

Zemlya

Earth (Ukrainian: Земля, translit. Zemlya) is a 1930 Soviet silent film by Ukrainian director Alexander Dovzhenko. The film concerns the process of collectivization and the hostility of kulak landowners under the First Five-Year Plan.

The kulaks were former serfs who had benefited from earlier land reforms and now owned enough land, livestock etc, to be independent and to employ workers themselves. They were threatened by the next stages of land reform which involved bringing all land into collective ownership.

The script was inspired by Dovzhenko's life and experience of the process of collectivization in his native Ukraine. That process, which was the backdrop of the film and its production, informed its reception in the Soviet Union, which was largely negative.

Plot

The film begins with a montage of wind blowing through a field of wheat and sunflowers. Next, an old peasant named Semen dies beneath an apple tree, attended by his son Opanas and grandson Vasyl. Elsewhere local kulaks, including Arkhryp Bilokin, denounce collectivization and declare their resistance to it. At Opanas's home, Vasyl and his friends meet to discuss collectivization and argue with Opanas, who is skeptical.

Later, Vasyl arrives with the community's first tractor to much excitement. After the men urinate in the overheated radiator, the peasants plow the land with the tractor and harvest the grain, in the process plowing over the kulaks' fences. A montage sequence presents the production of bread from beginning to end. That night Vasyl dances a hopak along a path on his way home and is killed by a dark figure. Opanas looks for Vasyl's killer and confronts Khoma, Bilokin's son, who does not confess.

Vasyl's father turns away the Russian Orthodox priest who expects to lead the funeral, declaring his atheism. He asks Vasyl's friends to give his son a secular funeral and "sing new songs for a new life." The villagers do so, while Vasyl's fiancée, Natalya, mourns him and the local priest curses them. At the cemetery, Khoma arrives in a frenzy to declare that he will resist collectivization and that he killed Vasyl. The villagers ignore him while one of Vasyl's friends eulogizes him. The film ends with a montage showing a downpour of rain over fruit and vegetables, after which Natalya finds herself embraced in Vasyl's arms.

Context

Dovzhenko wrote *Earth* in 1929, during the process of collectivization in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which he described as "a period ... of economic [and] mental transformation of the whole people." Collectivization began in 1929 as Soviet General Secretary Joseph Stalin sought to control agriculture in the Soviet Union as it industrialized. This meant breaking the power of the kulaks, rural landowners created by reforms in 1906, and the collectivization of privately-owned farms. Peasants resisted collectivization by killing their draft animals, sabotaging agricultural machinery, and assassinating Soviet agents. Much of *Earth's* script was inspired by Dovzhenko's experience of this process; Vasyl's death was based on the assassination of a Soviet agent in his home district. Dovzhenko also drew inspiration from his childhood memories, for instance basing the character of Semyon on his own grandfather.

Release

Earth was released on 8 April 1930 and was banned by Soviet authorities nine days later.

In 2012, the National Oleksandr Dovzhenko Film Center, the Ukrainian state film archive, restored *Earth* and gave it a new score by the Ukrainian folk quartet DakhaBrakha. This version of the film premiered at the 2012 Odesa International Film Festival.

Reception

Earth's reception in the Soviet Union consisted of high praise – receiving a standing ovation at its debut and the endorsement of the Red Army – and sharp criticism. Soviet authorities and journalists simultaneously lauded the film for its "formal mastery" and derided it for perceived ideological shortcomings. *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party, praised the film's visual style but called its political content "false". The Soviet poet Demyan Bedny attacked *Earth*, calling it "counterrevolutionary" and "defeatist".

Legacy

Earth is widely considered to be Dovzhenko's magnum opus, and among the greatest films ever made. The National Oleksandr Dovzhenko Film Center considers *Earth* to be the most famous Ukrainian film made. *Earth* was voted one of the twelve greatest films of all time by a group of 117 film historians at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair and named one of the top ten greatest films of all time by the International Film Critics Symposium. *Earth* was selected as one of five films to be screened at a festival to celebrate the 70th anniversary of UNESCO.



Zemlya is presented as part of the Art is... festival with an original score ("*Zemlya Orchestra*") written by Nick Shirrefs and performed live by an orchestra consisting of: Sandra Kitchen – Piano, Sandra Pope – Flute, Lauren Arnett – Clarinet/Sax, Jordan Tsousoglou – Clarinet/Sax, Elisa Matthias – Sax, Jo Ellis – Trumpet, Wally Pope – Tuba, Louis Willemsen – Percussion, Kai Dodson – Percussion, Nick Van Der Westhuizen-Spiller – Percussion, Sam Mackley – Percussion, and with an original score (*Zemlya Electro*) written and performed by Will Netherway.