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The Specter of Opacity: Sakha Indigenous Voice in the Ethnic Horror Film *Ich-chi* (2021)

Eva Ivanilova and Neepe Majumdar

The phenomenal vitality of Sakha cinema in its home region—the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) located in Eastern Siberia—and a series of recent festival acknowledgments has aroused significant scholarly interest in Sakha films. This local cinema emerged within the context of the politico-economic restructuring of the region in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the breakup of the USSR, as well as the cultural policies largely aiming at shaping Sakha national identity¹. Over the ensuing decades, Sakha cultural and memory politics have co-evolved with local film practices, audiences, and markets, so that by the 2020s, Sakha cinema had gained status as the only full-fledged regional film industry within Russia, operating with its own autonomous distribution system.

Although Sakha cinema includes a diverse array of genres, horror films have played a particularly influential role in its development as an independent industry and Indigenous mediascape. Early supernatural thrillers such as *Maappa* (Aleksei Romanov, 1986), *Summer Homestead* (Anatolii Vasiliev, 1992), *Night Maiden* (1999), and the first locally popular film *Cursed Land* (Ellei Ivanov, 1996) were the first to speak to the local audience about the relationship between the Sakha and their landscape in their Indigenous language (Mészáros 2022). In 2006, *The Blair Witch Project* parody *Path of Death* accelerated Sakha’s commercial “kinoboom,”—a term coined by Sardana Savvina, the region’s main promoter of cinema (Savvina 2022)—by earning approximately \$76,000 over its \$20,000 budget, which was the largest domestic box office return in Sakha to date.

Early Sakha horror films demonstrate low production quality and amateur aesthetics. However, there is a difference between micro-budget horror

¹ The scholarship on cultural identity and Indigeneity in contemporary Sakha cinema includes Caroline Damiens 2014 study “A Cinema of One’s Own Building / Reconstructing Siberian Indigenous Peoples’ Identity in Recent Cinema: Examples from Sakha (Yakutia) Republic and the Republic of Khakassia,” in *InterDisciplines* 5, pp. 161–187; Vladislav V. Levochkin’s 2016 study “National Film Industry of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia): The Dynamics and Main Priorities of the Region’s Cultural Policy” in *Observatory of Culture* 1, pp. 146–152; Vlad Strukov’s 2018 essay “Theorizing the Hyperlocal: The Cinema of Sakha (Yakutia) and Global Contexts” in *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, pp. 217–239; Eva Ivanilova’s 2019 article “Uzhas belogo lista: Istoriia Yakutskogo horrora” in *Iskusstvo Kino*; and Adelaide McGinity-Peebles’ 2022 essay “Cinema, Ethnicity, and Nation-Building in the Sakha Republic (Russia) and Kazakhstan” for the *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Communication*.

films produced within a long-standing film industry and films made by enthusiasts who are remote from the federal film networks. As the early Sakha cinema grew together with the local audience's interest in their own cinema, the naive form of certain films came to enhance their aura of authenticity. Within a few years, these early Sakha films became fertile soil for the rapid development of technical skills and visual styles. In 2020, Dmitrii Davydov's *Scarecrow*—an art horror film centered on a female healer—was the first Sakha film to win the Grand Prize at the Kinotavr Film Festival in Sochi and also won the Special Prize at the Tromsø International Film Festival. In 2021, Kostas Marsaan's ethnic horror film *Ich-chi* became the first Sakha film to be distributed globally. Before its US premiere in 2021, the film was screened at the Russian Film Symposium in Pittsburgh, where producer Marianna Siegen and director Kostas Marsaan introduced it as a statement expressing a specifically Indigenous point of view. Relying on this film as the primary case study and drawing on the concepts of Indigenous “refusal” (Simpson 2014) and opacity (Glissant 1997) as forms of narrative and the visual withholding of local knowledge, this essay discusses the political and epistemological meanings produced by a resistant construction of Indigenous identity in contemporary Sakha cinema.

