



Angel on the Right (2002)
by *Djamshed Usmonov*

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The film's title refers to an Islamic parable: two angels sit on our shoulders, one on the right and one on the left, keeping note of our virtues and sins respectively. Hamro, the protagonist, is a man whose life is imploding. Since returning from Russia to look after his ailing mother, he finds that the people of his village, Asht, have literally taken note of his sins and now it is time for him to pay for them. The *mis en scene* reflects the plot's claustrophobic and suffocating quality. When he realises he's been lured back to the village, he tells the mayor that, 'I wouldn't have even come back here to bury my mother.' The mayor has bought the various debts Hamro had accumulated from individuals in the village and is forcing him to renovate and sell his mother's house in order to pay him back. Everywhere Hamro turns he is accosted by people from the past with scores to settle and by his own son, who he refuses to take responsibility for. Eventually, even his life in Moscow enters the village and he is given another set of people to run from. His mother's house is a virtually sealed space. With high garden walls and a lack of door frames, her dying request is to have doors fitted so that her coffin maybe carried through them instead of hoisted over the enclosed walls. The physical entrapment of the space provides a visual analogy with Hamro's own situation. In many ways, his attempt to build a door parallels his own attempts to escape his situation.

His mother Halima, is played by the director's own mother. Similarly Hamro is played by his brother. The lack of classical training gives this film a feeling of total authenticity. The camera almost never approaches its subjects from anything longer than midrange. They are almost always present and enclosed in their environments. This produces a sense of total integration into the character's lives and habits. Many scenes showing the staples of village life occur alongside the plot. The bustling market is shown, the mother cooking and the nurse cleaning rice. The poverty apparent in a region still reeling from the civil war is apparent. Corruption is insidious, life is small and the quotidian exists entwined with the superstition that runs throughout the village. Joy and frivolity are hard to come by. The only entertainment in the village is a small cafe and a cinema which plays scratchy projections of Bollywood films. Hamro works as the projectionist there, the much maligned man and former criminal ironically provides a window to another world for the villagers.

There are many elements of absurdity and the surreal operating in this film. These both accentuate the desperate quality of Hamro's life, and beyond this, paint a spiritual quality to life in the village. It transpires that Halima is simply faking her illness in order to have her door built. Hamro's desperate attempts to help his mother and face his debts are based on nothing. Saints are frequently referred to, they enter the dreams of the villagers and are prayed to desperately. In a strange twist, the village has a hotline to higher powers. However, the intense connection to the spiritual the villagers have does not transcend bureaucracy and corruption. Interestingly this element becomes entwined with it. As Halima makes a desperate sacrifice to save her son from his fate, ultimately the unequal status quo of the village is consolidated.

The film begins with the mayor refusing to bury the body of a man who committed suicide. His relatives implore him, 'We bury the bodies of drunks and thieves here. Why can't we bury him too?' The mayor remains resolute. From the film's first moments, the idea of sin, desperation, cause and effect are subtexts that run throughout. The angel motif is made more complex, the film makes it clear that some people have easier choices than others. It also makes it apparent that redemption is taxing business, one that takes at least as much as it gives. When Hamro is driving back to Asht, they pick up a hitchhiker and a goat in the car. The hitchhiker tells him about his lucky escape in Russia. He had bought heroin in Tajikistan to sell over the border. He hid the stash under his hat. When he was stopped and searched by the Russian police he prayed for a miracle. The police neglected to look under his hat and he flushed away the remainder. The hitchhiker tells Amro he had to sell his house to pay back the people that lent the original sum and that he and his friend lost the clothes on their back trying to get rich. In this short anecdote the major themes of the film are further expanded upon. The lack of choices in Tajikistan are contrary to the social and religious morals. Usmonov communicates that no matter how desperate one is, the angels are still sat on your shoulders transcribing your actions. After Halima's funeral Amro's debts are finally resolved, but he is unable to stay in Asht as he has too many enemies. As he leaves the town with his son, one of the villagers tells him, 'You were taught a lesson. Be good in the future.'



