

BREAKING THE ICE

Unsung maestro Marlen Khutsiev channeled the joys and the anxieties roiling within the Soviet soul

BY NATHAN DUNNE



I Am Twenty (x 2)

IN THE SECOND HALF OF MARLEN KHUTSIEV'S 1965 DRAMA *I Am Twenty*, a group of students at a party dance gaily among potatoes that have fallen to the floor. Characters are often seen dancing in Khutsiev's 1960s films, yet this particular scene exemplifies the youthful break of the Khrushchev Thaw from the previous generation's hardships during World War II. Like his fellow revelers, the protagonist of *I Am Twenty*, Sergei (Valentin Popov), is free of the embittered wartime struggle endured by his mother, who had worked night shifts and foraged for potatoes during the day. Without the pressure of food shortages, this new generation is free to celebrate peacetime with a fond embrace of jazz and Parisian chansons.

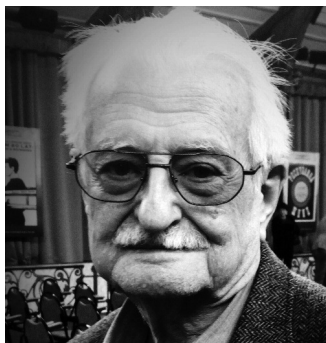


In *I Am Twenty*, characters seem to drift effortlessly along pavements, buoyed by the optimism of their youth in the manner of Godard's *Breathless*, and yet with a more pronounced sense of lyricism and even expressionism.

Of all the major directors that emerged during the Khrushchev Thaw after Stalin's death, when repression and censorship of artists was relaxed, Khutsiev is perhaps the least well-known outside Russia. He came from a generation that included Andrei Tarkovsky, Sergei Parajanov, Vasilii Shukshin, Elem Klimov, and Kira Muratova, who together might be called the Soviet New Wave. Unlike its concurrent European counterparts, however, the notion of a Soviet New Wave remains relatively ill-defined, due to the complicated relationship many of the directors had with the Soviet state. At the end of the Thaw, Khutsiev and others came under increasing scrutiny from censors for venturing too far from the directives of Socialist Realism. They were thought to be too European and had to be reined in.

Unlike Tarkovsky and Parajanov, who were exiled through defection and imprisonment respectively, Khutsiev never saw himself as a dissident and was keen to reflect the party line. This meant that he was never able to find an appropriate place in the polarization between the liberal intelligentsia and a State that was increasingly betraying a socially progressive ethos. But his status as an in-betweener made for a remarkable oeuvre. On the one hand the viewer is invited to observe an intoxicating vision of

Soviet idealism, where tanks roam among giant power plants and children sing in uniform, and on the other there is a dreamscape of decadent parties, lust-fueled liaisons, and characters in the grip of existentialism. Today Khutsiev, at age 91, is entering a period of rediscovery thanks to his first North American retrospective, last October at the Museum of Modern Art, which immediately toured to the Harvard Film Archive. His profile is sure to grow from here.



Marlen Khutsiev

BORN IN TIFLIS (NOW TBILISI), Georgia, in 1925, Khutsiev grew up in a patriotic family, his first name an amalgam of Marx and Lenin. Although his father, Martyn Khutsishvili, was a prerevolutionary Communist, he later fell into disfavor with the State and was sent to the gulag. Georgia had recently been absorbed into the Soviet empire, along with Armenia and Azerbaijan, but because the Politburo viewed its folk traditions as at odds with the image of muscular Soviet armory, these rich idiosyncrasies were ignored and suppressed. Khutsiev spent his adolescence immersed in cinema, discovering Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and Dovzhenko's *Earth*. He enrolled at the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow after the war and directed his first full-length feature, *Springtime on Zarechnaya Street* (1956), with Feliks Mironer, with whom he'd written his student film *City Builders* (1950).

The street of the title is named for the humble building where the protagonist, Tanya (Nina Ivanova), teaches Russian literature. Free from the town's heavily industrial surroundings, the classroom acts as an island where students learn poetic monologues and discuss the fate of characters. The setting anticipates Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and its use of the classroom to tease out youthful aspirations and the tension between generations. Tanya finds herself pursued by one of her students, Sasha (Nikolai Rybnikov), and although she refuses his advances they develop a kind of platonic romance. Through their relationship Tania is transformed from a lofty-minded teacher, who spends her nights dreamily listening to Rachmaninoff, to a citizen enamored with the power of industry. In one of the film's setpieces she finds herself engulfed by a cloud of steam billowing from the power plant and is overawed by the beauty of the giant furnace.



