

# Walking the Streets of Moscow

GEORGI DANELIYA

1964

Anyone who has seen winter turn to summer in Moscow will see the truth in Georgi Daneliya's magical love letter to the capital. As the winter ice that encases the city melts, so do peoples' harsh exteriors and inhibitions. What is revealed is a city of fantastical character, it is random and full of surprise.

The iconic film grew out of one scene that is inserted with no context within the final whole. Gennady Shpalilokov, a young screenwriter approached Georgi Daneliya with an image: a girl walking barefoot on the city streets in the pouring rain, accompanied by a soaked cyclist. Daneliya asked, 'What happens next?' And Shaplikov replied, 'We'll think of something.' So Shpalikov and Daneliya began work together, building a vision of Moscow through a series of poetic sketches and scenes. Eventually these were shaped into a screenplay, with order and narrative. But both director and screenwriter made sure that the magic and random was still embedded in the script.

The film begins with Volodya witnessing a woman singing and dancing at the airport. Church bells chime in the background. Volodya is a young writer from Siberia and this first experience of Moscow is romantic and hopeful. There is an openness in the film, character's frequently engage in conversations with passersby. The city and its inhabitants are shown as symbiotic. When Alena, Volodya's love interest, is using a payphone to try and convince her parents to let her stay out, a passing woman steps in to pose as her friend. As soon as the exchange finishes, the woman continues walking alongside the river, bathed in streetlight and cutting a glamorous figure. Similarly Kolya and Sasha, two Muscovites, end up taking a Japanese tourist to Tretyakovskaya Gallery. Stepping in to help the tourist, who is in a futile attempt at conversation with a state official, the boys end up being transported to where they want. Unbeknownst to the official, the boys communication with the tourist was virtually nonsensical.

Despite the convergence of characters and happy accidents, the darker side of Soviet life is commented on - albeit jokingly. When 'translating' for the Japanese tourist, Kolya tells the state official that he is admiring the majesty of their great nation. This line is delivered

with enormous irony. Kolya, a metro builder, is the Soviet answer to Ferris Bueller. The role is played by the inordinately charming Nikita Mikhalkov, whose role in *I Walk Around Moscow* made him an icon. Kolya's spontaneous, good nature inadvertently leads him into becoming Volodya's tour guide. Whilst on the way back from his night shift, he randomly makes the young writer's acquaintance on the metro.

Daneliya's Moscow is a city full of talented individuals. But it is also a place filled with labour, obligation and limited scope to shine. Volodya had recently had his first short story published. This garnered attention from a famous writer, who had invited him to Moscow to meet. When they reach the writer's office, Volodya converses with a brilliant and very brutal man who philosophises on the nature of art and Volodya's lack of creative substance. Humorously, it turns out that this man is not the author they had hoped to meet but the floor polisher. It is a funny moment, but it is a scene that speaks to the fixed nature of social structure in the capital. Similarly, a great deal of the plot is devoted to the boys trying to wrangle Sasha a small amount of time to get married and 'enjoy family life' before his compulsory military service.

The film begins with Volodya's arrival to the airport and a dancing woman who is never seen again. The film ends with Kolya's route to work, after a sleepless day. We see stunning shots of Moscow: a statue, an overpass of cars with blinking headlights and a view of lights from a metro window. We then see Kolya staring out, tired but blissful as an old couple watch and smile. Volodya's exciting arrival to the city and the numerous happy adventures in between fundamentally end with Kolya, a Muscovite headed to a night of work. After such deliriously sweet scenes and the revolving door of characters, you'd think this would seem anti-climatic. He apologises to Alena for being unable to see her home and saunters through an empty station singing. The attendant asks him why he is shouting, he replies 'I'm singing' but stops nonetheless. The last shot of the film is Kolya ascending the elevator. The attendant requests that he should keep on singing. 'Sometimes you feel good, but don't know why.'