The Buffalo Film Seminars

Directed by Larissa Shepitko
Script by Yuri Klepikov and Larissa Shepitko
based on the novel by Vasili Bykov
Music by Alfred Shnitke
Cinematography by Vladimir Chukhnov and Pavel Lebeshev

Golden Bear, Berlin Film Festival


the Pauper (1972), Proverka na dorogakh/Checkpoint (1971), and Andrey Rublyov (1966).


from World Film Directors V II. Ed. John Wakeman. H.H.Wilson Co. NY 1988

Shepitko, Larissa (1939-July 2, 1979), Soviet director, was born in the small city of Artemovsk in the Eastern Ukraine. At the age of sixteen she went to Moscow to take the examination admissions for VGIK, the state film school. There she became a pupil of the great Ukrainian director Alexander Dovzhenko. After his death in 1956 Shepitko worked with his widow, Yulia Solntseva, on Poema o more (Poem of the Sea, 1958), the first part of a trilogy about Ukrainian village life that had been planned and scripted by Dovzhenko.

After that Shepitko made two student shorts, The Blind Cook (1961), a satire, and Living Water (1962). The latter is said to have been in the nature of a tribute to Dovzhenko, reflecting his lyrical style. Shepitko’s diploma film and first feature followed: Znoi (Heat, 1963), made when she was only twenty-two. The picture was produced at Frunze, a small but enterprising studio in the Kirgiz Republic in Soviet Central Asia, near the Chinese border. Conditions on location were very difficult. The temperature at times reached such levels (up to 120° F) that the film stock melted. On the treeless Kirgizian steppes there was no shade except where shelters could be constructed, and Shepitko herself fell ill. She went on working, nevertheless, even when she had to be carried on location on a stretcher.

Heat was adapted from “The Camel’s Eye,” a story by Kirgiz writer Chingiz Aitmatov, set in the mid-1950s. Kemal, a seventeen-year-old member of the Party youth organization, arrives as an idealistic volunteer on a collective farm in the sweltering steppeland. Soon he finds himself in conflict with Abakir, who jealously protects his authority and his reputation as the region’s best tractor driver. Kemal suffers Abakir’s petty tyrannies and resistance to real change in silence, but when Abakir strikes a woman, Kemal swings his tractor around and drives it within inches of the older man’s face. Beaten, Abakir leaves the collective, watched by the silent and impassive peasants as he packs his possessions and viciously smashes the radio his comrades had given him. The struggle between old and new is examined in different terms in the character of the peasant girl Kalipa (Y. Yusupzhanova), striving to free herself from the dead hand of patriarchal customs and religious tradition.

Shepitko always managed to surround herself with collaborators of exceptional talent. Here she had the services of cinematographer Yuri Sokol and the composer (and future director) Tolomush Okeyev, whose soundtrack ingeniously mixes music, voices, and natural sounds. The cast was headed by two Kirgizians, Nurmukan Zhanturin as Abakir and Bolot Shamsiev, then a fellow student of Shepitko’s at VGIK, later a director himself, as Kemal.

In his article about the director in Films and Filming (March 1974), Derek Elley wrote: “Shepitko’s concern...has consistently been the death of old and new....This sense of people acting out their fortunes under the gaze of a greater and predetermining force is given its clearest expression in her first feature. The setting of man against the open sky achieves a double effect: not only is the struggle between Kemal and Abakir made to seem particularly naked, but also its shows that man’s struggle is not only with himself....Shepitko breathes her own particular spirit into the situation, managing to depict the departure of the old in the face of the new...with a striking lack of propagandising...[and] considerable sympathy is shown for the established order, the old ethics of the beys, despite the fact that the system is finally shown to be unworkable....Visually, the film is magnificent: the play of sun and cloud on corn; the value set on water in this arid part of Central Asia....There is a toughness, however, in the lyricism which prevents the film from foundering in its 84 minutes.”