Springtime on Zarechnaya Street (x 2)



The pure sense of joy in many of *Springtime's* characters, which helped make the film such an internationally renowned work of the Thaw, is deflated in *The Two Fedors* (1959), where the trauma of rebuilding life after war's destruction is expressed through the companionship between a soldier and a young boy. When the older Fedor (Vasiliy Shukshin) returns home to find his family house in ruins, the town pulls together in an act of collective rebuilding. The camera cranes over rooftops and buried tanks while the younger Fedor (Nikolai Chursin) struggles with his identity as a war orphan. Tension erupts when the older Fedor marries, but in

a touching finale, the new family comes together, deciding to live and work in harmony. Although the film is a more generic product of Socialist Realism, what stands out is the lyrical way in which Khutsiev shows boyhood to be a bewildering state. In one scene the younger Fedor rolls repeatedly down a dirt hill, taking leave of his duties in the town's rebuilding. He is elated, almost angelic, his spirit lifted above the ruins by his embrace of the earth. It is here we can see Khutsiev as both idealist and quasi-dissident.

Khutsiev's tilt toward dissidence is most pronounced in *Ilych's Gate* (1962), a 197-minute film that was severely reedited under the direction of the Politburo and released as *I Am Twenty* three years later. The scenes cut from *Ilych's Gate* portray Soviet youths as despondent about the fate of their lives and ambivalent about traditional notions of family. They appear indifferent about the consequences of casual sex and express the desire to go on living in the moment, as opposed to pursuing the ideal of a stable, married life. Both versions manage to remain stunning celebrations of youth in the face of an older generation. Characters seem to drift effortlessly along pavements, buoyed by the optimism of their youth in the manner of Godard's *Breathless* (1960), and yet with an even more pronounced lyricism and even expressionism: Rodchenko-esque camera angles; building facades shot in sternly mannered sequences; balconies and rooftops rendered sharply against cloudless skies. And all to a American jazz soundtrack. Khutsiev follows Sergei and his friends with a handheld camera, weaving among inky-black shadows and bright, sunlit pools of light that linger on the faces at outdoor cafés.

The urge to explore intergenerational tension recurs in *July*



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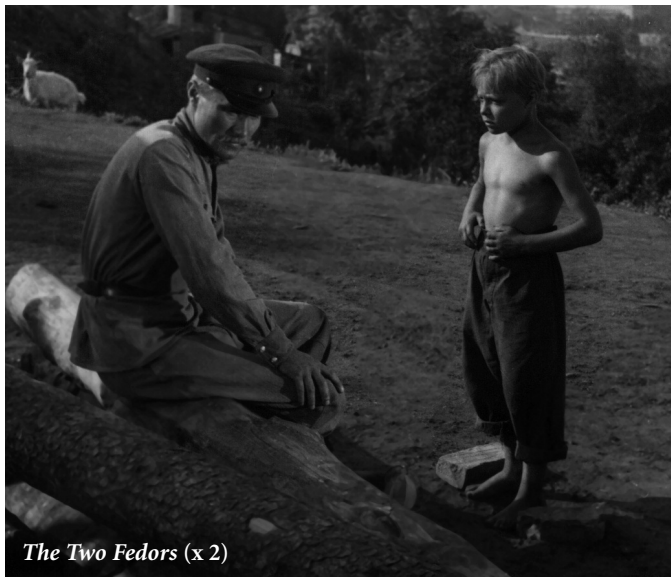
Rain (1967), a loose companion piece to *I Am Twenty* and perhaps Khutsiev's crowning achievement. More than any of his other films, this ensemble portrait of Moscow captures the spirit of the Thaw. The film opens with street scenes that cut to close-ups of Old Master paintings, laying the groundwork for the rest of the film's elliptical vignettes and abrupt sonic shifts. At first we hear the overture to Bizet's *Carmen*, a snippet of muffled English dialogue, news broadcasts, and then pop music, which suggests a restless impatience on behalf of the characters as much as it invokes urban polyphony. The camera focuses on small groups and individuals throughout the film, who participate in Soviet life by commenting on new trends rather than actively pursuing its goals.

These men and women roam aimlessly in depopulated spaces, trapped happily in idle moments of everyday banality. Khutsiev's shot juxtapositions deliberately destabilize a sense of time and place to implicate the viewer within the narrative flow. Telephones are used as a kind of a time machine to move back and forth across generations, and to connect isolated individuals in public spaces. The result poses ever-lingering questions: what is the actual legacy of the war? What, realistically, will the generation that follows accomplish? At the film's conclusion the camera

lingers momentarily on the Bolshoi's classical statues, underlining the difference between the past's frozen and fixed idealized figures and the buoyant youth of the moment.