Sakha Filmmaking and the Turn to Horror

Before the early 1990s, there was neither a distinct Soviet horror tradition nor a Sakha national cinema. Although there are many reasons for these absences, ideological motivations outweigh other causes for the underdevelopment of the Soviet horror genre, while the lack of a Sakha national cinema is to a greater extent grounded in the USSR's territorial structure and the status of “nationality” as the main administrative mechanism. According to the 1926 All-Union census, lower-class rural populations of the former Russian Empire struggled to identify their national belonging. People defined themselves through religion, place of birth, clan, or tribe, while local elites benefited from manipulations of the records. Seeking a category through which to decolonize and grant political agency to scattered peoples, the Soviet state promoted nationality (understood as a nation based on ethnic unity) as “a fundamental marker of identity” (Hirsh 2014, 145). Some Soviet nationalities were “built out” of cultures with distinct arts and literatures, long histories of political resistance, and signs of bourgeois nationalism, but others were granted to nomadic peoples who did not have their own recorded histories and were barely accounted for even by metropolitan ethnography. To break with the

Tsarist past and eventually equalize them on the Marxist timeline, the Soviet regime divided its subjects into “mature” and “backward” nations. This instrumental hierarchy was institutionalized in the organization of the Soviet film industry, which served as one of the key platforms for national border-making. The Belarusian, Georgian, Ukrainian, and other more nationally advanced and geopolitically critical (and therefore in need of more regulation) republics had been developing full-fledged film companies with constant financial and human resources support from Moscow since the 1920s. However, the “backward” national republics and non-autonomous regions within the Russian Soviet Republic had only newsreel studios at best. These studios produced ethnographic documentaries, educational films, and chronicles of industrialization, while fictional cinema in native languages remained outside their purview².

The only film institution in the Yakut ASSR was a branch office of the East-Siberian newsreel studio located in the neighboring Irkutsk region. During the 1972 anniversary of the Yakut ASSR, the studio released the documentary film *Speak, Yakutia!* (Valerii Khomenko, Tamara Chirkova) to explicitly address the Soviet Sakha “self.” The film was a typical example of the Soviet documentary mode, conveying a modernizing agenda through an explanatory voiceover and the juxtaposition of the prosperous present to the ostensibly primitive past. In one of the sequences, a simple cut transforms the pastoral pans of the Lena River into the panoramas of the Vilyuy hydroelectric power station. “For centuries,”—a narrator comments in Russian—“the shores of the Lena served as a prison for Russians and Yakuts, Georgians, and Tatars. But today, the united brotherly nations are conquering the forces of nature.”

Though attempting to appeal to the Sakha people, this TV-documentary remarkably overlooked two fundamental elements of their culture: the Sakha’s oral tradition and their environmental consciousness. First, the discourse of the industrial modernization of the vast Northern lands and of the scientific alteration of natural conditions contradicted Indigenous knowledge of nature and the myth-ritual complex focused on the coexistence of hunters and farmers with their environment. Second, the absence of a native language essentially

² In 1970, the chief secretary of Tatarstan Regional Committee of the Communist Party addressed this situation as “an important problem” on the opening pages of the July issue of *Iskusstvo kino*, saying that “[t]here are almost no fiction films about life of Tatars, Bashkirs, Buryats, Dagestanians, Komi, Mari, Tuvans, Udmurts and many other people of autonomous republics of Russian Federation. Apparently, our cinema does not pay enough attention to such an important matter as the heyday of once backward national outskirts of tsarist Russia reached due to Leninist national policy of the Communist Party” (Tabeev 1970, 1).

distorted the representation of Sakha culture, for which the idea of language as a non-human agent is one of the central aspects (Ferguson 2016). While the imperative exclamation *Speak, Yakutia!* contained the Sakha verb “kespe” in the original title, the film expected its audience to respond in the Soviet parlance of a Russia unified in ideology and language.

Overlooking the fundamental elements of Sakha's traditional worldview, Soviet cultural politics utilized Sakha identity as an empty signifier. In 1986, a student of The All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), Aleksei Romanov, made the first cinematic attempt to fill this semantic void. His graduate project, a short supernatural film called *Maappa*, was the first film in the Sakha language by a Sakha director.³ Based on a 1944 story written in Sakha, *Maappa* follows a young traveler who is lost in a blizzard but is rescued by a young woman living in the woods. While she is performing traditional rituals over his feverish body, he dreams of their wedding. However, his dream anticipates a union of a different kind. As soon as he is awake, the protagonist learns that his rescuer is the wandering soul of a young woman who killed herself after losing her entire family in a leprosy pandemic. Now, she wants the protagonist to reinstate the natural order of things by giving her body a proper burial.

