende Stern* (The Silent Star, 1960). Source: German State Film Archive/*Bundesfilmarchiv*.

as it came to pass, underpin the film's esthetic too.

Stanislaw Lem's Utopian Vision

It is a little known fact that Polish-Jewish science fiction author Stanislaw Lem's first protagonist was an African-American Soviet pilot named Robert Smith. After all, Lem's scientifically progressive, anti-racist novel *The Astronauts* brings humanity together not only via a multicultural space crew, but via a single heroic male figure who, echoing Paul Robeson, literally embodies the First, Second, and Third World of the 1950s.¹⁴ *Silent Star* is based on this novel, though the film erases all traces of Smith's existence. An alien message is received on Earth, the international crew goes to investigate, discovers a Venusian landscape blasted apart by atomic weapons, and has a suspenseful time in leaving the planet, though no one dies. Lem's novel is 'hard sci-fi,' such that accuracy of scientific projections plays a major esthetic role.¹⁵ The hard science fiction elements make palatable the socially imaginative decision to have such an anomalous character as the pilot-narrator.¹⁶ The other six astronauts in the book are Soviet expedition leader Arsenyev, Chinese linguist Lao Tsu, Indian mathematician Chandrasekar, Polish chief engineer Soltyk, German chemist/communications expert Rainer, and Czech doctor Ostawich.

Lem's social assemblage already raises several issues. First of all, the crew lacks a single female figure. The conspicuous voicelessness of the female perspective throughout the entire novel presumes both a primarily male audience for the work and the primacy of 'worker-scientist' masculinity under socialism. Such assumptions are carried through to the film. In addition, the Russian-born African-American pilot stands out as such an historical anomaly *vis-à-vis* national and racial relations in 1951 that his very existence testifies to the reconcil-iatory aspirations of the novel. In alignment with Stalinist interests, Lem **(p.125)** glorifies the equitable educational opportunities offered by the Soviet Union to all the peoples of the world.

Lem's text constructs an imaginary via Smith that conforms to Polish-Soviet ideals of racial solidarity emerging from global class solidarity. Yet five out of the seven crew members are Europeans, and none comes from an overtly capitalist country circa 1951. In composing a fictional worldwide space mission that was publishable in 1950s Poland, Lem elevates men over women, socialist-affiliated nations over capitalist-affiliated ones, scientists over laborers and post-racial identity over race consciousness. The masculinity of the austere, rational, and politically neutral scientist dominates the text. Yet for the film adaptation, this global space crew became a contested site of race, nation, and gender.

Silent Star's Conflicted Conception

As the first major science fiction film to be made in Soviet Eastern Europe, *Silent Star* was intended to perform many functions, but succeeded at few. To Soviet cultural officials in Moscow, its purpose was to demonstrate that the Communist Bloc was winning the space race on the silver screen as well as with Sputnik's launch. To GDR cultural minister Erich Wendt, this was an opportunity to remedy the 'painfully conspicuous absence of futuristic films and adventure stories in [the] studio's production schedule' (Wendt 1060). To Film Polski's Iluzjon production unit the film was to be a faithful adaptation of Lem's

novel, but to members of the DEFA team, it was to spread an egalitarian warning to the world that would also encourage more investment in space exploration. Regardless of motives, however, it was deemed necessary at various stages in the production to change the odd composition of the international space crew to fit culturally specific projections about the socialist future.¹⁷

Following an early Polish treatment of the film, DEFA scriptwriters Joachim Barckhausen and Alexander Stenbock-Fermor transformed Lem's novel into an entertainment film to rival American science fiction productions. To disambiguate the message of *The Astronauts*, this April 1957 version of *Silent Star's* script portrayed the space mission as a bilateral effort between the peaceful socialist nations of the world and a few reluctant-but-militaristic capitalist powers. They added female love interest Marina, who would choose between American pilot Higgins and German crew member Brinkmann. Marina would then become Sumiko, survivor of the Hiroshima bombing and Brinkmann's would-be lover. The original version of the script was a light-hearted, gag-filled space (p.126) fantasy with a cautionary message about nuclear devastation.