Of all the individual characters the film details, the one it lingers on most is Lena (Evgeniya Uralova), whose sunlit face and wry smile act as a kind of floating center, framed against the walls of apartments, halls, and building sites. The film is constantly pulled back to her image of urbane indifference. Lena is Western and cool—her posture, facial expressions, and vocal modulations foster a defiant, ironic detachment seemingly indifferent to authority. She embodies the attitude of the Thaw, when the individual could exist sufficiently removed from the hand of the State. This cool would not last, however, as the creep of the hard-line Brezhnev era (beginning in 1964) meant an end to the Thaw and a clampdown on cultural freedom.

IN THE '70S, KHUTSIEV TURNED TO TELEVISION. THE BROADCAST feature *It Was the Month of May* (1970) follows a cohort of Russian soldiers occupying a German town in the days after Hitler's death, when the town's residents must come to terms with their lives after the war. The controversial portrayal humanizes the townspeople by showing them going about



The Two Fedors (x 2)



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their lives without apparently being touched by the guilt of the Third Reich. Midway through the film, Khutsiev introduces '60s footage of a tall German woman directing traffic; when she turns, the screen cuts to images of Jews in death camps. In this jarring cut, Khutsiev seems to be expressing the challenge of finding meaning in the unfathomable reality of the Holocaust, and how it signifies some permanent historical break, after which there can no longer be history but only a kind of post-history. *It Was the Month of May* posits that modern German citizens could not possibly be asked to account for the hate and crimes of their parents and therefore the event could only be repressed.

The documentary *And Still I Believe* (1974) also makes extraordinary use of archival footage, in this case with respect to the legacy of his co-director Mikhail Romm, who left the film unfinished at the time of his death. It is larger in scope than *It Was the Month of May*, encompassing the breadth of the 20th century, where tanks, armies, bombs, and the bonds of men at war are spliced alongside images of people working, producing, and consuming. The footage is pieced together as a puzzle of human endeavor and disaster. It is profoundly moving, especially in the stirring epilogue, where faces of children—of all races—are shown one after the other, and are accompanied by Romm's voice saying, "All children of the world are good. Everything depends on how we shape these children."

With Khutsiev's first embrace of color in *Epilogue* (1984), the lightness and buoyancy of his Thaw period dissipate. His mature style is more concentrated, unafraid of being portentous. The film features a retired doctor who visits his son-in-law in contemporary Moscow, and is reminiscent of a somber chamber drama like Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* or Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*. The now-familiar theme of intergenerational tension is located in a long conversation in the son-in-law's apartment, where the two play chess and share points of view on the Great Patriotic War (aka World War II) and the nature of Tolstoy. It is as though Khutsiev has plucked two characters from the crowds of his earlier work,

drawing them in among modern life. The son-in-law's apartment is an '80s bachelor pad replete with purple carpet and bedcovers, and his cynicism is juxtaposed with footage of a circus on TV. It's hard not to read this cynicism as a symptom of the dying Soviet Union, where having become bogged down in an expensive war in Afghanistan, Russia's economy is crumbling (along with the hopes of its youth).

Infinitas (1992) premiered the year after the Soviet Union was dissolved and again focuses on a middle-aged figure, Vladimir (Vladislav Pilnikov), who sells his worldly possessions and takes a journey into the countryside. He is accompanied by a guide who is perhaps a younger version of himself, and is a symbol of youth. The film has several of the same visual and sonic motifs as Tarkovsky's work, with billowing curtains, Bach's Chorale Prelude, and Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* all used to signal Vladimir's revolving platform of memories. Although *Infinitas* is a significant achievement, its muted colors are firmly rooted in the '80s and '90s, and therefore its theme of timelessness feels constrained by its era-specific look.

Yet through the eyes of Vladimir, the viewer is presented with an unease about the relationship between the individual and the Russian state in the post-Soviet era. This differs from his earlier work in that its central character is bleaker, less optimistic that a youthful spirit can emerge from the empire's ruins. The film's wandering reflection on mortality and the fate of the Soviet empire may not have the visual brilliance of the earlier black-and-white films, but it continues his interrogations of the space between the personal and the political; it suggests that in an uncertain political climate the personal is stripped bare, sentenced to be divested of any meaningful identity beyond recollections of the past. True to its expansive title, *Infinitas* caps an oeuvre that, when seen as a whole, is a stunning visual and intellectual achievement. ●

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