The Middle World of Film: Ontological Poetics, Live Landscapes, and Sentient Beings in the Language of Movies

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In 2002, just two months after I first arrived in Yakutsk to carry out anthropological fieldwork and learn the local vernacular, I visited a small projecting room next to the Lena Cinema. The Lena Cinema itself was the second most prominent and well-equipped facility of its kind in Yakutsk, and it screened Russian and international movies. Yet, the tiny cinema attached to the Lena was significantly different; it was the venue of Sakhafil'm movies. The main entrance of the Lena Cinema and the side entrance of this smaller projection room were not far apart, but they led to two separate worlds. Two decades ago, this small projection room was the only place one could watch movies in the Sakha language. I wasn't interested in Sakha cinema *per se*, but rather, I wanted to practice my Sakha language skills in order to be as fluent as possible before starting fieldwork in the countryside.

I entered the small and shabby projection room where two or three people sat beside me. The film started and I focused on the linguistics rather than the plot, the ideas of the director or the acting. Back then it was fairly challenging to get a schedule of the projection times, sometimes the cinema was even unexpectedly closed, so I called ahead to find out which movies would be shown in the following days. There wasn't a wide choice of movies, but once every few weeks I could watch a Sakha movie from the archives of Sakhafil'm. I saw a few movies which were shot at that time, or earlier: *Night Maiden* (*Tüüngnü kyys*, Gennadii Bagynanov, 1999), *Settled in Exile* (*D'ukkaakh*, Nikita Arzhakov, 1996), *Settlement* (*Ötökh*, Gennadii Bagynanov, 1996), and a few others, some of them twice, in order to practice the language. At that time, I could not imagine that in 2017 I would meet Sakha film producers and directors at the NATIVe program of the Berlinale, introducing indigenous cinema to a European audience.

In 2013 after carrying out subsequent fieldwork in Yakutia, and thanks to the rapid spread of the internet, laptops, and smartphones in Yakutia's countryside, I realized that the position of Sakha-language films had drastically changed within a decade. Many digital devices held a copy of a Sakha movie. More surprisingly, young people watched Sakha films in regional centers, created screenplays, and shot their own films. With the help of the infrastructure of the local Houses of Culture, some of these recordings evolved into full-blown amateur movies circulated in local communities and beyond. In Yakutsk, many of my young friends used torrent resources to download Sakha films, as well as international titles.

I did not spend much time in Yakutsk—carrying out field studies on local environmental perceptions, I mostly lived in rural Yakutia. Yet, the change in the popularity of Sakha movies that had occurred between my visits was striking. Even in 2004, it was common at one of my fieldwork sites to see an exchange of Bollywood movies on VHS cassettes, but no one had any idea about Sakha films, directors, or actors. This situation has definitely changed in the last two decades. Besides the drastic change in the social life of Sakha movies in the countryside, there is now robust international interest in Sakha cinematography. Sakha movies have had recurrent success in international and domestic film festivals, and the budget of Sakha movies has grown considerably.

These changes are worth scientific scrutiny; the intense social life of movies and movie making in Yakutia is especially of interest for an anthropologist. But the present article will not undertake this task. Instead, it has a dual objective. First, it aims to provide a concise description of how to move away from the surface, the linguistic material of Sakha films, to the heart of its content: a genuine representation of the lifeworlds of the Sakhas. Secondly, it attempts to intertwine Sakha films with anthropological fieldwork experience in rural Yakutia.

Therefore, this article is, strictly speaking, not a study of Sakha films—I do not explore the technicalities of how Sakha films display this specific world, the cinematographic background, the artistic style, or the film's narrative structure. I restrict my interest to the following question: how does the world presented in Sakha films correlate with the world I came to know during fieldwork in Yakutia—an immediate environment providing a home, shelter, and food for fishermen, hunters, and village-dwellers, along with a complex and intimate relationship with sentient earthly beings, with whom they and their ancestors dwelt together. Before examining this correlation, I would first like to explain my perspective on comparing fictional movies with the local lifeworlds and ontologies experienced during anthropological fieldwork.

Observational and fictional movies

One of the most often quoted remarks in anthropological scholarship belongs to Bronislaw Malinowski on the main goal of fieldwork: "The final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight…is, briefly, to grasp the natives' point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world." (Malinowski 1922: 25). This perspective on fieldwork promotes a particular method known as participant observation. This method both intends to make the process of data collection and recording more precise, and provides a means for the (self)-legitimization of the anthropologist who can thus claim that (s)he was there and as an insider, can inform outsiders about the native's world (Rony 1996: 116). Johannes Fabian rightly pointed out that the participant observation method tells much more about observation than about participation (Fabian 1983).

