

Title: The Tractor as Novum: Science Fictionality, Socialist Realism, and the Soviet Experience
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Abstract:

In the 1970s, Darko Suvin coined a succinct definition of science fiction, calling it the literature of “cognitive estrangement,” bringing together the artistic notion of de-familiarization and a “totalizing ‘scientific’ rigor.” A key aspect of Suvin’s definition was the idea of the novum, a “strange newness” which swings a “dynamic transformation” of history into motion, and a reflection not only “of but also on reality.” Since then, this definition has been expanded and dismantled by scholars such as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Carl Freedman, and Frederic Jameson, but it has remained the landmark.

When we turn our attention to the Soviet Union, its inception, and the ideals that defined it, the narrative that unfolds—with its emphasis on revolution, revitalization, and transformation—begins to look decidedly science fictional. By focusing on a specific element of Soviet culture, the tractor, we can better explore the science fictionality of the Soviet experience. The way that the tractor was depicted in early silent films, such as Sergei Eisenstein’s *The Old and the New* from 1929, and Oleksandr Dovzhenko’s *Earth* from 1930, exemplifies the “strange newness” of Suvin’s novum that elicits a radical transformation in history. The awe, wonder, and even fear that such a transformation elicited are immediately present in these films.

By the mid-1930s, with the adoption of socialist realism as the de facto genre, cinema dramatically changed. Yet, the role of the tractor remained central. In musicals, such as Ivan Pyr’ev’s *The Tractor Drivers* from 1939 and *The Cossacks of the Kuban* from 1949, the tractor is still an important symbol. However, rather than centering on the moment when the tractor is first introduced into the collective farm, the focus shifts to the utopian near-future and an idea of a perfect reality characterized by the singing of songs. Focusing on the science fictionality of the tractor opens the door for a reassessment of the Soviet experience as a whole, with an emphasis on the relationship to technology and modernity, and the perception of reality.