

Special
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Sakha

KinoKultura

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reviewed by Csaba Mészáros © 2022

Orto Dojdu (The Middle World) is a crucial concept in the Sakha worldview. The Middle World, in contrast to *Üöhehe Dojdu* (The Upper World—where benevolent deities live), *Allaraa Dojdu* (The Lower World—the home of monsters and evil spirits) and *Anara Dojdu* (Afterworld—the place where the souls of people who have passed away move to) is the realm of human entities and human activities, as well as the home of other earthly beings, like horses, cattle, trees, and wild game. Yet, there is no watertight boundary between these worlds; a complex network of permanent communication interlinks them. Of all these worlds, the Middle World plays the most central, connecting role; here human beings dwell and create places imbued with their personal experience and memories out of the infinite space of created nature.



This Middle World created by deities, along with its inhabitants, is the film's main protagonist. Thus the question arises: how can an entire world be presented via the language of cinema? This is the challenge that the director (Alekssei Romanov), under the pseudonym "Uot Ajarkhaan" (Fire Creator), attempted to take on.

Although there is a storyline stretching through the more than two-hours-long film, it of secondary importance compared to the topography of the Middle World. The plot describes the fate of a young Sakha man, from his birth until his marriage. Yet the film does not take a traditional, chronological storyline approach to a single individual's life; rather, it enumerates important life events, when the fate of an individual in the Middle World takes a firm direction. The film provides a story of birth rituals, marriages, finding a profession, and vocation—the story of how a baby becomes a full-blown human while going through a sequence of rites of passage.

Today, in an era when Sakha movies are gaining increasing popularity at international film festivals and are reaching a broad audience, this Middle World (that is, the territory where Sakha live) is usually depicted as Yakutia's virgin natural environment. The natural character of this Middle World is evident for a Western audience, as Yakutia's environment is usually depicted as a pristine environment exposed to human harms, like climate change and forest fires. However, it is not the same for local Sakha. Usually, they do not see their environment as opposed to the human sphere, but rather as in a state of constant interaction with human communities.

In this film, however, the Middle World is far from a natural environment. It is a world built via the complex relations between various live entities: spirits, lakes, rivers, wild game, horses, and of course, Sakha. Although this Middle World is inclusive in the sense of ontological variation, it is strictly exclusive in terms of ethnic character as the Middle World is genuinely Sakha. All of the horses, cattle, birch tree groves (*charaan*), lentic-shaped thermokarst depressions (*alaas*), and humans are Sakha in the film.

In 1993, when the film was produced, the sociocultural context of Sakha films was quite different from that of today. At that time, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the weakening of central power in Russia, questions related to ethnic affiliation and national awakening played a crucial role in the cultural politics of the newly established Sakha Republic. Nevertheless, what might seem to outsiders to be an enumeration of ethnic markers or the presentation of national costumes and feasts in the film, is in fact, the immanent structure of the Middle World for its inhabitants. All of the elements that seem to communicate ethnic character for us are means of communication between different live entities in the Middle World, and betwixt the interrelated Upper, Lower and Middle Worlds.



The resurrection of the White Shaman, the Smith, and the Black Shaman, as well as the birth of a Sakha baby in the first half an hour of the film is the beginning of a permanent communication between the past, the present, and the future, as well as an exchange betwixt the Worlds.

Instead of focusing on the external features of otherness, the film provides an opportunity to immerse in an unknown ontology of an unfamiliar World by unfolding the dynamic exchanges between its live entities. Every episode in the film is a short story explaining the relationship between the inhabitants of the Middle World: the birth of a Sakha baby interlinks deities, dogs, horses, and humans; the initiation scenes provide a meaningful presentation of the connection between spirits and humans; the hunting and the fishing scene explains the link between humans, animals, and spirits; and lastly, the central (and the longest) scene, about the Sakha

summer festival, gives a comprehensive impression of the structure of these Worlds.

In that sense, *The Middle World* is far from an exotic ethnic film for outsiders – the stakes are much higher. We do not witness an epistemological difference in the film; it is not that Sakha see the natural world differently. No. It is an ontologically different World, with its own rules and structures, crisscrossed with fluid agencies, and held together with a richly interwoven fabric of communication and relations. This is the Orto Dojdu to which the director provides a short introduction.



After carrying out subsequent fieldwork in rural Yakutia, for me, this film represents the inverse of earlier Soviet films from Siberia. Of these films, the documentary *Speak, Yakutia! (Kepselakutia)*, produced by Valerii Homenko and Tamara Chirkova at the East-Siberian Newsreel Studio (*Vostochno-Sibirskaiia studiia kinokhroniki*) in 1972, provides an eloquent example, as it diligently follows the enforced aesthetic requirement that a piece of art should be “national in form, and socialist in content.” This film, on the contrary, builds upon the best traditions and stylistic language of Soviet cinematography, which the director mastered at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, and yet it still provides genuinely Sakha content. This inherently Sakha content simultaneously imbues the form of the film



and leads to a newly created realm: the realm of post-soviet Sakha films, naturally stemming forth from the roots of the Middle World.

Csaba Mészáros

The Middle World, Sakha/Russia, 1993

Color, 135 min

Cast: Petr Kolesoi, Vladimir Kondakov, Afanaasii Fedorov, Il'ia Kononov, Matrena Kornilova

Script: Keremen Sata, Uot Ajarkhaan

Director: Uot Ajarkhaan (Aleksei Romanov)

Art Director: Valerii Pavlov

Cameraman: Semen Vasil'ev

Sound: Iakov Aleksandrov

Music: Mikhail Tumus, Aleksandr Mondo

Production: Sakhafil'm

Aleksei Romanov “Uot Ajarkhan:” *The Middle World* (Orto Dojdu/Seredinnyi mir, 1993)

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