

The White Bird Marked with Black

YURI ILYENKO

1971

In 1965, the Armenian-Georgian auteur Sergei Parajanov released his first masterpiece, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* – the culmination of an almost decade-long immersion in Ukraine and its national culture. Parajanov’s adaptation of the novel of the same name by Mykhailo Kotsiubynskiy reimagined the legends of the Hutsul people, native to the country’s westerly Carpathian region, in a kaleidoscopic array of folk art and music, with vivid, painterly compositions enlivened by sweeping camerawork.

For Parajanov, the film represented a moment of personal release, the first realisation of the mature style that would make him one of the Soviet Union’s most celebrated (and persecuted) filmmakers. For his adopted homeland, the film was one of the most important foundational works in the loose movement that came to be known as Ukrainian poetic cinema. The cinematographer on *Shadows* was a young man named Yuri Ilyenko. Over the next decade, Ilyenko would struggle within the confines of the Soviet studio system to realise his own onscreen version of Ukrainian folk heritage, building on the lessons laid down by his friend Parajanov to become one of poetic cinema’s most radical proponents.

The White Bird Marked with Black, released to surprising acclaim in 1971 (including the grand prize at that year’s Moscow Film Festival), is perhaps the most perfectly distilled example of Ilyenko’s early folk-modernist vision, before his emigration to Yugoslavia the following year. Condensing an epic’s worth of family drama into just 97 minutes, the film recounts the trials and tribulations of the Zvonar family in the 1930s and ‘40s. Set in the foothills of the Bukovina borderlands, between western Ukraine and Romania, the plot follows four musician brothers – Petro, Orest, Bohdan, Georgyi – and Dana, the priest’s daughter whose divided affections and romance with a Russian soldier drive the narrative.

With its folkloric trappings, allegorical interpersonal relationships, striking camera movements, and expressionistic blasts of colour, *White Bird* is a potent example of Ukrainian poetic cinema in action. The label, coined in 1970 by the Polish critic Janusz Gazda, is used to describe a crop of filmmakers who emerged from Kyiv’s Dovzhenko Studio in the mid-1960s and early 1970s: Ilyenko, Leonid Osyka, Boris Ivchenko, Ivan Mykolaichuk (who plays Petro

here), among others. These directors turned to the folk cultures of Ukraine – in particular those western regions like Bukovina and the Carpathians where “non-Russified” native traditions are more pronounced – and elevated the visual, painterly, and formal elements of their films, often with borderline surrealistic results. The movement was influenced most obviously by the silent work of the great Oleksandr Dovzhenko himself, with his pantheistic take on agrarian communism, but also by Ukraine’s longer tradition of “folk modernism” in the visual and literary arts: from Gogol (whose works were adapted by Ilyenko and Ivchenko) to Marc Chagall and Sholem Aleichem.

The relationship between poetic cinema and nationalism is a complicated and controversial one. Many of the films that are now considered poetic cinema were banned or recut by censors who were wary of explicit expressions of the national (that is, local rather than centralised “Soviet”) cultures of the non-Russian republics of the Union – as was the case with Ilyenko’s first two features, *A Well for the Thirsty* (1965) and *The Eve of Ivan Kupala* (1968). *White Bird Marked with Black* tackles the question of divided loyalties head on: when the war breaks out, Petro joins the Red army, while Orest sides with nationalist, anti-communist partisans – with murderous consequences. Ilyenko’s treatment of the competing nationalist and communist causes was a provocation against conventional Soviet histories of the conflict. *White Bird* was labelled “the most harmful movie that has ever been made in Ukraine, specifically for young people”; it was only screened in Moscow thanks to the intervention of Ukrainian Party chief Petro Shelest, who was himself removed from office shortly afterwards for suspected nationalist leanings. We should also not ignore or excuse Ilyenko’s own post-Soviet slide into ugly, outright far-right politics.

Films like *White Bird*, however, stand on their own as vivid artistic statements that are not reducible to this or that competing ideological version of history. The scholar Joshua First has argued that Ilyenko and co straddle the line between the ethnographic and the folkloric – the former animating ethnic difference, the latter performing its “colonial domestication”. Ilyenko’s bewitching, lurid, and uncomfortable reimagining of Soviet film continues to trouble and excite to this day.