



Tuesday 15 September 2020

#Klassiki

Mermaid (2007) by Anna Melikyan

Anna Melikyan's film is wonderfully weird. It is often compared to *Amelie*, an understandable association given both films follow a quirky protagonist's adventures in the capital. But, where *Amelie* celebrates Paris, *Mermaid* is a brutal investigation of late capitalism in Moscow. Alisa, the film's heroine, was born by the Black Sea, and as she puts it, "People go to Moscow when they have nowhere else to go..." The Moscow of this film is superficial, chaotic and ruthless.

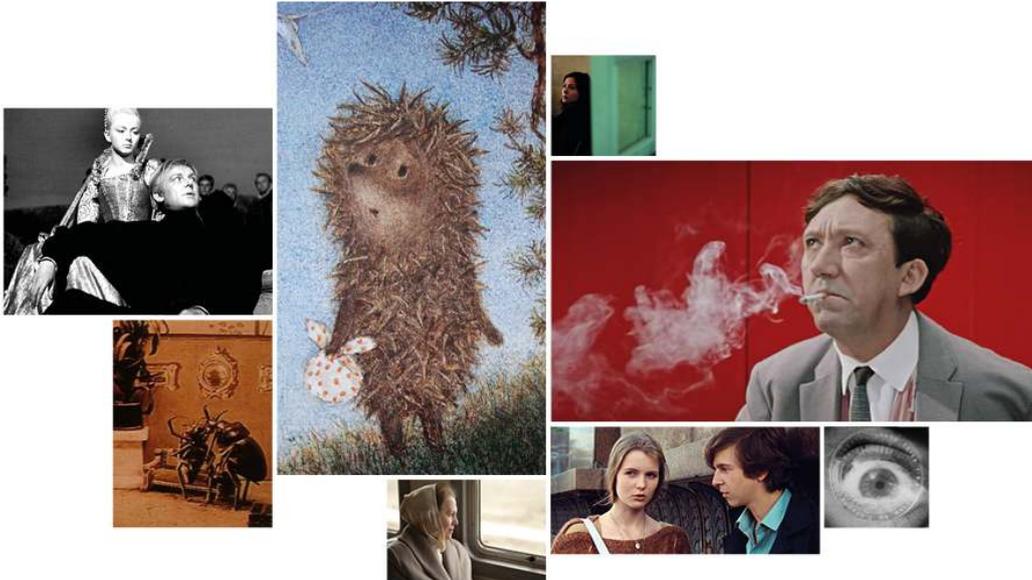
Melikyan's surreal foray is first and foremost hilarious. The dark scenes are absurd, a spectacular comedy of errors, with the power to both entertain and critique. Alisa, who loses the power to speak after witnessing a solar eclipse aged six, becomes a walking advertising hoarding. Inside a mobile phone costume she patrols Moscow, advertising for something unspecified. As viewers, we watch Alisa's perspective from inside the costume, as well as enjoying the hapless image of her bumbling against the city's natural current. During this job she witnesses the grotty and upsetting underbelly of cultural capitals. While her mother pursues an endless succession of hapless and unsuitable men, Alisa attempts to make herself financially independent, although even she admits that the waitressing section of her life seems to go on and on. In another scene, Alisa is caught up in a riot after Russia loses an international football match. We watch Alisa flattened in her phone costume whilst ruminating on the fact she cannot even remember whether they are playing the Japanese or the Chinese.

Melikyan presents most of the characters, and Moscow as a whole, as a place of warped motivations. Sasha makes his money selling plots on the moon. When questioned by Alisa on the ludicrousness of this, he responds by saying it's ludicrous that anyone owns land for whose is it truly to give. There is a stark class difference between Alisa and Sasha. He lives in an enormous two storey apartment, with remote controls, an aquarium and electric blinds. Alisa lives in a tiny flat in the suburbs, where the windows are covered by advertising hoardings and three generations are crammed in. Sasha, despite everything he has, is utterly ungrateful. He is drawn to a life of excess and recklessly hurts the people around him. Rita, his lover and Alisa's rival, describes him as only truly

loving his goldfish and yet until Alisa's intervention he keeps the fish in a wine glass. He and Alisa met after his attempted suicide, an event which he apparently has no memory of. And repeats more than once. Despite enormously profiting from social inequality, he too is shown as a victim of the system. Melikyan's depicts capitalism as a catch-22. In succeeding financially you ruin your sense of self; without financial gain you are at the whim of the world's cruelty.

