

The Lord Eagle

EDUARD NOVIKOV

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At once a deeply spiritual tale rooted in Sakha tradition, a quietly powerful portrait of Soviet rule clashing with an indigenous culture, and, possibly, a political allegory of the period, Eduard Novikov's *The Lord Eagle* is the epitome of modern Sakha cinema. In line with the majority of films produced in the region, the budget was minimal, the actors largely amateur and the shooting period brief (less than two weeks). Yet this adaptation of Sakha author Vasily Yakovlev's tale *The Larch that Grew Old with Me* struck a chord on the festival circuit, garnering domestic and international acclaim (including the grand prize at the Moscow International Film Festival) and propelling the distinct phenomenon of Sakha film into the limelight.

Founded in 1992, regional studio Sakhafilm has dedicated itself to serving the Sakha community on the big screen. Novikov himself, a now-leading figure in the company, believes "Yakut film has its own particular language," with the rich tapestry of indigenous folklore from the region serving as a continuous inspiration for his work. *The Lord Eagle* is no exception.

At its heart, this simple, 1930s-set tale of an elderly couple deep in the Russian taiga and isolated from wider Soviet society is a beautifully crafted exploration of the belief systems inherent to the Sakha people. Throughout, the film sheds light on shamanistic rituals, Orthodox Christianity, Soviet ideology, and, most importantly, the enshrined respect of nature in Sakha custom. Indeed, it is these competing reference points which comprise the rich and varied make-up of the region, allowing the film to serve as a poignant quasi-ethnographic portrait of Yakutia's indigenous inhabitants.

While the Sakha are thought to have existed in the region since the early middle-ages, the incorporation of Yakutia into the Russian empire in the 17th century and the events of the 20th century have resulted in various belief systems being adopted in the region. Novikov delicately exposes the audience to this melting pot of cultures

through our protagonists' reaction to the arrival of an eagle on their doorstep. On the initial assumption that its presence signifies a bad omen, the couple pray to both the Orthodox God and a Fire Spirit for protection. The wife, Oppuos, marks the sign of a cross and places an icon in the corner of the room; the husband Nikifor consults a local shaman for guidance. From this point forward, the eagle's arrival is considered less of a sign of what is to come, and more a form of karmic retribution for Nikifor's actions in his youth. As the film progresses, however, an almost symbiotic relationship develops between bird and man, both parties relying on each other to make it through the unforgiving winter.

Competing with these two spiritual belief systems, and taking place at the periphery of the film's storyline, is the seemingly distant yet fast approaching impact of Soviet rule. Though Christianity and shamanism arguably take equal precedence in the couple's home, both are steadily being threatened by the nation's new ideology. The arrival of two Komsomol members leads Oppuos to hide her Christian icon, and they fear the shaman will refuse to conduct his ceremony due to a Soviet crackdown on regional practices. Historically, violent purges against shamanism and other indigenous belief systems were widespread, and it is only since the 1990s that traditional holidays such as Ysyakh, the Sakha celebration of spring, have come to be celebrated in the region once more.

Nevertheless, while *The Lord Eagle* may be rooted in the cultural specificity of the region, its story is a universal one. The clash of modernity with traditional faith is easily transplanted to any number of contexts, and in part explains its well-deserved reception on the international circuit. Assisted by stellar performances from local actors Stepan Petrov and Zoya Popova, whose chemistry provides a light balance of humour to the film's plot, alongside intimate candlelit cinematography from Semyon Amanatov, this modest fable is elevated from its Siberian locality to the global stage.