

REVIEW

Staying Put

Andrey Konchalovsky's *The Postman's White Nights* (*Belye nochki pochtalona Aleksey Tryapitsyna*, 2014)

VOL. 57 (SEPTEMBER 2015) BY COLETTE DE CASTRO

The Postman's White Nights portrays the busy life of a Russian postman on the banks of Lake Kenozero in Northern Russia. On this small, isolated peninsula he represents the main connection between locals and the mainland. Early every morning, he takes his small motorboat across a vast lake as the sunrise lights up the wide waters and elaborate wooden houses that appear far along the banks. When he arrives at the post office, he chats flirtatiously with the blonde woman behind the counter, gently teasing her while collecting his letters.

The locals play themselves, and as the postman's visits introduce us to them, we come to realize his role is not only that of an anonymous delivery man, but more intimate and old-fashioned; he's the guy who brings the retirement money, does the food shopping and takes care of the interests of the local people. By getting the real residents to play themselves the director made a powerful choice; the community spirit that binds them comes across in a way that would have been difficult to fake.

When the postman, Lyokha, gets to the house of the local drunkard and realizes he's not at home, he goes looking for him. When he finds him wandering along the banks of Kenozero and leads him home again, we find out that the stumbling man is a dwarf – the postman almost looks like a father taking care of his vodka-addled progeny. Lyokha is a recovering alcoholic himself, and alcohol in the film is at once nearly nowhere to be seen, and omnipresent. When someone steals his motor, he becomes paranoid about who among his neighbors might have stolen it and heads towards a relapse. As he searches for a new motor accompanied by a local child, they stop at a café and he hesitates to order a cocktail – which is all they have at this bar – but manages to stop himself. Instead, like the boy, he orders a large ice-cream. His temporary responsibility for the boy is like his precarious responsibility for the people, it is a fragile balance. The role of postman is thus introduced to us not as an art that is moribund, but like the work of the priest or of the doctor, one that serves a social role and a link between village life and modernity.

Among those who were chosen to play the locals from the postman's village, the one professional actor is Irina Ermolova in the role of Lyokha's love interest. The characters' interactions will reflect the fact that she's ultimately an outsider. Indeed, her character is baffling for Lyokha, and when she leaves he doesn't really try to stop her. In more ways than one, this film is really about those who choose to stay and though it lingers on a departure for a time, it ultimately wants to return to the characters played by nonprofessionals.

The community is situated near a space station, with life vaguely threatened by modernity. The way this threat is brought to light is reminiscent of another docu-fiction, a recent Kyrgyz film directed by Mirlan Abdykalykov, *Heavenly Nomadic* (2015) – one of the best films at this year's Karlovy Vary Film Festival – in which nomadic tribes who struggle with the pull of the big city find a different threat at the end of the film, that of modernization right at their doorstep. In both films we find a contrast between what most viewers feel to be a vision of the past and what the director presents as an inescapable future. In *Heavenly Nomadic*, the tribes are dying out as the young people leave for the city. In *White Nights* people are leaving for the same reasons, even the once-lively school has long been closed.

In both cases, we are suddenly plunged into something that seems futuristic and contrasts shockingly with what we have been seeing throughout the film. *Heavenly Nomadic* shows huge Star-Wars-like tractors which seem set to build futurist housing or factories of some sort, while in *White Nights* a rocket takes off from a local space station. The films thus have different ways of showing an unreal-seeming contrast between the past (or what we perceive as the past) and the present. Both are uncomfortable realities for the viewer because our satisfaction with the comfortable and picturesque rituals of the past depicted in these films must, we know, retreat before the future's uncertain promise.