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January 2006

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Below *The Singing Blackbird*

The montage of Tbilisi culture

By Zaza Shatirishvili

Keywords
Tbilisi culture, Georgian cinema, the Caucasus, Otar Iosseliani, Robert Sturua, Sergei Paradjanov

Left Otar Iosseliani

TBILISI CULTURE IS NOT Georgian culture. Georgian culture is based on literature; it translates badly into prose, for its most important genre is poetry. Tbilisi culture, on the other hand, is playful, carnavalesque, based on the montage, and cinematographic.

The representatives of Tbilisi culture have obscure origins and their elusively immaterial status is, in a sense, part of their work as well. Directors such as Sergei Paradjanov and Otar Iosseliani have no background in acting. The cast for Robert Sturua's productions is randomly chosen; any actor could be replaced by another without changing the content. The logical extension of this absence of the actor is the puppet theatre of Revaz Gabriadze and the doll cinematography of Paradjanov, in particular his last film *Ashik Kerib* (1988).

Otar Iosseliani: representative of a self-destructing world

Even in his early films, such as *April* (1961), Iosseliani chronicled a rebellion against the world of objects, against the thickness and density of the external world. The assault of objects is carried in his early films to the point of absurdity. A tiny apartment is gradually filled with objects, both given and purchased. By the end of the film, it is impossible to move anywhere. The objects

do not leave space even for simple human relations. The finale is quite effective: a young husband and his wife fling all their possessions on to the ground below. The objects break against the earth, freeing a desired expanse, which once again reveals the emptiness of matter. Such is Iosseliani's way of signifying the contours of the foundational myth of Tbilisi culture: the transparency and the emptiness of the external world.

April was followed by the trilogy *Falling Leaves* (1968), *There Once was a Singing Blackbird* (1970) and *Pastorale* (1975). Rebellion against the external world became Iosseliani's main theme, expressed in the later films in more subtle ways but not with any less intensity.

Even the first critics and spectators sensed the irony of the title of the first film in the trilogy: *Pastorale*. Actually, the director set for himself the goal of producing an anti-pastoral and anti-utopia that was to tell the story of an anti-Arcadia. In Iosseliani's idyll, the same things go on which happen in the city. These two closed worlds, the pastoral and the urban space, reflect each other while remaining mutually impenetrable.

One of the most effective episodes of the film is the one in which a cargo truck filled with villagers comes up against a fence blocking their path. A train speeding along suddenly freezes on the tracks and the truck and train passengers stare at each other while jazz music plays in the background. In this instant, two impenetrable worlds merge into each other, never to meet again.

Critics and spectators alike were convinced that there was only one fully rounded character in the entire movie: the village girl Eduki who, unlike the other characters, preserves her 'pastoral' traits. In reality, however, Eduki is no allegory for human warmth in a cold world made alien to man. The secret of her character is that she is an observer, a witness. Nor is she the incarnation of the director's all-seeing gaze. On the contrary, Eduki's gaze is the spontaneous gaze of the spectator; it neither explains nor exposes. In the context of the movie, both observation and meditation empty the world and give place to the category of personhood. When this does not happen, a person sinks into the fleshly world of objects. Objects and things are not merely opposed to personhood; they are divided from the tatters of personhood, within which the potential for life and death still breaths. They must be given life or else they will become fossilized remnants of themselves, depriving humans of the means of living to the fullest.

Only that which has personhood can be alive. Gia, the main character in the film *There Once was a Singing Blackbird*, find himself on the verge of a catastrophe as the plot unfolds and the world of objects threatens him with death. A bundle of flowers nearly smacks him on the head, as he races along the street, and then he barely escapes falling into a pit for actors. Still, by the end of the film he is trampled beneath the wheels of a car, realizing in these concrete terms the film's structuring metaphor. In the film's last scene, we witness the bare mechanism of a clock and attend to its even ticking: the sound not of time, but rather of satiated space.

The absence of time is portrayed with startling accuracy for all characters. They are always complaining that they do not have enough time. Gia's lack of time is constantly alluded to as well. Sometimes it appears to the spectator that this is a form of self-deception, Gia's way of rationalizing the fact that he does nothing. But in his own way Gia is right. He truly does not have time, if by 'time' we mean the real time of observation, reflection and pausing. Unlike Eduki, whose gaze empties the fleshliness of the external world, Gia is charmed by the fullness of the materiality that penetrates him.

