

On This Day: Larisa Shepitko

On July 2, 1979 the film director was killed in a road accident.

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Larisa Shepito was an actress, screenwriter and film director who was an integral part of the “new wave” of cinema in the Soviet “Thaw” period in the 1960s. A peer of Andrei Tarkovsky, her films were renowned for their strong naturalism, associative imagery, and their depth of meaning and emotion. She was a woman in a traditionally male field, but she did not think that she was at a disadvantage. In fact, she saw her gender as a form of superiority. She said, “I’m giving you my word that there’s nothing, there’s no frame in my film, not a single one, that doesn’t come from me as a woman. [...] Men can make ladies’ sentimental needlework perfectly, too. But a woman, as one half of the source of humankind, a woman can tell the world, reveal to the world some amazing things. No man can so intuitively discern some phenomena in the human psyche, in nature, as a woman can.”

Shepito was born in Artemovsk, Ukraine, in 1938. She and her two siblings were raised by her

mother after her father, a Persian military officer, abandoned the family. Shepitko's earliest memories were connected with the war, hunger, deprivation and loss, particularly when her family was evacuated and then when her father left.

After graduating from high school, Shepitko was accepted at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in the studio of Alexander Dovzhenko, who had a strong influence on her style and approach to cinema.

Her graduation film "Heat," filmed when she was only 22 years old, about a teacher in a Central Asian village was released nationwide. Her second film, "Wings" (1966) was about a decorated woman pilot who cannot find her place in the post-war peacetime Soviet Union. Everything from the tight new suit she is having made to the small interiors she lives in constrains her, while she longs for the open skies and clouds outside her windows. While this film brought her notice and popularity, it also brought controversy for introducing generational conflict and the image of a war hero as a lost soul — both notions that were anathema to Soviet ideology at the time. Her next film, called "Homeland of Electricity," one part of a trilogy of stories about the first years of Soviet power, was deemed too harsh a depiction of the early Bolsheviks and shelved for several decades.

Shepito made four more films, including the award-winning "Ascent" (1977) based on a war-time story by Vasily Bykov about partisan fighters, sacrifice, betrayal, and inner struggle. Although the film used images of Christian iconography, its theme of sacrifice for the sake of a greater cause fit in with Soviet ideology.

In 1979, Shepitko and her film crew were scouting locations for her next film, "Farewell to Matyora" about a beautiful island threatened with flooding, when they were all killed in a road accident. The film was later made by her husband, Elem Klimov, and released as "Farewell."

Composer Alfred Schnittke, who wrote the score to "Ascent," dedicated his "Second String Quartet" to Shepitko's memory.

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