

Prisoner (Once Again) of the Caucasus: An Ethnography of Film

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Much of the debate regarding the relation between film and semiotics, which marked the early years of film theory (see Metz 1974), limited itself to a textual analysis of films as closed symbolic systems. On the contrary, taking film as a living microcosm where various and even contradictory multi-directional and multi-level processes take place, open up new possibilities. This paper will start its analysis from the film Mandariniid (Tangerines) (2013, Zaza Urushadze) in order to explore historically different meanings of captivity and hospitality. The examination of these historical categories in relation to film representation and policies will help us reveal national, regional or transnational processes which contribute today to the understanding of how a film can be the context of multiple meanings and power relations, but could allow a ground of a fertile dialogue between anthropology, semiotics and film studies.

KEYWORDS Film analysis, ethnography, semiotics, Georgian cinema

Introduction

Abkhazia used to be part of the Soviet Riviera on the Black Sea. Organised groups of socialist labor workers or young pioneers were sent there to enjoy the white-pebble-beaches and the eternally-covered-with-snow Caucasian ranges. At the same time, hidden by the proletarian classes among the eucalypti and the citrus trees, the party elite enjoyed the nineteenth century dachas (summer houses) (see Sideri 2012). The war between the Georgian and the Abkhazian armies (1991-1993) almost obliterated that past. The results were a massive flow of internally displaced people and refugees of different ethnicities (Georgian, Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Russians).

For the Georgian cinema, that war did not only turn to a source of inspiration, but it also created heroes. Georgian directors fought and died in Abkhazia, such as Levan Abashidze and

Giorgi Revishvili (Dönmez Colin 1998). The Georgian cinema with its long history dated since 1896 (see Makharadze 2014), its unique voice and style (a combination of Caucasian cultures, surrealism and allegory, see Rollberg 2008: 174-177) and a line of auteurs, like Paradzanov, Iosseliani, Abuladze, was one of the few national cinematographies from the former Soviet Union known abroad as a distinctive film tradition.¹

Mandariinid (Tangerines 2013, Zaza Urushadze), a film inspired by the war in Abkhazia, won the international acclaim. The success was considered as part of the renaissance of the post-Soviet Georgian cinema. 'The dynamic was put in place', according to Nika Rurua, Minister of Culture of Georgia (2008-2012), when the Georgian National Film Centre (GNFC) became member of the European Cinema Support Fund (EURIMAGES) in 2011. Since then, a new generation of filmmakers specialized either in fiction or in documentary emerged (Ovashvili, Ekvimishvili, Urushadze) (Rimple 2015). Currently, Tbilisi hosts two international film festivals and another one is organised in Batumi, turning Georgia to the film capital of the Caucasus.²

Since the 1960s, when the linguist turn, the consideration of language as vehicle of symbols and meanings for the formation of reality, emerged in the social sciences, the study of film through the lenses of ethnography remained marginal. This paper will enter the world of Mandariinid, as a field where meanings and their interpretations are construed in relation to different, but interrelated local, national and transnational contexts. My analysis paper will take into account the filmic text (form/content), the history of the Caucasus, but also, the European media policies. This exploration of Mandariinid will postulate how an ethnography of film could cross-fertilize both fields: Film studies could benefit from the inter-dependent exploration of different cultural dis/articulations; Ethnography could discover in film a new field of highly mediatized interactions that inter-connect different systems of production and consumption of pictures, words, and sounds.

Film and Ethnography

Saussure's theory (1966), which underlined the importance of synchronic analysis of linguistic signs in comparison to the historical approaches of the past, put the stress on the cultural than the natural designation of meaning (arbitrariness of sign). Splitting signs between form (signifiers) and content (signified), and narrowing their diversity down to few binary oppositions, which could produce meaning, Saussure provided a method to uncover the underlying structure of human cultures. Thus, the vast differentiation of words, symbols, ideas, images could be organized, analyzed and understood as structure, a whole that in itself became a sign of an absence. In Roland Barthes' words,

[s]tructure is therefore actually a simulacrum of the object, but a directed, interested simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained

invisible, or if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object". But how did this approach influence film studies? (1964: 213)