Once Maetzig became involved with the project, however, the anti-fascist director critiqued the Barckhausen/Stenbock-Fermor screen-play's levity, noting the sexist/racist tendencies underscoring its narrative. The original Sumiko was sexualized, flirtatious, and unprofessional. A scene in a hotel involved black waiters serving white socialist guests. As Stefan Soldovieri points out, 'given the fact that the Venus crew was to include a black African astronaut, possibly a science fiction first, Maetzig argued that a racial mix would better suit the film's egalitarian ideals' (Soldovieri 1998, 385). This black African astronaut, Talua, abruptly replaced white German chemist/communications officer Rainer. The GDR had interests in African independence movements during the 1950s, and the mere existence of a sympathetic black character would make the DEFA revolutionary in world cinema.¹⁸ Rainer's chemistry expertise, critical to the plot, was then conferred onto Lao Tsu's replacement character, Chinese biologist/linguist/chemist Chen-Yu. Maetzig's early intervention in the script lent the project its renewed anti-racist tone. The film was to be 'a realistic-technological utopia ... but political and social elements also [had] to be probable' (Maetzig 1957).

The disputed question was one of futurity: what does a socially and scientifically 'realistic' vision of the near-future look like? The disputants were Lem himself, the writers, the director, and myriad officials in fourteen distinct departments with a vested interest in Maetzig's future vision not rocking too many boats. Lem saw a universe ready for exploration by all inhabitants of the Earth who, regardless of ethnicity, could all think and act as Western European-modeled scientists. Early screenwriters played down his pacifist message and focused on the property's comedic potential, blatantly playing to prejudices as a result. Maetzig vouched for token elements (casting of extras and crew) to express social progressivism, but also shifted the production to align with instrumental interests of party officials, who wanted a positive-but-nuanced socialist image to emerge with little monetary expenditure. Talua's

creation, Sumiko's transformation from a flirty character to a tragic Hiroshima survivor, the addition of white American astrophysicist Hawling and his friendship with white Russian physicist Arsenyev, and the upgrade of Brinkmann to the pilot and star protagonist all came from this tumultuous negotiation over racial and national imaginaries.

None of this effort could be validated if DEFA and Iluzjon were not committed to a cast whose appearance reflected their national origins. Yet Wendt perceived the figures in the script to be 'politically retrograde national caricatures' (Wendt, as translated in Soldovieri 1998, 391). By the time the actors had donned their expensive Western-imported (p.127) spacesuits in 1959 after the twelfth major revision of the script (Wolfgang Kohlhaase and Günther Rucker's rewrite), national stereotypes in *Silent Star's* narrative had been toned down altogether, thereby heightening those stereotypes that would have been taken for granted by party and society.

Racial Performativity

Referring back to the film's opening credits, *Silent Star* functions as a kind of world exhibition not too dissimilar from the contemporaneous Willi Müller DEFA documentary *Messe in Damaskus* (Exhibition in Damascus, 1958), in which the world effectively gathers together to be awed by GDR technological prowess. For example, the font of the 'Omega Robot' credit is significantly larger than the names of the actors. Technical ingenuity in the realm of effects is emphasized as an exciting bonus to the film's cosmopolitanism, just as Syrian children are to be delighted by the GDR-made candy machine in the Müller film. As for the 'many actors from different countries,' one should note the German word *Darsteller* instead of *Schauspieler*, the latter connoting theatre training. The statement is well intentioned, but also informs us that the extras' presence was only instrumental in showcasing the GDR's internationalism. In the film, these many *Darsteller* are crowds of people who either stand around, look off-screen, or both. So what they are actually performing then is their race, since one can only guess at their nationality or other characteristics. These figures become the background, tokens of world solidarity that support a predominantly white socialist space mission.

In this way, the minorities of the world have all become the 'model minority' in Maetzig's vision, complete with the silence that ought to accompany such a status.¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze has commented on how one interprets the body-images of minority figures, given that 'the visual image shows the structure of a society, its situation, its places and functions, its attitudes and roles, the actions and reactions of the individuals, in short the form and the contents' (Deleuze 1989, 225–26). The silent presence of the Indians in Sikarna's lab at the film's start and the various dark-skinned individuals at the Kosmokrator's launch site depict a healthy 'world-body.' This is to say that within *Silent Star's* 1960s future projection of a mostly harmonious, functional socialist world order is a proposed imaginary of a better tomorrow. When one sees people of different races working side by side, it is presumed that they possess equal power relations and privileges.