At first, the dusty palette of the “Svema” film stock, used for most USSR films since the 1960s, makes *Maappa* look like a single fragment from some endless Soviet movie. However, the film's formal accomplishments effectively calibrate its auratic specificities. Opening with the singing of a traditional melody and meditative voiceover that synchronizes with the diegetic sound of the whistling wind, the film evokes a harmony between nature and memory. Resonating with the noises of ghostly non-human dimensions, the Sakha language appears as an intermediary between individual and collective, culture and environment, past and present. Thus, the blurred borders between topoi and temporalities represent the Sakha belief in equality between human and non-human agents. Since all meaningful events happen on the borders of the Upper, Middle, and Lower Worlds that constitute the universe in Sakha cosmological beliefs (pertaining to spirits, humans, and demons, respectively), only the Sakha language can serve as an intermediating system. No one among

³ In 1986 (early perestroika era), the censorship austerity ceased to be a general situation for USSR's filmmakers. Moreover, since *Maappa* was a student project with no claim to a wide distribution, any censorship (state and industrial) could be omitted. Particularly on the topic of censorship in relation to the student projects in VGIK in 1986, Kazakh director Rashid Nugmanov noted: ‘We did not care about ideology at all. We were absolutely free and the approval of our professors was more important for us than the approval of the authorities [; ...] in the filmmakers’ union in Moscow in 1986 we were witnesses that something was happening’ (Isaacs 2016, 146).

the supernatural worlds speaks Russian, and even if the language is spoken among humans, it is limited to one dimension and thus cannot impact reality where it matters. As we will see below, Romanov's film set up a long-standing genre tradition in Sakha cinema that relies on both horror and folk storytelling.

The Death of the Soviet Union and the Birth of Sakha National Cinema

Several years after Romanov's graduation, the Soviet empire of nations also made its way to the grave. Symptomatically, it split along the seams that had been holding it together, and national identity replaced socialist state networks as the primary political and cultural basis for social organization and collective action. In 1992, soon after signing the new Sakha constitution, the president of the republic endorsed another ethnopolitical document to establish the first national film company, Sakhafilm, aimed at "developing and preserving the traditional cultures of the native inhabitants of Yakutia" and "promoting those cultures through film and video" (Nikolaev 1992).

In fact, one of the official reasons to establish the first national film studio was to support Aleksei Romanov in finishing his first feature film, *Middle World* (1993), written by Romanov and his wife Ekaterina Romanova, a PhD candidate in anthropology (in the film's credits, both are listed under traditional Sakha pseudonyms). The production, which started at the Sverdlovsk film studio in 1989, froze due to the country's collapse in 1991 and was in need of additional funding. In 1992, the newly created Sakhafilm, where Romanov took the position of art director, organized local fundraising to support the production. Thus, Sakha national cinema emerged as a private initiative supported by the state, while its first independent feature film came out due to direct investment of the republic's population.

While *Middle World* displayed and explained Sakha folklore, Romanov's student film *Maappa* embodied it. In genre terms, the film is considered the first cinematic *tiibelte*—Sakha traditional ghost stories about wandering people's souls (*iiör*) or spirits of objects and places (*ich-chi*). During the Soviet era, Sakha writers converted this traditional oral genre into folk novellas to represent the folklore and culture in the literary mode. Making the first feature film in his Indigenous language, Romanov adapted Soviet literary *tiibelte* to the screen. In all the significant 1990s *tiibelte*—*Summer Homestead* (Anatolii Vasiliev, 1992), *Cursed Land* (Ellei Ivanov, 1996), and *Night Maiden* (Gennadii Bagynanov,

1999)⁴—local spirits or restless ghosts are portrayed as disturbing but harmless forces that eventually elevate the people who meet them. Since these ghosts and spirits share a logos with the people, they are ultimately not so much antagonists as they are emerging forces opposed to the values brought on the Sakha people by Western modernity and Russia's colonial presence. Instead of attacking the Middle world, the monsters of the early *tübelte* come to remind characters of the interdependency between human and non-human (or dehumanized) subjects. Commenting on the impending release of *Ich-chi* in 2021, director Ellei Ivanov, 1992 explained,

My intention to create *Cursed Land* was earthly and pragmatical. I did not seek to frighten the audience or, moreover, to plunge them into horror. I wanted to warn them against sudden moves in relation to fate, land, and nature. Look before you leap! At that time in the 1990s, people rushed to seize land, run away from their native places to unknown lands, knowing absolutely nothing about them, being unaware of the past and the secrets of these lands. The elements of horror that I used in my film were to make people experience a particular sensibility and respect for the land at the level of a fear. I hope that the new thriller *Ich-chi* preaches the same eternal truths, but unlike *Cursed Land* do so in a more vibrant and powerful way. (Danilova 2021)

In Kostas Marsaan's genealogy of Sakha cinema, the early horror films managed to bring to screen the essence of the ancient *tübelte* by constructing an alternative sense of time: “In contrast to the linear time of the West and cyclical time of the East, the Northern time is frozen: past, present, and future coexist on the same plane and influence each other” (Marsaan 2019). Continuing the cultural processes of translating Sakha myths and beliefs into the language of contemporary media, the *tübelte* attempt to subvert colonial temporality by blurring the time borders and insisting on a plurality of agents in contrast to the all-pervasive code of colonial epistemologies that assume only one modern and civilized agent.