The formation of film studies as scientific field was impeded by the strict distinction between art and sciences. It was further burdened by the dominant perception that distinguished arts and culture between High (traditional arts, like literature and painting) and Mass Culture Low (photography, film) (see O' Connor 2010). The former had an almost transcendental mission. The latter, in particular cinema, was considered an industrial populatization of 'true' art. Moreover, this commodification was connected to political propaganda and the development of consumers' culture (Horkheimer and Adorno [1972] 2006: 41-72). Turning the 'popular' and the 'lived' to significant categories of social and cultural meaning, had an impact on film studies and the study of cultural dualism as well, where the 'ordinary' was studied by ethnography and the 'cultural' and the 'artistic' by arts (see Williams 1958; Barthes 1962). First, it legitimized media and their impact on society as a field of study. Second, it shifted the attention from the examination of the author as a charismatic figure whose ingenuity contributed to the aura of the work of art (see Benjamin [1969] 2006: 18-41) towards the film text, as a closed system where personal creation, form and artistic value were mutually constructed within the specific codes of production (Dyer 2000: 23).

Christian Metz (1962) examined film codes as linguistic one (form/content). However, the dependence of film on reality³ circumvented any notion of arbitrariness found in linguistic signs. At the same time, film was not a one-modal language, but it was produced by the articulation of different semantic codes (narrative, image, sound), which increased its complexity as a sign. To address this complexity, film was further textualized. In each screening a space was produced between the individual viewer and the visual text (Kolker 2000: 38).⁴ This more dynamic and historical consideration took into account multiple 'readings' of film. Nevertheless, emphasis on text did not address the multi-scalar and interwoven relations of the manifold re-contextualization of film.

At the same time, the linguistic turn did not leave social anthropology unaffected. Structural anthropology⁵ reduced ethnographic experience to models and schemas that could provide access to the natives' understanding of 'their' culture. Clifford Geertz, criticizing the functionalist ethnography for observing cultures at a distance, considered deep immersion in the cultural subject matter as a way for ethnographic texts to postulate the interconnected networks of cultural meanings and actions (thick description) (1973). The internal duality in ethnography had an impact on its relation to film, as it consists of two interlinked parts: the practice in the field, which is always subjective, elliptic, as human experience always is, and the text (see Clifford and Marcus 1986).

Although for a long time ethnographic practice used film as a way to document reality (ethnographic film) (see Nikolakakis 1998, Stefani 2007), fiction films remained outside the radar of anthropological research.⁶ Anthropology's crisis of representation in the 1980s shifted

the attention to ethnography both as writing and practice. 'Twentieth-century ethnography (...) has become increasingly wary of localizing strategies in the construction and representation of "cultures"' (Clifford 1997: 19). Post-colonial critique regarding the embedded power relations and hierarchies found in many widely believed 'objective' texts and their language made urgent the re-examination of ethnographic texts and the modalities of ethnographic writing (a-historical present tense, language style and text organization) (see Clifford and Marcus 1986). In this context, anthropologists resorted to 'new' techniques, often borrowed from the early 20th avant-garde art (surrealism, Dadaism), like montage, allegory, pastiche (see Clifford 1986: 98-122; Tyler 1986: 122-141). These techniques aspired to reproduce the more fragmented reality of the field, instead of 'faking' a skillfully wrapped up 'objective' whole (Marcus 1998).⁷ However, social anthropology's endeavor into cinema as art and industry still remained occasional.

An exception was Steven Canton's study of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1999). Canton applied a fruitful dialogue between the social, the cultural and the artistic in different historical periods from the 1960s to the 1990s studying issues of travel and colonialism in fieldwork and film-making; orientalist representations of the Middle East; hetero/homosexual Otherness. In this way, the film shifted from being a text to becoming a context, a space which was not produced by bounded and homogenous territories, cultures and communities, but by the inter-dependencies of different and history-sensitive locales constructed by 'complex systems such as colonialism or market economies' (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 91). In this framework, film could turn to ethnographic field in the sense of an interwoven space of meanings (resulting both from form and content) produced, interacted, but also, circulated within uneven relations of power in different phases of production, distribution and reception. The emerging anthropology of cinema becomes sensitive both of the 'context' (local constructions of meaning, power, and politics) and 'their analytical value (cultural embeddedness) and for their dialogue with the audience' (Gray 2010: 106). How could this approach help us explore *Mandariinid*?

