

Environmental Contamination and Postcolonial Recuperation in Late Soviet and Post-independence Kazakhstani Cinema

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IN his seminal study of the cultural and psychological effects of colonization, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Franz Fanon stressed the importance of the land for the physical and spiritual sustenance of a colonized people, highlighting that imperialism “sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds” (Fanon 2004, 181). Even though the Soviet project was ideologically distinct from European colonialisms, most obviously in its adherence to “scientific socialism” (Spivak et al. 2006, 829), it produced profound and enduring changes not only in the Kazakh economy, society, and culture, but also in the land—leading to environmental degradation and contamination. In this article, I analyze images of environmental pollution, caused by the desiccation of the Aral Sea as well as by Soviet space and nuclear testing programs, in Rashid Nugmanov’s *The Needle (Igla, 1988)* and Rustem Abdrashev’s *Renaissance Island (A Girl from the City)* (Kaladan kelgen kyz / Ostrov vozrozhdeniia, 2004).¹ I trace these images’ role in constructing a postcolonial national identity in Kazakhstan, one that recovers ethnic Kazakh traditions but is mindful of the country’s multiethnic population, a legacy of Soviet-era mass migration to the republic due to war, Stalinist repressions, and deporta-

I am grateful to Arlene Forman, Maria Hristova, and Alyssa DeBlasio for their generous feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter. Special thanks go to Anatoly Pinsky for his thoughtful editing of the final draft.

- 1 The film’s name in Kazakh translates literally to *A Girl from the City*. From here on I use the English translation of the Russian version of the title, *Renaissance Island*.

tions of entire “enemy” peoples. Examining the films in their historical settings, I demonstrate how they use Kazakh “ancestral” landscapes and relations with nature as a “decolonizing tool” to help the viewer understand “the impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress” (DeLoughrey & Handley 2011, 4). I argue that Kazakhstani cinematic discourse about nature grows in postcolonial awareness as it evolves from a perestroika-era universal anti-totalitarian critique, with environmental and moral degradation treated as strictly social issues, to an interrogation of the detrimental impact that the Soviet project had on the ethnic Kazakh landscape, culture, and psyche. Finally, I investigate how in conceptualizing the land as a “source of physical and spiritual sustenance,” these films create a productive tension between what Rico Isaacs calls the “ethnic Kazakh” and “civic Kazakhstani” narratives in Kazakhstani cinema, in which the place and contributions of ethnic minorities are actively negotiated (Fanon 2004, 9; Isaacs 2018).

I am sensitive to the ambivalent relationship between Soviet and indigenous values in these filmmakers’ attempts “to break down colonial binaries (East/West, civilized/native, etc.) to create a counter-discourse about modernity that resonates with local understandings” (Adams 2008, 5). Using as a starting point the pioneering work of scholars who have examined the unique nature of Soviet colonialism, I investigate how these filmmakers place their narratives on a spectrum. On the one hand, the USSR was an “anti-imperialist empire” that “subsidiz[ed] republican economies, indigeniz[ed] regional party structures, and foster[ed] national cultures,” thereby cultivating national republican elites (Spivak et al. 2006, 832). It recruited local supporters through such modernizing endeavors as construction of factories, hospitals, and schools, and liberation of women (Moore 2001, 122). On the other hand, the Soviet project was a violent, centralizing force that transformed nature by building gigantic dams and canals; polluted the environment with industrial, military, and nuclear waste; and devastated indigenous traditions and ways of relating to nature and the environment (Moore 2001; Josephson 2013, 275). Nugmanov’s and Abdrashev’s explorations of the tensions between these two sides of the Soviet project take place within what Homi Bhabha (1988) calls the “Third Space,” an in-between creative terrain in which the filmmakers negotiate not only their characters’ hybrid Soviet, ethnic Kazakh, and civic Kazakhstani identities, but also the Soviet environmental paradigm, indigenous Kazakh relations

with nature, the Soviet legacy of sharing the land with non-Kazakh settlers, and the need to integrate into new global energy/waste patterns.

Soviet developers, based on extensive use of natural resources, searched constantly for new areas for economic expansion with little regard for environmental preservation or sustainability. Stalin's Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature and Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign called for an "assault on nature" aimed at "conquering" the elements and channeling them to serve the needs of industrialization and collectivized agriculture. A wide system of railways cut through indigenous lands to support Stalin's and Khrushchev's projects. Starting in the 1960s, policies of aggressive modernization were scrutinized by intellectual elites. Most notably, the Russian "village prose" writers cast the attack on nature as destructive of the traditional way of life, preserved in the rapidly disappearing villages. In Soviet titular republics, environmental concerns were similarly "intermeshed with nationalist ones" (Josephson 2013, 279). In the final decades of Soviet rule, the authorities saw the environment as a "safe" and "politically neutral" issue (Jones Luong 1999, 1267; Josephson 2013, 269). This allowed non-Russian activists to use environmental concerns to mobilize popular opposition to Soviet colonialist policies, since they often saw environmental degradation as "both a systemic fault of socialism and a direct result of Moscow's desire to weaken a particular nation by destroying its natural base, exploiting its resources, and poisoning its people while preserving Russia for the Russians" (Josephson 2013, 279).