⁴ *Summer Homestead* (1992) was one of the last projects of “Severfilm,” a private studio organized by Aleksei Romanov after his return to Yakutsk from Moscow film school. The same year his studio was reorganized into the state owned “Sakhafilm,” where Romanov acquired the leading administrative positions. *Night Maiden* (1999) is a later “Sakhafilm” project. *Cursed Land* (1996) was produced independently, even though there were no clear demarcation lines between independent and commercial/industrial cinema. As the exhibition networks had not yet developed in Yakutia in the 1990s, all three films reached local audiences through broadcasting on the republican TV. Only *Cursed Land* (1996) acquired a cult status and initiated the wave of mass filmmaking in the early 2000s.

On a textual level, *Maappa* and the further *tiibelte* proposed two ways of blasting out the borders of colonial epistemologies embedded in the Soviet cinematic tradition. The first is the subversion of the colonial hierarchy of languages by appointing Indigenous language, previously restricted to the private sphere, as the primary indexical and referential system within which an event can happen. The second is a new type of “looking” relation. As bell hooks (2007) asserts, “In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ always politicizes ‘looking’ relations—one learns to look a certain way to resist” (hooks 511). In Sakha horror films, facing the Other’s gaze becomes one of the most fundamental tropes. This gaze can belong to nature, supernatural entities, or the image of the past looking back to the person. In every instance, the Other is considered an organic part of the collective identity. On the one hand, this optical juncture represents a re-appropriation of the triumphalist Soviet gaze, which projected itself into every space it looked at. However, the Soviet gaze becomes subverted as soon as its object begins to look back. Although many of these concerns can be seen in 2021 film *Ich-chi*, even if it doesn’t intentionally lay bare these kinds of locally specific meanings explicitly.

***Ich-Chi’s* International Distribution and Critical Reception in Russian and Sakha Media**

From the early stages of *Ich-Chi’s* production, the film crew consulted with various experts in Sakha traditional culture—from local historians to shamans. At the beginning of the shoot, director Kostas Marsaan invited a shaman to conduct the ritual of asking for permission. The frenzied dance with a tambourine performed at the filming location at night resulted in an immersive collective experience, which, as the director has commented, bemused even the Sakha crew members but completely bewildered their colleagues from Moscow (Marsaan 2021). In the later production stages, the film changed its title from the initial *The Eyes of Night* to the more enigmatic *Ich-chi*. Refusing any direct explanation, *Ich-chi’s* authors focused on reaching external audiences by cultivating a sense of intrigue rooted in the film’s Sakha origins, which has become one of the essential aspects of the Marsaan-Siegen creative collaboration since the 2016 neo-noir mystery drama *My Killer*, Marsaan’s debut feature film. While some critics dismiss this approach as a marketing strategy (and it has indeed been effective in this capacity), it reveals a deliberate aesthetic and epistemological method. As Indigenous artists are fully integrated into

global cultural production, Marsaan and Siegen explore the overlapping of different traditions and points of view along the borders of cultures. The focus on the plurality of points of view automatically makes any sort of narrative or interpretative stability inadequate to the subject. Within this logic, uncertainty and vagueness in *Ich-chi*'s poetics, production, and promotional strategies function as a more appropriate expressive language for traditional Sakha culture. The concept of ich-chi, which Marsaan defines as a natural power enabling diplomacy between different worlds (2021), becomes a metaphor for his engagements with intercultural dialogue: "I am very interested in how people outside Sakha culture will perceive and understand the film. It's curious what interpretations their imagination will draw. We wanted to touch a mystery that should remain a mystery" (2021). Remarkably, in contrast to the other two Sakha films produced in 2020—Dmitrii Davydov's supernaturally-tinged social drama *Scarecrow*, which received the main prize at the Kinotavr Film Festival, and Stepan Burnashev's body-horror film *Black Snow*, which won the main award at the 'Window to Europe' film festival in Vyborg—*Ich-Chi* participated only in international venues, including the 53rd Sitges Film Festival and the 23rd Shanghai Film Festival. In May 2021, the film was released on 180 screens throughout Russia's largest cities. Also given a limited international release in the US and Europe and later release on three Russian streaming services, *Ich-chi* received an unprecedentedly wide distribution for a Sakha film.

