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Эликсир

Elixir

Daniil Zinchenko

Producer Andrey Silvestrov, Tikhon Pendurin, Gleb Aleinikov. **Production companies** CineCooperation (Moscow, Russian Federation), Cosmosfilm (Moscow, Russian Federation), Cine Fantom (Moscow, Russian Federation). **Written and directed by** Daniil Zinchenko. **Director of photography** Aleksandr Tananov. **Editor** Daniil Zinchenko. **Music** Maria Fedina. **Sound design** Andrey Guryanov, Anton Kuryshev. **Sound** Anton Kuryshev, Andrey Guryanov. **Production design** Grigoriy Selskiy. **Costumes** Anastasia Nefedova. **With** Aleksandr Gorelov (Carpenter), Nikolay Kopeikin (Pyotr), Grigoriy Selskiy (Grisha), Dmitriy Juravlev (Major), Victoria Maksimova (Gull 1), Anna Alekseeva (Gull 2), Sergey Frolov (Serafim), Oleg Rudenko-Travin (Scientist), Viktor Khorkin (Old Man), Anastasia Chupakhina (Anna Timofeevna).

DCP, colour. 80 min. Russian.
Premiere 26 April 2015, Omsk

A man in a white robe stands in a swimming pool guarded by men in black sunglasses. They are reminiscent of bodyguards. One of the besuited men enters the water and pushes the man under the surface, over and over again: a baptism, an initiation rite or torture?

The water turns black. Shortly afterwards, you see the man disappear among the trees, two soldiers from the Zayovsky Squadron propping him up. This film could be set yesterday, today or tomorrow; its characters seem to be outside of time. They are archetypes of Russian mythology and stories that embody their homeland's various extremes. A forest in the marshes offers them sanctuary. Via a messenger who knows the labyrinthine pathways, they communicate: the partisans, the cosmonaut and the scientist, who wants to brew the elixir of immortality. But another elixir also plays a role. Perhaps the man in the white robe is actually Jesus, and the black liquid he has left behind in the pool is actually oil. Is this grotesque game of citations and archetypes perhaps more than just a fairy-tale, but also a parable on present-day Russia?

Anke Leweke

The pursuit of happiness and cognition

In this film, the broad expanse of the Earth and the infinity of the Cosmos fuse together. The two conceptual axes – the worldly horizontal line as an allegory of the pursuit of happiness, love, and universal fraternity, and the heavenly vertical line symbolising the dream of resurrection and cognition of the infinite, the heavenward urge – unite in their aspiration to defeat absolute evil and death itself. Russia is where they become one.

Daniil Zinchenko

Delusions of immortality and partisan cult

A strange work appeared in 1906 that would influence Russia tremendously: Nikolai Fedorov's *Philosophy of the Common Task*. It speaks of the necessity of sons (all the living) to resurrect the fathers (all the dead) in a fraternal union. Fedorov asserts that humanity must take charge of its own salvation and develop the technological means for a physical restoration of the species. The avant-garde took inspiration from these utopias; the idea of the socialist superman also bears its features. Especially enthusiastic were the Cosmists and Biocosmists. Total liberation from space and time.

In Daniil Zinchenko's *Elixir*, not just small beings, but also the Common Task flit spookily through the picture, for example in the enigmatic messages presented with a creaky voice, of the postman hidden under a huge hood (Gleb Aleinikov, co-founder of the Cine Fantom club). And of course the scientist seeking the elixir of life is also a descendant of Fedorov: together with his assistant Serafim, an innocent boy in a folkloristic shirt, he digs his way through the region's cemeteries and tests the composition of the soil – when necessary, with his mouth and tongue. How can he suck knowledge from the ground, asks the boy. I want to see them alive, answers the professor.

