Silent Souls [Овсянки]

Russia, 2010
Color, 75 minutes
Russian with English subtitles
Director: Aleksei Fedorchenko
Screenplay: Denis Osokin
Director of Photography: Mikhail Krichman
Art Director: Andrei Ponkratov
Sound: Andrei Karasev
Cast: Iuri Tsurilo, Igor' Sergeev, Iuliia Aug, Viktor Sukhorukov
Creative Producer: Mariia Nazari
General Producer: Igor' Mishin
Production: Aprel' MIGpickers Media Mir

A sensual, lyrical, meditative elegy, Silent Souls is the story of loss, love and ritual existence. Miron (Iurii Tsurilo) is the head of a paper mill. When his beloved younger wife Tania (Iuliia Aug) dies, he asks one of his employees—the mill’s photographer, Aist (Igor’ Sergeev)—to help him conduct the funerary rites rather than consign her to the local morgue. The two men then embark on a journey into ritual, tradition, memory, and identity as they prepare Tania’s body for cremation according to ancient Meria traditions, ultimately delivering it up to the Oka River.

Since its premiere at the Venice International Film Festival, where it received the Osella, FIPRESCI, and Ecumenical Jury Awards, Silent Souls has gone on to win acclaim both abroad and at home in Russia. Not surprisingly, the film has been recognized for its screenplay, cinematography, music, and acting.

The film’s straightforward narrative belies its circularity, its unending liminality. As we come to realize, Miron and Aist travel not into the future (as time is wont to do) but into the past; and unbeknownst to us, we experience them as already-past.

This ghostliness perhaps accounts for the haunting photography in the film. Cinematographer Mikhail Krichman, of Zviagintsev’s The Return (2003), uses color to transport us from one time to another. Despite being situated firmly in the present day, we are constantly oriented toward the past, both the concrete personal histories of the characters and the greater long-ago, a time before culture and language had been forgotten; a time when we knew who we were and why. The present is dominated indoors and out by the late Uralian November palette of faded blues and greens, greys and taupes. The past sparkles onscreen in bright yellows, reds, and warm indoor lights. Even in the depths of past winters the sun shines—the past is what is most vibrant, most alive. The present is filmed only in the shadowless subdued beauty of overcast skies. The sun finally breaks through just long enough to facilitate Miron’s and Aist’s final reunification with the past, and disappears again as quickly as they sink into the waters of the Volga. Dappled by raindrops, the river’s turbid surface returns us to our own time. Color, music, and narrative combine to remind us that the past cannot be recaptured. We can only move forward.

Liminality in the film is not restricted to time. In fact, Silent Souls takes place entirely within the ritualized space of transition; it marks numerous changes within the lives of its characters as much as within the ontological transitions it maps out. Miron and Aist exist almost entirely within transitory spaces: the roof,
the road, the bridge, the mall. Their journey effectively prepares them for existence on the other side of loss and of life. Funerary rites, marking the passage from life to death, obviously preoccupy the film, yet the question arises early on: “Who or what, exactly, is being mourned?” Women, culture, tradition, language...each are addressed within the film, yet it is women and their bodies that tie each of these threads together.

Unlike much of contemporary Russian cinema, women are conspicuously present in Silent Souls. They are the beloved objects—bodies to be adored, adorned, and desired. Although Miron and Aist are cast as the keepers of Meria culture, it is Tania’s body (and that of Aist’s mother) that provides the rationale for the men to come together and re-enact cultural identity through ritual (be it marriage or death). This is emblematized by the French release title: Le dernier voyage de Tanya; she is the heart of this film. Women are ubiquitous in and crucial to the film yet they remain paradoxically inconspicuous, almost invisible. As Aist reminds us, “Women’s living bodies are also rivers carrying away [our—i.e., men’s] sorrow.” Like the buntings (овсянки) of the original title, women are demographically the most common in Russia; in the film, they are omnipresent, cheerful, and overlooked, yet provide the magical instigation for male bonding and vital cultural processes. This link is further signified by Tania’s maiden name (Ovsianska), and Miron’s pet name for her (Little Bunting). Birds and women alternate appearances at key scenes: as Tania’s body is consumed by flames, a pair of buntings watch on; after “drowning” their sorrows in the twin corporeal rivers of Rima and Iuliia, Aist and Miron come to peace with their respective losses when Miron’s eyes are “kissed” by the buntings in the car, causing the accident.

Fedorchenko uses the fabricated traditions of an existing, yet almost entirely sublimated, people to channel contemporary uncertainties in the face of perpetual change. Miron and Aist function as Russians in the modern world, yet recognize each other and unite as Meria when it comes time to perform sacred rites. But neither identity is tenable without the other; each man functions in the undefined space between his conflicting identities. Miron uses his cell phone to talk about signing contracts while Aist uses his camera and laptop to document his surroundings. In their personal lives, however, ancient traditions or the need to preserve them prevail.

This alternation between cultural identities returns us to the issue of liminality. Women hover somewhere between human and animal; Miron and Aist, between Russian and Meria; their journey, between the pragmatic and the mystical. Landscapes fluctuate between banal and extraordinary, devoid, even divested of human life yet replete with flora and fauna. Time is suspended somewhere between late fall and the onset of winter, between the last leaf-fall and the first snowfall. Language oscillates between silence, perfunctory expression, intimate revelation, and crude description. Nothing in the Silent Souls is static, not even the apparently permanent state of death.

Nicola Kuchta

Aleksei Fedorchenko (1966-) A native of central Russia, Aleksei Fedorchenko gained notice for his first feature-length film, the mocumentary First on the Moon (2005). He graduated from the State Institute for Filmmaking (VGIK) in 2000 and has since juggled producing, directing, and scriptwriting, becoming the head of Sverdlovsk Film Studio. His work has garnered numerous international awards.

Filmography

2010 Silent Souls
2009 The Wind of Shuvgey (documentary)
2008 Bath Day (documentary)
2007 The Railway
2006 Shosho (documentary)
2005 First on the Moon
2002 David (documentary)
2002 Kids of the White Grave (documentary)