(p.128) In the sequence immediately preceding the Kosmokrator's launch, for example, one sees this conflict-free, multinational, multi-racial society as a serious directive heeded by characters in ridiculous outfits. Jumpsuit-clad men work in consciously multiracial teams on seemingly important projects. As the camera tracks right to left in the sequence's opening shot, two black men stand at ready until the arrival of the astronauts cues them to head toward the media crews. All at once, another mixed crowd of well-dressed minorities and women surround Sikarna and then Hawling, framing their humble responses as scientists with the physical incarnation of the whole world watching as a mass. These two black men, apparently from the press, then make appearances at all further interviews after Hawling's, always standing visible and silent. This body-image reinforces an image of egalitarian society, while simultaneously documenting its slippages: the men are from the press, yet their characters cannot be allowed to do something so professional as hold a microphone, while Sumiko describes the endless tragedies that have happened to her. No sooner does *Silent Star* dignify these figures by incorporating them into the scene than it denigrates them by rendering them mute, inactive background objects. Stuart Hall emphasizes the paradoxical framework of this dynamic of exclusionary inclusion of non-white figures. He writes:\par

[We] understand very little, as yet, about ... [racism's] deep ambivalences ... The representations of Blacks keep, at different times, exhibiting this split, double structure. Devoted, dependent, childlike, the Blacks are simultaneously unreliable, unpredictable, and undependable. (1996, 342)

Hall argues that many Euro-American portrayals of Black characters are products of this double structure. The figure of Ongewe's Talua, for example, is not the only black character in the film, since shots of an all-black radio station in Africa and the dark-skinned reporter extras construct a world beyond that of white people. Nor does Talua act in a way that necessarily fits the stereotype that Hall describes. But a precise eye on Talua does reveal the way that, though the other characters treat him as an equal, the camera does not. During Talua's second appearance in the narrative, he is neither introduced personally while Soltyk stands next to him, nor granted the dignity of a full medium shot until after he is first obstructed by a random mechanic consulting Soltyk's expert advice. One has no idea of his name or function as a crew member. The actors move into a medium close-up as the camera tracks left, and they quite literally exchange a few words of insignificant consequence. **(p.129)** This gesture confers the status of a helpful *Mitarbeiter* (collaborator) upon Talua. Collaborators on this collective project bear little narrative significance. This would be more of a footnote if Brinkmann did not receive an ostentatious entrance in a GDR fighter jet one shot later in the sequence.

The next time the camera focuses on Talua, it is mostly on his backside as he looks for a radio operator for reasons initially unknown to the audience. After other scientists express their various thoughts about the mission and their fields of study in full medium close-up, a cut reveals Talua exiting the radio trailer and entering the crowd. He is lost amid the bodies and faces in the *mise-en-scène* for a split second, and then

re-emerges next to a conveniently placed microphone. Finally, Talua gets a chance to be seen and speak freely; he gives a message to his never-introduced daughter Mona that he is 'so happy he's flying to the stars.'²⁰ His speech ends with Arsenyev's arm paternally wrapping around him and gently pushing him into the transport to take the crew to the spaceship. Talua thereafter plays the easy-going, Sambotype of communications technician, always ready to support the mission and work in concert with the other professors on the ship, particularly Arsenyev the patriarch. At the film's conclusion, he volunteers to be lowered into a shaft to reverse the polarity of a matter-energy device, somehow launching the Kosmokrator back into space and leaving him behind to die. But Talua's last take is not of heroism, it is of him running at the camera with his arms desperately raised, shouting about Mona.²¹ The returning crew members praise his sacrifice when they return to Earth. Maetzig portrays Talua as altogether professional and heroic, a credit to socialism despite a childlike nature. Yet his is one of the lives that the *Silent Star* narrative sacrifices, a script decision unmoored from Lem's original book. He is cinematically present throughout the film, but not treated as an equal by the camera. His allegiances lie with the abstracted daughter off-screen, and thus it proves fundamentally incoherent that he should decide to leave the ship to help it on its one chance to take off. He redeems blackness only by putting white socialists before his daughter and his own life.

