

8 VIEWS OF LAKE BIWA

Approx. 100 minutes, drama

Director: Marko Raat

Producer: Ivo Felt, Dora Nedeczky

Production Company: Allfilm, Estonia

Co-Production Partner: TBC

Status: Pre-Production, expecting to shoot during the Spring/Summer of 2022

Based loosely on Eight Views of Lake Biwa, a novel by Max Dauthendey (1867-1918).

Film concept

Logline

Eight lake views of the Japanese art tradition translated into the language of the longings and desires of Old Believers at Lake Peipus.

Synopsis

Observing a Russian Old Believers village by the shore of modern-day Lake Peipus, through the frame of the Japanese artistic tradition of 8 views, this series of intertwined tragic love stories illuminates how we have all lost touch with the soulfulness of the world.

A devastating accident drowns many of the village's children and pushes the surviving inhabitants into a cascade of tragic consequences. Even in a community self-isolating from progress, their art and magic are fading. Christian and animistic faith are neglected and rituals harnessed for selfish purposes.

Archetypal characters fluidly change roles between the views, but the teenage Hanake is ever-present: a child shifting toward adult needs, she embodies the central theme of innocence lost and everything abandoned along with it. While we explore playfulness and intimacy across generations, it is crushing grief, ambition and a dogged fatalism that drive events toward a final reckoning with nature itself.



Director's Note

We need poetry to step out of the constraints of the dominant, pragmatic mindset and to describe the indescribable, in much the same way exploring a distant culture enables us to look at our own culture with fresh eyes. The traditional Japanese animistic Shinto belief system, upholding the spirituality of all living things, the soulfulness of the whole world, encompasses exactly what we, here in the West have lost.

Japanese culture as a whole exemplifies a certain type of organic and apolitical spirituality. The Eight Views is an Eastern artistic tradition that describes a place through eight poetic motives, such as evening glow, sails returning in the evening, autumn moon, temple bells, wild geese departing. Lake Biwa in Japan, in particular, has inspired a long tradition of artists and authors interpreting these scenes.

Through these views, we're seeking the intersection of this animistic sense of nature and the islets of magical thought within eight intertwined tragic love stories set in the modern world.

We aim to create expectations, deceive them, and distance the viewer from everyday realism.

Setting

Most of the action in the film takes place in Russian Old Believers' villages by Lake Peipus and in the boat canals surrounding the Narva Reservoir. The eight poetic scenes of Japanese high culture are therefore set in the rustic village landscape of Estonian periphery. As required by tradition, each season is represented. The water carries the villagers away to the city and back home; the city is limited to lone large urban buildings, a silhouette, harbours, and mostly interiors.

The environment and setting of the film are modern throughout, but the main characters, driven by their Old Believer distrust of everything too new, forgo the car, the telephone, the TV and the computer; (except for motorized boats: with fishing their traditional livelihood, they have adopted this technical innovation long since).

The filming will also take place near Peipus, mostly in real locations (not in the studio), we will selectively be adding elements of Japanese interior design to real households (slight screens and partitions that help make the rooms cleaner in shape and deeper within the frame; smooth transitions between the interior and the exterior areas)

In order to balance and complement the mounting drama of the staged scenes with the ordinariness of mundane and the archaic Christian mysticism practices, our goal is to add parts of our documentarist footage of local professional fishermen at casting their nets and the religious services of Old Believers'.



Dramaturgy

The film portrays intertwined tragic love stories between the people of a single village. Everybody knows everyone else and each story's protagonists are supporting characters in the other stories. All ballads are interrupted, only to continue in the next stories. The first story of the film lays out the supernatural that for the characters is completely natural; it sets a magical atmosphere for the rest of the film, which then, in turn, is cast into doubt and tested by its participants and outsiders alike.

The lake with its strange and dangerous water is an important party in each story. The water is tempting and perilous; the water comforts or confuses, it blends emotions and disperses hopes. Constant throughout the movie is the voice of the narrator, the teenage Hanake, who is involved in each story. Hanake's mindspace, language and thought, shaped by children's games and initiation rites, bring the archaic community into focus and cast it in conflict with the commanding presence of the modern world.

The film's "Eight Views" are made up of both visual and psychological elements. The so-called frame scenes that carry the weight of symbolism, the ones that entail the essence of the view, find the elements for this purpose in the everyday life and nature surroundings of the main characters, based on the characteristics and meanings specific to the Peipus area. In building the "Symbolic view" within the frame, Eastern visual art is also indirectly used as an example.