Similar to village prose writers in Russia, writers in Central Asia often led the charge against environmental degradation as part of a larger struggle against cultural imperialism. In 1989, the Kazakh poet Olzhas Suleimenov organized the Nevada-Semipalatinsk environmental movement, raising awareness of ecological damage in eastern Kazakhstan and advocating for a ban on nuclear weapons testing (Jones Luong and Weinthal 1999, 1269; Josephson 2013, 283). The Karakalpak writer Tulepbergen Kaipbergenov protested the catastrophic shrinking of the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan due to extensive water withdrawals for irrigation in one of perestroika's first expository documentaries, Lennauchfilm's 1987 *Computer Games (Komp'iuternye igr)*. In the segment "Where the Amu-Darya Ends" ("*tam, gde konchaetsia Amu-Dar'ia*"), Kaipbergenov asserts the importance of the Amu-Darya River and the Aral Sea for the indigenous people's spirituality and sense of identity. In so doing,

he went beyond the environmental, health, and economic concerns raised in the film by Karakalpak officials and residents. Referring to the Аму-Дарыа as a кровавая артерия, которая подарила жизнь всему нашему региону and the Aral Sea as a large cauldron that fed the people, Kaipbergenov stands in the desert left in their stead, lamenting that only fairy tales and legends remain of his people's natural treasures.² It is important to note that while the postcolonial component is an important part of perestroika-era discourse on the environment, in most cases it is tightly interlinked with the environmental disasters caused by Soviet development; the social issue critique of this systemic fault drives the activism aimed at both repairing the environmental damage and "restructuring" the system rather than toppling it. Thus, a Karakalpak official in *Computer Games* says that indigenous residents have not left their villages because they "have faith in Soviet power" to bring the Aral Sea waters back (Mouratov 1992, 9).

Exposing Contamination: Demythologized National Landscape and the Need for Healing in 'The Needle'

Rashid Nugmanov's *The Needle*, set both in the Soviet Kazakh capital of Alma-Ata and at the Aral Sea, has often been presented as an innovative social-problem film creating a new, neoromantic hero and subversively experimenting with form (Horton and Brashinsky 1992; Lawton 2007). The enigmatic protagonist Moro (Viktor Tsoi) returns to Alma-Ata to collect a debt. When he learns of his ex-girlfriend Dina's (Marina Smirnova) morphine addiction, he takes on the local drug mafia and tries to help Dina fight her addiction by taking her to the Aral Sea, where they "once felt good." He ultimately fails and is stabbed by a mafioso, but the film is ambiguous about whether he survives.

Because *The Needle* was shot in Russian and deals with more general issues of modernity, Soviet audiences failed to consider the film to be about Kazakhstan and decolonization. Nor did the filmmaker set out to make a "Kazakh" movie. A postcolonial reading, however, unearths the film's latent anti-colonial messages and implications. Even though the perestroika-era themes of drug addiction, youth counterculture, and Soviet ideological indoctrination take center stage in *The Needle*, the film also dismantles optimistic Soviet representations of Kazakh

2 "a blood artery that gave life to our whole region." (All translations from Russian to English in this article are mine.)

national space through its focus on environmental degradation, and imagines a more authentic, even if heavily scarred and russified, national landscape. Vida Johnson defines this process as деконструкци[я] и демифологизаци[я] единого Советского Союза, реконструкци[я] и ре-мифологизаци[я] идентичных русских, казахских, узбекских, латвийских и так далее национальных пространств (2001, 21).³

Contemporary Soviet and Western film critics predominantly interpret Moro, played by the Russian-Korean rock idol Viktor Tsoi, as an ethnically unmarked neoromantic, countercultural hero “free from all the ties, material and psychological, a lone wanderer possessing innate dignity, honesty and unerring sense of justice” (Lawton 2007, 204). The Russian-speaking Kazakh director working at the national Kazakhfilm Studio likewise stated that the protagonist’s ethnicity was not important (Nugmanov n.d.). Other scholars, while acknowledging the film’s setting, note “the virtual absence of Kazakhstan itself except as a metaphorical space within which the human condition is allowed to work itself out as a cautionary allegory,” or discuss it as a geographical location that gave a name to the Kazakh New Wave (Padunov 2004; Horton and Brashinsky 1992, 239). In the overall spirit of perestroika-era social critique, the film appears to address the more universal flaws of the Soviet system rather than focus on strictly ethnic grievances in a postcolonial context.

Kazakh film scholars offer a more nuanced view of *The Needle’s* Asian hero and setting. They see both the hero and setting as decolonizing tools that expose sovietization’s devastating effects on the Kazakh way of life. Baubek Nogerbek argues that by demythologizing the Kazakh national space as constructed in Soviet cinema, Nugmanov creates “an entirely new, unfamiliar Kazakhstan, with a dried-up sea” and a “strange hero,” a world “where there is no place for living people, for full-blooded, national life” (2004). At the same time, Nogerbek acknowledges that the problems raised by Nugmanov are “cosmic ones,” “not attached to any concrete national space” (2004). Gulnara Abikeeva hails the fact that the “new hero” of perestroika has “an Asian face.” She welcomes the stylistic revolution of the Kazakh New Wave, seeing this “westernization of Kazakh cinema” as a “protest of a colonized coun-

3 “deconstruction and demythologization of the unified Soviet Union [and] reconstruction and remythologization of identical Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek, Latvian, and so forth national spaces.”

try against Sovietization” (Abikeeva 2004b). Abikeeva interprets this Western turn as consistent with the ethnic Kazakh national character, because as nomads “living in the region of the intersection of the West and the East,” Kazakhs historically “have been very adaptive to various cultural influences” (2004a).

