

Document Citation

Title	Shukshin at Naples
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Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	1976 Win
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	26
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Khutsiev, Marlen Martynovich (1925), Soviet Union Bondarchuk, Sergei (1920-1994), Belozerka, Ukraine Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich (1929-1974), Srotski, Altay, Soviet Union
Film Subjects	Dva Fyodora (The two Feodors), Khutsiev, Marlen Martynovich, 1959 Oni srazhalis za rodinu (They fought for their country), Bondarchuk, Sergei, 1974 Strannye lyudi (Strange people), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1969 Vash syn i brat (Your son and brother), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1965 Kalina krasnaya (The red snowball tree), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1973 Pechki-lavochki (Happy go lucky), Shukshin, Vasilii Makarovich, 1972

Zhivyot takoj paren (There is such a guy), Shukshin, Vasili
Makarovich, 1964

Shukshin at Naples

The 1976 International Encounter with the Cinema was the most ambitious to date, befitting the celebration of its tenth anniversary, moving from the more intimate setting in Sorrento to crowded Naples. Attempting to 'encounter' the entire European cinema (15 films in, 14 out of, competition) as well as to include 'information' sections for German and Czechoslovakian films and mini-homages to Lang, Visconti, Bergman and Rossellini, the festival seemed disconcertingly diffuse; an impression encouraged by the lacklustre quality of most of the entries. That was, at least, the case until the screenings began of the films of Vasili Shukshin, the festival's major retrospective, electrifying the international press present, playing to ever-increasing audiences during the week and justifying the festival itself.

Although the documentation provided tended to be rather vague about Shukshin's career, this was evidently the first time the films had been seen together and the only time most have been seen at all outside the Soviet Union. Previously, Shukshin was not unknown in the West as an actor; he was the older protagonist of Marlen Kutziev's *The Two Feodors* (1958), but also appeared in more mediocre projects—dying of a heart attack at 45, indeed, while acting in Sergei Bondarchuk's indigestible war reconstruction *They Fought for Their Country* (1974). Shukshin's own last film, *Kalina Krasnaya* (*The Red Snowball Tree*), had a limited number of showings outside the USSR after becoming the most popular film there in 1975 in a version heavily cut—first 'voluntarily' by the director and then by the government censor.

Although Shukshin was awarded (posthumously!) the Lenin Prize, and in spite of the glowing, but still careful, praises heaped upon

him by the critic for *Pravda* in an essay written for the retrospective—including a tribute to his having 'put light on the profound social and existential problems of Soviet society'—it would appear that Shukshin was regarded as 'controversial' and his books and films as 'unexportable' during his lifetime. Indeed, at the time of his death he was encountering great difficulty in obtaining official permission to make a film about Stenka Razin.

It is not hard to see what might have caused problems. Shukshin was hardly an optimist, refusing either to find easy solutions to problems or to create an 'ideal hero'. In his first film as director-scenarist, *Zivet Takoj Paren* (*How a Young Man Lives*) in 1964, his protagonist, Pashka, is a braggart, a provincial Don Juan who floats through the countryside driving a truck at various rural projects where and when he chooses, drinking, singing and seducing as he goes. The portraits Shukshin draws of the people Pashka encounters are much the same as those of the characters in *Strannye Ljudi* (*Odd Folk*) and *Vash Syn i Brat* (*Your Son and Brother*). No matter where they are found, in the cities, in villages or on collective farms, people are living lives of quiet desperation.

Although not treated melodramatically, suicide, juvenile delinquency, crime, influence-peddling, divorce, violence and drunkenness are at least suggested as being part of the common experience. Moscow is presented as a labyrinth of inhuman bureaucracy. In *Vash Syn i Brat*, a son searches throughout the city for medicine for his ailing mother, meeting indifference everywhere and finally getting the medicine only through the influence of his wealthy brother, who has embraced most of the 'bourgeois' materialistic values. If that can be read as a critique of those who have lost their rural roots, Shukshin presents life in the coun-

try as little better. Even on the collective farm all is not well, as in *Kalina Krasnaya*: a widow, abandoned by her son who has been incarcerated in a prison camp, suffers in poverty (unrelieved by the local officials) and social alienation because of her son's criminal activity.

All is not unrelieved gloom, however. Tribulations are often treated with a comic edge, as in *Vash Syn i Brat*, when a son returns to his boyhood home to find his father seated at a table with a bottle of vodka. 'That's there to finish,' the old man says. Looking at the vodka the son replies, 'Don't take any more,' only to have his father softly correct the impression: 'Life is there to finish.' If there are only glimpses of an ultimately unobtainable happiness, as in *Kalina Krasnaya*, in relationships founded on mutual affection and respect or in self-fulfilling labour, there is also that sense of absurd laughter and a good deal of at least incidental joy to be found in fellowship and in the land itself. As one English critic remarked, Shukshin makes one think of the pantheism of Dovzhenko—although not at all of his style. One is also reminded of the mainstream of 19th century Russian literature, in which the land sustains and comforts, for in the films the fields and rivers of his native Altai region are almost always present.

Shukshin maintains a consistency of style in which a special treatment of landscape figures importantly. In all four films—and one can probably assume also in the fifth he directed, *Pecki Lavocki* (*Stoves and Benches*), which was unavailable for 'technical reasons'—the structures are episodic. Even in the more unified *Kalina Krasnaya*, the protagonist moves through the countryside in a series of 'encounters'. This penchant for episodes is also present in Shukshin's literary work; he wrote at least six collections of stories

with titles like *Peasants*, *Village Folks*, *Portraits*, and is 'the major star in the constellation of peasant prose which includes Vassilij Belov and Feodor Abramov.' It allows him to present a cross-section of people in relationship to a series of landscapes. Characteristically, he begins each film with a portrait of the land before he fills it with characters.

At moments of dramatic stress, Shukshin consistently moves his camera to follow behind his characters, letting them stop while the camera continues to move forward and upward to look beyond them to the sea, a grove of trees, or most often, a river. If nature is ever-present as a source of emotional nourishment, Shukshin refuses to treat the land sentimentally. His characters, however, do, especially in memory. Thus, in *Strannye Ljudi*, a young man leaves his wife behind on the farm to visit a brother in the city. As he becomes quickly disillusioned there, he imagines his return to the farm in bright sunshine, his wife greeting him with smiles in the midst of a flowering field. Reality would have it otherwise, of course, as he returns in a cold rain, trudging through a field of mud only to find his wife waiting moodily to ask him if he has any money left.

As Shukshin began his work in the cinema as an actor, studying with Mikhail Romm, he seems to have a particular sensitivity to actors. In his own films his performances are quieter and more introspective than those under the direction of Kutziev or Bondarchuk. But he would seem (at least on the evidence of *The Two Feodors*) to have learned a great deal from Kutziev about the uses of the tracking shot, and also about ensemble acting, having developed a Bergman-style repertory company for his films.

Subtitled prints of Shukshin's films are at present distributed only in Italy. A more complete reappraisal will have to wait until, and if, the films are distributed elsewhere as well. Still, even on the limited basis of a single retrospective, it appears that a major talent has been finally uncovered, if not discovered.

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Vasili Shukshin's 'How a Young Man Lives'

