

Special  
Issue 19

Sakha

KinoKultura

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## An Introductory Note

By Caroline Damiens, Csaba Mészáros

Yakutia's (Sakha Republic) cultural and educational politics has been remarkably prosperous since the demise of the Soviet Union especially in comparison to other republics and autonomous regions beyond the Ural Mountains (Argounova-Low 2012). The spread of internationally renowned psychedelic/shamanic Sakha rock music (*Sakharoga*), the ever growing popularity of jew's harp (*khomus*) music (Alexeyev and Shishigin 2004), the inscription of the Sakha heroic epic on the list of UNESCO intangible heritage in 2008 (Harris 2017), the popularization of Yhyakh Festival in Russia and abroad are the major milestones of this process (Nikanarova 2019). In recent years a new performative art emerged: locally enrooted movie industry in which Yakutia has proved to be exceptionally successful on domestic and international level (Abikeyeva 2017). Although the post-Soviet years saw the emergence of regional cinemas in the different ethno-territorial entities of the Russian Federation: Buryatia, Khakassia, Tuva, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Altai or Chuvashia (Galetski 2008, Antufeva 2012, Dobrynin 2015, Anashkin 2019), within the Siberian space, the Sakha Republic certainly has the most developed cinematography. It is distinguished by its variety, with almost all genres represented: comedy, art-house film, horror, psychological drama or war film, etc. The phenomenon is all the more notable because the film production is relatively important for the republic (in 2022, an average of 6 films per year for a little less than one million inhabitants) and has been going on for more than thirty years.

This issue of *KinoKultura* intends to constitute the most comprehensive exploration of Sakha cinema currently available in English. To date, the only other materials available in English are the book published on the occasion of the 2017 edition of the Busan International Film Festival in South Korea, which devoted a retrospective to Sakha cinema (Anashkin, Savvina and Park 2017), and some contributions to online periodicals (Damiens 2014 and 2015, Savvina 2017, McGinity-Peebles 2021). In Russian, besides earlier works dating back to the Soviet era (Klestkin 1973, Savvinov 1977), books on cinema in Yakutia are more historically oriented and only locally distributed (Zharaev 2011, Sivtsev 2005). In the recent years, the Russian specialized film press has been reporting on the extraordinary vitality of this local cinematography (Anashkin 2006 and 2011, Vanina 2012, Kuvshinova 2014, Ivanilova 2019) and, in January 2021, Russia's most important film journal, *Iskusstvo kino*, dedicated a special issue to Sakha cinema (Issue 1-2, 2021). Still, much remains to be done to make Sakha cinema better known and appreciated worldwide. It is our hope that we have helped make this become a reality.

This issue brings together film scholars, anthropologists and current Yakutia film professionals in order to offer a multifaceted look—cultural, industrial and aesthetical—at this cinema. We invited a majority of Sakha researchers and film practitioners to give them the possibility to express a voice on their own film production and try to keep any exoticizing or stereotyped views at a distance. The films included in the cluster of reviews span from 1986 to 2018. We deliberately chose to focus on films made prior to 2016—which corresponds to the success of *Bonfire* (*Koster na vetru*, Dmitrii Davydov) and the subsequent international interest into Sakha cinema—to shed light on films lesser-known internationally, but which are no less important in the constitution of Sakha cinematography. They form milestones of Sakha cinema in the longer time of its existence, be they existed on regional television, DVD or local release.

When we started preparing this issue in 2019, the ongoing aggression against Ukraine was not foreseen. Contributors from several countries and research institutions made a joint effort to present a unique cultural feature: the rise of cinematography among a marginalized Siberian minority group—the Sakha. In the spring of 2022, as we finish a volume that brings together contributions from researchers from different nationalities, we understand that the possibility of continuing this research together has been compromised indefinitely. In our perspective, this special issue may be a step toward embracing mutual understanding, respecting human dignity, and eventually towards peace. We firmly believe that it is still possible to share ideas and common values across state borders and political regimes in an era when barriers raised by military aggression and hegemonic ambitions aspire to alienate and isolate communities and ideas from one another. We hope that this issue will not be the last of its kind and that, in the years to come, we can publish a new edition, gathering the diversity of perspectives of researchers on Sakha cinema and its developments.<sup>[1]</sup>

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### Notes

1] This statement expresses the views of the authors of this introduction only. The authors of the various contributions to this issue had no knowledge of the contents of this introduction before publication and cannot be held responsible for the statements that we make in it.

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