

Triptych

ALI KHAMRAEV

1983

Ali Khamraev's modernist melodrama consists of three interwoven stories, each of which concern women constrained in some form by their social position in post-World War II Uzbekistan. It garnered praise internationally and was held in high regard by fellow Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, whose influence melds beautifully with Khamraev's unique cultural and political perspective. Like many of his works, women of the East lie at the centre of an exploration into Uzbekistan's modernisation and how to overcome social and cultural 'backwardness' in Central Asia amid generational conflict.

The first of the three women, Khalima (played by the wonderful Dilorom Kambarova, who appears in many of Khamraev's films), is determined to build a house despite being abandoned by her husband; the second, Sandobar, is a progressive bureaucrat set on bringing about change in the community; and the third, Khadicha, is an elderly widow who daydreams about what could have been had her husband fulfilled his promises. As Belinsky once wrote, art should have "a noble sympathy with everything lofty and sublime, and deal with the most vital problems of life, destroying the old inveterate prejudices and raising its voice in indignation against the deplorable aspects of contemporary morals." *Triptych* (1980) is an overlooked example of this artistic approach, which Khamraev would later go on to perfect in his masterpiece *I Remember You* (1985).

Triptych is first and foremost a poetic work of memory, breathing from scene to scene, from past to present; yet at the same time the film manages to grant vivid form to the material difficulties of Uzbek life being remembered. What links the three stories is not an intertwining of fate but the fact that these specific and personal perspectives come to occupy a shared meditative space not only for national introspection but universal transcendence.

Yuri Klimenko's cinematography is at once intimate and detached, tracing characters' movements with care only for the camera to steer its course, deftly rising towards a lightbulb filament or a crack in the ceiling as if they were windows to the eternal. Khamraev, like Tarkovsky, wants us to remain within time so as to get to eternity, of which time is the moving image. He is a kind of an iconographer of film: his camera acts as a window upon life itself, showing a unique and real physical reality in its full mystery of being. As such, the cinematic image sustains an acute awareness of the infinite, "the eternal within the finite, the spiritual within matter, the limitless given form," as Tarkovsky remarked of his own filmmaking philosophy in *Sculpting in Time*.

And so remaining in time, Khamraev's ephemeral narrative nevertheless puts into sharp focus his vision of Soviet progress. A young teacher reads Khalima a poem: "Take the veil off your soul," the poet entreats. This idea of unveiling will be worked out in various ways, though perhaps it's Khadicha's long-craved yearning for independence in dreams that lays the foundation for Khalima and Sandobar to attempt this unveiling in practical terms. For the latter, it's about creating the conditions for technological progress and using her position of authority to promote female autonomy in the workplace; yet for Khalima autonomy means supporting her family without her husband, whom she twice rejects. Thus Khamraev presents a triptych of emancipation: freedom from the past sets the stage for both professional and personal agency. It's a subtle reconfiguration of Soviet ideology, whereby collectivism is maintained yet through the lens of personal freedom: "Of course you will say that the factory is a public matter," the aforementioned teacher concludes, "but isn't the private happiness of each person separately the real target of our life?"