

REVIEW

Fedorchenko's Experiments with Style

Alexei Fedorchenko's *Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari* (*Nebesnye zheny lugovykh mari*, 2012)

VOL. 28 (APRIL 2013) BY MORITZ PFEIFER

With his new *Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari*, Russian director Alexei Fedorchenko offers yet another surprise in his choice of genre and style. Documentary, mockumentary, tragedy, or, this time, humorous portmanteau film, this director seems to take pleasure in destroying the genres he establishes in his previous films every time he makes a new one. *Celestial Wives* feels like a reply to *Silent Souls* (Schnitt review), which explored the funeral rites of the same Volga-Finnic minority that is at the heart of his new film. But if *Silent Souls* appeared like a metaphysical reflection about the meaning of death, *Celestial Wives* is full of cheerful women in the mood for love. Indeed, these 22 odd stories about women whose names all start with the letter "O" are as much about life as *Silent Souls* was about death.

Many episodes are naively cute, like the one in which a women asks her boyfriend to be breastfed in order to provoke Spring, or another one where a wife has doubts about the faithfulness of her husband, and takes the advice of a friend to smell his penis for the possible scent of another women, a test that ends up introducing her to oral sex. Episodes like these are similar to Pasolini's updates of the three collections of medieval stories (Decameron, Cantebury Tales, 1001 Nights). Other episodes are more imaginative. In these episodes mistresses look like demons or wild animals, menstruation comes in the form of a bird, and beauty is a birch tree. Some of these episodes lack the respect and admiration the director showed for these rituals in *Silent Souls*. In one of these fantasy episodes, a wife meets a three meter tall woman in the forest that looks like a National Geographics reconstruction of a neanderthal. The woman then tells her that she really wants to have sex with her husband, be it just for one night. Although it may be reasonable to think about love rivals in terms of prehistoric giants, the encounter is more ridiculous than magic.

Ultimately the strongest episodes are also the most simple ones. This may also be due to the fact that most episodes are too short to provide a minimum amount of understanding about what exactly is going on. Although 90 minutes for the depiction of one ritual may be a bit exaggerated, as was the case with *Silent Souls*, 102 minutes for 22 rituals is bound to run into a shortcoming.

Filmmakers that are in such an extreme dialogue with their own work are rare, and one can admire Fedorchenco for his courage to try out different styles to the point of risking to discredit some of his previous work (a similar switch could be observed from the politically charged, and earnest-in-tone *David* to the mockumentary *First on the Moon* that followed it). But this sort of auto-criticism may also turn into a routine, perhaps even into a signature, and hence into a style of its own. One can only hope that Fedorchenco will not fall into this trap. After all, it would be more interesting to see these films for their own sake or for what they show instead of in reference to each other.