In more recent Western analyses, writing about generic and ethnic indeterminacy in *The Needle*, Angelina Karpovich observes that even though “the film’s narrative does not directly address issues of national or ethnic identity,” Moro’s Asianness is “clearly symbolic, perhaps even metonymic” (Karpovich 2011, 173). She connects this symbolism to Viktor Tsoi’s Korean heritage, which “makes visible an ethnic minority which had not been represented onscreen before” (Karpovich 2011, 175). Although Karpovich admits that Moro’s ethnicity is most likely incidental (i.e., Tsoi was chosen first and foremost because of his cult status) and was not acknowledged by contemporary film critics, she argues that the film nonetheless raises the taboo issue of the Stalin-era deportations of Soviet Koreans to Kazakhstan, thus adding it to the list of other previously unrecognized topics, such as rock music and the environmental catastrophe of the Aral Sea (Karpovich 2011, 175). Even if Nugmanov did not intend to refer to the relocation of Soviet Koreans, Karpovich correctly identifies the importance of the protagonist’s non-Russian ethnicity, as the theme foreshadows the explicit inclusion of the topic of ethnic deportations to Kazakhstan in post-Soviet Kazakhstani narratives of decolonization.

Alec Brookes similarly ascribes key importance to Moro’s Asianness. In his Marxian analysis of the Soviet ecology in three Soviet films set on the Aral Sea, Brookes traces the roots of the Aral Sea catastrophe to the Soviet assault on “the ecological relations between the native and the land” (Brookes 2020, 42). Brookes demonstrates consistent alienation of producers from the land in both Grigorii Chukhrai’s *The Forty-First* (*Sorok pervyi*, 1956) and Viktor Turin’s *Turksib* (*Turksib*, 1929). He goes on to argue that in choosing a half-Korean to play the protagonist in *The Needle*, Nugmanov “suggests a film language that returns Asian bodies to Asian land,” thereby promising “collective, more-than-human recuperation” to Kazakh land and the Aral Sea (Brookes 2020, 45).

Taking a cue from the scholars who highlight *The Needle*’s Asian hero and setting, I approach the film as a postcolonial text with an ethnically marked protagonist acting in a reconfigured national space.

Nugmanov also foregrounds late-Soviet Kazakhstan's hybrid national identity via the ambiguous ethnicity of other key characters: the female protagonist, Dina, is played by a Russian actress, but has a typical Kazakh name, while the presumably Russian drug-peddling doctor, Artur Iusupovich, played by the Russian rock musician Petr Mamonov, has a Western first name and a Central Asian patronymic. The film's most poignant scenes are set at the site of one of the world's largest environmental disasters, the dried-up bed of the Aral Sea in southwestern Kazakhstan. It would be important to delve deeper into the significance of Kazakhstan's landscape and other Asian imagery to unlock the film's postcolonial dimension. Nugmanov encourages such an approach by emphasizing what he calls *пустое действие*⁴ as a structuring principle: Я старался максимально освободить фильм (сцены, диалоги, сюжет) от какой-либо символики, сделать его наподобие пустого сосуда, который каждый зритель мог бы заполнить собственной интерпретацией (Nugmanov n.d.).⁵

A postcolonial reading of the film's "empty action" would place the emphasis on Moro as a hybrid Russian/Korean/Kazakh/and more generally Asian warrior battling Soviet colonial influences with Asian indigenous knowledge, searching for an authentic identity in his ancestral land. While the Soviet Friendship-of-the-Peoples discourse portrayed Central Asians as little brothers,⁶ Tsoi's small-framed Moro defies Soviet stereotypes of Central Asians as childlike, unmodern, and requiring guidance and protection. A skilled karate fighter who single-handedly takes on a gang of drug dealers, Moro challenges the dominant Soviet ideology, visualized in the proliferation of television sets or in soundtracks, and synonymous with drug addiction given its effect on Dina.⁷ He does so with the philosophy of *внутренняя мощь*

4 "empty action"

5 "I tried to free the film (scenes, dialogues, plot) as much as possible from any symbolism, to make it like an empty vessel that each viewer could fill with their own interpretation."

6 A February 1, 1936, *Pravda* editorial established the Russian people as "the first among equals" and "a model for other Soviet peoples" (Martin 2001, 452). Seen as the USSR's most "backward" nations by Soviet ideologists, Central Asians were consistently portrayed in Soviet cinema as "little brothers" with diminutive physiques. Thus, in Mikhail Chiaureli's *The Fall of Berlin* (*Padenie Berlina*, 1949), the bear-like Russian soldier Alesha effortlessly carries the wounded Central Asian Iusup in his arms as if he were a child.

