



The light thief

Director: Svet Ake

Country: Kyrgyzstan

Date: 2010

Review by Derek Malcolm, This is London, :

Films from cinematic outposts such as Kyrgyzstan tend to be praised just because they appear at all and are full of nicely gnarled peasant faces, but Aktan Arym Kubat's *The Light Thief* is too good for such patronising behaviour.

It's about a rural society being systematically corrupted and a village electrician (the director himself) who fights against it all. He lives in a small village, where he's obsessed with constructing a wind machine that will produce the electricity the last few inhabitants need.

He'll break the law if he has to, by rigging up a pensioner's electricity meter so he doesn't have to pay. He is, in short, an admirable man with an open heart and a pawky sense of humour. You only have to look at his face to smile. The urban leeches, however, are all around him, and it is a thousand to one against him succeeding to bring light into darkness. Meanwhile, the film, though essentially angry at the electrician's fate, has both unforced charm and gentle humour.

Watch the scene where his wife bathes him to see what I mean. It's two minutes that express everything. Cinematographer Hassan Kydyraliyev has done a good job, but the film - Kubat's sixth - belongs securely to this cherishable director and actor.

An edited article from kinokultura.com by Vida Johnson:

The Light Thief by the best-known, and arguably the best, Kyrgyz filmmaker, Aktan Arym Kubat (formerly Abdykalykov) opened in the Director's Fortnight sidebar at Cannes to a standing ovation that reportedly brought the director to tears.

Arym Kubat makes virtue out of necessity in his low-budget—or art-house budget—filmmaking, giving his films a believability of character and authenticity of place that resonates with festival and art-house audiences across national boundaries. He does not attempt to make commercial films that might fit neatly a particular genre—he says that he doesn't know what genre is because he never studied filmmaking. What he does is to film what he knows. In a recent interview with this author at the Film Forum in Moscow (a showcase of films from the former Soviet republics), he admitted to always filming what he has experienced or felt and the place he knows best, the village: he grew up there and he lives there still. However, he added, in *The Light Thief* he expressed through his hero his philosophy of life and his feelings about what is happening in his country.

After failing to find the right actor, he cast himself in the role of the "little man," the kind, gentle village electrician, a post-Soviet Robin Hood who steals electricity from the state to give it to impoverished villagers who can no longer afford to pay. But in his persistent attempts to bring light, literally and metaphorically, to the village in a time of economic and political turmoil, Svet Ake, as the villagers call him, becomes the village's true conscience. Arym Kubat translates the hero's name as "Brother" Light, but in combination with the Kyrgyz "ake", the use of the Russian word for light (svet), and later for the electrical meter (schetchik) reminds the viewer that electricity came to the village thanks to the Soviet electrification project. Thus the hero's name, as well as the film's narrative, interrogate the Soviet past, as do so many of the films of the former Soviet republics.

The film begins with one of the numerous adjustments that the hero will make to the make-shift windmill in his yard. When—after some of the titles—the camera cuts in close-up to wires being twisted, it takes

the viewer a few moments to figure out what in fact Svet Ake is doing: connecting wires to make an electrical meter work in reverse. When the hero is caught and brought up before the village mayor, he defends himself with the simple statement that he does this “just for those who cannot pay.” As he is taken away in a van, presumably to jail, his wife shouts: “Is it a crime to help people?”

Svet Ake does his best to help and protect people as the village itself is bought up and taken over by Bekzat, a “New” Kazakh businessman–developer who wants to “make this barren land into a heaven.” The shouting match between Esen, the town’s honest mayor, who drives a modest Russian car, and Bekzat with his large foreign Jeep, encapsulates the on-going argument in all the post-Soviet countries about a Soviet system that provided the basics of life (food and electricity) and the new economic forces that want to develop the land and bring prosperity—or is it they are stealing the land and totally impoverishing its people?

The film is nominally set during the “Tulip Revolution” which brought down the harsh dictatorial Akayev government in 2005: we see protests on the television in the club that Bekzat is renovating, as he says, for the benefit of the village. Is he a good guy or bad? An outsider, he ingratiates himself with the village elders through his relative, Mansur, Svet Ake’s village buddy and drinking partner, whom Bekzat gets appointed as mayor after Esen dies. But Bekzat has big plans: he wants to be elected deputy, and even seems to want to bring to fruition Svet Ake’s dream of building a wind farm to electrify the whole valley. Svet Ake, it turns out, is not only a humble village electrician, but has the technical know-how to design a wind farm. However, Bekzat’s excessive interest in the windmills, his dark glasses, expensive city clothes, ominous Jeep, shady Chinese business partners, and, most significantly, thug-like subordinates—all do not bode well either for the village or for Svet Ake.

When Bekzat offers visiting Chinese businessmen and potential partners some Kyrgyz “hospitality,” including a yurt, a dancing girl, and ostensibly a local custom, an “erotic theater,” Svet Ake takes a stand that, it seems, will cost him his life. As the director noted in interview, it is important at certain moments in life to just say no. First an embarrassed and then an enraged observer, Svet Ake tries to break up the game despite the woman’s protestations. The scene is both comic and tragic, and Svet Ake pays dearly—the next day he is chased and beaten severely by Bekzat’s thugs and his limp body is dumped in the river. We never see him again, although he metaphorically lives on: there is a cut to Svet Ake’s windmill finally creating enough electricity to power a light bulb. The film ends with a close-up tracking shot of the bicycle wheels, ridden by someone we cannot see, yet the legs might be Ake’s. The open ending serves the director’s purpose, for, as he said in interview: his heroes are immortal; this could be Svet Ake who survived, or perhaps it was the little boy who followed Svet Ake around throughout the film. There will be people like Svet Ake to bring light, the “light of hope,” so that the “world would become more humane.”

Although the film’s narrative, as relayed above, seems to imply that the film is a social and political commentary on the Soviet past and on current-day Kyrgyzstan, particularly its impoverished villages, the film has a much more universal appeal. Some might critique the film for some slow, lingering scenes, disconnected episodes and unexplained or unmotivated actions. One moment Svet Ake is hauled off to jail for stealing light, and the next he is back home because, as his wife says, “the authorities have turned to dust.” But the viewer does not really care why it is that Svet Ake is released because of the visually memorable homecoming scene where his loving but long-suffering wife washes him in a small metal laundry or children’s tub and reaches between his legs, asking “how is my revolutionary?” as he smiles sheepishly.

Arym Kubat has said in interview that he is against all heroes, that he ignores what is traditional beauty, or a traditional hero in the film. His heroes are anti-heroes. He wants to turn our attention to “the simple, unattractive thing”, in this case Svet Ake. On the screen he convincingly lives the part of his unlikely hero: he was not afraid to bare his body and he did his own stunt work. Watching Arym Kubat climb a tree demonstrates to the audience that the time of heroes is not past, and that directors can make excellent films if they put themselves in their films, body and soul, and if they are fearless and literally willing “to go out on a limb.”