

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Gentle Indifference of the World (2018)

Adilkhan Yerzhanov (1982-)

OVERVIEW

Director Adilkhan Yerzhanov was born in 1987 in Djezkazgan, Kazakhstan. He studied at the Kazakh National Academy of Arts, majoring in film directing. In 1999, he created Kazakhstan's first animated series *Kozy-Korpesh and Bayan-Sulu*. He began writing and directing feature films with 2011's lo-fi time travel adventure *Realtors* (2011) before switching genres with his follow-up, the minimalist *Constructors* (2014). Yerzhanov gained international prominence with the release of his third feature *The Owners* (2014). A musical remake of *Constructors*, *The Owners* competed in the 2014 Cannes Film Festival. Since then, Yerzhanov has made 15 additional features.

Film Yerzhanov's second film to premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, *The Gentle Indifference of the World* premiered in Un Certain Regard, the section for new and emerging voices, at the 2018 Festival to praise from critics. With a title taken from Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, as well as references to Shakespearean tragedies, Yerzhanov's film uses intertextual references to Camus and Shakespeare to showcase the alienation of modern life in Kazakhstan, specifically in Almaty. The distinction between the idyllic rural lives of the characters is disrupted when they travel to the city, eventually leading to the film's tragic ending.

Background The film was released during a boon of Kazakh films and directors gaining global recognition at film festivals. Sergey Dvortsevov's Kazakh drama *Ayka* won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival the same year that *The Gentle Indifference of the World* premiered. Yerzhanov would follow up *Gentle Indifference* with the detective drama *A Dark, Dark Man* a year later. That film also starred Dinara Bakybaeva, the lead actress from *Gentle Indifference*. Since then, he's released, on average, two films a year.

LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS

Saltanat - trained doctor; forced to find a way to pay off her family's debt after father's suicide.

Kuandyk - farmhand; goes to city with Saltanat; works for gangster Zambeke.

Kaim - Saltanat's estranged uncle; runs illegal operations with Bayandyk.

Bayandyk - Kaim's partner; promises to pay off Saltanat's debt in exchange for marriage.

Zambeke - mobster; runs a grocery empire through force and violence.

SYNOPSIS

Two farmhands are fighting in an open field. One man, Kuandyk, gets the better of the other. Meanwhile, two movers are taking all the furniture out of a farmhouse. When his daughter, Saltanat, is signing the paperwork, she hears a gunshot and looks inside the house to find her father having committed suicide. Sometime later, Saltanat sits with her mother who implores her to go to the city to meet with Uncle Kaim because he can help pay off the family debts. As she's leaving, Kuandyk follows her.

Once they arrive, Saltanat is brought to her uncle, while Kuandyk stays behind. Kaim introduces her to his business partner Bayandyk. Their meeting is interrupted by Zambeke, a wealthy vegetable mogul. After he leaves, Kaim implies that Bayandyk will pay off her family's debt if she marries him. Saltanat refuses and goes back to Kuandyk. The next day, Kuandyk finds work with Aman. While working, Kuandyk learns that Zambeke has a monopoly on vegetables. He lights one of Zambeke's associates' warehouses on fire in retaliation for poor treatment.

Kuandyk is called into a meeting with Zambeke. He offers Kuandyk a job if he blames Aman for the fire. Kuandyk initially refuses. Saltanat visits her mother in prison. When she leaves, the lawyer who tells her that the family owes \$300,000. The next day, the police take Aman to prison. After sleeping with Bayandyk, he tells Saltanat that he has a wife. Saltanat meets with Kaim and Bayandyk. They suggest that she marry their other friend instead of Bayandyk. The man asks for assurances that she won't leave. Kaim tells him that he's keeping her passport.

Kuandyk and Saltanat go to retrieve her passport. They are caught by a police-officer. Kuandyk shoots him. During their escape, they also run into Kaim and his associates. Kuandyk kills them. While driving back, they are attacked by a militia group. They escape to a nearby tree and hold hands for the first time. Later, the police find their bodies, saying they died of gunshot wounds.