7 As noted by Zhukova, curing Dina of her addiction requires removing her from

and крепкий характер⁸ inherent in Asian martial arts (Tarmasinov 2020). Tsoi greatly admired Bruce Lee, whose characters' physical and spiritual strength had wide appeal in the USSR. As a compelling учение единства силы и духа, karate attracted Soviet youth more than тухлая коммунистическая идеология⁹ and was banned in 1984 (Khripun 2019). Despite the briefness of the karate fight in *The Needle*, the fact that Moro's guiding philosophy is based in the precepts of the martial arts defines him as an Asian superhero, as captured by the lyrics of the opening and closing songs, which Tsoi wrote specifically for the film. The songs, "The Star Named Sun" ("Zvezda po imeni solntse," 1989) and "Blood Type" ("Gruppa krovi," 1988), depict a world at war; a morally steadfast protagonist fights ideological oppression and conformism. He rejects physical violence but is ready to sacrifice himself for higher ideals. At the same time, Tsoi's (Moro's) ethnic indeterminacy suggests a Kazakhstani civic identity that is modern, multiethnic, and hybrid.

The Soviet colonialism that Moro fights is made visible through its corrosive effects on the indigenous landscape. Excessively optimistic, fakely cosmopolitan, and borderline absurd, late-Soviet ideology inundates the capital of Alma-Ata through the pervasive television soundtrack that drowns out reflection and critical thinking. Thus, ecstatic Italian-language skits not only mock ordinary Soviet citizens' inability to travel to the West, but also provide bizarre commentary on Moro's pursuit of Artur. The Soviet soundtrack invades the private space of Dina's apartment via three television sets, the new "Holy Trinity" that epitomizes the "shrine-like quality that the 'little black box' had taken on as a portal to the Soviet people's newly appointed deity" (Zhukova 2016, 173). The couple's journey to the Aral Sea extracts Dina from Alma-Ata's toxic environment. Even though the landscape has become a desert, it nonetheless sustains Dina's recovery. The film connects this capacity for healing to the Kazakh land and culture, as this is the only place in the film where Kazakh is spoken by a Kazakh elder, the last remaining resident of the abandoned fishing village who welcomes the visitors with fresh milk. Other references indicate that Moro fulfills the function of a doctor for Dina (Zhukova 2016, 182), thereby connecting

Alma-Ata's heavily televised environment, just as her return to the city results in a relapse (Zhukova 2016, 183–84).

8 "inner strength" and "strong character"

9 "teaching of the unity of physical strength and human spirit"; "rotten Communist ideology"

him to the indigenous Kazakh world of healing and contrasting him to Dina's false mentor, a corrupt Russian doctor who feeds her addiction for his own profit.

Signs of Soviet civilization abound in the desert left in the formerly fertile Aral Sea, and link the source of environmental devastation to the USSR's colonial projects. They include an abandoned railroad built for an unsustainable agricultural enterprise, and airplanes circling in the sky in place of diverse species of sea birds and indicative of proximity to a military base. At the end of the Aral Sea sequence the Aral desert becomes a wider signifier for the damage inflicted on the Kazakh land at military, biological, and nuclear testing facilities. As Moro and Dina walk further away into the parched seabed in search of the vanished sea, Tsoi's instrumental music gives way to a disquieting sound resembling an emergency alarm, followed by the machine-gun "fire" of a rapidly fast-forwarding digital clock taking us back to Alma-Ata. Nugmanov originally planned to end the sequence with a missile launch but gave up due to technological limitations (Nugmanov n.d.). This interconnect-edness of Soviet ideological and military colonialism, drug addiction, and the degradation of Kazakh land unveils the meaning of the film's opening credits, in which Nugmanov drew a needle and a missile next to the title followed by an animation of the missile's explosion.

Yet Nugmanov's concept of "empty action" allows for an alternative interpretation of the missile in the opening credits. Indeed, it can be seen as a spaceship. Many Kazakhs, including Olzhas Suleimenov in his poem *Earth, Bow Down to Man! (Zemlia, poklonis' cheloveku! Poema, 1961)*, were proud of the fact that the Kazakh land was the site of man's first launch into space. The ideal of "striving for the stars" is also captured in the lyrics of "The Star Named Sun." Interpreted in this key, the needle and the spaceship alongside the film's title suggest a wider field of negotiation between Kazakhs' ownership of Soviet scientific conquests and their rejection of Soviet colonization.

The russified Alma-Ata, ruled from Moscow via television and "colonized" by the corrupt Russian doctor, enjoys environmental amenities of which the indigenous landscape has been stripped. Thus, the hospital in which Dina works as a nurse for Artur boasts a luscious indoor tropical garden; and Artur relaxes by himself in a swimming pool in the city baths. This artificial urban paradise for the privileged is a poor imitation of the fertile garden that Soviet planners promised to cultivate

on the irrigated shores of the Aral Sea. Moro finds Dina at the hospital and interrogates her about her exploitative relationship with Artur; later he exposes the doctor as a fraud by draining the water in his swimming pool and leaving him at the bottom with nowhere to hide. Moro, on the other hand, is associated with natural water, such as the snow that starts falling at the end of the film and transforms the streets of Alma-Ata into a clean white sheet. Moro starts writing a new story for his land as he rises from his knees after a stabbing by one of Artur's thugs, leaving fresh footprints on the virginal snow to the beats and lyrics of "Blood Group." The lyrics call on Soviet citizens to leave their warm places in front of omnipresent TVs and follow the protagonist on his search for a "high star" that would prompt them to think and act on their own.

