

Selkinchek

AKTAN ABDYKALYKOV

1993

Selkinchek means swing in Kyrgyz, and this childlike symbol of joy is the centrepiece of Aktan Abdykalykov's deeply personal work. Filmed in Kok-moinok gorge, a village of extreme natural beauty in the Issyk-Kul region of Kyrgyzstan, Selkinchek begins with bucolic shots and the arrival of strong winds. The winds in their force seem almost mythological and are certainly pathetic fallacy, symbolising the harsh storm that the lead character, the little boy Mirlan, is about to weather. After the initial pastoral beauty, the film cuts to Mirlan pushing Ainura on the swing, accompanied by his friend. We see the giddy up and down from Ainura's perspective and the joy on the faces of the two young boys.

The film is Abdykalykov's second feature and the first in his autobiographical trilogy which comprises of Selkinchek, Beshkempir (1998) and Maimyl (2001). The second film, Beshkempir (1998) is considered to be one of the best 100 Asian films of all time and won a Silver Leopard at Locarno Film Festival. It details his father's alcoholism, his discovery of his adoption and his coming of age. Maimyl (2001) depicts Abdykalykov's teenage years in a provincial town and his work on the railroad, before his departure for military service. Maimyl was similarly successful, sweeping up awards on the festival circuit and screening in the Un Certain Regard category at Cannes festival. These films, highly personal and symbolic in nature end in adulthood and leaving home. They are concerned with the pain of adolescence, disillusionment and loss of innocence. Selkinchek, the beginning of this bittersweet trilogy, is about both first heartbreak and the first steps away from the innocent happiness of childhood. Mirlan, who has spent the first decade of his life playing with Ainura, the neighbour's daughter, and his friend Bakyla, one day runs straight into the arms of a visiting sailor. The sailor picks him up and gazes past him, toward his 16 year old love. We see the recognition on Mirlan's face, beautifully played by Abdykalykov's own son, as a moment passes between the sailor and Ainura.

Interestingly unlike Beshkempir and Maimyl, Abdykalykov made Selkinchek in black and white. When asked about this decision in an interview conducted by the Centre for Contemporary Art in Taskhent he pointed first to his limited equipment. He merely had a tripod, cheap black and white film and natural lighting. His mission

was to turn all these setbacks into assets. Beyond these practical concerns, he pointed to the colourlessness of his early memories. 'If my memories are of the nature of action they are monochrome, containing but one colour... Selkinchek is a return to the origins of the soul and a tribute to the classics of black and white cinema, it is an opportunity to recreate lost feelings with light and shadow. My childhood is associated with the colour of white: the walls of the house, blooming apple trees, my grandmother's white scarf.' One of the film's white symbols is the seashell the sailor brings to landlocked Kyrgyzstan. The shell is mesmerising to the inhabitants of the village, in particular Ainura. They take turns to hold it and listen to waves of the sea. It is a symbol of the wider world and the inevitable intrusion of the unknown into his home and childhood. Ainura is compelled by the mysteries and maturity the sailor brings to the village. Whereas Mirlan strongly feels he represents home and comfort and cannot bear the idea that she might want to leave this behind. Adult viewers can understand both perspectives. The pain of the first true changes that are wrought to our lives, is memorable to most of us. This despair eventually turns into our own appreciation for excitement and the unknown, as we witness with Ainura.

At the film's end Mirlan throws the seashell away in the hills that surround the valley. It remains out of sight but certainly not out of mind. After this act of defiance he comes to sit next to the mural he drew. The childlike but highly emotive drawing of Ainura on a swing is an expression of his sadness and a moment of the artist's becoming. The swing evokes the sensation of childhood and for adults is a symbol of a time to which we cannot return. At the beginning of the film he plays on the swing, at the end he sits alone by his depiction and remembers the past. Mirlan's mural is simultaneously a symbol of his pain and a commemoration of love and happiness. In this highly autobiographical work, it becomes meta. A remembrance of the first significant time the artist used art to process his feelings and leave an imprint of his memories within a work about art and memory. When Abdykalykov was growing up in the small village of Kuuntu, everyone told him he was destined to become an artist. He has stated that he would, "wish on falling stars" for this dream to come true.