In the context of the increasing interest in Sakha cinema within Russian festival circuits, *Ich-chi* received a warm critical response, reaching a 75% rating on the review-aggregation website Kritikanstvo. In contrast to Sakha and Russian horror films, the line between Russian and Sakha film criticism is harder to draw. Most Sakha Internet media operate in Russian, while in general, Sakha film journalists tend to promote every new locally produced film. Most Russian reviews of *Ich-chi* compared the film to Moscow and Saint Petersburg genre cinema. Notably, many critics favored *Ich-chi* for its visual poetry, experimental sense of time, and intentionally vague story, as opposed to Russian ethnic horror films by Sviatoslav Podgaevskii, known for indulging in CGI, jump scares, and narrative exposition. Numerous reviews by genre-focused critics compared Sakha and Russian ethnic horror trends by drawing on discussions of "elevated horror" in English film criticism. While Podgaevskii's films, explicitly orientated towards James Wan's style, were criticized for their conservatism, *Ich-chi* was likened to experimental genre films by A24 and slow-burn thrillers by Lee Chang-dong. In general, most reviews of *Ich-chi* featured thoroughly articulated evaluations of global horror trends alongside underdeveloped accounts of center-periphery dynamics within the Russian context. Summarizing *Ich-chi*'s

reception, critic Anton Dolin concluded that while some of his colleagues admire this peculiar film, others “rightfully accuse the authors of two contradictory sins: the exploitation of ethnographic material and the unwillingness to explain it” (Dolin 2021). While this overview accurately captures the general picture of reactions, it also overlooks the intentionality of the contradiction. Displaying ethnographic details without much explanation, *Ich-chi* hijacks the ethnographic spectacle to assert the right to visual sovereignty as we explain below.

***Ich-Chi's* Aesthetics of Refusal and Audiovisual Opacity**

Like many earlier túbelte, *Ich-chi* has the simplicity of a fairy tale, taking us to the isolated world of a couple and their two sons, the younger of whom lives with them and helps with their farm. When the older son, who lives in the city, visits unannounced with his Russian wife and young son, things begin to fall off kilter and the narrative enters the horror mode until its surprise ending. While this summary might suggest a simple opposition between the city and the country or even between Russian and Sakha identities, the film obfuscates such binaries through its narrative structure, shot compositions, language dynamics, and its complex web of “looking” relations.

Ich-chi is set up as a viewing experience that strongly resists any urge towards seeking easy access to Indigenous Sakha or local ways of knowing. The film’s visual and narrative complexity and its ambiguity about ultimate causes can be read as a form of Indigenous refusal (to explain, to perform, to make things easy). This concept is borrowed from Audra Simpson who contrasts “refusal” with “recognition,” writing that Indigenous refusal can be deployed

as a political and ethical stance that stands in stark contrast to the desire to have one’s distinctiveness as a culture, as a people, recognized. Refusal comes with the requirement of having one’s political sovereignty acknowledged and upheld, and raises the question of legitimacy for those who are usually in the position of recognizing: What is their authority to do so? Where does it come from? (11).

In a recent discussion of the films of Sky Hopinka, the Indigenous US filmmaker, Diana Florez Ruiz (2022) pairs Simpson’s concept of refusal with the idea of “visual sovereignty,” drawing from the work of Jolene Rickard. Ruiz writes that “Rickard coined the phrase ‘visual sovereignty’ as part of the wider

Indigenous-led project to create specific analyses and expressions of self-determination” and that it is a way to “protect, reimagine, and affirm Indigenous philosophies and cultural practices” (2022, 20). Our argument with regard to the audiovisual and narrative ambiguities of *Ich-chi*, and its particularities in the context of global horror, is that its formal language of refusal asserts a visual sovereignty, retaining access to certain forms of knowledge for the local viewer alone.

Furthermore, *Ich-chi* asserts a refusal whose visual and narrative forms might be more strongly indicated by the metaphor of opacity. Drawing on Édouard Glissant’s provocation in his *Poetics of Relations* regarding “the right to opacity” (Blas 2016, 194), Zach Blas suggests that opacity “exposes the limits of schemas of visibility, representation, and identity that prevent sufficient understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples” (2016, 149). The goal of opacity as an aesthetic and epistemological method would be to offer the viewer the experience of uncertainty and cultural inaccessibility. To put it differently, if anything is certain about the viewing experience of *Ich-chi*, it is that this is not a film that offers access to a touristic gaze curious about cultural practices and storytelling among the Sakha. Rather, the outsider viewer is invited or even enticed into the world of the film where its careful cultural opacity foregrounds the inaccessibility of locally accessible meanings. This is a productive opacity and one that works well with the horror genre, but it also raises the stakes for political meanings in Indigenous productions that are aimed at both local audiences and success with audiences at international festivals. While it may be argued that Indigenous refusal here dovetails easily and perhaps conveniently with art cinema’s tendency towards narrative ambiguity, the use of the horror idiom here works against ambiguity towards trauma and ritual explanations that might be available to some but not all viewers. *Ich-chi*’s ambiguity is to be found as much in its storytelling as in its audiovisual style.