Serafim, an important saint in the Orthodox Church to whom, as here, the Mother of God appears (though somewhat re-fashioned), is now tasked with obtaining tissue samples from male and female cosmonauts and partisans; naturally, he chooses pubic hair when he finally encounters cosmonaut-Chaika and partisan-Chaika. Another group of three are two descendants of an old partisan division who prop up a man in a white smock who, it later turns out, can turn water into petroleum (no one here drinks wine) and is reminiscent of Jesus in other ways, as well. Everyone here is actually trying to track him down, especially the clique of torch-bearing devils, who externally resemble perfectly ordinary Russian Mafia thugs.

Enigma is a basic trait of this convincing debut, which strikes like a falling comet in the intellectual doldrums of current Russian cinema. The enigma is not created solely by obscure actions and occult rituals, but primarily by sophisticated stylistics. Long vista shots with sparse dialogue, forceful, unusual visual compositions and unsettling sound scenarios make it hard to deny Zinchenko's studies at Moscow's Rodchenko School, the centre and symbol of a still-experimental art and video scene in Putin's Russia.

But we are offered much more than artful gimmickry or highly polished trash. Along with delusions of immortality, *Elixir* shifts and combines the cult of the partisan and the veneration of cosmonauts; the eternal (heathen) swamp and forest landscapes in which only space, but no time exists; its diverse forms of speaking and rhyme formulas; and finally its new-modern torture scenes into a cosmos all its own, reflecting the Soviet empire that

always burst its boundaries. And so it is only logical that in the end, as in a huge Carnival, all the characters join voices in a bombastic hymn, namely the hymn of striving upward.

Varya Chervyakova, January 2016

A requiem for the Russian soul

This film is a parable about Russia in which each character represents a Russian archetype. There are partisans and an astronaut, who represent different Russian mentalities, and two aspects of the Russian soul. The main focus of this film is distance – the concept of time plays no role; everything is always about space. In a certain way, Russia is a space where time is frozen, or as if it were surrounded by a bog. 'When I came to this country for the first time I didn't see any bogs,' says the carpenter, whom the viewer easily can recognise as Jesus.

The partisans and the astronaut are researching two fundamental metaphysical vectors – the horizontal and the vertical. The eagle says, 'It's our sister from the cosmos; she was looking for infinity.' The partisans are also looking for infinity, but in a different manner and on the horizontal plane. And somewhere at the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical is Russia.

The scientist is in the process of creating an elixir of immortality that will allow him to resurrect dead people. The scientist has a helper, Serafim, whom one could view symbolically as the son of Russia – his mother is the famous stone 'motherland' statue on Mamaev Kurgan in Volgograd. Petrification is important here because we can see that Russia has turned into a monument. The film brings back to life a Russia that has turned to stone by showing her in the form of stars or as an image reflected on water.

The poetry of *Elixir* has a similar tone to the works of the Russian writer Andrey Platonov, which are at once songs of farewell to Russia and the so-called Russian soul, and at the same time – thanks to their beauty – songs of praise to them. The requiem for the Russian soul and the miracle of resurrection become the most important emotional counterpoints of *Elixir*.

This film was made in the best tradition of 1930s Soviet cinema and the films of directors such as Alexander Dovzhenko or Vsevolod Pudovkin.

Uri Gershovich



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Daniil Zinchenko was born in Tyumen, Western Siberia, Russian Federation in 1984. After graduating from the Rodchenko Moscow School of Photography and Multimedia, he made his first film, *Derevnya i dachnik/A Village and a Summer Resident*, in 2004. He is a member of the Upward! community, founded in 2010 by young Moscow artists who have become known for their exhibitions and performances.

Films

2004: *Derevnya i dachnik/A Village and a Summer Resident* (15 min.). 2006: *List'ya/Leaves* (16 min.). 2010: *Dnevnik sobaki filosofa/ Diary of a Philosopher's Dog* (15 min.). 2011: *Izvol* (15 min.), *165* (34 min.). 2012: *Horizont/Horizon* (35 min.), *Snovidenia Hokinga/Hocking's Dreams* (25 min.). 2013: *Sni partizana Grishi/ Dreams of Guerrilla Grisha* (12 min.). 2016: *Elixir*.