

# We Are Our Mountains

HENRIK MALYAN

1969

The inciting incident in Henrik Malyan's *We Are Our Mountains* (1969), frequently cited by Armenians as their nation's finest ever film, seems trivial in the extreme. A group of shepherds in the country's remote foothills butcher a pair of sheep for dinner. Only when their bellies are full do they realise that they have accidentally feasted on the mislaid livestock of their friend Revaz. Although disgruntled, the offended party accepts payment for the sheep, and the matter appears settled. Things take a turn, however, when the local police lieutenant gets wind of the incident and takes it upon himself to prosecute this minor mishap to the fullest extent possible. What unfolds is an impish parable about the letter and spirit of the law, a slice of sixties satire that asks: what if a kebab could land you in court?

The film's reputation within Armenia derives in large part from the sheer concentration of domestic talent on display. Malyan himself is highly regarded for his accessible and tender character studies, but here his craft is elevated by the screenplay from Hrant Matevosyan, one of the true masters of twentieth-century Armenian literature. Adapting his own 1962 novella of the same name, Matevosyan translates his Steinbeckian portrait of village life from page to screen in all its empathetic detail.

This is a writer's film, to be sure – but good writing is nothing without the acting chops to back it up, and in this department *We Are Our Mountains* also excels. The cast is headed by a quartet of Armenian screen greats: Frunze Mkrtchyan, famous across the Soviet Union for his roles in comedies by Georgy Daneliya and Leonid Gaidai; Sos Sarkisyan, who would later star in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*; and Khoren Abrahamyan and Azad Sherents, both iconic dramatic and comedic performers. (Fans of experimental documentarian Artavazd Pelechian might be surprised to also see him pop up as the downtrodden Revaz.) The deliveries of Mkrtchyan and co went a long way towards embedding Matevosyan's script in the national consciousness, such that many lines from the film have long since become idioms in their own right.

Nor should the strength of the script and the performances detract from Malyan's assured direction, attuned to the rhythms of rural labour and leisure. For all the flurries of rhetoric, the film leaves

ample room to breathe, with its stunning and carefully framed mountain vistas and its sparse soundtrack. The sequence in which Sarkisyan's meddling lieutenant probes around the deserted farm committee headquarters, accompanied only by the buzz of bees, is a fine example of Malyan's comic minimalism.

The comedy here might derive from petty misunderstandings, but it has a sharp satirical edge, posing uneasy questions about social cohesion and the relationship between state and individual. Running throughout are the twin notions of connectivity and consequence. The shepherds are a tight-knit group resentful of outside interference; the lieutenant sees even minor infractions as the thin end of a thick wedge of criminality. The village of Antaramej is a microcosm of the Soviet Union, and perhaps even of the Cold War world beyond that – a point nicely made by the shepherds' ill-informed but earnest debates about "that Kennedy guy" and the atomic bomb, as well as the opening montage, which mashes together the sights and sounds of the swinging 60s – Beatlemania, Formula-1, Civil Rights protests, nuclear testing – before cutting abruptly to the apparent idyll of the Armenian countryside. As Matevosyan's original story puts it, "a million invisible threads connect the village to the world."

That opening montage frames the film from the off as a product of the '60s, and Malyan's increasingly bitter pastorate proves that within the Soviet Union, it was not just in the urban centres of Russia that the decade's debates about authority and rebellion raged. Armenia had experienced its own protest wave in 1965, when demonstrators demanded that the Soviet authorities officially recognise the Armenian Genocide on its fiftieth anniversary. Few Soviet films treat the institution of the law with such clear disregard as *We Are Our Mountains* (more renowned Russian films about crime and policing from the same period – Eldar Ryazanov's *Beware of the Car*, for instance, or Gleb Panfilov's *I Wish to Speak* – are tame by comparison). By the end of the film, the shepherds are directly demanding of their policeman "comrade": who serves who? Who represents the authority of the state? Are you not the real thief here? In the final shot, as their herds flood the streets of the capital, that fragile balance between centre and periphery, city and hinterland, state and worker, is definitively undone.