Equally problematic, but after a different fashion, is the figure of Sikarna played by Rackelmann. The very first scene of the film visually exposes his racial performance: he sits at a computer, his brownface contrasting with real Indian actors standing behind him. Maetzig somehow expected Rackelmann to appear as an Indian despite careful attention to 'authenticity' in casting. This inconsistent performance strategy calls much attention to the social construction of race, for just as it is presumed that a white German in blackface could not possibly **(p.130)** play the character of Talua, it is ironically deemed permissible to allow such a German to paint oneself as an Indian follower of Gandhi. In this fashion, DEFA make-up artists deployed ethnic tricks gleaned from earlier race performance on feature films under the Ufa studios (e.g. *Münchhausen*, 1943) or DEFA popular cinema in the 1950s (e.g. *Die Geschichte vom kleinen Muck* [The Story of Little Mook], 1953). Few taboos on ethnic performance existed at the time of this film's production. Whiteness could choose to mark itself racially, whereas non-white people always remained 'of color.' Sikarna was cast thus due to his large amount of German dialog, which would have made an Indian casting a potentially tedious choice. Thankfully, the script's dullness disallows the actor to push the stereotype farther than his skin. Because of the apparent inaccessibility of actors from India, Maetzig made do with the dubiously socialist realist trick of putting a cast member into an alternative racial performance, troubling this film's purported mission of representing the world.

Race Meets Gender

Gender in *Silent Star* intersects with race and the narrative, for—amidst the stern male technicians—the solitary female crew member Sumiko has the triple representative burden of being a woman, Japanese,

and the emotional core of the ship's crew in *Silent Star*. Sumiko was the extra detail that completely altered the film's screenplay in its adaptation from book to film. The date of the film was moved from 2006 to 1970 not only to make the space-faring future seem closer, but also to allow Sumiko to both be affected by the Hiroshima blast and still remain young (and attractive) for the male viewing audience. She is both sexualized in her make-up—primarily eyebrows with dark eyeliner, form-fitting clothes, and red lipstick, while at the same time depicted as a stalwart young scientist who fits into the sterile, asexual mold of the crew. The result is what Soldovieri calls an 'iron virgin,' a sexually guarded, radioactively infertile woman whose compassion and caring comes closest to the semblance of a socialist nun (1998, 390). Her unrequited love for Brinkmann and angst over the Hiroshima tragedy motivates her throughout the picture, but her melodramatic situation forbids her from acting to remedy it. She is depicted as a subordinate caretaker of the crew, her make-up accentuates her racial difference, and her passion underscores the fact that she is a woman.

Science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin once noted that women and men alike who adopt the hegemonic feminine passivity of most (p.131) Western societies 'can't play doctor, only nurse, can't be warriors, only civilians, can't be chiefs, only Indians' (Le Guin 1989, 117). It should then be unsurprising that Sumiko, the only medical doctor on board, is nevertheless relegated to nurse-like duties during the Kosmokrator's voyage: she is the one who distributes food to all the individuals on board. Yet more important than her being the ship's cafeteria lady, Tani performs gender through Sumiko in a way that renders femininity a seemingly impossible experience. She is a passionate, traumatized woman who cheers up the crew in whatever way she can with a face frozen under heavy make-up.

Because Sumiko's character was so hotly contested, her gender performance comes across as a negotiated, weak-willed compromise. She is introduced as a love interest before her professional skills are ever called upon, defining one facet of her hyperfeminine representation: she is a projection surface, a performer. Every scene she has alone with Brinkmann eventually revolves around powerful feelings of regret and guilt, a gesture that signifies her overdetermined emotional interiority. After she reveals that she cannot have children, these scenes cease. As a crew member, she wants the mission to remain unaffected by her personal issues. But as a creature of the script, she is predictably and melodramatically confronted with each of the following issues: her prior history with nuclear destruction, her old relationship with Brinkmann clouded by the death of her husband, and her overall inability as a woman to protect herself from further tragedy, as seen in her behavior during the infamous 'matter sludge' sequence, where her response to an alien threat is to run and scream. She exists to be pitied, seen, courted, and rescued by the male crew members. Her contorted visage dominates many close-ups and makes the male crew members' expressions of masculinity appear correspondingly rational and 'naturally' capable of handling the problems that arise. Sumiko's composite actions reveal not a character, but a male projection of an Asian female scientist.