Key motives

1. Whispers are the language of longings, fantasies, games.
2. The humility and forgiveness through a constant internal process of prayer, even while the characters in their human weakness and psychology simultaneously and constantly sin against it. It is emphasized by the constant intersection of coarse everyday dialogues with poetically spoken prayer and high poetry. The poeticism cancels out the elementary psychology, which, as a rule, is a single-minded driver of the ego and desires, an overly superficial excuse. The prayer language carries the same purpose, it's not canonized and doesn't strictly adhere to any liturgy and it doesn't deny human weakness and selfishness nor the duplicity of society.
3. Straightforward, spontaneous playfulness of teenagers that most adults have lost on the way. This level of sacred innocence is purposefully shifted in the film to age groups out of this age - late teens and adults.
4. The eternal problem of sexuality for youth and grown adults alike and its foundational role as a catalyst and as an indicator of intimacy. In Japanese tradition society has not had a moralistic attitude and control towards sexuality, whereas the cultures with a Christian background have always associated it with shame and judgement. The two teenage characters' age is carefully set to 15, as it is the in-between state of adolescent-teenager; who can both be either a mature woman or a child. The actual age is never revealed in the film, it depends on the characteristics of the actual actor. Any sexual grotesque elements in the film will be executed with using prosthetics, special make-up (silicone) in the style of shunga woodcutting technique. An intimacy director/expert can also be involved to help the actors on set.
5. The intertextuality between authentic Japan and modern Estonia eliminates any direct ideological bent, without evading politics.



Community, characters and their identities

The main characters of the eight intertwining views are: Ōne the teacher, who's married to Sora. Fisherman Andrei is in love with Ōne, but also friends with Sora. Shortly after Sora dies Andrei is in a relationship with Ōne, this makes him hated by the community - at the same time he suspects that he is not loved by Ōne. Ōne who carries Sora's baby and wants to believe her former lover is not dead;

Teenagers Hanake and Merikarp who don't want to grow up, but end up spectacularly betraying their mutual agreement; teenager Kiri who is under the paw of his militaristic father Timofei and doesn't want to become a hero in the war that has erupted. A corrupt fish-protection officer Roman who tries to gain both power and empathy by buying himself a wife. Security guard Olger who takes advantage of Ōne's intoxicating self-deception and reluctance to accept the loss of her lover and the go-getter merchant Okuro who falls in love and after being rejected sinks an entire cruise ship.

There are more recurring characters, 12 in total and they represent all age groups of the small community as there are teenagers, middle-aged people and the elderly. All the characters live in a modern world that is mythological - through faith or superstitions - yet ordinary; their magical world-view blends animistic nature, Christianity (primarily in the context of the Old Believers and the so-called Seto village Christianity, that is without the presence of hierarchical priests and institutional rigidity), Japanese spirits and gods, but also the Japanese shunga erotic art (which accordingly to genre always involves irony and grotesque - whereas in the Western culture humour and eroticism cancel each other out); and in addition the Japanese pop culture that is overly sexualized and tinged with violence.



Prayer or spiritual address is a habitual earnest everyday state of mind; it opens the door to ecstasy, and that, in turn, to affective action. But their spirituality does not preclude sensuality nor natural urges. The religious practices of the main characters who consider themselves as carriers of the Old Believer tradition are not canonical nor based on any specific school, but rather, is a traditional mindspace of children's games. The liturgical elements and spirituality that stem from the habit of communicating with God/spirits or-ganically blend into adult relationships and teenagers' games, into the lives of these people who have grown up surrounded by village Christianity and nature (right next to the dangerous water). The muddled Russian Old Believer - Japanese - Estonian triple identity of the characters is not as unrealistic as it might initially seem. It resembles the self-image of numerous small communities and their inhabitants, whose mythological ancestors and tradition combine with the modern national status of their land.

Modern psychology and a more pragmatic perception of the world creep into the film through characters who are losing their connection with the magical world or harness it for pragmatic, selfish purposes.

Visuals

The film's imagery is contrasting and relatively monochromatic, using restricted colours where 3-5 different main shades dominate. Historical Japanese woodblock prints (Hiroshige, Hokusai, etc.) are used as an example.

In addition analogical early photographs and films hand-tinted in a few chosen shades. In framing we as a rule avoid the so-called golden ratio, rather taking our cues from Japanese art where the central emptiness directs attention towards the tension at the edges of the frame. The frame is wide aka Scope.

The mise-en-scene-s are mainly captured with a static tripod camera, more of a voyeuristic look from the side. But the characters being observed are very close to each other within the frame, physical and sensual. Often the faces of the main characters are shy and shrouded, meaning that people view each other with the same tact as the characters whisper on the audio track; so the subconscious peeks only partially, only to trigger the fantasy and desire while at the same time concealing the whole picture. -



One of the starting points in framing and composing the scenes is the so-called aesthetics of concealment from the Eastern art tradition: which primarily sees beauty in the hidden and obscure elements of the image, that is the basis of this artistic and philosophical worldview. Hints rather than revealing the entire naked whole. The forms are simple, but since the picture does not reveal everything or not the entire whole, there is also some-thing infinite about it. The image leaves one guessing about the hidden depths and "echo", that wouldn't be possible with informatively and clearly drawn out details. A certain visual inexhaustibility arises, an infinity; the Japanese term *yūgen* - that what lies beneath, elegance, grace; the inner beauty of things that manifest itself outward.

