

Asya's Happiness

ANDREI KONCHALOVSKY

1966

Andrei Konchalovsky's second film is a remarkable exploration of the tribulations of love. Set in a small village in Nizhny Novgorod Region, Konchalovskiy's creative partnership with screenwriter Yuri Klepikov merges realism and fiction in this gorgeous testament to the tragic beauty of real love stories. *Asya's Happiness* begins with the bucolic image of a child sleeping in the straw. An intertitle tells us that only three of the actors in this film are professional and the rest are genuine villagers from the region. Diegetic sounds fill the film; the sound of birdsong and the distant noises of machinery almost constantly accompany the film's conversations. The effect is visceral for the viewer, and beyond this it greatly enhances the evocative nature of Konchalovsky's direction. Equally, the constant background sound provides the inescapable call of duty and reality, which responds wonderfully to the intimate emotional journey the characters enter into front of the camera.

Asya's Happiness has undergone many title changes, it was originally entitled 'The Story of Asya Klachina, Who Loved a Man But Did Not Marry him Because She Was Proud'. After being shelved for 20 years, in an instance of excessive censor paranoia, it was eventually re-released under a shorter title. The decision to shelve Konchalovsky's film is fascinating, in part because of its lack of provocative content, and in part because of its adherence to a typical and quintessentially Soviet mode of realism. There are so many scenes that celebrate village life and pay homage to the wonderfully and culturally specific tradition of filmmaking in the region. Not only does the subject centre around a regular person, as was a staple value of communist cinema, it displays the beauty of village life and labour with a quiet dignity. The images of machinery and work owe a great deal to the canon of Soviet cinema, especially Aleksandr Dovzhenko. One scene which features a midrange tracking shot of a tractor ploughing, almost seems as though it are directly from the poetic imagination of Dovzhenko, who incorporated many similar sequences into *Zemlya* (Earth, 1930). In paying homage to the early Soviet masters, Konchalovsky imparts a poetic quality to work on the land, which is emboldened by the use of amateur actors, whose traditions and personalities burst with life. In one wonderful scene we watch the villagers eat together one evening, accompanied by a soundtrack of traditional music. Teenagers flirt and older women give wishes

of health in this honest depiction of community intimacy. After eating, the villagers begin to sing together, their voices taking over the previous secondary soundtrack. The camera tracks down the table, taking a moment to rest on the faces of individuals as the song flitters between various choral arrangements. The camerawork has a musicality in itself, and returns an individuality to each 'voice' in the community, whilst displaying them as a synchronous whole. Greg Dolgopov for Senses of Cinema aptly recognises the power of Konchalovsky's direction in this compassionate endeavour, 'Strangely for a Moscow aesthete such as Konchalovskiy, the film does not observe these figures as weird specimens of a perverted humanity. In contrast to his later films, their stories and faces are not moulded into leaden metaphors of the soul of Russia. This is a genuine Russian love story, one that would haunt Konchalovskiy throughout his career.'

Asya, the titular character, is played by Iya Savvina. One of the three professional actors in the cast, Savvina's talents allow her to merge wonderfully with the villagers and provides the central struggle of the storyline. *Asya* is pregnant with Stepan, the village driver's, child. It is a hopeless kind of love; *Asya* knows this but simply cannot help herself in a vivid representation of the old adage, 'love makes fools of us all'. When *Asya* speaks to Stepan of their baby, he simply tells her to be quiet. In a story of second bests, whilst *Asya* is loving Stepan, Chirkunov a widower, is unrequitedly loving her. This fictional triangle holds together Konchalovsky's meditation on love, and this is interspersed with real stories from the villagers.

The war and the troubles of the last few decades hang over the village and the film. The trauma is apparent in the injuries of the men and the matriarchal nature of their community which displays the gaping hole of lost lives. One man talks about his competition for a girl with his best friend. Sat against a tractor smoking, his face is transformed with happiness when he describes his lost love. Another man explains how he spent nearly a decade in jail for nothing and when he finally was able to meet his wife after the long years apart, they discovered they had nothing to say to each other.