Observation, as an essential methodological means of anthropology, has imbued not only fieldwork technique, but also the way researchers relate to the use of visual materials—especially movies. Therefore, until the last two or three decades, many anthropologists regarded film primarily as a technical means of observation. The camera was no more than an artificial, technicized eye, inferior in many senses to the human eye and perception. Whereas anthropologists' observation and textual processes are open-ended and semi-detached from their actual viewpoint, the camera may seem not more than a fixed device, a single-glass lens, which dominates the recorded moment. Therefore, visuality provides only additional assistance for the researcher, and sometimes creates a barrier for abstraction and contextualization.

Anthropology's focus on textuality and observation delimited its interest in interpreting visual materials and movies. Most notably, Maurice Bloch and other anthropologists dismissed visual images in anthropological-knowledge production and described them as confusing (Houtman 1988). Nevertheless, anthropological scholarship has a more profound reason for resisting the use of visual images in analyzing ethnographic data. Kirsten Hastrup, in her oft-cited article, argues that language and motion pictures lie on two separate epistemological horizons. Whereas images cannot do more than grasp and reproduce the visual surface of reality, the use of language to understand and comprehend social reality requires a higher degree of abstraction. By definition, words and sentences should "mean" something—and therefore, this meaning should be created in the course of fieldwork and analysis. Authors use both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis of language to choose and arrange words and meanings (Hastrup 1992). Thus, writing down observations always goes a step beyond a shallow reproduction or copies of the perceived reality.

If visual anthropology focuses predominantly on observation, then movies are no more than concrete images perpetuating a course of events, in contrast to not strictly linear academic texts, which are able to rise above the temporal and spatial constraints of the moment. If culture is a web of meaning, then only texts full of interrelated meanings—and not totalizing any given moment– can provide a thick description of events. If we follow the footsteps of some of the representatives of the standard anthropological interpretation of films, then we have to conclude that motion pictures are not much more than raw materials enhancing visual observation. In this vein, insufficient emphasis has often been given to the fact that films and images are fundamentally different from seeing, and the camera (especially in observational films) does not imitate the anthropologists' eye. As a corollary, observational cinema focuses in on the lived time and space, just as a fieldworker in anthropology (Suhr and Willerslev 2012: 283).

This observational approach has a further consequence: the radical other allows itself to be incorporated in and adapted to a visual world created by observation, creating "a sense of familiarity" (MacDougall 1998: 245). The visuality created in observation movies—in contrast to language, which aims to underscore differences and the act of translation —points at the possibility of transcending cultures, interlinking cultural boundaries (MacDougall 1998: 252). Whereas in textual analysis, the anthropologist becomes Hermes and transmits messages to the reader, in observational movies, the images enhance the viewer's understanding. This difference in handling and theorizing visual materials reinforced an unbalanced relationship between visual and textual articulation of anthropological knowledge; whereas anthropological texts vary greatly in genre and the textual presentation of intersubjective situations, visual anthropology sticks to temporal succession and narrativity (cf. Pasqualino and Schneider 2014: 2).

But what if anthropology is more than the observation of data? And what if anthropologists regarded film as more than a tool for enhancing the recording of the visual surface of real-life happenings, which otherwise can be grasped and theorized more thoroughly in/by texts. And, what if visuality is not the illustration of, but the constituent of anthropological knowledge? These are the fundamental questions tackled in the following pages as I endeavor to juxtapose fieldwork experience with Sakha fictional movies.

I argue that it is possible to bring non-observational and fictional movies into play in contextualizing and deepening anthropological understanding, and visa-versa, anthropological field experiences may open a new perspective on the interpretation of fictional films. In order to bring these two dissimilar fields into harmony with one another, it is crucial to find the shared experience which characterizes my relationship with Sakha fictional movies and anthropological fieldwork in rural Yakutia. For me, in both cases (i.e. in movies and fieldwork) this experience disrupted my basic assumptions.