In the context of Kazakhstan's despoiled landscape, the snow in the final scene contrasts with the snow-like salt and toxic agricultural runoff covering the bed of the desiccated Aral Sea, on which Moro and Dina walk earlier. The snow promises a regeneration of the Kazakh land, able to nurture its multiethnic population. For the viewer focused on Moro's role as a rock-and-roll and martial arts countercultural superhero, the snow symbolizes the spiritual component of these cultures' strength and their moral superiority over Soviet ideology. For those proud of Kazakhstan as the site of the first manned-spaceflight, the snow finds a parallel in the "star dust" on the protagonist's boots in the closing song, as he sets out on a journey to his "high star," thereby redeeming the Soviet space project. In opening the film to a variety of interpretations, Nugmanov's concept of "empty action" acts as Homi Bhabha's Third Space, in which the USSR's multiethnic audiences can negotiate their specific cultural, national, and personal aspirations within the context of the larger Soviet system.

Assessing Contamination: Resilience and Postcolonial Recuperation in 'Renaissance Island'

Where Nugmanov's apocalyptic desertscape exposes Soviet modernity's devastating effects on "full-blooded national life," Rustem Abdrashev's *Renaissance Island* assesses the resilience of his land and culture and their ability to bounce back from the damage. He weaves his ancestral landscape on the northern shores of the Aral Sea into the very fabric of Soviet Kazakhstan's multiethnic society in 1960–1961, when the environmental harm from diverting water for agriculture was barely visible

and when his father, the prominent Kazakh poet Zharaskan Abdrashev, was coming of age, experiencing first love, and discovering his poetic calling. The film sets out to capture these interconnected events, suffusing its often-impressionistic narrative with Abdrashev senior's original compositions. The Kazakh title of the film is based on Zharaskan Abdrashev's poem "A Girl from the City" ("Kaladan kelgen kyz") and develops the theme of tension between Soviet urban and Kazakh rural spaces, as raised in *The Needle*. In *Renaissance Island*, the city produces sovietized political elites, while the country surreptitiously nurtures indigenous poets and harbors the USSR's ethnically diverse deportees and political exiles who have found a new home on the shores of the Aral Sea, even as metastasized Soviet prison camps and military testing sites invade Kazakhstan's innermost natural sanctuaries.

The eponymous girl from the city is Zhibek. When her father, a new Party boss from Alma-Ata, moves his family to Zharas's fishing village, Zharas and Zhibek fall in love. The Soviet establishment, comprised of political administrators and school authorities, do not approve of this love and pressure Zharas into renouncing it. Crushed by this betrayal, Zharas leaves his childhood paradise and embarks on an adult life as a Kazakh poet in a Soviet world. Earlier in the film, young Zharas has a prophetic flashforward to the Aral's desiccated seabed, which is inspired by "Gray Soil" ("Sortopyrak," 2001), a tragic poem written by Zharaskan Abdrashev shortly before his death.¹⁰ This vision symbolizes a Kazakh national catastrophe and establishes the poet-seer as the conscience of the nation, responsible both to his ancestors and to his descendants for the preservation of their ancestral land and culture.

Renaissance Island reflects the changes that took place in post-Soviet states following independence, when "various nation-building and geopolitical priorities—economic growth, security, independence—that have so often dominated emerging national ideologies pushed environmental concerns into the background" (Josephson 2013, 283). In the early years of Kazakh sovereignty, President Nursultan Nazarbaev closed down the nuclear testing site in Semipalatinsk, declaring Kazakhstan a non-nuclear state. In 2001–2005, the Kazakh government, with financial support from the World Bank, made successful efforts at remediating some of the damage to the Northern Aral Sea with the construction

10 I am grateful to Fatima Moldashova for translating the poem from Kazakh to English for me.

of the Kok-Aral Dam. At the same time, Kazakhstan's government, in cooperation with Western oil companies, created new environmental risks associated with the exploitation of the Caspian Basin oil reserves. This most recent environmentally damaging venture has raised fewer concerns among Kazakhstani citizens, who see it as critical for the economic development of their region from which they expect to benefit as opposed to Soviet-era environmental projects that were perceived as "promot[ing] outside (i.e., Moscow's) interests" (Jones Luong & Weinthal 1999, 1277). Abdrashev's film does not set as its primary goal to raise awareness about environmental issues in Kazakhstan; instead, it engages in nation building and a search for a Kazakh(stani) national identity, in which the devastated indigenous environment represents "a primary site of postcolonial recuperation, sustainability and dignity" (Fanon as summarized in DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 3) in a more explicit and deliberate way than in *The Needle*. The Soviet "seeds of decay" that Abdrashev aims to "root out" from his land and his people's minds are clearly identified as hindering the development of both ethnic Kazakh and Kazakhstani national identity.