***Mandariinid* as an ethnographic field**

Mandariinid relates the story of three men who, due to the Abkhazian-Georgian war, became captive in Abkhazia, in a wooden house surrounded by a tangerine orchard. Who are these three men? Ivo, the eldest is Estonian; Ahmed, a Chechen mercenary and Nika, a Georgian soldier. The film starts with a historical notice: two lines informs us of the history of the Estonian presence in Abkhazia. What is the need for that? Grant and Yalçin-Heckman (2007) argued that the imperial agendas (Russian, Ottoman, Persian among others) treated the region as an 'absent presence'. The Caucasus⁸ was taken into account only as part of imperial politics overlooking local interests and strategies. In this way, the Caucasus, its populations

and cultures remained to great extent unknown for the rest of the world. What were these ambitions? The Caucasus would be used as a buffer zone between the great empires of the region: Russian, Ottoman and Persian empires. What is the relation of the filmic text to the historical context?

The first scene opens with a close-up to an old male hand and then, to a man (Ivo) cutting a piece of wood with a machine under a yellowish light. The composition of frame transmits warmth, intimacy, and a sense of hominess. The sound of the machine is fused with that of *panduri*⁹ (a traditional Georgian string instrument which used to accompany folk poetry and dances). Pieces of wood are thrown all over. A man with a gun (Ahmed) evades this intimate space and asks Ivo to come out. Cut. The atmosphere of the first scene is overturned by the next one. Long shot. The setting is a humid and misty exterior.¹⁰ The warmth is lost; home is lost. The dialogue is short and abrupt. The man with the gun tries to identify the old man. Ivo is Estonian. 'What is an Estonian doing here?', Ahmed asks.

Estonia became a frontier among the dominant powers of the Baltic region (Sweden, Russia and Poland) since the sixteenth century. The Great Northern War (1700-1721) between the Russian and Swedish Empires sealed the fate of the small rural nation. The gradual expansion of the Russian Empire to the East and the South as well as the emancipation of the serfs (1861) produced challenges, but also opportunities for landless farmers. In the Caucasus, Estonians were mostly settled in Abkhazia between 1864 and 1885, founding small villages north of Gagra near the Psou river, but also in Sukhumi, the capital. Estonians in Abkhazia comprised almost 608 persons according to the 1897 census (see Viikberg 2014).

But what was the situation in Abkhazia when Ivo's ancestors arrived? The Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783 established Kartli-Kakheti (approximately today's Georgia) as a protectorate of the Russian Empire. The western parts were gradually incorporated in this protectorate. The war of resistance against the Russian imperialism in the North Caucasus further militarized the southern borders. Moreover, it systematized the religious differences deepening the division between the Islamic and Christian Caucasus. It enforced a policy of exchange of populations between the Muslims and the Christians by altering the demographics of the area and trying to produce an area dominated by friendly Christian population (in 1784, 50.000 Muslim Abkhazians were expelled to the Ottoman Empire¹¹). The Tsarist administration developed and enforced a program of categorization of the imperial subjects, cultures and languages, according to the emerging biopolitics, where quantification, bounded-ness and essentialism were indispensable for modern governmentality (Burbank 2006). As a result, land (territory), religion and language (culture) became almost intrinsic to the imperial and later Soviet ethnicities.

The Soviet Nationality Policy was based on 'territorialized ethnicity' (Sokolovskii 2005). In other words, the Soviet administration continued and further entrenched identity to land. However, the ethnic and cultural pluralism of the Caucasus -and other areas of the former empire - could be contained in ethnically homogenous territories. As a result, the Soviet au-

thorities organized a plan of different land hierarchies (independent republics autonomous, regions, areas) that corresponded to different ethnic groups. These groups enjoyed similar rights under the Soviet statehood, but were bounded to their territories. Georgians, a titular nationality, were considered, according to the Bolsheviki ideology of nations, as one of the advanced nations (*natsia*) in comparison to other often non-Indo European groups, which were recognised as *inorodtsy* (lower rank nations in the national hierarchy of nations), for example, the Abkhazians or the Chechens. The issues of belonging and ownership, but also of inherent perceptions of cultural hierarchy are central in the film. What are the representation strategies that *Mandariinid* uses in order to portray this historical complexity?