The film’s shots are composed in very precise ways to convey suggestive connections and to enhance the general feeling of tension, uncertainty, and spatiotemporal dysphoria or unease, accompanied by an effectively minimalist sound design, where silences and distinct diegetic sounds are sometimes supplemented by single long-held notes whose status as music is ambiguous in relation to machinic and other diegetic noises. The shot compositions and editing do much of the work of storytelling, often through methods of doubling, mirroring, and cross-cutting, but more precisely, they convey ambiguous connections and correlations that materialize the spirit world for us without producing certainty about what is happening. At one level, this is a family story with a familiar binary of a bad son from the city, Timir, and a good son, Aisen,

who lives with his parents and helps them with the work around the farm. Although the film is structured along several visual, narrative, and thematic binaries, as Maxim Bey-Rozet points out in his program notes on the film for the Russian Film Symposium of 2021, in a world where nothing is at it appears to be, these binaries are not so simple, and the film complicates all but the good brother-bad brother dynamic of fairy tales that is in keeping with the folkloristic feel the film conveys. But this very binary also works to destabilize other binaries that an outsider viewer might expect in an Indigenous film, such as between cultural insiders and outsiders. With the bad brother trying to persuade his father to sell their family property, and the film ending with the entire family destroyed, it is as Bey-Rozet writes, “difficult not to see in *Ich-chi*’s dual conflicts an expression of anxieties about the erasure of the past” (2021) and more broadly, of cultural erasure and the loss of Indigenous knowledge and storytelling of the kind we witness in the film. But the film also asks us to consider who is the true outsider, the true disruptive force, as we see oppositions that do not align in expected ways: city/country oppositions don’t align with the Russian/Sakha binary as the brother’s Russian wife, Liza, is a sympathetic figure while it is the son, Timir, and his doting mother who are pivotal to the destabilization that overtakes the family. Similarly, there is no straightforward modernity/tradition opposition along a temporal axis. An example is the way modernity and tradition are recast as communism versus superstition, when the mother talks about why their family has chosen to remain in a place that even the “shamans avoid,” saying that her grandfather was a communist and didn’t believe in superstitions. There is no simple alignment of superstition, tradition, the past, and the older generation here, even as the narrative of this film belies the Communist grandfather’s disdain for what he called superstition, revalidating claims to Indigenous forms of knowing and storytelling that exceed norms of rationality and modernity.

Although most of the film, or at least its horror elements, can be understood as being from the point of view of the younger son, Aisen, it is the figure of the mother who splits the visual and narrative arc of the film and destabilizes boundaries between outsider/insider and past/present. One-third of the way into the film, a pivotal doubled or mirrored image inaugurates the crisis and split in the family. As the mother reaches the end of her bedtime story about Ich-chi, which she explains to her grandson as a benevolent guardian spirit, she begins to sing about Ich-chi in the Sakha language, at which point, the image splits in two in an uncanny visual mirroring with no clear distinction between “real” and “mirrored” image (figure 1).



Figure 1. Visual mirroring in *Ich-chi* (Marsaan, 2021)

Appropriately, at least in terms of subtitles, this is the moment in the story when the mother sings “Let no one else know of our strength. Let our secret be kept forever.” Although the language is translated for us, the secrets and local cultural practices the film draws upon are merely suggested, not explained, in the remainder of the film.

The combination of an uncertain doubled image and the inscrutable text of the song also inaugurates an aesthetics of opacity as the film proceeds to create a narrative of uncertain knowledge and a visual language that favors barrier framings and other forms of visual obstruction. The aesthetics of opacity extend beyond narrative structure to shot compositions and a pattern of doubled and mirrored images and events. There is a strong visual pattern of partially obscured framings (figures 2 and 3, next page) alternating with shots of Aisen looking or attempting to look (figures 4 and 5, next page). Even though this kind of gaze may invite viewers into Aisen’s subjectivity, objects and landscapes remain inscrutable. Shots of the landscape are sparse and sparingly used and almost as elemental as river, forest, house, barn, farmland, sky, water, fire, soil and is very much in keeping with Sakha environmental consciousness discussed earlier. Signs and portents are repeated in ways that are suggestive but are not explained, such as a black sludge in the water, sightings of a white wolf, or the suddenly bare birch trees with an animal skull on a branch.