The light around Lake Biwa is dim and natural. It uses hints to direct toward what's important. There's always two sides to the light of the characters; public - aimed towards being noticed and internal - shadowy and intimate. Exterior views are marked by the shifts between spacious day and night. The city is nocturnal, stuffy, more artificial and more saturated as a counterpoint to the spaciousness and naturalness of the village and the lake.

The shots of the fetus inside the belly are a combination of realistic 3D animation and the stylized aesthetics of the shunga woodcut technique.

The scene with the trees growing on the lake and the water that carries is a combined shot (green fabric + different locations).

Dialogues and text in the film

The dialogue consists predominantly of monological prayers and modern free verse, through which all main characters address their partners and God/ spirits at once. The prayer as; both an altruistic and a selfish desire to change the world - with the same words and sacraments you can do both good and evil.

These heart-wrenching cries expressed as prayer blend longings, expectations, Estonian folklore and Christian terminology, poetry, psychology, the power of faith and doubt in faith; Japanese mythology and modern pop culture. E.g. the world of the teenager Hanake combines religious mystique with the romantic language of teenage scrapbooks, Estonian folklore and mature modern free verse. Children's and teenagers' dialogues will be partially improvised using the I spy with my little eye word game. There's also a plan to improvise a scene were the adults all confess together, based on the prayer hour of the churches of Christ.



Sound

As the characters are often in silent prayer or whispering the sentences going through their mind “directly to the viewer” a lot of the “dialogised” text of prayers and poems is asynchronous, occasionally unexpectedly interrupted by synchronised dialogues.

I would not call this asynchronous sound in the film a V.O., but a dialogue based on the language of prayer, and it will also be recorded while acting with scene partners during filming, not later in the sound studio. The starting point, then, is the idea that unlike the constant demand for public attention, this film has personal encounters that do not demand the attention of others and do not perform - on the contrary, they only want to speak sentences that are only intended for one person and not for the ears of others.

About the production company

Allfilm is an Academy Award and Golden Globe nominated production house operating since 1995.

The company’s scope of activity varies from developing and producing quality features, documentaries and TV series to developing transmedia concepts and producing highly finished commercials. The company also provides production services for international films and commercials.

Over the years Allfilm has produced more than 80 films, including international Co-Productions.

Director’s bio

Marko Raat is an award-winning Estonian writer-director, curator and academic, active in the fields of both arthouse fiction film and documentaries since 1999. He has a vast background in theatre directing, TV productions and in fine art. His latest feature length documentary FUNERAL DIARIES (2019) after premiering at Dok.Fest Munich and opening DocPoint Tallinn, is still travelling the festival circuit. His most recent short film A CHAIRMAN’S TALE (2015) had its debut at the International Art Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia. His last feature length fiction film THE SNOW QUEEN (2010) had been developed at SOURCES2 and premiered at the Montreal World Film Festival, then was screened at Cairo and Mumbai among many acclaimed festivals.



Producers' bio

Producer and Sound Designer Ivo Felt co-founded the production company Allfilm in 1995. Currently Ivo is focusing more on producing but has created sound design for more than 50 feature and documentary films in the past.

Ivo's productions include Zaza Urushadze's TANGERINES (2013) nominated for the Academy Award and Golden Globe as well as Klaus Härö's THE FENCER (2015) nominated for Golden Globe. Ivo's latest feature TRUTH AND JUSTICE (2019) directed by Tanel Toom broke box office records locally, won a Sattellite Award and was shortlisted for an Academy Award. He has produced also a number of creative documentaries and works with director Marko Raat for over twelve years now. Their latest collaboration, FUNERAL DIARIES (2019) opened at DOK.fest Munich and screened at many festivals later.

Dora Nedeczky is a Hungarian producer and strategist, working between Tallinn and Budapest. Her recent works include films from cult director Peter Strickland, found-footage auteurs Péter Lichter and Bori Máté and observational documentary filmmakers Ivete Lucas and Patrick Bresnan. Strickland's GUO4 (2019, Venice) and Cold Meridian (2020, San Sebastian) are both still out on the festival circuit, and his segment in horror anthology THE FIELD GUIDE TO EVIL (2018) premiered at SXSW. Lichter/Máté's THE PHILOSOPHY OF HORROR - A SYMPHONY OF FILM THEORY (2020) was screened at Torino, Cottbus and IFFR, while HAPPINESS IS A JOURNEY (2021) by Lucas/Bresnan is premiering in Locarno. Dora collaborates with Allfilm for over a year, they have several projects in the making. She is also an EAVE Producers Workshop 2016 graduate and her works have been acquired by MUBI and recognised by the end of year lists of Sight & Sound Magazine.

