

Autumn Sun

BAGRAT OGANESYAN

1977

Among Armenian-language audiences, Hrant Matevosyan's reputation as one of the twentieth-century's great prose stylists is a given. He was that rare author equally adept at capturing both a sense of place, and the emotional complexity of even the most unassuming human life. Indeed, Matevosyan's most popular works are shot through with an intuitive grasp of the mutually constitutive relationship between the Armenian landscape and its inhabitants – a combination of the visual and the verbal that lent itself beautifully to film adaptations, several of which Matevosyan scripted himself.

The most famous is undoubtedly *We Are Our Mountains* (dir. Henrik Malyan, 1969), from his novella of the same name. Bagrat Oganessian's 1977 drama *Autumn Sun* might not share the outsized reputation of its predecessor, but the literary source material is equally rich and skilfully adapted by the author. In fact, the two films form a kind of diptych: both are about rural Armenia in the Soviet midcentury, and both culminate in the protagonists leaving the safety of their village for the big city of Yerevan; but where *Mountains* explores the loyalties and fractures amongst a tight knit community of male labourers, *Autumn Sun* is about a solitary woman. Indeed, it is a film about her solitude, at once personal and universal.

The protagonist, a middle-aged woman named Aghun, is one of the most well-crafted examples of Matevosyan's poetic vernacular and compassionate characterisation in action. Aghun (played to perfection by Oganessian's wife, Anahit Gukasyan) is the heart of the film in every sense, anchoring the action from her fortress of a farmhouse, her stony expression framed by grey-streaked auburn hair dominating the frame. There is barely a "plot" to speak of: Aghun is preparing to head from her village to Yerevan to visit her elder son and his fiancée; she is visited by neighbours and relatives, each of whom provokes fresh irritation in her, often icily and wittily expressed; brief, episodic flashbacks sketch out her past as a fresh-faced girl married off against her will to the oafish Simon by her cruel

father, Ishkhan, and forced to build a home and a life for herself against the odds.

What emerges is a portrait of resolve, anger, and resentment that remarkably manages to forego judgement of its characters. No one in Aghun's village is a saint, but neither are they purely devilish. They are simply getting by. Matevosyan and Oganessian manage to distil the petty trials and tribulations that constitute rural life into the image of Aghun grumbling over her basket of eggs.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the principal delights in the film is Matevosyan's dialogue. The characters relate personal anecdotes like parables, measuring out their familial disputes and sense of personal worth in garlic cloves. Aghun's near-constant commentary on the people and events around her is caustic and consolatory; her ability to put her bitterness into words is clearly her saving grace. That is not to say that Oganessian is a mere adjunct to his screenwriter's brilliance. The rich colours of the landscapes and costumes are offset by that titular wan and wilting light, suggestive of the struggle against resignation that Aghun is waging. The carefully framed and modulated wide shots, judicious use of perspective, and measured pans imbue the humble surroundings with a rightful sense of gravitas.

Aghun may feel cut off and unappreciated, but over the course of the film's spry 81 minutes, we do get a sense of her village as an ecosystem in which every member plays their part. This is most forcefully conveyed in a flashback to her youth in which we see the harvest being brought in. The abundance of golden grain set against the azure sky, and the joy of collective labour captured in this sequence would not have been out of place in the Socialist Realist musicals that dominated Soviet cinema 30 years earlier. It is a rare moment of playfulness. Shot in Matevosyan's home village of Ahnidzo and starring the director's spouse, *Autumn Sun* reminds us that both joy and woe never belong solely to either the individual, nor the collective.