Some of my assumptions about Sakha culture and nature were exposed and challenged by Sakha movies and subsequent fieldwork experiences. These disruptions denormalized my expectations about Sakha lifeworlds and the basic categories I used to present (cf. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 2-4)—as Malinowski put it—the Sakha point of view and vision of the world. In the following section, I will present how these disruptions helped to deconstruct my basic assumptions about the Sakha world. In accordance with this, I problematize the role of anthropologists as the sole individuals mediating between different Worlds. I argue that cinema and the interpretation of fictional movies may provide a proper context for getting closer to unknown ontologies.

Disruptions in Sakha movies
Disruptions and unfamiliar sequences of visual images not only interrupt the spectators' attention, but may be a significant constituent of a message otherwise difficult to transmit via a chronological plot. Unusual arrangements and unexpected turns in Sakha movies provide an opportunity to cross the visible-surface boundary of life events, leading to a world that is sometimes invisible in anthropological textual analysis.

An excellent example of this appeared in the first Sakha movie I saw, *Middle World* (*Orto Dojdu*, Russian title: *Seredinnyi mir*, Aleksei Romanov, 1993). It was not easy to follow the director's intentions along the film's path. Instead of entertaining with a story plot, the movie exposed me to an unknown world where different entities (spirits, animals, humans, plants, flames, inanimate museum exhibits, and graven images, and water) constantly communicated with each other. Thus, *Middle World*, rather than creating textual message employing the formal language of cinema, invited me to an unexpected visual experience—a cinematographic performance (see. Pasqualino and Schneider 2014: 4). That is, the cinematographic representation of the Sakha Middle World is not subjugated to the articulation of a clear verbal message, but rather immerses spectators in this world; the film performs the concept of the Middle World, without explanation or narration.

The movie's main aim was not to provide a postulated position for the spectator as an onlooker, an observer of happenings in a world structured according to Sakha ontology. The director did not intend to imitate the human eye. His primary focus was to create a valid conceptual framework of the Middle World where Sakha and other earthly beings dwell. Therefore, what may seem like a disruption in the plot is, in fact, a method of presenting a detailed topography of the agents and domains of the Middle World. The recording of life events rolls and breaks like waves, seemingly disjointedly, and thus provides insight into local Sakha ontologies (c.f. Suhr and Willerslev 2012: 283).

There are several types of disruptions in Sakha movies. The first, and probably the most apparent, is the permeability of categories. In several Sakha films, the boundaries of basic categories appear porous for a Western spectator. Categorical boundaries, such as the living and dead, the past and present, dreams and reality, man and animal, are often problematized. There is no watertight isolation between live and inanimate entities. The films presented in the last section of this article suspend the narrative line of the screenplay and enrich storytelling by adding unexpected elements in order to invite us to learn about a world in which different basic categories regulate the relationships between entities. An excellent example of this can be seen in the movie *Night Maiden*, where the plot is repeatedly disrupted by the appearance of a non-human live entity in the daydreaming of the main protagonist.

Similarly, during fieldwork, I often came across events where it was not easy to interpret the messages, acts, and emotions of my Sakha friends, at least not in the frames of a world based on shared basic categories. Disruptions and unexpected turns in conversations, interviews, and joint fishing, hunting, and herding activities often suggested that my Western assumptions of ontological diversity were hindering my perception and interpretation of these events. For example, when young couples move towards the northern end of an Eastern-Yakutian village because the nearby hill (*Mekke khajata*) brings/radiates fertility, or when people take detours to avoid a specific meadow and its hostile reactions, one may have the impression that the categorization an attributes of entities are fairly usual for Sakha. In the following pages, I will provide a more detailed description of disruptions in m anthropological fieldwork experience.

Nevertheless, textual descriptions in academic articles cannot come close to the experience one has when staring at a tree that has a personality. It's possible to transmit ideas by transforming experience and feelings into a generically defined language of anthropological discourse, but it is more than challenging to textually articulate ideas that are never uttered or performed even during fieldwork. Some anthropologists, therefore, chose a language of the arts—more often than not, photography and cinematography. By this, they seek to voice local opinions and express the irrational, subtle, and elusive. Moreover, with the help of the arts, anthropologists are often able to represent their genuine opinions and impressions, which is a "fundamental part of an authentic research and any encounter between cultures" (Nicoletti 2014:166). Martino Nicoletti dubs this approach to anthropological activity as "poetic ethnography" or "sensorial anthropology;" according to him, this approach represents an "experimentation where art and anthropology can dialog osmotically" (Nicoletti 2014:166).