TASHKENT FILM ENCOUNTERS

CLASSIC CINEMA FROM CENTRAL ASIA

Djamshed Usmonov

Djamshed Usmonov is a Tajik director, actor and screenwriter. Born in Asht, the subject of *Angel on the Right* (2002), he attended the arts institute in Moscow. However, despite his exposure to the city, his filmic subject is almost always his native country. *The Flight of the Bee* (1998) was his first feature film, a whimsical tale set in a small village. His works are regarded as an important contribution to a region that is not frequently shown on the screen. His film *To Get into Heaven, First you Have to Die* (2006) was screened in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes Film Festival. However, his most recent release is a French film, written and directed by him called, *My Wife's Romance* (2011) which departed from the scenes of village life that started his career.

About Klassiki

Klassiki is an opportunity to experience online a weekly curated selection of the best of Soviet, Russian, Caucasian and East European cinema. Championing director led work, each week's offering chooses a relevant film of a great director to introduce audiences to the director's work and give biographical, social and political context to each film in the form of specially commissioned and downloadable informative program notes.

This is the birth of Klassiki, our planned free streaming platform, which will allow you to stream great cinema from the region, literally on the hop. If you would like to support our endeavours to showcase the best of Russian and Soviet and Central Asian cinema please share our work on your social media channels using the tags we have added to this program page or consider supporting us with a donation. Thank you.

About Centre of Contemporary Arts Tashkent

CCA Tashkent is a new space for the development and support of contemporary culture in Central Asia. This year CCA Tashkent is operating in test mode: among its first projects is the CCA LAB, a research laboratory whose aim is to nourish and develop contemporary art and cultural practices in Uzbekistan, as well as to formulate new readings and understandings of the region's artistic heritage.

About Tashkent Film Encounters

Kino Klassika Foundation, in association with the Centre of Contemporary Arts Tashkent presents TASHKENT FILM ENCOUNTERS, a film programme spotlighting classic film from Central Asia. This season continues Kino Klassika's long standing undertaking to showcase classic films of the Soviet, Russian and Caucasian film traditions, as well as expand the offering to include contemporary classics of Central Asian cinema. We will spotlight a selection of modern classic filmmakers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan will be spotlighted. Films will be available online for a week, free to view and will take place each Tuesday from the 21 of July to 18 of August 2020.

TFE Curator: Saodat Isamilova

Saodat Ismailova is one of the representatives of a new generation of artists from Central Asia who came of age in the post-Soviet era and have established cosmopolitan artistic lives while remaining deeply engaged with their native region as a source of creative inspiration. After graduating State Art Institute of Tashkent, she was granted a residency in Fabrica, Research and communication center of Benetton, Italy. In 2005 she was awarded DAAD - Artist in Residency program in Berlin developing the script of her debut award winning feature film "40 Days of Silence", which was nominated for the best debut film in Berlin International Film Festival, 2014. She participated in Venice Biennale, 2013 as part of the Central Asian Pavilion with her video installation "Zukhra". In 2018 she graduated from Le Fresnoy, France's National Studio of Contemporary Arts, where she developed "Stains of Oxus" and "Two Horizons". In 2020 she is running Laboratory from the Center for Contemporary Arts in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. She is currently working on her second feature film "Barazgh".

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About Kino Klassika Foundation

Kino Klassika creates programmes of film restorations, publications, art commissions and events to educate audiences about classic Russian language and Eastern cinema. This includes a 2-year programme to spotlight the pioneering work of filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, our first restoration projects including *Hakov Havnatanyan*, *Arabesques on the Ploshmani Theme* and *Jirtan* (1969). We have recently completed *Melodia! Discovering Musicals from Russia and the Caucasus*, a screening season in partnership with the British Film Institute, Institut Francais, Bristol Watershed and Broadway Nottingham. The program celebrated the diversity and complexity of Soviet, Russian and Caucasian musicals.

The Kino Klassika Team

This screening could not happen without the unstinting support of the Kino Klassika team: Joseph Andreyev, Tatiana Isaeva, Zoryana Mischiy, Olja Mlljevic, Seraphina Paisey and Talitha Piggott.

Klassiki programming is supported by funds from the BFI Film Audience Network (FAN) which is made possible by the National Lottery. Klassiki screenings are also part of Film FeelsConnected, a UK-wide cinema season, supported by the National Lottery and BFI Film Audience Network. You can explore all films and events at filmfeels.co.uk



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