

Flights in Dreams and Reality

ROMAN BALAYAN

1982

Flights in Dreams and Reality is Roman Balayan's melancholy vision of a mid life crisis. The mise-en-scene is grey, from the clothes and belongings on the characters; to the constant steel grey clouds filling the sky. Using Viktor Merezhko's dark script, he executes an unflinching portrayal of a man's descent into acute depression. The idea for the story came from Balayan's own struggles with turning 40, after successfully adapting Ivan Turgenev's Lone Wolf (1978) he found himself listless and uninspired. His collaborator and friend, Nikita Mikhalkov advised him to contact Merezhko, when Balayan did he requested Merezhko capture the essence of his loneliness: 'Write about me. All the time I dream I am standing on a high mountain and then flying down. When I wake up , I am back on the ground and alone with all my problems. My wife says there is no money, the children are screaming; they want to eat...' The title, 'Flights in Dreams and Reality' came to Merezhko almost instantly.

This truth and personal experience underlines Balayan's film. Middle age is most of life, and in general it is not often represented on screen. Instead representations of youth, and to a lesser extent old age, dominate film and television. However the 1970s and 1980s in the Soviet Union was an exception, directors began to break the cult of youth and this gave rise to a wave of tragicomedies depicting the deep ennui and psychological issues prevalent in middle aged men. Flights in Dreams and Reality (1983) is part of this milieu and shares the same qualities and preoccupations as Vitaly Melnikov's Vacation in September (1979), Georgiy Daneliya's Autumn Marathon (1979) and even Andrei Tarkovsky's Solaris (1972). Balayan's film was released at a delicate moment in Soviet society, Leonid Brezhnev had recently passed and the troubles of perestroika were brewing. This onscreen disillusionment that defined the 70s and 80s in the Soviet Union is emboldened by the film's star studded cast. Lyudmila Gurchenko, the cheerful ingenue of the 1950s and 1960s plays Larisa, a colleague of Sergei's who is plaintively in love with him. This switch from exuberant heroine to lovelorn would be notable to Soviet audiences, this transition mirroring the predominant social disappointments or the era.

The depiction of Sergei Markorov, the film's troubled protagonist, is by no means rose tinted, in fact it is rather warts and all. In the first few moments of the film, we see a visceral rendering of depression: he lies on his desk, cast in shadows and the angle of his body accentuating his pain; mere minutes later he is making a young girl cry with unsympathetic cruelty. He is mostly filmed wearing a frayed jumper and a pair of jeans, an outfit simultaneously youthful and worn, a perfect parallel for his slightly pathetic persona. He follows women with a desperation that is evident and unbecoming, and his sensitivity at their inevitable rejection is abundantly apparent. In one scene he tries to talk to some women on the street, they naturally ignore him. His face configures into a grimace at the rejection.

Sergei's relationship with women is fascinating, he is loved by a colleague, Larisa. But despite her affection for him, and his fixation with youth overwhelms his desire for genuine connection. His current lover is far younger, and it is evident that for her it is a passing affair. Unlike most depictions of mistresses, she appears to have the upper hand. He inserts himself into the spectacle of her bohemian, youthful existence less out of love and more out of a drive for masochism and the bizarre desire to be near youthful energy. In one scene he watches her dance with her friend, they are vibrant and playful; he merely observes with abject apathy. The lens of the camera becomes his eyes, highlighting his lonely dissatisfaction. His wife, understandably hates him, accuses him of being a stranger to his daughter and an 'animal'. He is disaffected by her revelation, his self hatred already running deep.

The film ends with Sergei's birthday, a strange carnivalesque affair. He plays on a swing set like a child, flinging himself high into the air: a flight that is finally in reality and not just in dream. It is an almost pagan sequence, his friends and colleagues are there and they join him in his strange, fervent celebration. It becomes the the pinnacle of his mental health issues and the point he begins to accept his situation in life. The last image we have of Sergei is him running toward a hay bale screaming; accompanied by Vadim Krapatchev's ethereal and disorienting music he breaks down into tears.