To step a bit further in this direction, I argue that it is not only anthropologists who can understand and transform local lifeworlds i a subtle and elusive way by using a language of the arts, but also artists, film directors, photographers, etc. who live and are immersed in their own culture. Several studies have demonstrated that, with an insight into their own culture and nature, local filmmakers are able to provide spectators with a glimpse into an unknown world (Adair – Worth 1975; Dowell 2013). The rich legacy of Sakha cinema and the popularity of Sakha movies in Yakutia, Russia, and beyond shows us that Sakha filmmakers hav mastered the art of transmitting local lifeworlds to local, Russian and foreign audiences. This is especially true in an era when bot filmmakers and anthropologists have heavily contributed to the reassessment of human-nonhuman relations (Sweetgrass, Barbash and Castaing-Taylor 2009; Stevenson and Kohn 2015).

Ontological poetics and local categories

There are ontological cinematic forms that can express the realities of local worlds. This reality does not always coincide with our Western(?), ego-focused Cartesian world. Sakha movies cultivate a specific representational craft to develop visual images that present a polyphony of voices and perspectives, and which debunk our categorical system. This cinematic language, like spoken Sakha, gives a voice and agency not only to select humans, but also to various nonhuman entities.

Especially today, when post-humanist intellectual currents permeate academic discourses as well as the arts, and whilst Siberia i undergoing environmental degradation, raising questions about the role and place of humans in a greater ontological context can attract a broad audience and provide an opportunity to represent worlds that previously did not make sense to an audience accustomed to the strict demarcation of human and natural spheres. Therefore, these movies offer much more than an entertaining version of academic articles on the relationship between nature and culture in Yakutia. Instead, they grasp phenomena that are difficult to transmit through observational movies and anthropological textual analysis. In other words, these movies do not intend to translate or explain anything from local Sakha lifeworlds; they simply depict a specific reality (Taylor 1996 86).

Textuality is based on words and concepts, but what if our basic ideas are so different that translation is futile or shallow? In thes cases, visual immersion might add more to our understanding than textual explanation, especially as, in the history of anthropology, phenomena that did not immediately lend itself to rational analysis within the conceptual framework of Western understanding was routinely placed in the categorical ghetto of the irrational, the magical, or the religious.

A world that seems irrational from a Western ontological perspective, regardless of whether it has been analyzed in anthropological articles or depicted in fictional movies, is often translated into a category that is easier to adapt to the epistemological horizon of the researcher. This adaptation, the translation, and the "taming" of local categories create supra-cultural analytical tools applicable to any culture and people. Religion, magic, animism, and ritual are categories that typically seem useful for interpreting unexpected and often irrational observations and experiences. Many studies have pointed out that these general categories often fail to grasp local ideas and usually express concepts based on European-Cartesian perspectives on mind, body, and existence.

Film studies, as well as anthropology, has struggled to interpret phenomena labeled as irrational. According to the generic categorization of Russian cinema, Sakha movies problematizing the interface between nature and culture, or the animate and inanimate, are often labeled as "*misticheskaia drama*" (mystical drama), "*uzhasnoe kino*" (horror) or "*khudozhestvennoe-etnograficheskii fil'm*" (artistic-ethnographic) films. The Sakha movies I analyze in the following section problematize not only the validity of anthropological concepts, but also the illuminating power of the language of cinematographic critique.

In many cases, it is problematic to use concepts based in Russian cinema studies and Western anthropology to describe the content of Sakha films attempting to convey a genuinely Sakha ontology of Yakutia's lifeworld. The visual language these movies cultivate may be called, following Eduardo Kohn's suggestion, "ontological poetics" (Kohn 2015). Indeed, not all Sakha movies follow the footsteps of postmodern Western films—the prototypes of Kohn's category—but many of them, to a greater or lesser extent, do not lend themselves to a study based on a conceptual framework differentiating rational and irrational elements. Ontological poetics—especially in cinema—create a complex sensory experience that allows unknown ontologies and realities to wash over the spectators (Stevenson and Kohn 2015:52).

Yakutia's landscape—the Middle World
In 2002, when I started my fieldwork in Yakutia, I initially focused on local power relationships, and the texts and performances constituting local narrative knowledge. I soon realized that it is impossible to interpret these relationships and texts without detailed knowledge of the environments surrounding Sakha villages. These natural environments are imbued with social meaning and history, because Sakha do not perceive them as sheer physical realities, passively exposed to human interventions and placemaking processes.