SCENES

Fight A dog pants in an open field. Two men watch in silence as two other men, both wearing black, fight each other, swinging wildly. A few minutes later, both are on the ground. One man gets the other in a head scissors, forcing him to pass out. He gets up, goes over to a rooster coup and takes the money sitting on top. He walks away, out of frame.

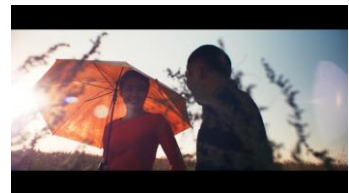


Suicide A woman, Saltanat, dressed in red walks across a field. Inside her house, two men in suits move all of the furniture out of the house. Her father looks on. The woman signs the paperwork and hears a loud gunshot. She sees her father laying on the floor of the empty house, dead.

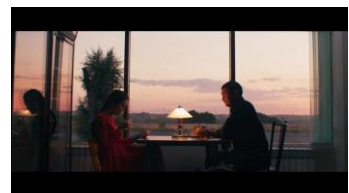
Debts Saltanat sits with her mother as she implores her to go see her Uncle Kaim to help pay off her father's debts. Saltanat pleads not to go, saying she doesn't know the uncle. Her mother asks if she wants to lose the house and the land instead. The mother leaves and Saltanat sits in silence.



Leaving Home Saltanat is walking down the road away from the house, holding a parasail. The man from the fight, Kuandyk, runs up to her. She tells him she has to go to the city, he asks to come along as he's been "planning to move to the city." He tries to tell her a joke, but she walks away, asking him to "keep an eye on my mother." He continues to follow her, telling Saltanat that she's like a "sister" to him. They walk off together as the sun sets.



Tea While Saltanat and Kuandyk wait for a bus, he gets them both tea. Saltanat is reading *The Stranger*. When he sits down, he quotes "The Gentle Indifference of the World." Saltanat asks if the quote is from Camus. He says it is and tells her that he's been reading her books since she got them ten years ago. He tells her about his love of Shakespeare and Stendhal. Sometime later, she's asleep at the table, while Kuandyk looks through her book before waking her when the bus arrives.



Bus Station Saltanat and Kuandyk arrive at the city bus station. They are accosted by a taxi driver before finding a limo driver standing outside of a car, holding a sign with Saltanat's name on it. She gets in the car and asks the driver if Kuandyk can have a ride. The driver hesitates but reluctantly agrees. Kuandyk walks over and shuts Saltanat's door for her. The driver chastises him for closing the door too aggressively. Fed up, Kuandyk walks back to the bench and tells Saltanat to go without him, as his friends will be there soon to get him. He looks at a billboard claiming "The Best Vegetables are from Zambeke and Co"



Boardroom Saltanat is brought into a boardroom where she meets her Uncle Kaim. He gives his condolences about her father's death before asking her to take a seat. Kaim introduces Saltanat to Bayandyk, his partner. Kaim tells her that Bayandyk "did a lot for your father. And he'll do more." Before they can continue talking, Zambeke comes into the room to hand Kaim a stack of money. He leaves and Kaim tells Saltanat that Bayandyk has an offer for her. He'll pay for her brother's college, help her pay off all her debts, and make sure Saltanat won't face criminal prosecution if she agrees to marry him. Saltanat tells her uncle she has to go home. Kaim pleads with her to stay and spend time with Bayandyk but she leaves the room. Kaim tells Bayandyk that "She'll be back. She's a smart girl."



Motel Saltanat returns to the bus station and finds Kuandyk still there. They decide to get a room for the night and find jobs tomorrow. In the room, she tells Kuandyk that she graduated from medical school, can speak English, and type but still has no actual work experience. He tells her she's smart and they'll find something. As she falls asleep on the bed, Kuandyk lays next to her on the floor, sketching out a picture of her.



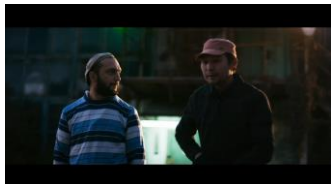
Jobs The next morning, Kuandyk is wandering around a shipping container depot. He happens upon a man, Aman, and tells the man he can move sacks of potatoes in five minutes, when it would take his usual workers fifteen minutes. If he can do it, he tells the man that he should hire for the job. He quickly moves all of the potato sacks, impressing the man, who tells him to come back tomorrow at 7am for a job. Next, we see Saltanat in scrubs mopping the floor in a hospital. She receives a phone call telling her that they'll foreclose on her father's land if she doesn't "pay off at least \$2000 by the end of this week." She hangs up.



