

Three Polars in Plyushchikha

TATIANA LIOZNOVA

1968

Tatiana Lioznova was one of a few female directors working in the Soviet Union in the 1960's and 1970s's, and the uniqueness of her voice is immediately apparent in this delicate exploration of the tension between female empowerment and duty and expectation in provincial Russia. Set between a rural village near Moscow and the capital itself, the film follows the burgeoning friendship between Sasha, a Moscow taxi driver/h and Nyura, a village woman. This provides the film's beautiful visuals, as the bucolic countryside is counterposed naturally with the inspiring city streets. *Three Poplars in Plyushchika* (1968) is a classic, a box office success that went onto be a point of cultural reference. The film *Gentlemen of Fortune* (1971) features a character saying as three prison escapees sit in a sports stadium, 'We're just sitting here, like "Three Poplars in Plyushchika.'" It has become a ubiquitous phrase, used to express living on stolen time, and the liminality of experiences that we cannot fully integrate.

Nyura, the film's lead, is naturally gentle. In one wonderful scene we see her lie on the back of a horse drawn cart. A French song plays in the background as she throws her head back in bliss. It is a gorgeous moment, clad in a headscarf and the clothing of a villager; accompanied by the French music, she is treated to the same glamorous treatment heroine's receive in New Wave Films and is so rarely extended to working class rural mothers. Her husband is a misogynist, buying into a traditional and cruel vision of the state of home and emotions. He sends her to Moscow to sell their ham whilst criticising her, and in a flashback to their wedding day, as an innocent Nyura expresses her excitement her husband chose her instead of wandering to another village he replies, 'All our women must belong to someone, be it a husband or a parent.' To him Nyura is no different from his livestock, who he treats with lack of affection.

Sasha conversely is a slightly gruff taxi driver, and his meeting Nyura provides the emotional journey of this heartbreaking tale of the failure of spiritual closeness to blossom into love. Nyura and Sasha are different in character and experience, but their affinity and rapport with each other is practically instant. This is underpinned by the script's dialogue, which always seems natural. Even when the pair get stuck in the taxi, whilst they wait out the

onslaught of a rain storm, Sasha implores her to sing and it seems strangely organic. Nyura does, she sings 'Closeness', evidently comfortable around Sasha and lacking the self consciousness and pretensions of the city. Diegetic sound shifts to non diegetic, Nyura's singing is replaced by the song's real instrumentals and the camera briefly rests on Sasha's face as he leans on the wheel, as he clearly falls for the women he has just met. The quiet beauty of it leaves plenty of room for the unspoken to rise to the surface. The actors should be lauded for this, played by Tatiana Doronina and Oleg Efremov, they play their characters with emotional force and lyricism, never retreating to over-acting or compensation. Lioznova herself commented on the film's status as a classic, saying she got exactly what she needed from the actors. The moments of quiet longing are gentle and understated, which just makes them more powerful. When Sasha takes a rouble from Nyura he tells he will put a hole in it and wear it for luck. They stand and stare at each other in the square, in unspoken understanding.

In many ways, this film resembles the American classic Richard Linklater's, *Before Sunrise* (1995) in the narrative, the devices used and ultimately the similar journey of the characters. Sasha ends up waiting for Nyura, who finds herself unable to leave her old life behind. It is a heartbreaking moment, and one that we do not want to happen; but it is a moment that imbues the film with poignancy and authenticity. After all, this is not a fairytale, it is a snapshot of a beautiful day in two people's lives. The plaintive image of Sasha waiting is painful, as is witnessing Nyura's inability to leave the house. In spite of our hopes for the pairing as viewers, we recall the film's rather abstract beginning, where we witness Nyura's strange, unsettling dream. In this dream, Nyura walks through the white poplars towards her husband who stands menacingly amongst them. there is a vision of a couple on a horse and cart, her inescapable future. She embraces her husband in this sequence. Sometimes the promise of love is not stronger than coincidence or the things we are tied to. The film ends with Nyura back in her home, she embraces her family and the quiet beauty of her life is apparent. Yet the film's final image is of her staring into space as 'Tenderness' plays.