From the above it seems that the choice of an Estonian as central character is not random. Every movie has an entry point, usually the main character who drives action, whom the audience identifies with. The central character of *Madariinid* Ivo is considered as an 'outsider' to the region, an ethnic Estonian. Ethnographers usually are. This quality generated the necessary for functionalist ethnography distance and objectivity. It also allowed ethnographers to construct an ambiguous, 'strange', in Simmel's sense (1908), dual position within the community: that of a person extraneous to group, often provoking fear and/or admiration. This ambiguous position is key for the script development, but also for any ethnographic narrative.

When Ahmed and a fellow Chechen bump into a Georgian group of soldiers, Ahmed is hurt by the exchange of fire between the two parties. His friend ends dead. All Georgians are believed dead, but miraculously, one of them, Nika, is saved. Both men are found by Ivo and Magus, Ivo's neighbor, and are taken to Ivo's wooden house. The realization of Ahmed and Nika, the two enemies that cohabit under the same roof, makes them seek for revenge for their friends' death. But they can proceed with their plans. Hospitality and honor canon dictate that no blood should be shed under the host's roof. Hence, revenge is forbidden as long as they remain at Ivo's house. Their injuries do not allow them to go out. Ivo removes their guns and he locks them up in separate rooms. As a result, they are guests, but also captives of their host, as the code of honor prescribes (see Herzfeld 1988, Papataxiarchis 1992).

This captivity opens the floor to a series of verbal struggle between Ahmed and Nika. In medium shots, which produce a deadlock atmosphere, the two men/soldiers confront each other. They debate about the issues they feel that separate them. Nika stresses the significance of Georgian culture in comparison to the mountaineer Chechen. Ahmed rejects the argument. Nika wonders about the legitimacy of Ahmed's presence in Abkhazia arguing that the land belongs to the Georgians. Ahmed challenges it. 'This is an Estonian chair', he responds. Nika accuses Ahmed for lacking knowledge and manners.

The symbolic interaction between the two men and their cultures gives a glimpse to the cultural competition of the Soviet years, which often veiled nationalist ideas behind a vocabulary of cultural difference. For example, the Georgian intellectual Akaki Bakradze (2004), writing about the proposed by the Soviet authorities reforms relegating the Georgian language (in

the late 1970s), underlined the fact that whereas Georgians had no other homeland (*samshoblo*), other ethnic groups living in Georgia had homelands elsewhere. To illustrate this he used the metaphor of an apartment (Georgia) whose owners (the Georgians) should have full rights, even when they received '*stumrebi*' (guests). The latter were not '*aborigheni mosakhleoba*' (indigenous peoples). This division of cultural difference was reproduced in the early 1990s when Georgia declared its independence with the emergence of nationalist discourses.

The vocabulary of 'hospitality' (*stumar-maspindzobla*, guest-host) is far from unknown in the Georgian and the wider Caucasian, cultural traditions. '*Stumar ghvtisaa*' says a Georgian proverb (the guest is God sent) and enjoys the devotion of the entire family of his *maspindzobla* (host). In this way, through a variety of cultural practices which are frequently labeled as honor code, different groups in the Caucasus negotiated economic, political and cultural capital not only among themselves, but also between them and the colonial outsiders (Persian or Russian armies). But what seemed to change in the 19th century, according to Gordadze (2001: 161-176), was the passage of this tradition in the collective imaginary of the nation with the emergence of the Georgian nationalism. In other words, that period transformed custom(s) to tradition (see Hobsbawm 1992: 1-15). It is in this process that the above division (*stumar/maspindzobla*) became metonymic of the generosity and tolerance of the Georgian nation. Moreover, the *aborigheni mosakhleoba* that was identified in ethnic terms (same language, culture, religion), included cultural variations, branches (*shto*) which, nevertheless, belonged to the same root, for instance the Svans, the Mingrelians and the Lazs.¹² However, for Georgian nationalism Abkhazians were often considered as non-indigenous to the land they inhabited.¹³ But Ahmed and Nika seemed to be not only guests but also captives in Ivo's house, as they were unarmed and not allowed to go out. This situation seems, extreme due to war, however, it is not irrelevant to nationalist narratives that try to define who can go in/out of national borders, renegotiating regimes of mobility in relation to national categories (religion, ethnicity etc.).