Clare Kitson agreed that “the images have an extraordinary intensity, the heat seeming to drive human relationships to their breaking point.” Shepitko’s extraordinary skill in relating landscape to character—both as shaping influence and challenge—reminded Elley not only of her mentor, Dovzhenko, but also of the early work of Leni Riefenstahl. This first feature won a special jury prize at Karlovy Vary and was very warmly received in the Soviet Union itself. After completing the films, Shepitko left the Frunze Studio for the capital, spending the rest of her career at the Mosfilm Studio.

With her second feature, Krylya (Wings, 1966), Shepitko turned to a contemporary urban theme. Moving back and forth between past and present, the story deals with four days in the life of Nadezhda Petrovna (convincingly played by the little-known Maya Bulgatova). She is a respected member of her city’s Soviet and head of a college of civil engineering. In World War II, however, she had been a much-decorated fighter pilot and a national heroine. Secretly she is consumed with nostalgia for those great days and envy of those who can still enjoy the freedom of the skies. Moreover, if her peers admire her, her students find her narrow-minded, heartless, and authoritarian, And so does her only daughter Tanya (Zhana Bolotova), whose immersion in a love affair is something Nadezhda can hardly comprehend. In the end...
Nadezhdas comes to recognize that her stern values are inappropriate in the postwar world, but it is not entirely clear whether she is capable of change.

“The particular theme has intrigued me for a long time,” Shepitko explained. “I want to tell about the generation of victors, the men and women who bore the burden of the war, and show through one person the difficult path traveled by those who fought in the war, the moral and ethical mistakes they made, and how they corrected them.” For Nadezhda is an example: “The war has put its stamp on her thinking. Everything in wartime is brutal, definite and clear—an enemy is an enemy, a coward is a coward. She had carried these theoretical judgments over into civilian life and failed to realize that her swift decisions had turned into superficial decisions. Her mental growth had stopped. A proud person, Nadezhda tries furiously to justify and defend herself, and succeeds, as a result, in losing the regard of her family and friends; she finds herself alone. The viewer will hear no repentant speeches from her lips, but at the end he realizes that the crisis has passed and Nadezhda’s attitude has changed.” The “thaw” that had followed Stalin’s death, bringing greater freedom of expression in the Soviet arts, was interrupted after Krushchev’s enforced retirement in 1964, and some of the old controls were reimposed. Iskusstvo Kino (October 1966) was brave enough to devote twenty copiously illustrated pages to Wings. A range of critical opinion was represented in the article, along with a guarded editorial commendation saying that the serious viewer would find in the film “much of importance and (in the right sense of the word) edification.” Elsewhere there were self-righteous complaints that Shepitko had done her country a disservice by suggesting that conflict might exist between the generations in the Soviet Union, and by “jeering” at war heroes. Nevertheless, according to A.S. Barkiest’ Soviet Cinema, the film, controversial as it was, established Shepitko as “one of the important film makers of the Soviet new wave.”

Her next project was Radina elektirchestva (The Homeland of Electricity), a medium-length feature based on a story by Andrei Plstonov. According to Ronald Holloway in Variety (July 25, 1979), it portrayed “poverty in the 1920s during the civil war period” and “had as its central motif the search for water and the employment of religious icons and processions to wring water from an arid landscape....[It] linked her with Dovzhenko and recalled an earlier student short, Living Water.” For some reason the project was shelved by the authorities in 1968, and Shepitko did not complete another film until 1971.

This was Ty I ya (You and I). In this film, far from retreating to the relative safety of literary adaptations and costume movies, like many of her colleagues at the time, Shepitko addressed herself even more directly than in Wings to the ailments of contemporary Soviet society and in particular to the alienation of a privileged intelligentsia. She also invited further disapproval by adopting an elliptical and nonchronological time structure that reminded some critics of Antonioni and Resnais.