While Soviet ideas and practices fully dominate national life in *The Needle*, Rustem Abdrashev more intentionally differentiates between two kinds of discreet ideological space: the "Soviet world" and the "Kazakh world," which, as Gulnara Abikeeva has shown, emerged in Kazakh cinema in the 1960s (Abikeeva 2004a, 64–65). Following Abikeeva, Rico Isaacs identifies this distinction as becoming central during the Thaw, because it allowed for a more authentic expression of the national identity of Kazakhs and provided a "subtle form of dissent against Soviet ideology" (Isaacs 2018, 75–76). Within the Soviet world, he further distinguishes between external (Moscow) authority and local (Kazakh) elites, who embrace and implement central Soviet policies (Isaacs 2018, 168).

The new Kazakh party boss arrives in the village with a brand-new television set that represents his ideological connection to the external authority in the Kremlin.¹¹ The boss introduces an ambitious fish-harvesting plan passed down from the center, thereby condoning the unsustainable practices of Soviet agriculture that carelessly strip indige-

11 Zhukova emphasizes the role of the new medium as a "mouthpiece of the Party" and an ideological transmission belt in the USSR starting in the late 1950s (2016, 172).

nous terrain of natural resources. Although the film clearly portrays the party boss as an opportunist rather than an earnest believer in Soviet modernity, this porous boundary between the local Kazakh and external Soviet authority is illustrative of the contested nature of the Soviet project in Central Asia, where “representatives of indigenous peoples supported the advance of modernity that did not treat natural resources with care” (Obertreis 2018, 129). Similar to *The Needle*, *Renaissance Island* depicts the ideology and policies emanating from the “Soviet world” as invading the “Kazakh world” of the Aral fishing village; but Abdrashev shows the resilience of Kazakh land and culture in both repelling and creatively absorbing Soviet assaults. The totalitarian Soviet regime as external authority is mentioned only indirectly, through a children’s poem about the Moscow Kremlin. However, it is literally embedded in the Kazakh land, desecrating it with moral and physical contagion by colonizing it with Soviet penal camps and repressive policies; appropriating indigenous territories for secret military facilities; and practicing reckless stewardship of the Kazakh land through unsustainable agriculture and nature-transformation projects.

The legacy of Soviet military colonization is shown to have a deep and lasting impact environmentally. The fish in the Aral Sea are unhealthy and stressed, which local fishermen connect to the appearance of Soviet soldiers on the sea’s islands, but the Party boss suppresses these concerns, forbidding any references to the military. Soviet decay has penetrated the most secluded sanctuaries of the Aral Sea. This includes Renaissance Island, which the traveling Kazakh shoe repairman Omar-agai describes as “the very heart of the Aral Sea where souls are born and dreams are buried.” That is where Renata Isakovna, a teacher of Russian literature from St. Petersburg, traces the disappearance of her father, repressed in the Stalinist purges. In 1924–1926, Renaissance Island hosted a special-purpose Soviet prison, and in 1948 this former hunting and fishing paradise was closed off to indigenous people, becoming a top-secret site for a Soviet bioweapons-testing facility. Periodic accidents killed local fishermen and multitudes of natural life. With the evacuation of the lab in 1991, deadly pathogens remained in the island’s soil and in the abandoned equipment (Gorvett 2017). The film implies that some of the scientists in the lab were political prisoners, such as Renata Isakovna’s missing father. A close-up of suffocating fish, as if “imprisoned” behind metal bars in an overloaded boat, comments on

the physical and ideological contamination of the Kazakh land and sea by both toxic military pollutants and the deadly web of Gulag camps.

The village has also absorbed the shockwaves of Stalinist repressions, most notably, the pre-war and wartime wholesale deportations of “enemy” ethnicities. The film opens with village children playing hide-and-seek among a bountiful harvest of watermelons in a kolkhoz field, where one of the old cattle cars that transported human cargo now serves as a makeshift shelter for field workers. A rusty bed without bedding in the shed, along with a broken watermelon that one child used to imitate a pregnant belly, indicate the deadly impact of Soviet colonial policies on people forcefully displaced from their homes elsewhere in the Soviet empire. Although scars like this pepper the Kazakh landscape, the film also highlights the hospitality and the healing that the generous Kazakh land has extended to the victims of various Soviet repressions, as if modeling a grassroots, non-imperial version of the Soviet Friendship-of-the-Peoples policy. Embraced as inherently auspicious, the policy continues to shape independent Kazakhstan’s multiethnic citizenry.

Despite the environmental and moral degradation caused by Soviet authority, the film highlights the Kazakh land’s resilience, which comes less from ethnic Kazakhs’ hybrid identities as Soviet citizens than from their traditional hospitality cultivated in the boundless steppe, where nomadic settlements offered long-distance travelers vitally needed shelter; openness to other cultures fostered by the location on the Silk Road; and indigenous ways of relating to history and the environment nurtured by pastoral nomadism. The multiethnic village that has opened its doors to “enemy” ethnicities represents a microcosm of Kazakhstani society in the transformative aftermath of Stalinist deportations. The film suggests that it was not the restrictive and colonial Soviet ideology, but indigenous Kazakh knowledges, hospitality, and cultural open-mindedness that cultivated authentic citizens and secured peace and prosperity in multiethnic Kazakhstan.