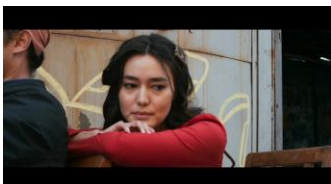
Backstory Back in the motel, Saltanat laments the fact that she previously left working at a hospital to help her father, telling Kuandyk she could've been a doctor by now, instead of just cleaning floors. Kuandyk tells her they'll find a way to get the money. Kuandyk shares that his problems are worse. He lost his documents when he was drunk years ago, with his friend setting up a LLP in his name, before running away with the profits. Now, he says, the "taxman is looking for me." He laments that his friends are all rich and go on vacation every year while he's forced to work manual labor. But, he says, it's good because he's seen "all the wonders of the World" including Saltanat and her innocence.



Vegetable Truck Kuandyk and Aman wait for a potato truck to arrive. It pulls up and Kuandyk runs to grab the first batch of vegetables. Aman pulls him aside, telling him that Zambeke's men get the first pick, and they get the leftovers. Kuandyk tells Aman that won't happen today and runs over to start unloading the truck. Zambeke's men jump him. Kuandyk escapes, running away and fighting each man individually. He manages to beat all of them, goes back to the truck and starts taking the potatoes off. Afterwards, Kuandyk sets fire to a warehouse while Aman watches.



Flight Later, Kuandyk takes Saltanat to the shipping containers, telling her that he "wanted to invite you to the exhibition in Paris." They pull up chairs one behind the other, with Kuandyk pretending to fly a plane. While doing so, he hands Saltanat an envelope of money to give to her mother. He walks her around the pretend exhibition, pointing out impressionist and primitive paintings, before telling her about the "paintings of Kuandyk," which "the critics don't understand." He tells her that he's painted all the good in the world.



Back on the Farm Saltanat returns to her family farm and sees two police officers napping on a hay barrel. A young boy is kicking a soccer ball at them. One police officer wakes the other up and tells him that the break is over. They get into their car and drive away as Saltanat watches.



Ultimatum Back at the shipping containers, Kuandyk is moving potato sacks. Two men come up to him and ask if he was the one to set fire to the warehouse. He doesn't answer. The men take him to see Zambeke. When they sit down, Zambeke offers Kuandyk a job, but tells him that someone needs to go to prison for the fire. If he writes that he saw Aman take the gasoline can from the store, he'll offer Kuandyk a manager position. Kuandyk refuses to betray Aman and walks away.



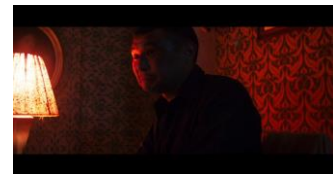
Prison The two police officers are going through Saltanat's possessions. They ask her why she's come to the prison, and she tells them to visit her mother. They walk her into the cell. Her mother is sitting in a corner. Saltanat tells her "everything will be fine" and that she'll "be free soon." She has contacted a lawyer. Her mother gets up, telling Saltanat that under the law she's the director of the LLP and personally liable for her husband's debt. She scolds Saltanat for being too proud and unwilling to marry Bayandyk. She tells Saltanat that she's always lived for herself and to just carry on that way. Saltanat leaves the cell and finds her lawyer waiting for her. The lawyer tells her that if she pays off the debt, \$300,000, then her mother can go free. He also can get her out on bail for \$12,500 and some bribes to the police officers.



Return to Boardroom Kaim and Bayandyk are in the boardroom. Bayandyk is dressed in boxing gear, seemingly training. Saltanat sits in the corner. Kaim asks Saltanat if she's a doctor. She says yes and Kaim tells her that Bayandyk has a private clinic she can work at. Bayandyk tells her she can get a job as an administrator there. She asks if he can pay off her father's debts. Bayandyk says of course he can pay them off, little by little. He tells her that she will move into his house first and they'll become friends.