Beyond these field experiences, several in-depth interviews with fishermen, hunters, and cattlemen reassured me that many Sakha consider specific natural environments animate entities. Large freshwater reservoirs, like broad lakes and rivers, are usually considered live, sentient entities, but many meadows and hills may also have spiritual qualities (see Mészáros 2020, Crate 2021). Therefore, the way Sakha relate to these natural features expresses an attitude similar to social connections in human communities. People should not shout, fight, curse, or listen to loud music in these areas. Like other living beings, these animate landscapes have a body and soul, and indeed, one does not tread upon them without reason. Therefore, traditionally, roads go along the edge of the meadow, rather than violently slicing the area in two.

As some natural environments are alive, people unfamiliar with a meadow, lake, or hill are cautious and do not willingly enter a meadow without a specific reason, mainly because one never knows the history of a meadow: it might be benevolent or (after conflicts with previous human residents) malevolent. As a result, Sakha conceptions of space are saturated with social significance, and thus, in their perception of environment, there is no point in talking about space in terms of scale or measured distance. In Sakha, there is no exact translation for the word "space" as a neutral word expressing the extent to which objects and events have a relative position. Sakha space consists of a cluster of interrelated places with specific properties. Or, to put it differently, live entities (like meadows and lakes) have definite character traits. As a result, meadows, rivers, lakes, and hills should have names. A meadow without a name is not a proper meadow. As the Sakha proverb goes: *Alaas aattaakh, dojdu surakhtaakh* ["The meadow has a name; the land has fame"].

Therefore, Sakha perceive and represent their environment as a cluster of discrete entities connected with roads and waterways. If one argues that egocentric navigation is subjectively oriented, then allocentric navigation, represented in these maps, is intersubjectively oriented. They are based on complex, varied, and historically-embedded socio-natural relations. As a corollary, multiple place names may refer to the same site, pointing at different aspects of the same entity. Yakutia is an archipelago of live entities with more or less definite contours, coexisting in the boreal forest. Sakha's mental maps are similar to sociograms enumerating the encountered live entities. As a result, movement throughout the boreal forest is not a continuous motion in space but a series of meetings with entities/realms of coexistence—like leaping from one island/place to another in a measureless ocean of boreal forest.

Ecological anthropological research and studies on the environment have gained prominence in the last three decades (Ingold 1990, 2000). This research has revealed the contingency of the European distinction between the human and nonhuman spheres. A robust corpus of ethnographies from societies around the world has demonstrated that various nonhuman entities are regarded as human and members of the local community (Descola and Pálsson 1996, Kohn 2013). These porous animistic ontologies have also been the object of anthropological scrutiny in Siberia (Brightman et al. 2012). The application of contingent European assumptions on Sakha lifeworlds may mislead us in understanding the ways in which Sakha relate to landscapes, animals, and spirits. Let us suppose that entities with dissimilar bodies are equally human (or have the same interiority as humans), and that they cannot be considered external phenomena opposed to the human sphere. By engaging with Sakha ontology, ethnographic data can transform the basic categories of analysis by radically interiorizing the "native point of view," and by not trying "to domesticate or tame otherness by explaining or reducing it to something which is known" (Spyer 2011: 62).

Therefore, instead of describing Yakutia's landscape as a physical relief on the Earth's surface created by complex natural processes, dominated by permafrost transformations, and later by human presence, it might be more instructive to cultivate another perspective: perceiving this land as the Middle World (*Orto Dojdu*)—the home of entities with dissimilar bodies who are in constant communication with each other. The Middle World is a crucial concept in the Sakha worldview: it is the place of human, earthly entities and the hub or agora of animate beings of other, related worlds (the Upper, Lower, and Otherworld). Applying the conceptual framework of *Orto Dojdu* (rather than that of ecological anthropology), which consists of sentient animate landscapes, human-like animals, and respondent spiritual beings, it is possible to provide a study of Sakha films from a novel perspective.

Sakha cinema reflecting on the Middle World
In this last section, I turn my attention to specific Sakha films. I argue that one may gain better insight into the content of these films by employing the Sakha system of categorizing earthly beings. To begin with, it makes sense to dive into Aleksei Romanov's pivotal movie, *Middle World*. Released in 1994, it is of particular interest for several reasons: it is one of the first films to represent a world that does not resemble our Western notions, and more importantly, this representation does not theorize these dissimilarities as irrational, magical, or exotic. On the contrary, it displays a rational and coherent world with strict internal logic. Although this world's logic may be challenging to immediately interiorize, it correlates well with anthropological field experiences.

