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Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari

Aleksey Fedorchenkho

Russia (2012)

Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari is the second film that director Alexey Fedorchenkho and writer Denis Osokin have collaborated on together. Their earlier feature *Silent Souls* shares with *Celestial Wives* an interest in folk culture, and the peculiarities of place and identity. As *Silent Souls*' protagonist Aist describes; "I don't know when or why it started, but I wanted to know, to understand who we are. Why are we like this and not like something else? Maybe that's why I began collecting snatches of songs, names, words. Some I needed to look for, and some were always right next to me." *Silent Souls* has a semi-ethnographic, poetically-infused interest in ritual, and the often inscrutable cultural habits that comprise community traditions and identity. It is a film interested both in a sense of belonging and a sense of loss, chiming with wider European narratives of the erosion and loss of bounded cultures; of 'pure products' as James Clifford might say. Russian film historian Andrei Plakhov described *Silent Souls* as "a metaphor for the lost (and probably mythical) world that was crushed by the moloch of industrialisation". As Aist goes on to describe, "long ago, I read that a nation remains alive as long as it remembers its language and keeps its traditions. This rite is the last thing that connects a Merjan with life. What will be left if it is forgotten? We were leaving our beloved Neya. We didn't know then it was forever".

Contrastingly, *Celestial Wives* does not enact a narrative of cultural loss. Rather it stages a celebration of vitality, fertility and femininity. Whilst the temporality of some of its episodes borders on the mythic, the film maintains, for the most part, a resolute sense of the present. There is no implication that the ways of the Mari people are under threat. Rather there is frequently a sense of tradition (often with a pre-Christian resonance) incorporated and adapted to the present. By the time we get to the sublime roll call at the end of the film where each woman reappears and tells us her name (empowered by a 'return gaze' at the camera), there seems no doubt that the Mari women are survivors, and that their culture and traditions are going nowhere.

The film's writer Denis Osokin studied folklore and philology, and thus we assume that the customs and lore depicted in *Celestial Wives* are drawn directly from research (although without an extensive knowledge of the Mari ourselves, it's difficult to know how what has empirical precedent and what is creative fancy). Perhaps due to Osokin's interest in ritual and culture, *Celestial Wives* has a curious feel of poetic ethnography. Its 'list' structure seems, in itself, to create a reflexive sense of taxonomic categorisation, even if the highly poetic, subjective content of each chapter outplays any sense of scientific objectivity. Indeed, there is resonance here with the folk cinema of Parajanov, who also employed film as a highly subjective, poeticized form of

ethnography, through a deep interest in costume, ritual and lore. *Celestial Wives* also has a sense of rhapsodic in what may also be a nod to Parajanov, driven by music, movement, costume and its curious 'list' structure rather than by linear narrative (the impish behaviour of costumed figures in *Okshiva* seems particularly Parajanovian). Indeed, the film's 'chapter'-like structure also recalls the 'chapters' sections of Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and *Colour of Pomegranates*. Indeed, it's interesting to consider how, even in 2012, Russian filmmakers seem still to be looking to folk culture and tradition as cinematic touchstones, in a manner that bears strong resonance with the earlier work of Sergei Parajanov in the 60s and his mentor Alexander Dovhenko almost a century earlier. Perhaps there is a sense in Russia of folk culture (and the respective folk cinemas of Parajanov and Federchenko) being a place to explore the heterogeneity of pre- and (in a more complex sense) post-Stalinist identity; the many distinctive identities within the vast territory of the USSR that homogenizing state programs attempted to assimilate and normalise. Indeed, in a manner that has tragic resonance with Parajanov's imprisonment (and the danger his multi-ethnic heterodoxy represented to the Soviet authorities), the Mari people were brutally suppressed by Stalinist authorities, leading to the murder of certain key Mari figures such as Sergei Cavaj and Olyk Ipai.

In its portmanteau structure (which, along with its absurdist humour, seems to look outside national film traditions to recall the Swedish auteur Roy Andersson) *Celestial Wives* evokes a sense of folk tale, and of multiple, interlinked protagonists in a manner similar to the Taviani brothers *Kaos*. As in *Kaos*, the film's portmanteau structure, which could equally be seen as a compendium of folk tales, allows for a variety of tone – the bawdy, the comical, the mythic, the tragic, the dramatic – and thus a feeling of broad, subjective, choral experience. There is again a sense of animist and pre-Christian connections with the natural world that recalls Timothy Neat's conception of magical realism as "the theatre of the folk imagination". There is Odocha who upsets a birch tree, Onalcha who is the wind's lover, Oropti who is cursed with a curlew in her vagina, and the wood sprite Ovda who "has blind hedgehogs in [her] belly, unborn nuthatches, [and who] breastfeed[s] martens and badgers." Apparently the Mari people retained aspects of animist 'pagan' traditions long after they had disappeared in other parts of Russia, and it's a survivance to which the film pays colourful tribute.

Another of the film's interesting attributes is its thematised approach to gender. There is an moment later on in the film where the film's writer Denis Osokin himself plays a man paying spoken tribute to a woman he has loved and lost: "our true love began on that day, as deep as eyes". This seems an important moment of reflexivity for indeed *Celestial Wives*, taken as a whole, plays like a strange, poetic tribute to femininity, constructed by two men, within a folk idiom. A feminist critique of the film might well point to the unbalanced presence of semi-fetishized female bodies, without an equal presence of male nudity. When considering the film's stance on gender, however, it's also perhaps important to remember that many previous engagements with folk culture in Russian film history (with the exception perhaps of Abuladze's *Wishing Tree*) have tended to focus upon male characters and male experience; *Celestial Wives* may thus represent an attempt counter to Russian folk cinema's predominantly male-centric bias.

The film seems to survive its own ambiguities, and its final roll call ultimately seems to frame *Celestial Wives* as a sincere, inclusive and multi-faceted celebration of women and tradition. Taken as a whole *Celestial Wives* is a remarkable film in terms of both its form and content, and it's important not to dismiss its innovations as mere curiosities. Drawing upon the cinema of Dovhenko and Parajanov, Federchenko and Osokin have made a work of Russian folk cinema that is decisively new, which is aware of the gender bias of previous folk filmmaking, and prioritises a sense of *presentism*. It is not a eulogy to the Mari women and their traditions, in the manner of *Silent Souls*, but a celebration of their continuing vitality and grace.

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