Packing Saltanat returns to the motel where Kuandyk is staying. She begins packing up her clothes, telling him that she's going to stay with her uncle for a while, but that she'll be back. He tells her that he has nothing in his life but that she has been the best thing he's ever had. He says, "if you go, you won't come back." She still leaves.



Aman Kuandyk walks into a shipping container and signs a form saying that Aman set fire to the warehouse. Later, Aman drives him and Kuandyk to his house, insisting that he meet his wife and see the place. Out back, Aman tells Kuandyk that, thanks to him, he's going to be able to take out a loan and finish his house. He asks Kuandyk what he plans to do. Kuandyk responds that he has a girlfriend and that while everything else ends, only "love is eternal." He again quotes Camus, telling Aman: "And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head." The next day, a police officer comes to the shipping containers to take Aman off to jail. Kuandyk sits and watches.



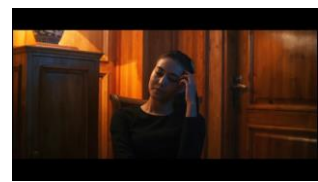
Bedroom Saltanat redoes her hair in the mirror while Bayandyk sits on the unmade bed. She asks if he's transferred the money and Bayandyk admits that he has a wife. He says that they can't get married because of her. That she'll take half of his business if she finds out. She calls him an animal who only cares about money.



Killing Kuandyk stands outside a shipping container as Zambeke takes a man who owes him money into it. His enforcer shoots the man and kills him. They exit the shipping container, and the enforcer tells Kuandyk to bury the body.



Negotiation Bayandyk, Kaim, and Saltanat are sitting back in the boardroom. Bayandyk tells Saltanat that his wife is “threatening to send certain documents to the police” if they get married. If she does, all of them will go to jail. Kaim tells Saltanat she should wait and that if she marries Bayandyk’s friend then he’ll pay off her debts. The friend asks for guarantees that she won’t run away, and Kaim tells the man that he has her passport. The man tells Kaim he’s responsible for her before leaving.



Theater Kaim, Bayandyk, Saltanat, and Zambeke watch a theatrical performance of a woman being sold for money. Kuandyk shows up to see Zambeke. Saltanat notices him and grows uncomfortable. Kuandyk leaves and goes to Aman’s house, giving his wife money. He drives off with Aman’s car and his gun.



Revenge Kuandyk and Saltanat sit inside the car outside of an office building. Kuandyk reveals that he grew up in an orphanage and tells Saltanat that the men will never let her go and her debts will never end. They break into the boardroom, rummage through the drawers, and find her passport. The police officer who arrested Aman shows up and Kuandyk shoots him with Aman’s rifle. Then, they go to the staircase to escape only to find Kaim, Bayandyk, and Zambeke walking up. Kuandyk kills them and they escape the building.



Death While driving out into the country, they are attacked by a militia group. Their car shot up, Saltanat and Kuandyk get out and find refuge under a tree. Kuandyk tells her it was a bad plan. She responds, “But a good day.” They hold hands for the first time. Sometime later, the police are roping off the area around the tree. A medical examiner says there are two bodies, both shot to death.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Saltanat

Saltanat is a young woman forced into a dangerous and violent situation because of her father’s suicide. She went to medical school but was forced to come back to her family’s farm to help her father, who had fallen into debt. When her father died, she is told by her mother to go to Almaty to plead for her family. She’s naïve about the ways that others see her as nothing more than a sexual object. She always wears a red dress, symbolizing the danger she finds herself in Almaty. Yet she’s determined and hopeful that she’ll find a way out of the debt for her and her family.

Determined Saltanat initially refuses Bayandyk’s advances, returning to the bus station and renting a motel room with Kuandyk. There, they plan to get jobs, with Saltanat taking on the manual labor of cleaning hospital floors, determined to make money to free her family from debt.

Naïve Once she discovers that her mother is in jail for debt, she goes back to her Uncle Kaim and Bayandyk, agreeing to a sexual relationship with the latter. After being intimate with Bayandyk, she asks him about paying off her family’s debt, only for him to tell her that he’s married.