Alisa's brutal honesty, her personality unfettered by social norms, is a refreshing catalyst to show the disingenuousness and strangeness around her. She is drawn to adverts in the city, that roll out as though speaking to her. One tells her that 'everything will be ok'. She smiles, feeling as though the world is in conversation with her. Another tells her, 'everything is in your hands'. The film plays with the ludicrousness of the symbols we encounter everyday. Through Alisa's active mind, we can see the things that we ourselves might internalise. Her Moscow is a Moscow of money, necessity and fighting to survive. Her only lifelines are snippets from adverts and Sasha. Her love for Sasha is deep, childlike and pure. But beyond his beauty, it is abundantly evident to the viewer that Sasha is largely unremarkable. Alisa has spent her life dreaming of her father, a man who she has never met. He appears in her dreamscape as either a deep sea diver or a sailor. Once she meets Sasha her father no longer visits her in dreams. Instead Sasha appears and she tells him, 'I don't need to see my father anymore now I have you.'

Melikyan's loose adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid* fairytale is a winking critique at the long standing culture of women idolising male figures. Using an age old tale, she updates it into an inherently feminist and anti-capitalist one. Within her retelling, the mermaid's dreams of an unsuitable man are placed in the metric of modern day, glamour-free Moscow. The casting is body positive and the main characters are not intended to fit a standard or titillate. The scenes of excess are displayed as debauched and pathetic instead of enviable. The dreams of the characters are, in the end, as farcical and unobtainable as owning Sasha's patches of land on the moon. They are as far away from reality as having Ronald Reagan or Russel Crowe as neighbours.



Anna Melikyan

Anna Melikyan was born in Baku, 1976 and raised in Yerevan. Aged 17 she moved to Moscow and began her career as a television director, writing scripts for commercials and TV programmes in the 90s. In 2002 she graduated from VGIK. Her feature films have met with consistent applause and awards. Her first feature, *Mars* (2004) premiered at the Berlin film festival. *Mermaid*, her second feature, won the best director prize at Sundance and the FIPRESCI Prize. Most recently *About Love* won the two main prizes at Kinotavr, the influential Russian film festival.

About Klassiki

Klassiki screens a highly curated selection of director led films, with each week's choice introducing UK audiences to an important filmmaker's work. An opportunity to experience online a weekly curated selection of the best of Soviet, Russian, Caucasian and East European cinema, KLASSIKI ranges from early silent cinema, to masterpieces of animation, from post-war classics to contemporary Cannes winners. Supplementing the film experience, KLASSIKI offers specially commissioned and downloadable programme notes as well as podcasts and filmed introductions which give biographical, social and political context to each film. We also program film seasons, including RED FRONT: 75 YEARS OF RUSSIAN WAR CINEMA and TASHKENT FILM ENCOUNTERS, to spotlight classic cinema from Central Asia.

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.

Support Us

Kino Klassika is a UK registered charity (1150791). We rely on the generosity of our supporters. If you want to encourage education and engagement with classic Russian language, Eastern and East European film, please support us by making a donation.

Our bank details are as follows:

Account no. 69358087

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Or please donate at our website:
www.kinoklassikafoundation.org

About Kino Klassika Foundation

Kino Klassika is the only organisation in the world dedicated to spotlighting cinema from Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The foundation 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 and our first restoration projects *Hakob 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. KLASSIKI continues Kino Klassika's longstanding undertaking to showcase classic films from the region. By giving audiences access to unseen gems as well as the opportunity to meet and chat with directors and filmmakers from Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Kino Klassika are a trusted, credible and essential part of the UK's specialist film exhibition sector.

Kino Klassika's trustees are Professor Ian Christie, Daniel Jowell QC, Roger Munnings CBE and Justine Waddell. The patron of Kino Klassika is Ralph Fiennes.

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 Mljjevic, Seraphina Paisey and Talitha Piggott.

Upcoming Klassiki Screenings

Klassiki will screen a new film in our weekly curated series, every Tuesday from 2pm. Please check in with us on social media or via our website to access each week's new screening. And please share the news with your friends!

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Klassiki programming is supported by funds from the BFI Film Audience Network (FAN) which is made possible by the National Lottery.

