

Woodpecker's Don't Get Headaches

DINARA ASANOVA

1969

Whilst Dinara Asanova's, *Woodpecker's Don't Get Headaches* is about a teenager at a sensitive moment in life, it is not a bildungsroman. In many ways this is the film's strength. It occupies itself with the intense emotions of adolescence and displays adulthood as forced de-sensitivity. It is not a film about learning to inhabit graceful maturity. Rather it displays society's particularly brutal process with regard to growing up. The adults in *Woodpecker's Don't Get Headaches* are flawed, sometimes bitter, and often dispassionate. Conversely Asanova's film shows that adolescent passion, love and rage, are perhaps raw and unfiltered, but they are in many ways our pure nature. These passions are often, as in Seva Mukhin's case, under attack.

The protagonist, Seva Mukhin's nickname is, 'Mukha' or in English 'fly'. The people he loves treat him as such, as an annoyance whose very presence is inconvenient. Mukha inhabits the awkward stage between childhood and adulthood, and particularly awkwardly at that. The people around him are generally unsympathetic to this and his feelings. Instead they focus on the wild, obstinate quality of his character; without any consideration of the artist and talented soul beneath. In response to his playing the drums, his brother throws him out the window and into the pond. His brother, a famous basketball player, is strangely given a free pass for this and Mukha is blamed when he traipses in soaking and has to walk past the family dining table. His neighbour, a hairdresser who hates Mukha's drumming, kills and stuffs a woodpecker. The woodpecker, a metaphor for Mukha himself, drills away at the tree all day. Mukha who hears the rhythm and music in everyday life sees and hears the beauty in this pecking. He is learning that many will only see this as annoyance and act on it with utmost cruelty.

The world shown by Asanova is one where cruelty to children is routinely administered by adults; who react disproportionately to bad behaviour, or do not view children as having their own internal world. His friend's mother takes away his clothes and locks him in the apartment for the day, after she finds out he spent money for a haircut on a taxi ride to town. Mukha stops by his friend's window.

He is told of an incident where a cat was thrown out of the window, attached to an umbrella. The cat got tangled in the wires briefly and then ran away. The umbrella, however, was ruined. His friend's mother was more concerned about the umbrella, it was after all, Japanese. After Mukha's visit a teacher comes by, she is presented as the only adult who tries to understand the children. She gives the hungry boy a cucumber. Later, she meets with Mukha's father and expresses her opposition to his parenting. She derides him for his critical stance toward his child. 'I bet you make fun of him when a girl rings the home phone,' and 'I imagine you don't encourage his drumming.' His father sheepishly agrees. She tells him, 'love is patience'.

Mukha knows love is patience too, in his own wild way. Deeply in love with his best friend Ira. He questions her about her future, going through the stages of university, marriage, motherhood, becoming a grandmother and death. She is annoyed at his questions, he states, 'I'll die on the exact same day as you. You'll see.' To convince her to go to the cinema with him, he stands on his head and waits. First love is overwhelming and wild, but in comparison to the adults around him Mukha gives it to the object of his affections with reckless abandon. In a heartbreaking moment, Ira describes his only point of objective interest being his brother: 'Otherwise you're just like a thousand other flies.' The unconscious rejection is painful and acute.

Asanova relied on improvisation for all of her films. This emboldens the rawness and the intensely 'real' characterisation that informs her voice as a director. It is rare for any work of art to dig so far into the depths of genuine feeling and connection. Her aim as an artist was to show that there are, 'No different truths for different age groups.' As viewers, when we watch Mukha's raw passion we are reminded of how deep our own depths of feeling runs. As the film closes we watch him run behind the train that is taking Ira to Murmansk. He doesn't give up, even at the point that it is clear his attempt is futile. It maybe a testament to his youth and passion that he doesn't stop running. The film ends on a freeze frame of this moment.