Hopeful After Kuandyk kills the mobsters and they go on the run, their car is attacked by a militia group. They escape and Kuandyk reflects on how bad the plan was to get her free of Kaim and Bayandyk.

Saltanat responds that plan might've been bad but it's a "good day," remaining hopeful even in the face of her death.

Kuandyk

A farm hand who has made a series of poor choices in the past, Kuandyk is Saltanat's ever loyal friend and partner. He previously lost his passport and documents while drunk with a friend, who opened a Limited Liability Partnership in his name and ran away without paying the taxes. Poor and only able to work menial jobs, he obviously harbors romantic feelings for her, but hides those feelings, instead focusing on his work. He's caring, but also can resort to violence, if need be. These violent outbursts reflect his unwillingness to compromise.

Caring When Saltanat is sent off to Almaty to visit her uncle, Kuandyk volunteers to join for the trip, saying that he was already planning on moving to the city for a job. Yet, when he gets to the city, it's obvious that he has no friends and no prospects, having only travelled to keep Saltanat company.

Strong-Willed During his first day working for Aman, he refuses to accept the established hierarchy that sees Zambeke's men get first pick of vegetables. He tells Aman that they will go first, leading to fights with the men. When he's confronted by Zambeke about setting fire to a warehouse, he initially refuses to betray Aman.

Violent The first scene of the film shows Kuandyk fighting a fellow farmhand, as others bet on the outcome. Kuandyk ends up getting the better of the other man, putting him in a headlock until he passes out. Once he wins the fight, Kuandyk goes over to pick up the money, showing that his willingness to use violence for economic means.

Kaim

Saltanat's estranged uncle, Kaim co-runs an illegal empire with his business partner Bayandyk. Saltanat is told that he helped her father when he was in debt. Together, they loan out money and collect on various people throughout the city. Connected to the police, as well as other rich and powerful men, Kaim portrays himself as an underling in the criminal organization, but people like Zambeke come to him with money.

Manipulative During their first meeting with Saltanat, Kaim tells her that they can help pay off her father's debts, pay for her brother's school, and make sure she avoids prison if she is willing to marry Bayandyk. We find out later that Bayandyk already has a wife, as Kaim lied to her.

Cruel When Kaim's friend is propositioned to take on Saltanat as a wife, he seeks assurances from Kaim. He tells the man that he keeps Saltanat's passport so that she cannot run away from them. He continues to lie to her, making her believe there is a way out of the family's debt.

Powerful Zambeke, a powerful grocer, goes to Kaim and gives him a stack of money, presumably a payoff for the enforcement that Kaim and Bayandyk provide for him and his grocery stores. Further, the police keep watch over his building, leading to a confrontation with Kuandyk when he breaks in.

Zambeke

A powerful grocer who controls all of the vegetable imports in Almaty. We first see his face on a billboard, before Kuandyk is later introduced to him. He keeps control of his sprawling grocery empire through violence, yet is still obedient to Kaim and Bayandyk, knowing his place in the pecking order of the criminal underground in the city. He's eventually killed by Kuandyk in a stairwell.

Violent When the manager of six grocery chains under Zambeke cannot pay him, he becomes agitated and eventually violent. His enforcer ends up killing the manager, forcing Kuandyk to bury the body.

Obedient While he oversees a sprawling empire of groceries, he nevertheless answers to Kaim and Bayandyk, paying them off, suggesting this role in the criminal organization is more middle management than leader.

Detached While Zambeke oversees a violent corner of the criminal underworld, he also keeps his hands clean of most of the violence. He has his enforcer kill the underperforming manager and he has the police arrest Aman after Kuandyk betrays him. He tries to keep his hands clean despite his profession.

THEMES

Society

Institutional Corruption The police and government are presented as appendages to Kaim and Bayandyk's criminal enterprise. The police do their bidding, including arresting Aman for a fire that he did not set, only to clear the way for Zambeke to build up his vegetable empire. Similarly, the police in the countryside arrest Saltanat's mother for debts that her husband incurred. Saltanat and Kuandyk are forced to navigate a world in which public institutions turn a blind eye to their plight.