Iosseliani likewise reveals the destruction and emptying out of different worlds. In the film *Falling Leaves* the characters' attempts to assert their freedom reinforces the predetermined system of the film itself, while in *Pastorale* personhood is brought into being in the conflict between the village and city life. The hero of *There Once was a Singing Blackbird* dies beneath the wheels of a dense cosmos, deprived of consolation, as bare as its very real emptiness.

There are happy and unhappy worlds, those that can be penetrated and those that remain opaque, those that are heavy and tender. But every world is destroyed beneath the observing gaze, which fact is amply demonstrated by the self-chosen representative of the self-destructing material world: Otar Iosseliani.

Robert Sturua: the theatre of power and the power of theatre

Robert Sturua's stage philosophy can be summarized by the term 'theatre of power'. The director found his theme even in the beginning of the 1970s: the impersonal structure of power and the arbitrary status of those who wield it. Sturua portrays power as an immaterial object with its own physicality. It can be compared to an epidemic, distributed in space but with an elasticity that evaporates on contact.

In *Kvarkvare*, a production based on a text by the Georgian playwright Polycarp Kakabdze, Sturua provided an example of an opportunist dictator who is accidentally raised to an influential position and who loses his power in the same accidental way, raised from nowhere and vanishing again into the impenetrable distance. He masters the art of power with a success surprising to himself and then loses his skill just as suddenly. The same thing happens in the case of Azdak, the main ▶

hero of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1945) but, unlike Kvarkvare, Azdak creates a just legal system and leaves good memories behind him after he disappears.

Sturua even managed to introduce his theme of the arbitrary nature of power in his staging of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. As always, he fundamentally altered the plot of his script, in this case cutting the text in half without changing a single word. Sturua created mirror images in the characters of Richard and Richmond. Richmond follows Richard for the length of the play as a shadow follows its reflection, silently participating in all his intrigues and learning from him the art of acquiring power, so that by the end, after a short period of exile, he returns and acquires reason, speech and a King's crown.

At the end of the 1970s Sturua turned to documentary material. In 1979, he staged Shatrov's *Blue Horses on Red Grass* (1978). No other play underwent such a drastic reworking in its translation to the stage as this one. Sturua entirely reworked the text and introduced new characters, but the most radical changes concerned the role of Lenin who was the main hero of the play. The main change was not even that Lenin's role was played by three different actors but rather that different actors played Lenin's character during the same scene. Through this multitude of simultaneous and contradictory representations, Sturua caused his audience to question where Lenin's character ends and where his opponents' characters begin. This detail was noted by more than one perceptive critic.

Blue Horses on Red Grass neatly summarizes two aspects of Sturua's poetics: on the one hand, the arbitrary status of those in power and their utter replaceability along with, on the other hand, the replaceability and accidental status of the actors themselves.

Blue Horses on Red Grass was followed in the mid-1980s by Sturua's unsuccessful staging of *King Lear*. The production's theme, the arbitrariness of power, had grown old. Power had begun to fall apart in the socialist space. But a used-up theme, like a terrible disease even after the patient has recovered from it, ultimately reveals its true face. An example of one such repetition, the recent production of *Macbeth*, was unsuccessful because the director lost his control over the material that used to be his own unique theme.

The cinematography of dolls: Sergei Paradjanov

According to the Russian critic Yuri Lotman,

at the end of the eighteenth century, Europe was seized by a general lust for machines. Vokanson's invention of factory dolls incarnated the metaphorical unity between men and machines, via the image [which dolls presented] of dead movement ...The creation of the doll spoke of an alliance between the ancient myth concerning the coming to life of a statue [Pygmalion] and the new myth concerning the dead life of mechanical objects. (Lotman 1992: 377 and 380)

> 'The representatives of Tbilisi culture have obscure origins and their elusively immaterial status is, in a sense, part of their work as well.'

Ashik Kerib

However, the myth of a statue coming to life received a specific development within the context of eastern Christianity. As Roman Jakobson notes, statues in the work of Pushkin

frequently signify those same idols which tormented Tsar Nikolai in [Pushkin's poem] 'The Bronze Horseman'. [Subsequent] Russian poets, such as the heretic Blok, and the atheist Mayakovsky, even though they may not have believed in Pushkin's [Eastern Orthodox] God, were all raised in a world of Eastern Orthodox tradition, and, even though they may not intend it, their work is saturated with the symbolism of the Orthodox Church, which sharply condemns the art of sculpture, refusing to allow it to enter the temple of God and regarding it as a mark of paganism or Satanism, (which were essentially the same thing from the perspective of the church). It was precisely this Orthodox tradition that led Pushkin to dogmatically associate statuary with idolatry, satanic power and witchcraft. (Jakobson 1987: 173)

If in eastern Christianity, statuary is associated with idolatry, then dolls, which can be contextual-

ized in Lotman's terms according to the oppositions of doll/statue (child/adult), should be viewed from the perspective of this same tradition, as objects which are less than serious. However, in certain contexts, dolls can be as blasphemous as statues.

