



### *Angels of Revolution*

[Ангелы революции]

Russia, 2014

Color, 105 minutes

Russian with English subtitles

Director: Aleksei Fedorchenko

Screenplay: Aleksei Fedorchenko, Denis

Osokin, Oleg Loevskii

Camera: Shandor Berkeshi

Production Designer: Aleksei Fedorchenko,  
Artem Khabibulin

Costume Design: Ol'ga Gusak

Composer: Andrei Karasev

Cast: Dar'ia Ekamasova, Pavel Basov, Georgii  
Iobadze, Konstantin Balakirev, Oleg  
Iagodin, Aleksei Solonchev, Iakov Tarlin,  
Valeriia Kontereva, Veronika Kontereva,  
and Ekaterina Obatina

Producer: Dmitrii Vorob'ev, Aleksei  
Fedorchenko, Leonid Lebedev

Production: Studio "29 fevralia" and  
"Krasnaia strela"

*Angels of Revolution* examines the intersections of utopia, art, power, and violence. In this film Aleksei Fedorchenko continues his fruitful collaboration with author Denis Osokin, as well as with Shandor Berkeshi and Artem Khabibulin, the cinematographer and designer from his previous film, *Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari*. As a result this film feels very familiar, displaying his fondness for striking imagery that often borders on the surreal, as well as his interest in exploring the space between myth and history (earlier films include a mockumentary about the Soviet Space program and an ethnographic investigation of the folklore and rituals of the Merya, a minority population in Russia that does not exist).

Bringing together a number of Osokin's stories with the history of the Kazym rebellion—a revolt against collectivization by members of the Khanty and Nenets ethnic groups in northern Siberia that was brutally repressed—*Angels of Revolution* follows war hero Polina Schneider and her team of avant-garde artists to the tundra on a mission to help the inhabitants of Kazym develop a culture that was, in Stalin's words, "National in form, Socialist in content." Fedorchenko again lays claim to historical accuracy, beginning the film with an assurance that it is based on historical events. Almost immediately, however, he subverts this claim as we encounter the Peoples Commissar of Nationalities dressed in a Polynesian grass skirt in anticipation of a world revolution that would soon reach Oceania. This pattern continues over the course of the film as the fantastic narrative is interspersed with historical events and artifacts—including a number of landmark works of the Soviet avant-garde, including Arsenii Avraamov's "Symphony of Steam Whistles," Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva, Mexico!*, Dmitrii Osipov's First Moscow Crematorium—all of which are attributed to the fictional artists depicted in the film.

The film explores a paradox at the heart of the revolutionary spatial logic prevalent during the early years of the Soviet Union, articulated by avant-garde architect Moisei Ginzburg as a drive to make "every center a periphery and every periphery a center." The utopian dream of creating a radically non-hierarchical space relies on an understanding of space as fundamentally hierarchical; Kazym can only be transformed into a center if it—and by extension its Khanty and Nenets residents—are

peripheral and, therefore, available to be exoticized, modernized, and civilized. While on many levels the film allows, or even encourages its audiences to emulate the orientalist curiosity of Polina and her team about Khanty folk belief, it also destabilizes their Moscow-centered understanding of the world. Audiences are left to wonder whether Polina is cured of a life- (or spirit-?)threatening illness by magic rather than medicine, while subtitles allow us access to a Khanty understanding of a suprematist painting of a black triangle as a pretty good picture of a tent rather than a radical experiment with form.

The juxtaposition of avant-garde art with the everyday lives of reindeer herders often creates a sense that the desire of artists to transform the world through aesthetic action is fundamentally absurd—as, for example, when we are shown a model of Viktor Kalymykov’s plan to build a city that would circle the earth like the rings of Saturn (another real avant-garde project that was incorporated into the film). Despite the playfulness with which he treats the material, Fedorchenko also suggests a clear link between avant-garde aspirations and violence. While we only hear a reading of the plan for the “Symphony of Steam Whistles,” the film’s soundscape could accurately be described as a Symphony of Firearms. This violence is perpetrated both by and upon the avant-gardists, whose doom is frequently foreshadowed both abstractly by scenes where they lie in constructivist coffins and literally as we see the arrest and execution of the Moscow State Latvian Theatre (another fragment of historical reality).

Despite this, the formal playfulness of *Angels of Revolution* acknowledges the continuing appeal of the avant-garde and can be read as a continuation of the experimental work done in the first decades of the twentieth century. The self-reflexive use of film and filming points to Meyerhold’s insistence on the baring of the theatrical frame; the use of puppets to show the suppression of the Kazym rebellion can be seen as an attempt to “make strange” familiar narratives about Soviet violence, allowing us to see them with new eyes; and Fedorchenko’s incorporation and transformation of historical material can be thought of as a sort of neo-factography.

Rather than resolving these issues the film concludes with two provocative artifacts, fragments of reality presented unaltered for our contemplation. The final shot of the film features footage of Ekaterina Obatina, the “First Girl of Soviet Iurga”—whose story is incorporated into the film—singing a Soviet song, which was shot by Fedorchenko while on location in Kazym. The final word of the film is given in the credits as Prokofiev’s “Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of the October Revolution,” which was banned in 1937 (and which Fedorchenko has called the last work of the Soviet avant-garde) sets to music the words of Karl Marx: “The philosophers have only interpreted the word in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”

**Chip Crane**

A native of central Russia, **Aleksei Fedorchenko** gained notice for his first feature-length film, the mockumentary *First on the Moon* (2005). He graduated from the State Institute for Cinematography (VGIK) in 2000 and has since juggled producing, directing, scriptwriting, and becoming the head of the Sverdlovsk Film Studio. His work has garnered numerous international awards.

#### **Filmography:**

- 2002 *Children of the White Grave* (documentary)
- 2002 *David* (documentary)
- 2005 *First on the Moon*
- 2006 *Shosho* (documentary)
- 2007 *The Railway*
- 2008 *Bath Day* (documentary)
- 2009 *The Wind of Shuvgey* (documentary)
- 2010 *Silent Souls*
- 2011 *Australia* (documentary)
- 2012 *Chronoeye*
- 2012 *The Other World* (documentary)
- 2012 *The Fourth Dimension*
- 2012 *Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari*
- 2014 *Angels of Revolution*