

White Sun of the Desert

VLADIMIR MOTYL

1970

One of the most popular movies of all time in Russia – watched by cosmonauts as a pre-launch ritual – *White Sun of the Desert* is a classic in the true sense of the word. It combines populist sentiment with a daring genre-bending premise that traverses action, comedy, drama, and musical numbers, all unfolding against the wild expanse of the desert. Set by the Caspian Sea, in what is now Turkmenistan, the film follows Red Army soldier Fyodor Sukhov as he navigates the conflict between the Red Army and Basmachi guerillas.

Director Vladimir Motyl was born in Soviet Belarus. After his father's arrest, Vladimir and his mother were exiled to the Northern Urals, where he became fascinated by theatre and cinema. His first film, *Children of Pamirs* (1963) was set and filmed in Tajikistan. The work was met with public success, as well as earning him the State Prize of the Tajik SSR (1964), and the title of honorary citizen of Dushanbe. However, his next film *Zhenya, Zhenechka and Katyusha* (1967), a romantic comedy set in 1944, earned the displeasure of officials for its "disrespectful" treatment of the Second World War, despite being warmly received by the public. Despite this fall into disfavour, Motyl was invited to direct a film which was to become one of the most popular examples of the strange Soviet genre known as the "Red Western".

It may surprise some to learn of the impact the Western, that most American of genres, had on the cinema of the former Soviet bloc. The majesty of the landscape, the sense of adventure, and the civilising mission that informed the American classics all proved adaptable to the Communist bloc, with East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania all producing popular examples.

While the term "Red Western" is broadly applied, technically speaking, the the action in a "Red Western" proper takes place in America itself (in reality locations such as Mongolia and southern Russia were used), with the narrative updated in accordance with communist sensibilities; Alla Surikova's *Man from the Boulevard des Capucines* (1987) is a classic example. "Osterns", on the other hand, are films that transpose the tropes of the American West to the Russian steppes, the Caucasus, or the Central Asian republics. Here, Western stock characters such as cowboys and Indians

were replaced by (equally problematic) Caucasian or Central Asian stock characters, such as bandits and harems. *White Sun of the Desert* is a classic example of this latter category, along with films like *The Burning Miles* (1957), *The Bodyguard* (1979), and *The Sixth* (1981).

The box office success of *White Sun* helps to situate it at a time in Soviet cultural history when mass entertainment and consumer culture was on the up. The 1970s saw the emergence of a sophisticated and effective cinematic mainstream, with genre fare – adventures, musicals, comedies – drawing crowds to the well-stocked cinemas of the Soviet cities. As is so often the case, of course, popular and critical success did not exactly go hand in hand: despite its broad appeal, *White Sun* never received much in the way of critical acclaim or awards. The quality of the performances, the visual wit and panache on display, and the captivating soundtrack, though, all bear witness to the craft that went into Soviet popular culture.

Perhaps the true measure of the film's significance lies in the way it has penetrated into the popular consciousness. The film's main theme song, 'Your Noble Highness, Lady Fortune' (with lyrics by legendary bard Bulat Okudzhava) became a hit and remains wellknown even amongst those who have not seen the original film. Moreover, the film coined many popular sayings still used in Russia today. The most well-known of these is undoubtedly "the Orient is a delicate matter" ("Vostok – delo tonkoe"), a punchline often used to refer to any complicated or difficult issue.

In and of itself, this minor legacy serves as an example of the fundamentally orientalist nature of Red Westerns and the colonial undertones of both film and genre. The use of blackface in the film does not help the matter – the supposedly Turkmen villain Abdullah is played by a white Georgian actor, Kakhi Kavsadze, wearing dark makeup. The Soviets found a way to add their own revolutionary spin on the Western's stock narrative of the advent of civilization to a dusty backwater – and their own way to fashion pure entertainment from the result.