The film opens, indeed, with a series of apparently disconnected scenes: painful shots of the dogs being used in laboratory experiments (over which the credits are read aloud); a woman strolling on a Moscow street; a man running through Stockholm. Gradually it emerges that the man is Pyotr (Leonid Dyachkov), a brain surgeon (hence the laboratory animals); the woman is his wife Katya (a memorable performance from Alla Demidova). On a posting to Sweden, Pyotr undergoes a “life crisis”—a failure of faith in his work, in his unsatisfactory marriage, and in himself.

Pyotr returns to the USSR but only to drop out of his career and his marriage, boarding a freight train to Siberia. Working there, he meets and helps a girl (Natalya Bondarchuk) who has also tried to opt out, in her case by attempting suicide. Their unhappiness brings them together and a relationship develops. It cannot last; they are products of different societies and different generations. This is confirmed in a powerful scene when “recovered, confident in herself, indifferent, she suddenly takes close to her heart his failure and misfortune, and in his outburst of open emotion, unintelligible to her, she bows and kisses his hand in the presence of an unsought group on onlookers—only acute skill could make this mechanical, conventional action seem natural” (V. Demin). Coming to terms with reality, Pyotr, a little more mature than when he arrived in Siberia, decides to return to his proper métier: to Moscow and to Katya.

You and I was scripted by Gennadi Shpalikov and photographed in color by Alexander Knyaginski (partly on location at Norilsk, a part of Siberia associated with Stalin’s prison camps). Both were 1963 graduates, with Shepitko, of VGIK, as was the art director, Alexander Boym. “The film is really about us,” Shepitko said. “That is why it is called You and I...At the age of thirty one gains a certain clarity about many things which have happened or are happening to you. Thirty is a peak of life....Three years ago I couldn’t have made such a picture. And probably a couple of years from now I will look at this period differently.” And, speaking of this, her first use of color, she explained “this is a film of sensations, feelings, emotions. The subject of our investigation is the inner world of our characters—impulsive, concentrated, varied. Color...becomes a vital component. The material and color sphere of the film were absolutely new to me—I entered it with trepidation and curiosity.”

The film was, not surprisingly, frowned on by the Soviet critics. Derek Elley quoted V. Demin as saying that “the work, in my opinion, does not come off; the story of a young doctor, seduced by an easy life and now wandering through society in search of a confused calling, is told hazily, with strange omissions.”

For Elley himself, “Shepitko has told her story in a succession of dazzling images, edited together in to a finely honed time structure which does not begin to yield up its secrets until Pyotr boards the freight-train out of Moscow.... The film is as much about Katya and the couple’s colleague and friend Sasha (Yuri Vizbor) as about Pyotr. By fleeing to Siberia, he has selfishly left his wife in a pool of indecision over whether to remain faithful in his absence. For some time their marriage has been breaking down; there is also clearly an attraction between Sasha and Katya. In a final central scene, set in a café, the two talk about themselves and Pyotr....This is the other side of Pyotyr’s action, an acknowledgement by Shepitko that no one is free to pursue an absolutely separate line of action; though caught in an apparent vacuum in everyday work (a long tracking shot along a corridor, exclusively composed of meaningless greetings, succinctly encapsulates his feelings) he also owes something to those in his circle....From her three features so far, Larissa Shepitko leaves no doubt that there is a major talent at work in Soviet cinema today.” The film won a prize at Venice, but some critics there were almost as confused by its jigsaw puzzle time structure as their Soviet colleagues.
There was another long silence before Voskhodzdenie (The Ascent, 1977 [sic]), adapted by Shepitko and Yuri Kpletikov from a story by Vasil Bykov. The Russian title has religious overtones, invoking the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The film is set in the bitter winter of 1942 in German-occupied Belorussia. A Russian officer (Boris Plotnikov) is captured by the Germans and interrogated and tortured by a fellow Russian, a collaborator. Suffering thus, he comes gradually to the conclusion that his own life is worthless, but can acquire meaning if it is sacrificed: “To die for others is to survive.”

