

Beanpole

Kantemir Balagov, 2019

Screenwriters: Kantemir Balagov, Alexander Terekhov

Place: Russia

Studio: Non-Stop Productions

Length: 137 minutes

Language: Russian

Hanna Hodgetts, University College London

Back to the bare bone of suffering

Kantemir Balagov's *Beanpole* (*Dylda*, 2019) provides a rare peek into the sombre lives of traumatised women in post-war Leningrad. Regarded as the wunderkind of Russian cinema today, Balagov creates a haunting sense of suspense and uses an original colour palette, which turns Leningrad into an ethereal place. Taught by Aleksandr Sukurov, whose *Russian Ark* (2002) and *Father and Son* (2003) have entered the cinematic canon, Balagov has managed to develop his own distinctive style and has become an acclaimed artist in his own right.

The plot follows Iya, a fair ex-anti-aircraft gunner, who owes her nickname 'Beanpole' to her impressive height. She works as a nurse at a hospital and takes care of Pashka, a fragile-looking three-year-old. When Masha, Iya's friend, returns from the front, Pashka has already passed away and the two friends embark on a search for renewed hope. They long for a new beginning, a clean slate. They desperately want to leave the atrocities of the war behind, but their means is of an extreme, heart-wrenching sadness; Masha tries to persuade Iya to bear a child as recompense for Pasha's death. The film's script was inspired by Svetlana Alexievich's first book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, which chronicles the experience of Soviet women who fought on the front lines. By drawing from Alexievich's polyphonic oral history, Balagov takes on a topic uncommon in Russian cinematic tradition. In choosing the post-war period and focusing particularly on the suffering of women, he reinvents the legacy of the Second World War in the Russian national consciousness. References to Victory Day or even a mention of their triumph in the war remain absent, as if to say, what is there to celebrate if the country lies in tatters and citizens suffer from physical and psychological trauma? Instead, Balagov paints a tangible portrait of human pain, where historical context takes second place.

War trauma is most apparent in Iya, who often gets caught up in a paralysed state, emitting repetitive ticking noises which resemble the sound of a pendulum clock. Whilst Iya rarely speaks, Masha dominates all conversation. She is the driving force behind all action and pushes Iya to go along with her plans. This results in an imbalance between the two women, creating an uneasiness which is present throughout the film. Only with difficulty can this film

be regarded as an account of friendship or love and characterising it as such – as some critics have - would mean to fall into the trap of cinematic clichés. On the contrary, Balagov manages to avoid the cliché of love in the face of war and instead *Beanpole* tells the story of two human beings who are traumatised to such an extent that they are incapable of maintaining a healthy, loving, and caring relationship.

Balagov shows his mastery with his remarkable use of colours. Emerald green and crimson roam the screen like haunting crows, which nestle in the spectator's consciousness for the full two hours. The colours are entangled in a delicate dance and establish a visual antagonism. Red, personified by Masha with her fiery red hair, symbolises action, energy, and often indicates a breakthrough in the narrative. Green, personified by Iya who often finds herself in these trance-like states, symbolises passivity. It is therefore telling that Iya wears a crimson-coloured jumper in the last scene - a shade she does not wear prior to that moment. This deliberate choice of colour indicates hope, a possibility for a happier future and hints at a continuation of the story after the film has ended. To some extent, the use of colour resembles Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*, where crimson fills the background, evoking an unsettling sense of suspense. The use of green and red might also remind one of the works of Flemish painter Jan van Eyck, in particular his *Arnolfini Portrait*, where a similar sense of mystery reigns.

All in all, *Beanpole* is a feast for the eyes. Its success relies heavily on the brilliant cinematography of Kseniya Sereda. The strength of the performances of Viktoria Miroshnichenko and Vasilisa Perelygina - in what is their feature-film debut - will not fail to amaze the viewer. However, it would be unjust not to mention *Beanpole*'s shortcomings. Its plot lacks subtlety by speaking in superlatives of suffering. Emotions are overstated in sentences like "I am futile inside." One could even doubt whether Balagov really manages to present a refreshing women's perspective on war devoid of *topoi*, as the fate of Masha and Iya is inextricably linked to and defined by their fertility and potential motherhood. Nonetheless, it cannot be doubted that Russia can add another name to its long list of magnificent directors.