Zharas’s prophetic dream set in the drained bed of the Aral Sea epitomizes the external Soviet authority’s physical and moral abuse of the Kazakh land and people in its arrogant nature-transformation project, allegedly building a Communist paradise on earth.¹² Traditionally

12 The project envisioned diverting water from the rivers flowing into the Aral Sea to create cotton farms on the newly irrigated parts of the surrounding desert and on the lands “conquered away from the sea” (Sidel’nikov 1987).

nomadic Kazakhs have closely associated their culture and their land, and Kazakh bards have sanctified the Kazakh steppe and the freedom it represents. In Soviet times, “the sacred land of Abai and Mukhtar,” two of the most revered Kazakh poets, has become a nuclear testing ground, while its most prized “natural pearl,” the formerly abundant Aral Sea, the main source of livelihood for the native people, has turned into a toxic desert laden with carcinogenic pesticides from agricultural water run-offs and studded with ghost-like rusted ships (Kulbarak 2016). The source of the disaster transpires in the visual mosaic of Zharas’s dream, in which footage of the dried-up Aral seabed is interspliced with flashing images of villagers walking under a convoy and wearing gas masks, as well as with Zharas’s family photo taken with alabaster statues of Lenin and young pioneers from the village school.

Abdrashev gives Zharas insight into the future of his land by bringing him into contact with the spirits (aruakh) of his dead ancestors and the souls of the children destined to remain unborn due to the contaminated Aral’s lethal hazards. Zharas appears in the dream in national dress, riding a white camel and holding a dombra, a traditional Kazakh instrument used to accompany recitations of poetry and national epos. This positions the fledgling poet Zharas, like it does the established poet Zharaskan Abdrashev, the author of “Gray Soil,” on which the dream is based, as a seer and leader of his nation akin to the prominent Kazakh zhyrau (a philosopher-poet “marked by god”) and influential adviser to Kazakh khans, Asan Kaigy (“Asan Kaigy—*uiti*” 2017). Living at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, during the period of Kazakh tribes’ migration to new lands, Asan Kaigy (the sad Asan), traveled the steppe on his white camel in search of the Promised Land for his people, место счастья и равноправия людей (Abdrashev in Nurseitova 2012).¹³ The dream therefore contrasts the Soviet and traditional Kazakh visions for Paradise on Earth. In bringing Zharas in touch with his ancestors’ hopes for their common land, the dream reveals the colonial exploitation and subjugation that takes place in the Soviet world.

Despite its critique of Soviet political and economic imperialism, *Renaissance Island* negotiates a hybrid Russo-Kazakh cultural identity that selectively appropriates humanistic masterpieces of Russian literature into the Kazakh national heritage. Renata Isakovna, the Russian literature teacher hailing from Russia’s “cultural capital,” acts as one of

13 “a place of people’s happiness and equality”

the two mentors who introduce young Zharas to non-Soviet knowledges about the world. When students in Renata's class cheerfully and loudly recite paeans to the Soviet soldier protecting the peace and happiness of the multinational Soviet Family, or to the Kremlin stars extending their light to the farthest corners of the USSR, she calls for "quieter," more "grownup" verses that "come from the heart," offering them lyric poetry by Anna Akhmatova and Aleksandr Pushkin. Zharas avidly absorbs this Russian poetic wisdom, just as Zharaskan Abdrashev made the poetry of Pushkin and Aleksandr Blok a part of his people's intellectual horizon by translating it into Kazakh. Zhibek too makes Pushkin's art her own, reciting his love lyrics "To Kern" ("K Kern... ia pomniu chudnoe mgnoven'e," 1827), which resonate with her feelings for Zharas, in her native tongue. Zharas's Kazakh mentor, Omar-agai, hands the budding poet a collection of verses by Kazakh poet Magzhan Zhumabaev, promising that the book will provide answers to many questions that Zharas has not yet had a chance to ponder. Zhumabaev (1893–1938) perished in the Stalinist repressions and his banned love lyrics and poetic confessions of love to unprepossessing Kazakh nature symbolize indigenous knowledge, which the film depicts as vital for proper emotional and moral maturation, but which the Soviet system suppresses because it threatens its ideological dominance.

Similar to *The Needle*, the battle of Soviet and indigenous world-views plays out on the soundtrack, which overflows with recitations of poetry—some Soviet, but mostly Kazakh, prerevolutionary Russian, and ancient Persian (a philosophical quatrain by Omar Khayyam). Lyric poetry by Zharaskan Abdrashev and Magzhan Zhumabaev merges the young protagonists' budding romantic feelings with their awareness of their native land, as they flee their school's ideologically saturated Soviet space to be alone and free in nature. Extended poetry-voiceover sequences depict Zharas and Zhibek walking on flowing sand banks next to the gently shimmering Aral, with Zhibek's silk scarf catching the sea breeze like a sail. Abdrashev emotively inscribes the indigenous lyrical poetry and young protagonists' beautiful bodies in the Aral landscape; poetry seems to emanate from the land itself as if it were the expression of its soul. The pristine, sandy Kazakh land supports the fledgling poet: it both cradles Zharas in its soft indents and provides a quiet, contemplative environment for writing poetry. By contrast, the ideologically violent space of the Soviet school tarnishes the purity of Zharas's and

Zhibek's feelings with crude insinuations, barging into their emerging private worlds and imposing a ban on their thoughts and emotions.