Middle World.
Worshipping the Sun at the Yhyakh Festival

This is not surprising as a Sakha ethnographer, Ekaterina Nazarovna Romanova, co-wrote the screenplay under the pseudonym "Keremen Sata." A year later she published a monograph (Romanova 1994) on the meaning and presentation of the most important Sakha festival, the *yhyakh*. Coincidentally, the *yhyakh* festival is the focal point of *Middle World*. Here Sakha gather in order to communicate with benevolent deities and spirits and ask for their blessing. The *yhyakh* is also a ritual reconstruction of the world order, opening up different communication channels between worlds and living beings. Without permanent communication and collaboration, the world would be a dangerous place to dwell in, which is why recurrent sacrificial rituals and communication through divination texts are necessary to ensure a peaceful coexistence.

The 1996 short film *Crisis* (*Tölörüjüü*), directed by Gennadii Bagynanov, is an excellent example of how the creatures of the spirit world are often less dangerous and harmful for humans than their fellow humans. The film tells the story of an ill-fated family with a concise and straightforward plot. A husband brings home a man he finds unconscious, lying in the snow. The husband and his wife nurture and heal the man. Yet, despite their help, the man turns against them: out of desire for the wife, he kills the husband, and, after being refused by the widow, kills her as well. The story can

hardly be any simpler—mainly because there is no dialog in the movie—but the central message, the intrusion of evil into a peaceful realm, lies outside the sequence of events.

The first live entity to understand the danger and evil nature of the rescued man is neither the husband nor the wife, but a carved idol safeguarding the family. In a movie in which no one speaks, and communication is limited to gazes, expressions, and fine movements, the camera focuses on the idol's face for quite some time to convey its disapproval of the newcomer. When the husband leaves the house for hunting, the newcomer man turns the protecting idol towards the wall, in order to obscure, that he is approaching the wife. At this moment the idol sends a (spiritual?) message to the husband, who rushes back from his hunting raid only to see his wife sewing a birch bark dish, and the newcomer lying in his bed.

Crisis. The carved idol

The husband does not realize the danger, and the unfaithfulness of his wife, and he (alongside his wife) continues to care for the newcomer. The director expresses this increasing danger and tension through the hostile gaze of the wooden idol. Thus, the protective spirit living with the family is not only a religious phenomenon and ritual object, but also a member of the family who intends to express his worries and emotions. Unfortunately, the family does not listen to the idol and his opinion is not considered.

Maappa. The holy tree. Ytyk mas

A similar example of benevolent spiritual beings can be found in Aleksei Romanov's 1986 film *Maappa*. This was the director's graduation film at the Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). Although the movie was produced at the Sverdlovsk Film Studio, one can see the stylistic elements of the Sakha movies created later, in Yakutia, from the 1990s. The film focuses on the fate of a traveler who, in the cold of Yakutia's winter, gets lost in the wilderness. Suddenly, nearly frozen, he finds himself in front of a birch tree. This birch tree, however, is not an unconscious plant; it is a holy tree (*ytyk mas*). The traveler begs for help and the tree shows him the way to the nearest settlement. The benevolent tree's positive relationship with the Sakha living in the vicinity and passersby can be seen in the white ribbons and amulets (*emeget*) it adorned with that express honor and gratitude from humans.

Yld'aa, the traveler, enters a *balaghan*, a traditional Sakha house, and meets Maappa, a beautiful young maiden. The lonely young maiden cures him and helps him to regain his power. After a while, Yld'aa falls in love with Maappa and marries her. Only after the wedding does Maappa reveal the truth about her solitude; this is her family home, but her parents passed away, leaving her orphaned here.

What is more interesting, from the perspective of human nonhuman relations, she says that the neighboring Sakha did not want to contact her, and whenever she approached them, she was chased away. Later, Maappa explains to Yld'aa that she is also dead, and it is actually her spirit with whom Yld'aa has been living. She asks him to bury her before he leaves the settlement. Although Yld'aa is puzzled by this unexpected course of the events, he embraces (the spirit of) Maappa, and fulfills her request. In the closing scene of the movie, we see Yld'aa again as a traveler on his way, leaving the settlement where he met Maappa, and passing by the sacred tree.