Captivity is a theme that became endemic in the representation of the Caucasus since antiquity (see Khodarkovsky 1999: 394-330). The Prometheus myth is one of the most persistent representations of the region: circulation of goods, such as fire, is restricted by a power regime (the Gods) leading to smuggling (the act of stealing); after that the punishment: exile, captivity and torture. However, as Bruce Grant (2005: 41) underlined, in this myth the local Caucasian people remain bystanders -'hosting' the foreign Titan, the benefactor of humans, without having any say. However, it was another exile that connected the Caucasus to captivity. Young Alexander Pushkin's socially liberal worldview, expressed in the poem *Ode to Liberty* (1820), along with his popularity made the Tsarist regime nervous. They sent the poet to exile in Ekaterinoslav (today's Dnipro-Ukraine) in 1820.

While in exile, he wrote a series of poems which used the local settings as their framework, 'The Prisoner of the Caucasus' (1820-1821), 'The Bandit Brothers' (1821-1822), and 'The Fountain of Bakhchisaray' (1821-1823). The first one remained the most influential for the region. The

poem depicted the Orientalist fascination of the Russians with the Caucasus, which oscillated between admiration of the pristine natural beauty and the braveness of the Caucasian male, but also, fear of their alleged savagery. For the readership of that period, the poem became a big success. Later it was adapted by Lermontov in verse and by Tolstoy as short story in 1872; it also became a popular opera in 1879. Grant stressed the fact that Tolstoy's story was reissued 28 times and sold more than 2 million copies by the time of his death in 1910 (ibid: 41).

The story was also an early hit in the movies. Despite Sergei Eisenstein's reservations regarding the possibility for *The Prisoner* to become a film due to Pushkin's flat characters that seemed to be more archetypal than having real emotional interest, *The Prisoner* made a career in the movies: it turned to the satirical blockbuster motion-picture comedy *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* (*Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus*, 1966), and the Oscar-nominated film *Kavkazskii plenik* (released as *Prisoner of the Mountains*, 1996). According to Grant, the circulation of the theme of captivity and its persistence in the Russian culture was a sign of an imperial longing and belonging (2005: 47).

However, *Mandariinid* is a Caucasian myth, in the sense that it negotiates the myth of captivity not in order to restore the binary oppositions of insiders/outsideers, locals/foreigners, hosts/guests, guardians/prisoners. It uses captivity not for creating familiarity through genealogy, but for de-familiarizing stereotypes when action takes place. The film takes an experiential approach, close to the ethnographic observant participations, which focuses on social practices and informant's agency. The characters experience the events for themselves. Ivo is a first-person narrator: he is an eyewitness, he suffers, he feels, he acts. His eyes are the dominant point of view in the film. Through this experiential approach, history is personalized (see Erl 2008) and, as such, it affects audiences who are not necessarily familiar with the historical facts. Affect helps audiences to overcome the unknowability of the region. Cinematography through contrast in light, tight shots focusing on the relations amongst characters and with their environment, but also script privileges affect. Through affect, audiences overcome the unknowability of the region, become interested, and create connections.

In spite of being the host, Ivo shares the same fate with his guests: the loss, the pain, the suffering. He is also a captive in the land of tangerines, as he feels that he cannot live far from his home.¹⁴ How does the film represent this ambiguous position and what is its significance for the film narrative? Although in the beginning Ivo defends his roots and his land, he does not name it with a political designation. He, instead, talks about his cabin, his workshop, his home. Many establishing shots, which describe a situation, a setting or a dominant feeling, place Ivo within its environment by stressing textures, nature (wood, fire), objects (household equipment). This strategy of personalizing home without naming increases audience identification with Ivo through setting, emotions, and objects that all humans can feel as part of their home. Ivo's home becomes ours.

