

## Issue 31 (2011)

Aleksei Fedorchenko: *Silent Souls (Ovsianki, 2010)*

reviewed by Serguei Alex. Oushakine © 2011



The document has always enjoyed a peculiar status in Russian cinema: rarely taken for its own importance, the cinematic document is often seen as a “weapon,” an expressive tool to fight an aesthetic battle. For early Soviet cinema, the emphasis on factography and the unmediated portrayal of life-caught-unawares was supposed to provide an antidote against the prosthetic psychologism and narrative straightjackets of the formulaic cinematic genres of the time (see Fomenko). The same distancing from dominant expressive canons and formats seems to be at stake in Russian New Drama’s current investment in the use of verbatim: the “uncombed” (and often violent)

speech of teatr.doc has usefully expanded the scope of discursive ethnography of Russian society, providing a welcoming alternative to highly stylized plots and strictly policed formats of glam-literature and film of the last decade (see Beumers and Lipovetsky).

Aleksei Fedorchenko’s films assume a special position in this newly inspired interest in the document. His *First on the Moon (Pervye na lune, 2005)* was a 75-minute mockumentary about an “unknown,” successful voyage to the moon conducted by the first Soviet “cosmopilot” in 1938 (see Prokhorov). His second feature film *Silent Souls* is also a mockumentary of sorts. Yet, unlike in his début, here Fedorchenko moves beyond the retrofitting of familiar plotlines and visual conventions (of the USSR’s heroic history) with new content. Instead, he creates an ethnographic *trompe l’œil* by inventing a realistically detailed story about entirely invented customs of the actual Merja people. What is unsettled here is not a particular plot or myth, but rather the very desire to find ontological certainty and identificatory stability in a tradition carefully protected from the influence of the present. As *Silent Souls* suggests, traditions are indeed invented, made from scratch, constantly woven into the fabric of the daily life. Rather than providing an emotional template, they mystify social relations. Instead of suggesting a clear direction in an uncommon situation, they obscure already available paths.

This skepticism about the value of history can, of course, be expected from a director who approaches the document as a source of artistic inspiration rather than evidence of authenticity. Yet Fedorchenko is no Sergei

Kurekhin, and *Silent Souls* is not a campy variation of the Lenin-was-a-mushroom genre. The point of Fedorchenko's *trompe l'œil* is not to defamiliarize the already known, but to imagine a counterfactual, plausible past. To frame it differently: Fedorchenko does not just limit tradition to its deconstructive potential. Also, and perhaps more important, his emphasis on the fictitious, fabricated—and therefore changeable—nature of tradition helps move beyond the obsessive (and often parasitic) fascination with forms of the past by inventing *new* points of origin. As the director explained it in an interview: “We invented the mythology of the Merja people from scratch. We wanted to offer them a mythology that would not offend this people; the customs that could have existed” (Kuvshinova).



This reference to the Merja people could be misleading, though. Taken for a ride by Fedorchenko's *trompe l'œil*, *The Boston Globe* recently described *Silent Souls* as a “cinematic field guide to Merja traditions,” as a restorative ethnographic project of sorts (Barry). Restorative it is not: *Silent Souls* uses the fabricated “ethnic peculiarities of the disappeared people” (Barry) to tell a basic, existential fable about death and love. Taken together with such films as *The Lover* (*Liubovnik*, dir. Valerii Todorovskii, 2002; see Beumers), and *How I Ended This Summer* (*Kak ia provel etim letom*, dir. Aleksei Popogrebskii, 2010; see Lipovetsky and Mikhailova), *Silent Souls* contributes to the

emergence of a strange post-Soviet genre of the “*pietà* of our times,” in which traditional gender roles are completely reversed. All three films use the death of a woman to initiate a story about two men sorting out their complicated relationships with each other. In *The Lover*, the widower becomes engaged in prolonged and painful exchanges with his wife's lover. In *How I Ended This Summer*, the sudden death of the protagonist's wife results in a convoluted psychological fight between the widower and his male intern. *Silent Souls* has nothing in common with the exalted emotional drama presented in *The Lover*, nor does it provide anything similar to the thrill of the psychological nightmare of *How I Ended This Summer*. Yet, similarly to these two films, it places the unlikely figure of the widower at the center of a story about coping and survival. [1]

This re-emergence of the trope of “men without women” is important. Unlike early Soviet variations of this theme, perceptively discussed by Eliot Borenstein, the narrative disappearance of the woman in post-Soviet cinema is not compensated by rediscovering the value of masculine camaraderie or utopian visions of the global collective. Instead, the erasure of the woman is presented here as a sign, as a symptom of the upcoming collapse of the man.

*Silent Souls* is based on a story published in *Oktiabr'* in 2008, in which Aist Sergeev describes a road trip with his boss, Miron. The trip is a funeral ritual: Miron's wife suddenly died, and—as is common among the Merja people—her body should be cremated so that the ashes can be scattered in the river. Structured as a collection of non-dated diary entries, this allegedly autobiographic story

is a thinly disguised mystification: the reader (and the film viewer) learns at the very end that the monologue is narrated by Aist from under water: after cremating the body of Miron's wife, the car with two men falls (accidentally?) from a bridge into the river. The story, in other words, turns into the message of a ghost, a post-mortem auto-obituary.



Written by Denis Osokin, the story/screenplay provides a poetic backbone for Fedorchenko's inventive play with the ideas of unlocalizable authorship and fluid pasts. The term *ovsianki* (the Russian title of the film) refers to flinches or buntings, small birds which Aist buys in the beginning of the film and takes with him (in a cage) on the journey. The maiden name of Miron's wife was Ovsiankina; her nickname was *ovsianka*. The viewer would never learn the exact importance of this parallel, but some scenes provide clues: the scene of the cremation ends with a shot of a couple of buntings suddenly appearing on a tree brunch. And the fatal car accident on the way back home is caused by the buntings, too: released from the cage by Aist, they "rushed to kiss the eyes" of Miron as he steers the car.



The instability of symbols, the consistent transformation of the mundane into the metaphoric and vice versa is hardly accidental. And Fedorchenko emphasizes this semantic liminality further by his choice of crucial images: every major scene starts or ends with a shot of a bridge or a road whose starting points and destinations are rarely specified. Epitomizing the key message of the film, these endless (and origin-less) roads and bridges stand as materialized metaphors of the importance of the process of linking, connecting, bringing together different parts of one's life and one's history. Traditions and rituals—cultural bridges of sorts—are indeed constructed; but the process

of such construction is neither automatic, nor autonomous. It requires some vision; it needs some will; and it demands some perseverance. The film's biggest contribution is its convincing (and long-overdue) suggestion to make a paradigmatic shift—from laments about lost traditions to creative exercises of their invention.

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**Notes**

1] Sociologically, the emergence of this genre is puzzling: at the moment, the figure of widower is rather anomaly, with men's life expectancy not exceeding 57.8 years (vs. 71.8 for women).

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*Silent Souls (Buntings)*, Russia 2010

90 minutes, color.

Director Aleksei Fedorchenko

Scriptwriter Denis Osokin

Director of Photography Mikhail Krichman

Editing Sergei Ivanov

Cast: Iurii Tsurilo, Iuliia Aug, Igor' Sergeev, Viktor Sukhorukov

Producers Igor' Mishin, Aleksei Fedorchenko, Meri' Nazari

Production April Mig Pictures, 29 February

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