Figures 2 and 3.
Barred framing in
Ich-chi (Marsaan,
2021)



Figures 4 and 5.
Aisen looking
in *Ich-chi*
(Marsaan, 2021)

The doubled image of the mother thirty minutes into the film presages her role in both the past and the present, the two temporalities becoming increasingly braided in the final half hour of the film. It is not by accident that modern technologies such as the tractor and car are brought into the fold of the haunting as the hint of an individualized traumatically abusive family secret merges with older, more collective mythologies of place. The aesthetics of opacity blur the boundary between subjective and objective, contributing to the general feeling of uncertainty and aimlessness that takes over the film after the first thirty minutes. From this point on, much of the film is taken up in wanderings by Aisen, Liza, and the mother, sometimes looping back to their original places, with the exact relation of the events of the past to the characters in the present remaining obscured. In a sense, the story ends early in the film with Aisen falling asleep and, as we understand later, mysteriously dying on the couch. During their wanderings, time and space both become “out of joint.” The present is haunted by the past, but the division between past and present is porous. There are various repeated images and tropes that together produce an impression of a network of meanings that lie just outside understanding. These include the trope of Aisen frequently finding himself back at the tractor or the car, or conversely, the tractor and car turning up at various places, or the skull motif, both animal and human. Even the Ich-chi bedtime story is repeated with its technological double as we see it being shown as an animated feature on television at the very moment when Aisen falls asleep on the couch. At this pivotal turning point in the film, the image of the creature eating all other creatures is an apt way to understand the film’s narrative and temporal structure with its multiple forms of looping upon itself.

Doubled images and events lie at the heart of the film’s structural opacity, which can be linked also to a careful confusion of distinctions between subjective and objective, person and mirror image, and most crucially, causation and correlation at several narrative pivot points. A good example of the confusion of causation and correlation occurs right before the scene of the mother’s Ich-chi bedtime story. Aisen is forced to walk home from quite a distance because his tractor runs out of gas, seemingly a clear case of causation. This walk is accompanied by some of the signs and portents mentioned above. But the forced abandonment of the tractor is also strongly correlated to his brother Timir’s violent treatment of his Russian wife and his lies about Aisen to their father. Aisen forgets to complete filling the tractor with gas as he is interrupted when he notices Liza crying, and drops what he is doing to speak to her. Timir comes upon them, accuses Aisen of groping her, and Aisen storms off in the tractor that has no gas. One might say that this is the original sin that

unleashes the rest of the movie. Later when their father has a stroke in the middle of the night, Aisen blames Timir for trying to get his father to sell their property, while Timir blames Aisen for “groping his wife.” The mother is key to this split as she is the only one in the family who refuses to see Timir for what he is. The confusion of causation and correlation and the mother’s pivotal role contribute to the film’s horror sensibility. Although the mother is shown to be the primary keeper of Sakha traditions embodied in the Ich-chi toy horse that her grandson finds and that the film also ends with, the film also imbues her function with ambiguity given her uncertain ethical position and the way in which the concept of ich-chi is rendered suggestively multivalent, but not transparent.

The doubling and mirroring of events also includes Aisen’s two walks home, both times from stalled vehicles, the tractor and the car, and both times accompanied by increasingly disorienting signs along the way. The vehicles, in turn, show up in different places in unexplained and uncanny ways, infusing both landscape and modern technologies with

supernatural power. Another moment of strong correlation occurs in the synchrony and crosscutting between the father’s death and Timir being run over by Aisen. This is more than a simple case of cross cutting to suggest simultaneity of action, but rather is a strongly suggested correlation between the two events, separated by space but not in time. An uncanny doubled appearance of Timir in front of the car gesturing to Aisen to back up, even though the real Timir is actually under the car, directly causes Aisen to back up the car and run over his brother. Paralleling such cases of doubled sightings, such as when Liza sees her son or his double disappear into the greenhouse, are actual mirror images. Mirrors appear early in the film, when reality and mirror images are not yet confused, although Liza and Timir’s estrangement can be understood through parallel mirror images (figures 6 and 7).



Figures 6 and 7. *Ich-Chi* (Marsaan, 2021)

Over the course of the film, the mirror as an object becomes increasingly uncanny. At the moment of realization that he has run over his brother, Aisen's image is mirrored in the car (figure 8).