In this sense, Ivo distinguishes himself from the other two central characters. Ahmed and

Nika claim rights to their (home)land, because they belong to a certain ethnicity and territory. Ivo is at home because all humans have one. His belonging-ness stems not from the particular cultural identity claims, but from the universal human right. As a result, Ivo is both an outsider and insider in Abkhazia. He was born and raised there. This inside-ness allows him to develop compassion for his compatriots. This compassion in a period of war makes him different from the other two. This double quality of insider/outsider brings him closer to ethnography, especially the ethnography at home where the process of de-familiarization is central in order to unpack dominant and often hegemonic categories of the Self and the Other. This perspective of inside/out allows the formation of an understanding 'in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations' (Narayan 1993: 671).

Another issue that seems to be challenged in the film is the characters' masculinity. The representation of the land through binarisms, such as savage/noble and brave/weak is connected to gender perceptions and stereotypes. Masculinity and the so-called macho culture were identified with the Caucasian region (see Layton 1995). Often these representations were connected to the image of the male Caucasian fighter due to all those years of conflict. Social etiquette and cultural canon based on the dominant axis of honor and pride were significant for the management of social and economic issues in the Caucasus through, for example, the exchange of bodies in circuits of kinship alliances or even slavery (Shami 2000). The Soviet ruling, although it introduced ideologically and socially the emancipation of women in the public sphere, did not bring changes in intimate environments (Heyat 1999, Aswin 2000). *Mandariinid* as a war film lacks female presence. Nevertheless, Ahmed and Nika's admiration for Ivo's granddaughter, pictured in a photograph on an old chest of drawers, still identified femininity with Beauty and the ideal of family and peace, which, however, remained under the protection/threat of (foreign) male presence. However, the film, even if it objectifies femininity, does not praise masculinity through violence. It rather challenges macho culture.

In the scenes where Nika and Ahmed come out of their rooms to eat, they sit on opposite sides of the table, like the characters of western films. However, the two characters can hardly walk; they are covered in bandages and, instead of guns, they have a bowl of hot boiled eggs between them. Moreover, their host almost infantilizes them by removing their guns and trying to tame their passion and lack of logic. In the film, Ahmed and Nika's fight are mostly rhetorical and symbolic debates about the superiority of the one or the other side. However, Urushadze's cinematographic choices rather challenge, if not undermine, virility, stripping the (visual) poetics of the Caucasian manhood (Herzfeld 1988) from older stereotypes, leaving his characters naked in their human fragility.

Urushadze crafts characters in an aesthetic realism supported by a cinematography and a script that follow a classic linear narrative and editing, and by articulating distinctive voices stories and experiences. He challenges them by constantly focusing on a common human destiny through affect. The film refers to the Caucasus to critically reflect on humanity. In this

sense, Urushadze essentially talks about history as a human experience and not an ethnic one. To reinforce this humanistic approach, Urushadze does not make references to the Russians, who in many post-independence Georgian war films are the Archenemy. Twice soldiers visit Ivo's house. The first time they are Abkhazians, tricked by Ahmed and Ivo to believe that Nika is a Chechen mercenary who cannot speak due to his injuries. The second time things are more ambiguous, as the unnamed soldiers – who seem more professional, however, than the previous ones – challenge Ahmed's identity. As the director stated in one of his interviews, 'these brutal drunk soldiers, can belong to anybody. I am trying to avoid politics.'

Urushadze's film uses Ivo as a central character in order to narrate the story. The viewers enter the film world as outsiders to the land, to the conflict, to the traditions. Ivo becomes their guide. He does not turn the unfamiliar to familiar, explaining it to them. In such a violent context, explanation could become attribution. Instead, Ivo uses affect in order to touch audiences: his memories, the photographs of the family, his things, his relations to neighbors and friends, his loss, his compassion, his pain, a 'vocabulary' understood by all humans. Purposely, Urushadze does not adopt the dichotomous juxtaposition of Abkhazian/Georgian sides, but his leading character is an ethnic Estonian. As Urushadze says, he believes that the choice of an 'alien' to the conflict is central for the construction of the film's narrative. His ideas are in line with western secularism, which postulates neutrality as a critical political category, especially in the context of conflict resolution. 'Which is my land?', Ivo wonders. Is it Estonia, where he had never been and where his family fled¹⁵ because of the war? Or is it the estate of tangerines where his son is buried, as he reveals in the end of the film? Ivo's narrow house and land full of tangerines become a metaphor for the Caucasus and its history, and finally, a metaphor for humanity as a whole: aren't all human captives of the same mortal fate?

