

R E V I E W

Russian Old Believers: Three Videos

Old Believers. Directed by Margaret Hixon. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, Extension Media Center, 1981. 29 minutes, VHS; The Old Believers. Directed by John Paskievich. National Film Board of Canada. 1989. 57 minutes, VHS; Savoniha, a Siberian Old Believer. A film by Costanzo Allione. Available from Mystic Fire Video, www.mysticfire.com. 1997. 30 minutes, VHS.

For a folklorist, the term “Old Believer” is about as helpful as the term “Protestant.” Old Believers may inhabit isolated wilderness settlements, living every detail of daily life in accordance with hallowed tradition, or they may live in a Novosibirsk apartment, adopting their neighbors’ norms as their own, pretty much undistinguishable from the society around them.

What makes them Old Believers, of course, is their faithfulness to Russian Orthodox Church life as it existed prior to liturgical reforms introduced in the seventeenth century. Historically, Old Believers’ adherence to the “old,” pre-reform liturgy often included adherence to what they understood as “old” ways of life, most famously illustrated in their rejection of western habits (such as shaving off beards) introduced by Peter the Great. Thus, their liturgical conservatism was often part of a broader cultural conservatism.

Under intermittent persecution from the Russian government and the official, reformed church, many Old Believers fled to isolated regions of Russia or left Russia altogether. This dispersal, plus internal divisions within Old Belief, resulted in hundreds of small Old Believer communities scattered around the world; more or less in touch with each other, more or less in agreement with each another, and more or less culturally conservative. Among these, it is the culturally conservative communities that have attracted the most scholarly and popular attention, as they often preserve colorful aspects of Russian traditional culture which have disappeared elsewhere.

The videos under review represent part of the popular examination of Old Believers. None of the film-makers involved have any scholarly training in Russian traditional culture. All made use of scholarly consultants, but the videos are essentially journalism – produced by generalists

for a general audience. All meet high technical standards and all are easily accessible to the English-speaking viewer.

Old Believers, directed by Margaret Hixon, modestly sets out to document a wedding in the Old Believer settlements of Marion County, Oregon, in the years 1979 and 1980. Set in the berry farms of the Willamette Valley, it records the preparations, celebration, and significance of one real-life wedding. Along the way, the film briefly touches on a wealth of traditional arts (such as embroidery, clothing construction, weaving, vernacular architecture, folk song, and foodways) and beautifully presents a whole series of rituals; the “devichnik” or engagement party, “selling” the bride and her braid, the wedding feast, the delivery of the dowry and subsequent bargaining, the ceremony of bestowing gifts and advice on the newlyweds, and tossing the groom’s father to the ceiling.

The narration throughout is unobtrusive, supplying just enough detail to let general audiences feel in touch with the action on the screen. While the narrator supplies some basic historical background, we mainly hear the Old Believers themselves (in English, with subtitles or with voice-over translations), as they describe wedding preparations, hopes for the future, or memories of life before coming to the USA. Traditional Russian costume fills every frame, and Old Believer voices grace the soundtrack with sacred and secular song. The viewer feels like a guest in a foreign home at a busy and happy time, with the narrator as a friend who can explain briefly what is going on, but who has no time for lengthy lectures on cultural assimilation.

This topic does appear, but only momentarily, just as the “pech” (Russian stove) and the “zybka” (hanging cradle) and the “pel’meni” (Russian ravioli) appear in glimpses. Viewers alert to assimilation issues will catch several fleeting glimpses – in the words of the bride and the weaver and the cantor’s son, and in the “Have a Pepsi Day!” t-shirt among the handmade “rubashki” (traditional-style Russian shirt). But, resolved to let the Old Believers speak for themselves, Hixon refrains from forecasts and pronouncements. The narration ends with the words: “Like their ancestors before them, the children face challenges of their own. And life goes on.”

In Canada, however, the end is near. In John Paskievich’s film The Old Believers, we see three Old Believer women, in traditional dress, strolling through the glittering West Edmonton Mall. The eldest takes in the glamour, the frivolity, the lasciviousness of the whole scene, and remarks that “when the end of the world comes, it will probably start here.”

Director, writer and narrator of The Old Believers, Paskievich has a great deal to say about the place where Old Believers encounter the outside world. His film is at once a vehicle for these comments, a documentary about a year in the life of the Reutov family, and a presentation of Old Believer history, ritual, and theology. A large amount to pack into sixty minutes, and the results are uneven.

The presentation of Old Believer history, theology and ritual is by and large accurate, although pronouncements such as that “all Old Believer houses are built beside a river” cause the informed viewer to wince. Still, some essentials such as “the past is always present” and the concept of the physical world as a window through which we can glimpse heaven are presented accurately enough.

His documentary of a year in the life of the Old Believer Reutov family on their remote Alberta farm is also largely successful. We see the family matriarch consulting the calendar to determine what food is canonical for that day, girls eating raw eggs at the start of a singing party, harvest scenes, Easter celebrations, and non-Old Believer guests being served far from the family table. We see children and adults gathered to sing *dukhovnye stikhi* (spiritual songs) from a book. We see the men going off to the woods for a week of forestry work. The shots of forestry camp life in the woods and slaughtering the pig in a muddy farmyard convey the gritty physicality of life on the land. These are marvelous scenes.

However, Paskievich’s heart lies in examining the zone where Old Believers and outsiders interact. He examines the walls Old Believers erect when they meet the outside world – walls of ritual purity, isolationism, exclusivity and “stubborn certainty” in matters theological. He also examines the reaction of the outside world to Old Believers – historically, persecution under the tsars and the Communists; and in modern North America, a kind of benign neglect combined with the seductive alternative of a materialistic, individualistic way of life.

This seduction occasionally proves powerful enough to break through the Old Believers’ walls, and Paskievich dwells on schoolchildren trying to reconcile physics with Biblical teachings, on a Reutov daughter who married out of the faith, on the rock music infiltrating into engagement festivities. Presently Paskievich mounts a pulpit, telling “us” that in comparison to the Old Believers, “we” are like children with no memories and no purpose. He equates “our” society’s physical pollution with the moral pollution that Old Believers strenuously try to avoid. It is all too much.

This pompous attitude constitutes a real shortcoming, as do the disingenuous use of historical images and inappropriate soundtrack music. It is still a worthwhile film, however, one which will provoke much discussion.

In Savoniha, A Siberian Old Believer, we meet a ninety-year old Semeiskii Old Believer woman whose experience of war, revolution, religious repression and general hard times led to a profound understanding of forgiveness. Savoniha's earthy, practical, inward peace suffuses the film as thoroughly as the late autumn sunlight and the floating, polyphonic songs on the soundtrack. And while Italian filmmaker Allione is essaying a spiritual portrait of an individual, not an ethnographic portrait of a group, there is much here to interest the folklorist.

While Savoniha's translated words reveal her personal history and spiritual depth, the camera follows her and her neighbors about their daily business in the Siberian Old Believer village of Kuitun. We get a close look at the hills, the fields, the architecture, the herds of horses and the muddy streets. Villagers harvest cabbage, feed the pigs, milk the cows, herd the livestock from horseback. One woman blesses water drawn from her well, then sprinkles it on the buildings of the family compound.

This is a culture where the spiritual and the physical interpenetrate to the point of blending. Savoniha makes clear that her clothing and amber jewelry are as much a part of her religion as the words of Old Believer preachers and the birch tree to which she makes her confession. "Earth is our heaven." she declares, and this bent old woman, at the end of a turbulent and difficult life, quietly gives us all a lesson in forgiveness.

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