

In Pursuit of the Siberian Shaman

In Pursuit of the Siberian Shaman. Anya Bernstein, director; 2006. 75 mins., color, in Russian and Buryat with English subtitles. Distributor: DER, 101 Morse St., Watertown, MA 02472.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, it became popular among tourists, journalists, and intrepid scholars to travel as deeply as possible into Siberia in search of shamans. A discourse of authenticity was quick to develop—which were the “real” shamans, reviving an ancient practice that was perhaps not as totally eradicated as the Soviet power might have hoped? How could one tell the real shaman from the neo-shaman—or, as one Russian Orthodox priest in this film jokes, from the “showman”?

Anya Bernstein’s film purports to grapple precisely with this tension between ancient religious practice and encroaching modernity. However, I think the film actually does much more than this, and is much more interesting than its banal title suggests. Bernstein is a young Russian émigré with an MA in visual anthropology from the University of Manchester, and is now studying anthropology as a graduate student at New York University; this is her fourth film. What she has accomplished here is a beautiful visual ethnography of the everyday life of a practicing Buryat shaman, Valentin Khagdaev, without a hint of the sensationalism or romanticism that so often accompanies accounts of shamanism. As it happens, this shaman’s everyday life entails intimate shamanic rituals performed for a local, multi-ethnic clientele, as well as lectures, and, yes, shows performed at a Lake Baikal resort for tourists, who are at times delighted, at times skeptical, but always captivated by this engaging man.

Bernstein has expertly captured moments both dramatic and mundane, following Khagdaev’s whirlwind movements as he performs rituals at a variety of different sites (switching between Russian and Buryat languages, depending on his clientele); feeds his pigs and waters his garden at home with his wife and young son; runs for a seat in the district council and then attends the inauguration ceremony, where the deputies receive their all-important ID cards; hitches a ride on the main dirt road to get to one of his tourist gigs at the resort; and gives performance after performance for innumerable tourist groups. As Khagdaev jokes to a member of one German tourist group, “I’m a wandering shaman, wandering around the region. And I’m followed everywhere by a wandering anthropologist—her!”

Aside from this moment when Khagdaev gestures to the camera, Bernstein is minimally present in the film. There is no narration, but Bernstein has assembled her footage in a coherent narrative sequence that communicates clearly her

perspective. Only the opening sequence—in which we hear what are supposedly telephone messages that two Russian-speaking men left for Anya, warning her against studying shamans—seems at all contrived (and contributes very little: there is surely a better way to convey the odd mixture of skepticism and fearful respect that Russians feel toward shamanism). Any moments of ambiguity in the narrative sequencing are bridged with title cards (it is a tiny bit ironic—intentionally so?—that this is exactly the technique used in the 1928 Soviet footage of a shamanic performance that she uses to open and close the film).

In the first part of the film, Bernstein shows us the shaman in action, casually performing what he himself calls his “real” rituals for local clients. It is only later that she begins to add the layers of complexity that make up this shaman’s diversified career, including the more showy tourist gigs. By the time the whole picture is revealed, it is impossible for the viewer to dismiss the shaman’s authenticity simply because he also takes advantage of this economic opportunity. In between, Bernstein has editorially constructed a fascinating if disjointed debate between the shaman and a local Russian Orthodox priest, artfully juxtaposing their separate responses to her questions. The priest calls shamanism an “infection” and laments that the clash between Orthodoxy and shamanism has meant that adherents of both religions are superficial in their belief and practice; the shaman says that shamanism is about “simple daily requests” rather than complicated ceremonies, and reminds us that no one was ever found trying to “shamanize” Christians. He later adds that he does not discriminate against Orthodox Russians when they ask him to perform rituals on their behalf.

This film is technically superb: the shots are well-composed, the photography of Siberian landscapes is quite beautiful, the editing is of good quality, and there is some wonderful regional music used here to good effect. I was particularly impressed with the subtitles, which in other films often are so poorly executed that they actually interfere with a film; here the subtitles are accurate and complete translations of what is being said, and they are on-screen long enough to be absorbed without one feeling rushed.

This is an excellent film for the classroom, appropriate to many different subjects, including anthropology, religion, Asian studies, globalization, tourism, and economic development. I fully intend to use it in my anthropology of religion class. However, for those interested in classroom use, the film’s length is an awkward 75 minutes. Bernstein might consider producing a shorter, classroom version; in fact, this version seems to lose its momentum in the final third, and while it would be a shame to lose some of the beautiful landscapes and the entertaining “on the road” segments, by this time they really are no longer necessary to move the film’s story forward.

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