***Mandariinid* and the European Media-scapes**

Up to here, the ethnography of *Mandariinid*, helped me explore imperial colonialism and national formation in the Soviet and the post-Soviet politics through a cultural semiotics of the notions of hospitality and captivity, and how they travelled through the history of the region. This exploration followed film codes, its cinematography and narrative as well as the creator's intentions regarding its film. However, media landscapes today are shaped through the inter-connect-edness of different scales, which should be considered more carefully. How did these landscapes influence the Georgian cinema? In the 1990s, the former Soviet cinema moved from an entirely subsidized and controlled film market to a so-called free one (Bahun and Haynes 2014: 1-7). As Youngblood (2008) emphasized, film was considered as the highest form of art in the former Soviet Union. This was not unrelated to the first avant-garde nature of the medium, which was embraced by the Russian circles of the 1920s and which tested the transformative relationship

between art and reality. Secondly, film was considered a key instrument of socialist propaganda, when literacy levels were very low and there was no other way for ideological indoctrination. The framework of the Soviet cinema that the national cinemas developed into, produced both a domestic marketplace, as well as, according to Eric Scott (2016), a 'domestic internationalism,' where the movies of the different republics dubbed in Russian, as well as other forms of arts, could move freely, as long as they respected the premises of socialism.

In that context, the 'Georgian cinema' was engaged with a 'self-fashioning' (Radunović 2014: 23) vis-à-vis a supra-national political and cultural context. The cultural antagonism between the different republics that had replaced the economic one, struggled with ideological loyalty and national pursuits within a transnational imagination of nationalities, which was formed within the idea of a Soviet brotherhood. In this imagination, the Caucasians and especially the Georgians were categorized in distinctive, territorialized cultural characteristics (Scott 2016). In that context, the specific and the local were shaped within a vocabulary of difference, outlined in general-national-traits, which could travel and become consumed among the Soviet republics.

At the same time, the 'Soviet cinema' became a brand name in the post-war European cinematic landscape (1950s). The successes of the early Soviet auteurs, like Eisenstein, turned today to an important pillar of the European cinema, which was branded under the signifier of art cinema within the global market competition. The European cinema recognized the Georgian cinema of creators, for example Shengelaia, Abuladze, Iosseliani, for their professional mastership. This recognition gave critical acclaim to the Soviet art production, even if the regime had its doubts about those creators' artistic innovations. These doubts were influenced by the Cold War ideology, which deepened the distinction between totalitarianism and dissident creators, and created suspicion for any form of art that declined the ideological canon expressed through socialist realism (Bahun and Hanes 2014: 1-7).

Zaza Urushadze was born in 1966 and he was educated in the prestigious State Rustaveli Theatre, Film Georgian State University. *Tangerines* was his fifth film. For the film Urushadze underlined that 'the war is not the main focus. It is rather an intimate drama about maintaining our humanity in a difficult situation'.¹⁶ *Tangerines* was a co-production between Estonia and Georgia with the Estonian production company All Film, the Estonian Institute (Eesti Film Institut) and the Estonian Ministry of Culture contributing the lion share. As the director underlined, when the entire Georgian budget for cinema was 2.000.000 euros and the budget of the film reached more than half a million, a co-production was the only way for Georgian creators to produce films (see IMDB¹⁷).¹⁸

This culture of co-production is at the heart of the emerging transnational European landscape. Since the 1950s, the formation of this landscape in Europe has become a project of economic, political and cultural agendas, ambitions and desires. Although culture as a field of applied policies and political technologies remained marginal in the inception of the EU

(Shore 1983), it was the epicenter of the Council of Europe. Since its inception (1949), it constructed a profile based on soft politics defending the European values (democracy, justices, human rights, European culture). Stripped from any capacity to enforce or politically intervene, the Council became the moral heart of extended Europe (beyond the EU). In this framework, the Council became the first European institution that supported the European cinema financially through EURIMAGES (1989). EURIMAGES became important for the development of the film industry in the post-socialist countries of the European eastern peripheries, like Georgia.