Many Georgian critics read a scene from Paradjanov's film *Surami Fortress* (1985) according to the Eastern Orthodox suspicion of statuary. In this scene, the child's initiation into his native culture occurs with the help of doll figurines that represent famous people from Georgia's past. Unlike the Georgian critics, Lotman, in his survey of this movie, reads the 'doll episode' as the doll's

transition from the world of children to the world of adults. As the doll performs this rite of passage, it carries with it memories of the childhood, folkloric, mythical and playful world. This makes of the appearance of the doll [in Paradjanov's film] more than an accident, but rather an integral component of the visual domain of any 'mature' civilization. (Lotman 1992: 379).

We should note here that the mythology of the doll in Tbilisi culture is at one and the same time a challenge to and a technique for avoiding the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In this sense, *Surami Fortress* is Paradjanov's most radical film. In his last film *Ashik Kerib*, Paradjanov addressed as well the doll-like qualities of the utopian East, which he himself had invented.

Paradjanov filmed *Ashik Kerib* in 1988, during the most intense period of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. He said that with this film he aimed to create peace between the Armenians and Azeris. Many believed and still believe that this was a well-intentioned but utopian ideal. But the fact of the matter is that utopianism is the internal structure in all of Paradjanov's work.

The primary source for the film's plot is a Turkish story that was popular in the Caucasus and was recorded by Lermontov in the 1830s. During the unfolding of this film, the actors speak in a completely invented language. The conventionality of the institution of the actor is carried to its logical extreme; instead of dramatic acts, we have a choreography of dolls. Paradjanov's most ambitious goal was to overcome cinematography through cinematography itself. The foundational myth of cinema studies is that film is a moving picture. With his strategy of presenting the viewer with an endless series of shots, Paradjanov proved that film is not the representation of time but rather it is the time of representation.

Perhaps Paradjanov's so-called 'indifference' to his material, based on the heterogeneity of the stories he tells, is the defining feature of his cinematic poetics. *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1964) is a reading of Ukrainian folklore. *Surami Fortress* is based on the Georgian legend of the building sacrifice. *Sayat Nova* (*Colour of Pomegranate*) (1968) tells the story of the famous eighteenth-century Armenian poet Sayat-Nova, who was a classic writer for three separate literary traditions: Armenian, Azeri and Georgian, and who in the most radical sense embodied the multicultural hybridism of Tbilisi culture at the end of the eighteenth century. But Paradjanov never attained the same degree of freedom from his material as in *Ashik Kerib*. Here he constructs his own personal East, to which he streams at the end of his creative career. But in actual fact, Paradjanov's East was the multicultural synthesis of the Caucasus.

Paradjanov's transgressions reach beyond the narratives of Caucasian as well as of Russian, Georgian and Armenian culture. His films' aesthetics find their logical correlation in the discourse of trans-narrativity, which operates on the level of film's language about itself. Paradjanov is a true hybrid of Caucasian multiculturalism: nation and empire, Russian and Georgian, child and adult, doll and theatre, Azeri and Armenian merge into and overcome each other in his work, while at the same time they fall apart and dissimulate, imagining in their materiality the complex physicality of the other Caucasus, or rather the Caucasus as other. ●

Translated from the Russian by Rebecca Gould

Contributor details

Zaza Shatirishvili (b. 1966) is a literary critic and philosopher. He is a professor at the Tbilisi Shota Rustaveli State Institute of Georgian Literature. Shatirishvili writes on literary theory and culture history and has published more than 70 articles and two books: *An Apology for Narrative* (Tbilisi: The Centre of Theology and Culture, 2005) (in Georgian); *Galaktion Tabidze's Poetics and Rhetoric: 1919–1927* (Tbilisi: Logos Press, 2004) (in Georgian). His most recent articles include: 'Fictional Narrative and Allegorical Discourse' in *Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter*, 2 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), pp.179–83; 'Romantic Topography and the Dilemma of Empire: The Dialogue of Georgian and Russian Poetry' (in cooperation with Harsha Ram) in *Russian Review*, 1 (2004), pp. 1–25.

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