
DIMITRI KIRSANOFF / NADIA SIBIRSKAIA

Dimitri Kirsanoff's output alternates between formal research and films that were definitely more conventional and commercial. In the 1920s, he developed his personal research and participated in the advent of the French avant-garde. During that decade, his systematic collaboration with Nadia Sibirskaïa gave the public several surprising melodramas in which the actress portrays a fragile woman, often abandoned or betrayed. Her feline face, dominated by captivating large eyes, expresses a whole range of melodramatic feelings. 'We have just discovered a new Lillian Gish!' Jean Tedesco, director of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, exclaimed enthusiastically upon discovering the actress in *Ménilmontant*¹. In Kirsanoff's first film, *The Irony of Fate* (shot in 1921, released in 1924 and now considered lost), the actress already portrayed a woman unlucky in love. The film brought the Kirsanoff-Sibirskaïa couple critical and public recognition, which would be confirmed by the success of the second film, *Ménilmontant. Destin* (1926, released in 1928), *Autumn Mists* and *Sables* (1928) complete this fascinating joint filmography.

Just like *The Irony of Fate*, *Ménilmontant* has the particularity of revealing its plot without the help of insert titles. 'In absolute cinema,' Kirsanoff explained, 'the subtitle should not exist. It is a palliative. The subtitle persists and has entered the public's habits because people lack sensitivity, because they are not yet won over by the new aesthetic. One does not explain a symphony using words. A film must be comprehensible by itself².' Through the mastery of syncopated editing and his art of the ellipsis, Kirsanoff produces a fascinating work in which images are therefore not words but rather notes or chords, and in which the musicality of the scenes appears straightaway. *Ménilmontant*: these deserted alleyways littered with trash, where one inscribes one's hopes on the walls in chalk; where one hides spying the lover; where one watches out and from where deadly brawls suddenly break out... These alleys turn out to be both traps and silent witnesses to everyone's fate. But beyond the incidence of these places on the destiny of beings, Kirsanoff visibly wanted to give an account of the movement of time and the permanence of things in the most natural and universal way possible.

In regard to *Autumn Mists*, Henri Langlois wrote³:

Some dared boo this work. Shameful! Why not also boo Verlaine whilst you're at it, gentlemen! Come now, I am now going to attract the worst annoyances by comparing it to literature. That is perhaps the only thing for which the admirers of Rain and Industrial Symphony could reproach it⁴. Unless they were unable to keep its charm for themselves. But finally, here is an avant-garde film that seems to say something. It sings the melancholy of autumn and, to heighten that, as in ancient poetry, it associates autumn with the death of love. This film is splendid. And there is nothing more beautiful than the scene in which the young woman burns her love letters and reminisces, whilst the fog thickens and the rain disfigures the trees on the pond. And there is nothing more beautiful than when, saddened, she slowly walks along the muddy path, melancholic and tender. And these are the passages that were booed. Either I am foolish or they are stupid. Fortunately for me, and this restores a bit of my confidence, they are the same who applauded Maryrose and Rosemary [Korda, 1932], a sentimental vaudeville.

¹ Quoted by André G. Brunelin in 'Au temps du Vieux-Colombier de Jean Tedesco', *Cinéma* 61, issue 52, January 1961

² Dimitri Kirsanoff answers Marcel Lapierre's questions in 'Opinions de cinéastes', *Cinéa pour tous*, issue 127, 15 February 1929

³ Henri Langlois, *Écrits de cinéma*, texts collected by Bernard Benoliel and Bernard Eisenschitz, Ed. Flammarion / Cinémathèque française, 2014

⁴ *Rain (Regen)*, Joris Ivens, 1929; *Industrial Symphony (Philips-Radio)*, Joris Ivens, 1931.

THE FILMS OF THE SHOWING « DIMITRI KIRSANOFF / NADIA SIBIRSKAIA »

Running time : 54 min.

Ménilmontant

France, 1924 – 42 minutes

Direction, script, production and editing: Dimitri Kirsanoff

Photography: Willy Faktorovitch, Léonce Crouan, Dimitri Kirsanoff

Cast: Nadia Sibirskaia, Yolande Beaulieu, Maurice Ronsard, M. Arduin, Jean Pasquier



A couple is savagely murdered. After the drama, the two orphaned sisters remain more united than ever. Having become young women, they work in Paris and live in the working-class quarter of Ménilmontant.

Ménilmontant was preserved in 1960 from an original release print in the collections of La Cinémathèque française. In 2012, a HD digitization was carried out at the Omnimago laboratory in Germany. In 2014, a new color calibration allowed for making a DCP.

Autumn Mists / Brumes d'automne

France, 1928 – 12 minutes

Direction and script: Dimitri Kirsanoff

Production: Les Films Markus

Photography: Jean de Miéville (inside), Dimitri Kirsanoff (outside)

Music: Paul Devred

Cast: Nadia Sibirskaia



The evocations of a past haunt a melancholic young woman. 'In *Autumn Mists*, I expressed anxiety through drastically changed images in which nature was losing its density and unity' (Dimitri Kirsanoff).

Autumn Mists was preserved in 1991, based on original elements from the collections of La Cinémathèque française.