Figure 8. *Ich-Chi* (Marsaan, 2021)

Aisen's lurid reflection recalls his brother's doubled image that caused his death, but after the turning point in the film when both Timir and the father have died, a mirror now becomes an explicitly uncanny object in which Liza sees her dead father-in-law sitting upright in the mirror, which is crosscut back and forth with the prone father in the bed behind her. The false mirror image propels her to pack up and leave, leading to the next stage of the unfolding crisis.

The precise ways in which *Ich-chi* both participates in global horror and maintains opacity are illustrated in the mirror as a classically uncanny site, and yet also as a form of looking that invites speculation about its specific local meanings, to which the outside viewer is refused entry. Even if we are tempted to understand these ways of seeing false mirrored and reflected images as Sakha folk tale experiences, because they aren't confined to Sakha characters, they bely any straightforward understanding of the moral universe of the film—especially since everyone in the film dies. Mirrors, as we all know, are multivalent objects, especially in horror films, and their use here opens up a strong desire for meaning that the film ultimately refuses. Whether such meaning does reside in local knowledge or not is something that remains opaque to the outside viewer. A broader kind of visual mirroring also extends more to shot compositions over

the course of the film, and in retrospect, connects actions seemingly separated in time and space, such as the boy, Michil, digging in the ground and Aisen digging to find the skull. The final doubling occurs at the end of the film when Aisen sees himself dead on the couch and this becomes the moment when the various repetitions become crystalized in the doubled image of the main character.



Figures 9 and 10. *Ich-Chi* (Marsaan, 2021)

Conclusion

One might say that *Ich-chi* is a bleak film because there are no survivors, but this is so only if one thinks in an anthropocentric way. In fact, the land has survived and the spirit of the horseman, which is the last image in the film, offers a visual point of confluence between human and natural worlds. Through its aesthetics of opacity, the film offers us an oblique look into the Sakha world, one which does not fully explain to the outsider viewer what the figure of ich-chi signifies or what the ritual practice at the beginning and end of the film is. Shrouding those in mystery works for the horror genre but is also a refusal to be “native informants” for the outside world. As an Indigenous film, *Ich-chi* works to strip us of our habits of seeing, preserving a certain opacity towards the cultural practices of locals, which is a way of preventing their commercialization or integration into dominant modes of seeing and understanding the Other. While the film draws on global horror tropes (such as mirrors and portents) to reach international audiences, its reception has also been framed by its status as an Indigenous horror film, which comes with its own burden of representation and expectations of authenticity or cultural purity—burdens and expectations that the film resists through its aesthetics of opacity.⁵ This film opens a door, offers an invitation, but gives us only tantalizing glimpses of a way of viewing the intimacy of humans and their natural environment, the entanglement of family and mythology, past and present, refusing the burden of further cultural explanations. In the current context of token gestures towards Indigenous dispossession, such as in land acknowledgements, a politics of refusal and opacity offers one way to maintain an invitation to outsider viewers while also letting “our secrets be kept forever.”

While Western monsters represent the Other suppressed by a privileged class (Wood 1979, 14) that must be expelled, the Sakha monsters predominantly embody the state of being the Other. In contrast to most US, European, and Canadian horror films (especially those in the mainstream), *tübelte* tend to authorize monstrosity rather than expel it to restore the status quo of secular time. Thus, in contrast to Frantz Fanon's (2008 [1952]) understanding of the negative self-image shared by colonized subjects as a universal side-effect of

⁵ Shohat and Stam (2014) explain the burden of representation borne disproportionately by those who are non-White as follows: “[W]ithin hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community. Representations of dominant groups, on the other hand, are seen not as allegorical but as ‘naturally’ diverse, examples of the ungeneralizable variety of life itself” (183).

colonialism, Sakha “negativity” appears in their films as a way of constructing sovereign agency rather than as a self-deprecating stance.

Nation-building and identity commodification function to subject marginalized groups to the broader systems of capital. It remains an open question whether an identity-focused culture can meaningfully oppose the colonial mindset in its current neoliberal manifestation. Is the category of national cinema even relevant anymore, except to those who are (self-)limited to their national identities? What Sakha filmmakers learned from the Soviet film infrastructure and its symbolic regime is that the only sustainable way to exert one’s power is to do so collectively. The second part of this lesson is that each collective must define its own terms of collectivity. The contemporary Sakha film industry functions as a network of horizontal connections between state-owned and private studios, professionally trained and self-taught filmmakers, and local audiences. Working as a profit-based industry, Sakha film production appropriates Western production and distribution models. However, the selectiveness of this appropriation has allowed Sakha filmmakers to develop a kind of visual sovereignty.

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