Illustrative Moment When Saltanat visits her mother in jail, she tells her that she's hired a lawyer. Yet, when she meets the lawyer outside of the cell, he tells Saltanat that getting the mother out is next to impossible unless she has the funds to do so, adding up all the bribes that will have to be given out to the police.

Urban Decay The city of Almaty is presented as a corrupting force compared to the idyllic beauty of the rural countryside. While Saltanat and her father had to deal with crippling debts on the farm, ultimately leading to his suicide, the city presents an indifferent face to Saltanat's trouble, forcing her to trade her innocence and morality for monetary gain. This arc is mirrored by Kuandyk, who has worked hard to escape his violent past only to be sucked back into a criminal underworld when he is forced to work for Zambeke to make a living. The shipping container depot acts as the midpoint between the fruits and vegetables brought from the farm into the city and, also, the place where Kuandyk is forced to contend with the violent nature of Almaty.

Illustrative Moment When the first truck of vegetables arrives, Kuandyk and Aman are pushed to the side by Zambeke's men. Yet Kuandyk believes this hierarchy is unfair and pushes his way past them, creating a fight between the two sides and ultimately results in Kuandyk setting fire to one of Zambeke's men's warehouse.

Philosophy

Existentialism The film takes its title from Camus's assertion in *The Stranger* that there is no right or wrong in the world, instead the natural world is indifferent to the plight of both Saltanat and Kuandyk. This means that they are forced to navigate through their existence knowing that there will be no happy ending unless they make one for themselves. By the end of the film, the two characters have realized that they've been boxed into certain jobs and fates, finally asserting their autonomy by escaping from Almaty and killing those who've oppressed them. Yet, at the end, they are gunned down by a militia, furthering the theme that the world is indifferent to them, resisting a happy ending.

Illustrative Moment Before Kuandyk and Saltanat board the bus to go to Almaty, they camp out at the bus station. Saltanat reads *The Stranger* while Kuandyk recites the final line of the book, foreshadowing their terror that awaits them in the city and suggesting an intertextual relationship between Camus and the film.

Psychology

Loss of Innocence Saltanat's journey from medical student to kept woman highlights her movement from innocence to the cruelty of adulthood. While she returned to take care of the farm with her father, his

suicide forces her outside of the comfort of the rural farm and into the city. There, men take advantage of her because of her innocence and beauty, slowly corrupting her in the process. Her initial resistance to Bayandyk's advances is finally ground down by the need to make money for her family to survive.

Illustrative Moment When Saltanat first visits her Uncle Kaim and Bayandyk, she is aghast at their ultimatum that she marries Bayandyk in order to secure financial stability for her mother, brother, and herself. She flees the meeting. Yet, Kaim knows that she will return because of the condition that her family finds themselves in, telling Bayandyk "She'll be back. She's a smart girl."

Unrestrained Love Kuandyk's love for Saltanat is unbounded and totalizing. He leaves the farm to watch out for when she has to go to Almaty, lying about the fact that he has job prospects in the city. When they get to the city, he rents out a motel room with her and gives her money to care for her mother. At the end of the film, Kuandyk gives up any prospects he has for a normal life when he kills Saltanat's captives and a police officer, fleeing with her from the crime scene. He never asks her for anything in return, always taking care of her without thought of his own life.

Illustrative Moment Despite sharing so much, Saltanat and Kuandyk are never physical with each other. He sleeps on the floor of the motel, while she takes the bed. It's only at the end of the film when, after they've been attacked, they briefly hold hands before they both died. Their bodies lay side-by-side when the coroner arrives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe that Kuandyk's devotion to Saltanat is destructive? Does Saltanat give as much back to Kuandyk as he does to her?
2. In what ways does the film mirror Camus's *The Stranger*?
3. How is the city of Almaty presented and what differences can we see between Saltanat's family farm and the city?
4. How does the film present institutions (police, politics, etc.) in Kazakhstan and what commentary does it make about the function of government?
5. There's a repeated image of a flower at the shipping container depot. How does this flower serve as a metaphor for the themes of the film?