The film not only shows us how porous and indefinite the demarcation between spirits and humans are and how communicating, living together, moreover marrying the spirit of a dead person is highly possible, it also shows us that different animate and sentient entities (like the birch tree or the spirit of Maappa) are benevolent to those ones who treat them with respect. Unlike the residents of the neighboring settlements, who (probably) saw a haunting, evil spirit in Maappa, Yld'aa found love and compassion with her.

Despite being confused by Maappa's confession that she is a spirit, Yld'aa does not run away in horror. Instead, he understands that Maappa (the last of the family) should be buried next to her parents to help her leave the Middle World. All the same, from the time when Yld'aa (half-frozen) asks the sacred tree for help, until the moment he leaves at the end of the movie, the spectator remains uncertain about whether the events are real or not. And yet, it is evident that for the main protagonist, communicating with nonhuman entities is absolutely natural. In Yld'aa's understanding, the spirit does not represent a radical Other, but a Sakha incarnated as a spirit (Ivanilova 2019).

Both *Crisis* (Gennadii Bagynanov, 1996) and *Maappa* (Aleksei Romanov, 1986) are stories that take place in an indefinite time—most probably in the past. *Aanchyk* (Nikita Arzhakov, 2006), however, tells a story from a more definite and realistic past. Aanchyk is a young bride who leaves her native settlement and moves to her groom's house. Before leaving, she bids farewell to the cow that she used to milk, and to a birch tree, which she decorates with hair from a white mare and says: "Please do not be sad. Next year, we are going to meet again."

Among the objects she takes to her new home is a carved wooden idol that she handles with respectful care. Her husband is physically abusive. Her only comfort is the small wooden idol, to whom she explains her hardships. Her husband throws the wooden idol in the lake and whips her to death. Many years pass and we see the husband, Mychaar, as a miserable old man, looking for the wooden idol in the lake to ask it for redemption. Like the movie *Maappa*, in *Aanchyk*, nonhuman agents are good-willed and less harmful or dangerous to humans than their fellow Sakha.

Night Maiden (*Tüngngüü Kyys*), directed by Gennadii Bagynynanov in 1996, is another love story between a spirit and a young Sakha. This film, in contrast to the films presented above, does not refer to a withered, past world. It takes place in Yakutia, shortly after perestroika. A young man, Keese goes to make hay one summer, and in his dreams and daydreams, meets a fair young maiden named Kylbaara, who is dressed in traditional Sakha clothes. Keese falls in love with Kylbaara, and the two have a romantic relationship whenever Keese is thinking of or dreaming about her. After a while, Keese must decide whether to become immersed in this relationship and spend his life as a hay worker in his native village, or if he should go to Yakutsk to take the university entrance exam alongside Tamara, a fellow villager. Keese eventually decides to leave Kylbaara and travel with Tamara to Yakutsk. Before arriving in Yakutsk, they cross the Lena River on a ferry. Crossing the enormous span of the river, he daydreams and meets Kylbaara. Their love is finally fulfilled. After a few twists and turns in Yakutsk, Keese and Tamara pass the

Night Maiden. Farewell from Kylbaara

entrance exam and Keese starts everyday life without Kylbaara. At their last meeting, Kylbaara says goodbye to Keese and tells him to find happiness with Tamara.

These four movies depict the nonhuman residents of the Middle World as benevolent beings with whom humans may have good relations. Moreover, unlike other humans who can be unpredictable, respectful communication with nonhumans can assure peaceful coexistence, and even love, healing, and comfort. By default, the inhabitants of the Middle World strive to maintain a balance in power relations and avoid unnecessary conflicts. Therefore, in the absence of miscommunication, mishaps, and hostility, the relationship between human and nonhuman earthly beings is, by definition, neutral if not friendly.

There is always the potential for conflict between humans and nonhumans, and tensions may emerge when one party does not treat the other respectfully. When someone drowns, loses his way in the forest, or has an accident in a particularly sentient landscape, it is usually retribution for some earlier human hostility.

Cursed Land. Ancestor as an evil spirit

Cursed Land (*Setteekh sir*), directed by Ellei Ivanov and released on Yakutia's local television broadcaster (NVK Sakha) on New Years' Eve 1996, tells of the troublesome coexistence of humans and nonhumans in a meadow. My review (Mészáros 2022) covers the plot of the film and sheds light on the fact that it is difficult to demarcate the human and nonhuman sphere in the history of a meadow—not only are the two intermingled, but the meadow's evil spirits are, in fact, deceased Sakha residents who once lived in the area.