Like You and I, The Ascent has an excellent score by the avant-garde composer Alfred Shnitke. For this film Shepitko returned to black and white, perhaps because this can best express and symbolize the conflict between good and evil. Clare Kitson thought it “ravishingly shot” and “uncompromising in its view of wartime collaboration and an unusual Soviet work in its emphasis on spiritual qualities rather than conventional heroics.”

The Ascent won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1977 and a number of lesser prizes elsewhere. At Telluride the film was hailed as “a breakthrough in socialist cinema.” In 1978 Shepitko returned to Berlin as a jury member, and was further honored by a retrospective of her four features. She even received an invitation (from the actress Ellen Burstyn) to direct a film in the United States, but declined for the time on account of her inadequate grasp of English.

Shepitko’s most acclaimed film was also her last. On July 2, 1979, returning from a location search, she and four members of her crew died in an automobile accident on a road near Moscow. The film she was working on, adapted from a story by the Siberian writer Valentin Rasputin, was a sad irony called Farewell. It was completed by Shepitko’s husband, the director Elem Klimov. He also assembled a moving “love-letter” to his wife in the short photomontage Larissa (1981).

Clare Kitson has testified to the personal magnetism that made Shepitko “so many friends when she visited the London Film Festival with The Ascent in 1977,” adding: “One probably shouldn’t mention her extraordinary beauty at all.” Jeanne Vronskaya said that Shepitko was “fascinated by painting and music, and her films bear witness to this.” She and Klimov had one son.

from “Film Captures Effects of War: by Dena Capano

The black-and-white film “The Ascent” portrays the Russo-German conflict through the story of a captured partisan who escaped the Nazis only to fall into the hands of a Russian interrogator.

Set in the blistering winds and snow of occupied Byelorussia of 1942, two Russians, Sotnikov and Rybak, are cut off from their platoon and seek refuge from the cold Soviet landscape in a woman’s cottage. Soon after finding shelter, all three are captured by the Nazis and tortured, an ordeal only two survive.

There is virtually no dialogue in the beginning of the film, the only sound is that of gusting winds as Sotnikov and Rybak struggle through knee-deep snow in a blinding storm, which is enough to convey the men’s fear on its own.

Real conversation comes after the capture, when Sotnikov and Rybak come into conflict as one ascends to heroic status while his fellow becomes an agent of the German-controlled local police.

The Ascent is a compelling account of the Russian peoples’ encounter with the Nazis during World War II. It powerfully conveys the environment of paranoia, fear, self-doubt, and self-conflict which prevailed during the conflict as well as the traumatic impact the war would have on future generations, which came out toward the end of the film in an extremely moving execution scene.

But the struggle for survival in a hostile physical environment also brings out two positives strengthened by conflict: friendship and patriotism.

Larissa Shepitko, who directed the film in 1976, was one of the few major female directors in Soviet filmmaking. Born in Kiev in 1939, Shepitko went to study direction at the State Institute for Cinematography in Moscow in 1958. Shepitko was married to another prominent figure of Soviet cinema, Elek Klimov, and died shortly before the completion of his film “Farewell,” which she was originally supposed to direct.

Susan Sontag, in the New Yorker:

No photograph, or portfolio of photographs, can unfold, go further, and further still, as does The Ascent (1977), by the Ukrainian director Larisa Shepitko, the most affecting film about the horror of war I know.

from The New Yorker Weekend Shorts, Sean Nelson

On film, dear old Mother Russia is all snow crushed by army boots, human spirits crushed by ludicrous governmental stricture, and viewers’ attentions crushed by ponderous pacing. Larisa Shepitko’s Ascent, a story of Russian fugitives behind German lines in Belarus, is an exception to the rule that just because a movie was made in the Soviet ’70s, it has to be a crushing bore. Dramatically bold and radically self-critical.

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