She is the doll to be seen, but not heard. During one scene in the long space flight, Chen-Yu even sings her praises for her status as a role model for Chinese women, which certainly did not reflect Chinese-Japanese relations of the 1960s.²² She contrasts the clean-cut, boy-scout-looking Chen-Yu, whose masculine scientific prowess allows him to decrypt the Venusian message and discover life on Venus before he dramatically suffocates on the surface, a true model minority in the socialist sense. Sumiko, on the other hand, remains in the feminine shadow of that same model minority, asking the questions that the men scientifically answer, serving the crew depending on their mood, reminding the viewers of the damage that capitalist militarism did to her and framing the other **(p.132)** scientists' accomplishments. The performative space that is created by the combination of her race and gender makes her a character with whom ultimately few women anywhere could identify.

Racial Adaptation—*First Spaceship on Venus*

Strangely enough, *Silent Star* appeared in United States theaters two years later, re-dubbed and re-edited under the title of *First Spaceship on Venus*. This Crown International pirated copy of the film cuts out many of the DEFA additions to the story, including Sumiko's tragic past in Hiroshima and the joining of hands at the end, but inserts racially mistrustful dialogue (Ciesla 2002, 122). The anonymous editors wrench the odd multi-racial composition of the cast into a 1960s American racial paradigm that alludes to a world of comparative 'racisms' (Hall 1996, 338). With respect to *Silent Star*'s crude American appropriation, the DEFA's anti-racist project actually presents the modern viewer with multiple competent crew members of color who have a distinct voice and work well together. By contrast, *First Spaceship on Venus* transforms many main characters into marginal figures like the extras in the launch sequence. Chen-Yu and Sumiko's scene is entirely cut, as are most of her lines. Her Hiroshima references are removed to render her simple eye-candy. Such edits were predictable, given an early 1960s American audience directly implicated in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.²³ All of the crew members's nationalities remain unmentioned, taking an opposite route toward nationality from the internationalist original by simply assuming that all aboard are Americans. Thus Talua the African becomes Talua the African-American, and Arsenyev (renamed Dr. Harringway) thereby earns the right to harshly bark orders at him. During the rocket-test scene, for example, Dr. Harringway orders Talua to 'check the radar,' and the film cuts before the (original) shot finishes with Arsenyev/Harringway wrapping his arm around Talua and asking about his family. An act of human sympathy between a white man and a black man was deemed unacceptable at Crown International. Only four years later, as the Civil Rights movement swept through United States, *Star Trek* would inherit the film's project of representing a multi-racial crew through problematic frames of reference.

In order to unify the world around the project of space travel, Maetzig, and others since him, insisted that the nations of the world, signified by their unilateral racial stereotypes, make an appearance within a science fiction film's *mise-en-scène*. However, films are material products that require real people in real costumes and make-up to stand **(p.133)** in front of the camera, 'representing' their complicated national

and racial heritage to generate a projection of world consent. As *Silent Star* illustrates, even a forward-thinking project with anti-racist intentions can raise issues of race and gender power relations *unless* the critical interrogation of these relations lies at the project's core. Much science fiction film attempts to provide the illusion that one can fictionally reconcile such relations with a sweep of the camera. Yet a film that buys into whiteness will do symbolic violence via its own utopian projections. Multicultural whiteness permits and perpetuates lurking fears of living with difference. Though a racially diverse cast and lofty pan-human goals helped East German science fiction cinema depict a future global unity, the intersectional matrix of identity and power relations of the 1960s reveals that such unity was undermined by the production history and esthetic methods of the film.

Notes

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Notes:

(1) Such studies include, but are not limited to, Soldovieri (1998), Ciesla (2002), Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (2010), Heiduschke (2011), and Ivanova (2011).

(2) Rosemary Jackson offers the thoroughly political definition of sci-fi/ fantasy that underpins this argument, in which a text either 'expels' a desired concept of re-organizing the world, or 'tells of' it to consciously divorce the reader from the text (1981, 3).

(3) Note that Marx himself saw utopian fantasies as a distraction, which explains both the SED's suspicion of the genre and science fiction's hesitation to make Marxist predictions about the future. 'The point for Marx,' writes Terry Eagleton, 'is not to dream of an ideal future, but to resolve the contradictions in the present which prevent a better future from coming about' (Eagleton 2011, 68).