The battle of the Soviet and indigenous visual- and sound-tracks is perhaps most complex in the censure scene in the school principal's office, in which Zharas, in a coming-of-age moment, must face and process the imposed Soviet part of his identity. For the first time an external voice of Soviet authority speaks directly, over the radio, but the ambiguity of its exact source of origin creates ambivalence about Kazakh ownership of the Soviet project. The announcement of the "good news" about man's pioneering flight into space comes in right after school administrators and teachers denounce Magzhan Zhumabaev's love lyrics as pornographic and force Zharas to renounce his love for Zhibek. External Soviet authority further belittles Zharas's indigenous trauma, when everyone abandons him at the height of his emotional crisis and rushes to the radio to hear "the important message" from Moscow. Contrary to viewers' expectations, however, we hear the message not in the principal's office, a temple of Soviet ideology, but in the open steppe freshly dusted with snow and sparkling underneath a brilliant blue sky, a visual shrine to Tengriism, Kazakhs' traditional pre-Islamic religion that "centers on the relationship between humankind and nature, sanctifying humans' relationship with the sky" (Isaacs 2018, 177). The camera pans over the bright snowy expanse as we hear the sounds of the radio transmission, as if the Kazakh land itself is communicating with the sky and the universe. This is one of the few color sequences in the black-and-white film, and despite the noticeable switch from the summery seascape to the snow-white steppe, the official announcement of Iurii Gagarin's message, followed by the live broadcast of his greetings from space, just like Kazakh poetry in previous scenes, resounds over the Kazakh land.

This ambiguous portrayal of a Soviet nature-conquering project as both indifferent to indigenous traumas and connected to indigenous land and its ancient spirituality may indicate the filmmaker's sense of conflicting ownership of the Soviet space program. The message that the external Soviet authority appropriates via the usual broadcast preamble of "Moscow is speaking" (*Govorit Moskva*) in fact originates from outside the Soviet Union and the earth, from Gagarin's spaceship, launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome near the Aral Sea. This symbolic event seems to inspire Zharas, launching him on his own journey away from

his shattered childhood “paradise” into the “boundless sea” of life as a new Kazakh poet (Abdrashev in Galkina 2004). Unlike other Soviet projects shown to affect the Kazakh land and nature, the film does not raise the issue of the environmental impact of the Soviet space program on the indigenous landscape.

Renaissance Island moves beyond *The Needle* in identifying the ancestral Kazakh landscape not only as a healing space, but also as the locus of Kazakh indigenous values and knowledge that have survived the devastating impact of Soviet repressive policies, ambitious nature-transformation projects, and reckless stewardship of the Kazakh land. Nugmanov’s vaguely Asian superhero gives place to an ethnically Kazakh protagonist firmly grounded in his indigenous land and culture, but also open to cross-cultural exchanges outside of the dominant Soviet ideology. Like Nugmanov’s Moro, the hybridity of Abdrashev’s protagonist comes mostly from non-Soviet influences, but Soviet ideology nonetheless leaves both positive and negative imprints on his psyche. More deliberate than Nugmanov and his concept of “empty action,” Abdrashev still allows for some degree of negotiation between his protagonist’s Kazakh and Soviet identities. The Soviet Friendship-of-the-Peoples ideal finds its true realization in the Kazakhs’ tradition of hospitality, as they open their ancestral lands to political exiles and repressed “enemy” ethnicities to forge a multiethnic civic nation in Kazakhstan. Abdrashev’s vision of the Aral Sea catastrophe becomes synonymous with a national disaster and a genocide, in which environmental degradation figures as a metaphor for the Soviet colonial impact on the health, land, culture, and the very ancestral identity of the Kazakh people. Abdrashev, however, seems to be less concerned than Nugmanov with the environmental impact of the Soviet space program, demonstrating a less ambivalent ownership of this scheme to conquer nature. In reclaiming humanity’s first flight into space from Soviet colonial authorities and linking it instead with the Kazakh land and its indigenous nature-centric religion and native poetry, Abdrashev offers it as an inspiration for his indigenous protagonist to dream and create freely. *Renaissance Island* thus reflects the early post-independence era’s priorities of nation building, as it uses Soviet-caused environmental decay for the purposes of decolonization rather than a comprehensive critique of Soviet ecological practices that have been perpetuated in nature-exploitation projects in independent Kazakhstan. In the evolving

contexts of capitalism, globalization, and climate change, more recent Kazakhstani cinema, such as Ermek Tursunov's Tengriist narratives, has increasingly engaged in global discussions on the environment, answering the call for a more fundamental rethinking of humans' exploitative relationship with nature in the Anthropocene.

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