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The Letter That Was Never Sent

1959 98 min. B&W Rental: \$65.00

Directed by Mikhail Kalatozov; screenplay by Valery Ossipov, Grigory Koltunov, Viktor Rozov; photography by Sergei Urusevsky; music by Nikolai Kryukov. With Tatyana Samoilova, Yevgeni Urbansky, Innokenty Smouktenovsky. Russian dialog with English subtitles.

Mikhail Kalatozov and his cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky, who had collaborated on *The Cranes Are Flying*, employed the same elaborate photographic style for *The Letter That Was Never Sent*. Four determined geologists—three men and a woman—set out to locate the vast diamond deposits which supposedly exist in Yakutia, the coldest and most sparsely populated region in Asia. Their difficult search takes months and they press themselves to the point of exhaustion. Shortly after they succeed in finding the first bed of Yakut diamonds, a forest fire destroys most of their supplies and claims the first victim. Autumn rains, sickness, and winter frost and snow storms follow in succession. In the end there is only one survivor to reach civilization and tell of the hard-won victory.

Although *The Letter That Was Never*

Sent had its critical supporters from the moment of its release, it has suffered undue neglect both in the U.S.S.R.—where it was deemed too pessimistic—and in the West—where many attacked it as an exaggerated, empty moving-camera exercise. Seen today, it can be appreciated as one of the great films in the tradition of *Greed* and other films which have pitted man against violent, hostile nature. In preparing his epic Vietnam War version of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola screened *The Letter That Was Never Sent* several times to his camera, sound, and design crews. One of Coppola's assistants, Dennis Jakob, has written of *The Letter That Was Never Sent*: "Put briefly, this is perhaps the greatest Soviet film since *Ivan The Terrible*...With each passing year this film gains in greatness and stature, for the 'story'—which was dismissed by critics as being particularly thin—is in actuality the most profound examination of man against nature ever filmed. The artistic trajectory is extremely high in this film, far higher



than anything in Flaherty and curiously far higher than anything the Japanese have done on a subject so close to their culture. It took a Russian to do it well, and I think because of the traditional Russian pessimism associated with the theme. In this film, the conflict of man against nature is looked at with a pair of eyes that seems to be supersaturated with 'The World As Will And Idea.' Its bleak, pessimistic view of the outcome is in no way invalidated by the film's chief weaknesses, two flawed sequences: where Samoilova recites the Young Pioneer motto to renew her strength and the flutter of Konstantin's eyelids (indicating he is still alive) at the end of the film. Despite these concessions to the Russian censors, the film remains a powerful testament to the existence of the most neglected sub-genre in the history of the movies: The Schopenhauerian Cinema." (TL, YB)

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