(4) The other six productions are *Der Mann mit dem Objektiv* (The Man with the Lens, 1961), *Signale—ein Weltraumabenteuer* (Signals—A Space Adventure, 1970), *Eolomea* (1972), *Im Staub der Sterne* (In the Dust of the Stars, 1976), *Das Ding im Schloß* (The Thing in the Castle, 1979), and *Besuch bei Van Gogh* (Visit with Van Gogh, 1985).

(5) This problematic process for the science fiction productions has been documented in Stefan Soldovieri (1998, 383–85) and Fritzsche (2010, 83).

(6) See Torner (2007, 89–106). See also Stott (2002, 91–99), concerning the resultant increase of science fiction imports during the 1980s, and Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (2010, 121–30), concerning the origins and effects of the GDR science fiction film.

(7) For more on the co-production arrangements, see Ivanova (2011).⁸ See, for example, Peter Packhäuser's (n.d.) anxiety about *In the Dust of the Stars's* reception in the US and Japan.

(9) See the 1972 commentary by the Cultural Ministry about *Eolomea* in 'Eolomea: HV Film.'

(10) Solidarity with nations in the Global South actually distinguished the GDR, and Romania, from all its other communist neighbors. Thomas Barnett argues that this policy was part of a dual strategy of "drawing together" with the Soviet Union and "delimitation" with West Germany' (Barnett 1992, 95). The Global South never became economically significant for East German exports, but retained an ideological and political significance disproportionate to this impact.

(11) Rita Chin and Heide Fehrenbach describe East and West Germany as equally 'ethnicized economies' where labor needs are met through ethnic segmentation while white consumer needs are met through according them adequate subsidized purchasing power (Chin, et al. 2009, 24–25). For more information about marginalized foreign labor in the GDR, see Stach and Hussain (1994). For a detailed overview of race in DEFA films, see Piesche (2004).

(12) Indeed, Ongewe was perhaps less available than Mahlich had conceived: his third-year exams were to take place shortly after the production wrapped, causing him to bring his study materials with him, including a medical skeleton. See Göring, 'Der schweigende Stern.'

(13) Mensa received the same rate for three days of work as Ongewe did for 36.6 days of work (receiving 9,275 marks total). See Rost (1959).

(14) As opposed to his present level of empowerment, the narrator himself also notes his ancestors' victimhood in this hyphenated identity, as his grandfather was a 'communist and a negro, a double crime for which he had to suffer much' (Lem 1954, 81).

(15) Early Lem film adaptations, such as *Silent Star* and the Czechoslovakian film *Ikarie XB-1* (1963), evince what Loska (2006, 154) calls a 'strong biological and technological bias' in a utopia that can only conceive of scientific innovation, rather than its drawbacks.

(16) This is not to say that African-Americans were uncommon as emigrés to Russia; thousands of unemployed Ford auto workers from Detroit moved to Soviet Russia in the 1930s to find work, and some of these employees were African-American. Robert Robinson's narrative about the black experience in Russia, documented in *Black on Red: My 44 Years inside the Soviet Union* (1988), addresses the fact that his skin color not only inadvertently made him a national celebrity, but that the racism in Soviet Russia proved difficult for him because it was not culturally acknowledged within that society. Suffice to say, this character represents a conscious, fantastic departure from the 'normal' conceptions of Russians.

(17) See Soldovieri 1998, 382–98 for the complete history of *Silent Star's* conflicted production.

(18) For more information on the GDR's attempts to impress the Soviet Union by providing aid to colonial resistance movements in Africa, see Winrow 1990.

(19) See Greg Smith's section on the 'burden' of the positive stereotype in Smith 2011, 103.

(20) One wonders if she is not introduced due to a dearth of small African girls found conveniently in the GDR at the time.

(21) In DEFA genre film history, this trope of black people running desperately toward the camera is then repeated on a larger scale in Konrad Petzold's *Osceola* (1971).

(22) Deep-seated Chinese beliefs in the decadence of Japanese culture, and the relatively fresh memory of the Japanese invasion coupled with the Rape of Nanking, would render Chinese idolization of a Japanese woman in 1970 as an optimistic Western European projection. This is yet another case of the closure of the gap between the present and the future creating social continuity problems and a forced suspension of disbelief.

(23) It is worth noting that the American version of the Japanese sci-fi film *Gojira* (1954) was also edited to remove as many references to atomic weapons testing as plot continuity would allow. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956) defies the original's anti-nuclear sentiment in favor of its romantic and horror elements.

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