

Portret v sumerkakh, 'Twilight Portrait' (2011)

Drama, colour, 105 min.

Dir ANGELINA NIKONOVA. Written by ANGELINA NIKONOVA and OL'GA DYKHOVICHNAIA.

Cast: Sergei Borisov, Ol'ga Dykhovichnaia, Sergei Goliudov.

Russia: Baraban Film.

Language: Russian

Angelina Nikonova's debut feature film, *Portret v sumerkakh* ('Twilight Portrait'), is a tale of moral and state corruption set in an unremittingly bleak modern-day Russia. Together with lead actress and co-writer Ol'ga Dykhovichnaia, Nikonova etches a portrait of a listless society in which institutional apathy and individual indifference are accepted constants. Beset on this backdrop is the sombre existence of counselling psychologist Marina (Dykhovichnaia) who, discontent with her life in middle Russia, maintains an ungratifying extra-marital affair and distances herself from her milieu. The heroine's materialistic nature is put to test when she is the subject of a robbery, to which she receives no sympathy from passers-by or the police. Enduring a similar traumatic experience as one of her patients, Marina is subsequently the victim of police brutality and rape, whereupon the film embarks on a psychological evaluation of the heroine, yet offers no clear diagnosis for her behaviour.

As night encroaches on the city, we follow Marina's irresolute movements as she turns into a social somnambulist and seems to lose all desire for rehabilitation. Roving through the streets, she purchases a second-hand camera with a 'twilight portrait' function, foreshadowing future events and giving the film a meta-cinematic element. Pictures stored on the camera present her with a glimpse into the previous owner's lacklustre life, which works to intensify this episode of introspection. The pivotal moment for her character comes when she happens to see one of her attackers, hardened police officer Andrei (Sergei Borisov), in a café. She stalks him from the shadows as he returns to his apartment block and then, arming herself with a broken bottle, follows him into the elevator. The camera, and through it Marina's gaze, inspects the neck of the unsuspecting Andrei, looking for the best place to strike, yet hesitates. Instead of taking advantage of this chance for revenge she lovingly embraces her attacker. The story descends deeper into a cycle of perversion as she begins a masochistic relationship with her assailant and domesticates herself within the household of his dysfunctional family.

The film opens itself up to a variety of feminist and psychoanalytical readings but retains a certain ambiguity throughout. Cinematographer Eben Bull's use of hand-held photography on a Canon 5D MK II gives the viewer an unashamedly intimate view of Marina and her consciousness. The cinematic style evokes an interesting depiction of the two rape scenes whereby the screen is completely blackened, as if the gaze of the camera does not dare to witness such horror, while the persistent sound of the attack in isolation leaves a formidable and lasting impression. This obscuration works to represent the victim's clouded consciousness during her trauma and likewise a black-spot in the memory of her attacker as he fails to recognise her later in the film. This sense of realism is further emphasised by the fact that Borisov is not a trained actor but is a police officer by profession. Ultimately the characters are not self-reproachful, just as the film offers them no counselling or a chance for atonement.

Portret v sumerkakh received its world premiere at the 2011 Kinotavr Open Russian Film Festival and has since undergone a modest circuit of European film festivals. It is scheduled for DVD release however details of this are yet to be announced at the time of publication. Nikonova and Dykhovichnaia's second project together, *Velkom khoun* ('Welcome Home'), is currently in post-production and is due for release in 2014.

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