When Ali’s herd begins dying off, it is time to leave the steppe to seek out the wife who left him and their infant son nine years earlier. With nothing but several old photographs, her former address, and a memory of generic physical details (“black hair, black eyes”), Ali and his son arrive in Moscow where they become migrant wage laborers: Ali in a cement plant; his nine-year-old son in a saw mill.

While director Dmitrii Mamuliia has noted in interviews that the film contrasts the two worlds of the protagonist—the sandy, bush-dotted landscape of the steppe with the busy expanse of the bustling metropolis—the cinematography uses visual and aural mirroring to link the two locales. In Moscow, Ali carries bags of cement, one after the other, as he and his son carried sheep carcasses at home. The next body Ali will carry is that of his sleeping son: the accident that this episode foreshadows and mirrors is unexplained, just as Ali’s herd is inexplicably stricken by death in the opening scenes of the film. The sounds of the herd and the nearby highway that punctuate these first scenes are similarly replaced, in Moscow, by the background noise of train terminals, factories, and news broadcasts. Yet, as location and language change, Ali remains silent, responding to his reunion with his wife with the same dejected expression as when he discovers his ailing herd.

Mamuliia was recently included among a list of “Russian New Wave” directors published by OpenSpace.ru, along with Aleksei German Jr., Boris Khlebnikov, Kirill Serebrennikov, Aleksei Popogrebskii, and others. Many of the standard characteristics of Soviet and post-Soviet New Waves are present in Another Sky: a privileging of silence and mood over mainstream cinematic devices (e.g. genre cinema); dialogue in national languages instead of in Russian; and the use of natural sets and non-professional actors.

Mamuliia’s use of minimal dialogue and Tajik subtitled in Russian only reinforce Ali’s liminal status at home and abroad. Not only is he at a linguistic disadvantage while in Moscow (he does not understand Russian, needing an interpreter even to describe his wife’s features to the authorities), but he is alienated at home as well. The vices of contemporaneity have come to the Uzbek countryside as a stack of hundred dollar bills, an amount almost equal to the “price” placed on his son in the Moscow saw mill.

Furthermore, in Another Sky natural sets are combined through editing to capture the daily routine and habitat of the Moscow
migrant worker: a labyrinth of crowded barracks, crumbling entrance ways, and sanitation showers. It is thereby fitting that one of the film’s few geographically grounded scenes occurs in Moscow’s Kazan' train station. This extended segment unifies the two geographically discrete portions of the narrative in the same way the station itself serves as the hub for migrants, vagrants, and long-distance travelers arriving in and departing from the center.

Like the characters they play, the cast of Another Sky themselves represent a variety of hybrid identities and professions—a casting tradition very much in line with Russo-Soviet and European New Wave cinema. After searching in vain for actors among migrant workers in Moscow (they were all too expressive, Mamulija lamented), for the protagonist the director settled on Habib Boufares—a Tunisian construction worker-turned-actor living and working in France. The role of his son is played by Amirza Mukhamadi, an Afghan refugee studying in a Moscow school, and his wife—Mitra Zakhedi, an Iranian living in Berlin for over two decades, and whom Mamulija chose based on her “look” alone after an extensive search for actresses.

The silence and “looks” that pervade the film make sense not only in the context of New Wave aesthetics, but in Mamulija’s avoidance of mainstream film techniques—of “cinema for viewers.” While the Russian program of the 32nd International Moscow Film Festival boasted its turn from auteur cinema to genre films, Mamulija has admitted on OpenSpace.ru and in Seanc that he works to minimize the viewership of his films, so as to not waste his time on the “contemporary average idiot.”

If Another Sky succeeded in alienating the average idiot, however, it found a place among critics. The film took home a number of awards in 2010, including the Grand Prize at the International Festival of Auteur Cinema in Batumi; the prize for Best Musical Score at Kinotavr; the Jury Prize, the Prize for Best Directorial Debut, and the FIPRESCI Prize at the Cottbus Film Festival; and Special Jury Mention at Karlový Vary.

Alyssa DeBlasio

Dmitrii Mamulija (b. 1969)

Born in Tbilisi, Mamulija graduated from the Department of Philosophy at Tbilisi State University in 1993 and from the Higher Courses for Scriptwriters and Directors (workshop of I. Kvirikadze and A. Dobrovol'skii) in 2007. He is the author of a number of works of poetry and prose (some published under the name Leo Luriia), including Anal Roses [Anal'nye rozy, 2006] and A Bird Inside [Ptitsa vntri, 2006].

Filmography

2010 Another Sky
2007 Moscow (with Bakur Bakuradze, short)
2006 An Indescribable Community (short)
2006 Locus Severus (short)
2006 Silence of the Sirens (with Sergei Uryvaev, short)