Dangerous Land. The ugly doll

Dangerous Land (*Sibienneekh Sir*; Russian title: *Besplodnye zemli*, 2008), produced 12 years later, directed by Konstantin Timofeev, and written by different authors, presents a similar story. Unlike *Hostile Land*, *Dangerous Land* relies heavily upon tropes from international horror movies, with less of a genuine Sakha perspective on spiritual beings. Clichés, like a chainsaw-wielding man chasing the protagonist, devil worship, vampire bites, evil beings climbing out from under the floor of the house, or a young girl playing with an ugly doll echo elements common in classic Western horror movies. These features distance the movie from the Middle World, but the constant interaction and communication between different spiritual and human entities anchor the film in the main characteristic of the Middle World.

The protagonist, Dayaana, a young teacher, arrives at a small, peripheral Sakha village. She is settled in a haunted house where many people were tortured and killed by communists during the era of repression. This house serves as a hub where the dead and living appear to each other. Threatened by various spirits, Dayaana asks for comfort and advice from the old lady living in the neighboring settlement. The woman advises her to carry out a ritual, offer a sacrifice to the oven, and purify the four corners of the house—that is, to start communicating correctly with nonhuman agents. After the purification, Dayaana again experiences the presence of spirits and the dead, among them her daughter, who had drowned. Only after these encounters is Dayaana able to accept the loss of her child.

Evil spirit (*Derietin'n'ik*, 2016) is an amateur film by Gavril Nikolaev. This low-budget movie tells the story of a short summer fishing trip. Three friends go to an abandoned settlement next to the lakeshore. They plan to catch crucian carp and spend a few days relaxing. They build a fire, but do not perform a sacrificial offering to it; they fail to introduce themselves to the local spirits and other living beings. After fishing, they return and create another fire to prepare a fish soup, again without any ritual greeting to the local living beings. At night, the local spirit—in the shape of a young Sakha maiden—turns against one of them, and on the following day, the friends flee the settlement.

Evil spirit. First appearance of the local spirit

Although the majority of Sakha films refer in one way or another to the importance of maintaining a balanced relationship with spirits and animals, I believe that even this brief overview provides some insight into a genuinely Sakha world, where various live entities freely communicate with each other. In accordance with the Sakha concept, known from oral poetry and Aleksei Romanov's pivotal film that opened a unique cinematographic sphere for Sakha cinema, I call this realm the Middle World. The Middle World allows Sakha film directors to present a reality inconsistent with our Western ontology. I have argued that examining this unique cinematographic world may contribute to a better understanding of ethnographies emerging from rural Yakutia. Furthermore, with a firm knowledge of local ontologies, it is possible gain a novel perspective on some of Sakha films.

Closing remarks

While the Middle World is inhabited by various living beings (plants, animals, spirits, humans, and animate natural features like lakes and meadows), this last section focused mainly on the cinematographic presentation of the coexistence of human and spiritual beings. What may seem like a mystical, magical articulation of stories about humans is a story of communication and coexistence between entities of dissimilar bodies that, from the point of view of Sakha ontology, share similar interiors. This explains why, in most cases, the protagonists generally find it acceptable to encounter local spirits, sentient plants, or the spirit of deceased person. Problems emerge only when there has been a prior human transgression against nonhumans, in which case, lakes, spirits, and/or meadows can turn against newcomers and seek retribution.

Besides the coexistence of spirits and humans, the cinematographic representation of relations between humans and animals is particular interest. It deserves further examination as killing, sacrificing, and consuming each other's bodies complicates the stratified and delicate relationship between animals and humans. Movies such as *Lord Eagle* (*Tojon Kyyl*; Russian title: *Tsar Ptits*, Eduard Novikov, 2018) and *24 Snow* (*24 Snega*, Mikhail Barynin, 2018) provide us a glimpse into this highly emotional relationship, and shows us that the filmic world of Sakha directors can be further expanded in this direction. Finally, what we

consider science fiction, thriller, horror, or even mystical movies based on our generic understanding, in Sakha cinema is simply visual immersion into the Middle World. This immersion provides Sakha filmmakers with visual sovereignty—something absolutel crucial in the indigenous film industry (Dowell 2013).

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