Through these cultural technologies, as Luisa Rivi (2003: 2) underlined, 'a European identity was mobilized by the European Union (EU) through new mechanisms like MEDIA and EURIMAGES'. Moreover, the global economic transformations (Bondenbjerg and Redvall 2015: 1-25) promoted a culture of collaboration and co-production that transcended national borders and generated transnational media-scapes that 'avoid narratives and discourses of containment, replacing these with critical travelogues, charting the fluidity of identities, and tracing the brief encounters between films and shifting audience formations' (Bergfelder 2012: 329). In this way, the emerging transnational space in Europe did not try to praise a brotherhood, like the Soviet one, which reiterated exotic identities and communities. It rather depicted differences produced by de-centered identities and power inequalities, opening the space for less recognized, if not marginal voices to be heard under the umbrella of European diversity.

These changes were fundamental for Georgian cinema: first, it found the necessary funding for films to be made and to become available to festivals and theatres in wider distribution, all around Europe and beyond; second, it cultivated a culture of collaboration with others (see also Yilmazok 2010). The emphasis of Urushadze on humanity and his decision to stay away from local, national, and supranational politics seems to become a different form of re-fashioning his work from what Georgian artists used to do in the past in order to have access to Soviet funding. The humanism of *Madariinid* turned the local into universal. It opened a dialogue with the poignant issues of the past of the Caucasus. But this past was represented through modalities that could become understood by universal human categories of traumatic experience: loss, pain, death, home, war and peace. *Madariinid* is specific; it inter-connects, instead of separating, but also it does not take accountability, a necessary step for transitional justice¹⁹ through recognition. In a presentation of some of these ideas in a workshop in Sofia, a Georgian student told me that *Mandariinid* is '[their] way to say to [their] neighbors to come back, to stay altogether.'

His statement recognized the power of film as advocate for critical political issues and diplomacy in a society, where wounds of the past are still oozing. However, the road is not covered with rose petals. Urushadze admits, when interviewed by a Georgian journalist, that he himself 'cannot stay calm when [the Georgians] are depriving us from a part of our territory'.²⁰ His decision to avoid national politics helped his strategic production plan to open up to new funding bodies, Estonian and European, but it provoked reactions among Georgians, as

many found the film 'less Georgian'. However, it was this quality that made the film European. *Mandariinid* found a way to speak to multiple audiences by negotiating poignant experiences as part of the human fate. However, these other voices that criticized his decision should not be dismissed, because they challenge the 'all-inclusive' European narrative. Addressing them might allow a critical negotiation of the European past and present, but also a re-examination of the new European vision.

According to Roland Barthes, 'of all learned discourse, the ethnological seems to come closest to Fiction' (1975: 84). *Mandariinid* made the opposite happen; fiction came closer to ethnography. De-familiarizing the known and familiar is a technique that inspired both the narrative (Ivo's character role, multiple perspectives/voices) and the cinematography (slow pace, contrasts between inside/outside in light, tilting, avoiding close-ups). Although these techniques are not 'ethnographic' decisions, but creative ones, they reveal an intention: the creator's determination to communicate with wider audiences. This made Urushadze apt 'listener' to various voices, experiences, and histories. This also bestowed the film with an 'ethnographicness' (Banks 1992: 127). The latter 'is not a thing out there which is captured by the camera but a thing we construct for ourselves in our relation to the film.' *Mandariinid* seems to have this quality embedded. However, this quality is not irrelevant to the European media agendas that often marginalize anxieties related both to past wounds, but also, to present disillusionment.

The paper tried to enter the world of the film as a viewer decoding its characters, its cinematography, and the narrative, in other words, the text (form and content) in relation to the history of the Caucasus, in particular that of Abkhazia and Georgia, but also to imperial colonialism, the Soviet engineering, and post-socialist agendas. Moreover, it explored the themes of hospitality and captivity as signifiers of different symbolic interpretations of culture. The paper also postulated the interconnections of the film as cultural space to the contemporary national and transnational European media policies and the quest of a European cinema. The starting point of the paper was the still hesitant ethnographic exploration of film. Exploring film with the ethnographic method that postulates the complexities and constraints of global capitalism could be a fruitful way to examine how stories are re/produced, circulate, and are consumed in a highly mediatized world.

NOTES

1 The Georgian cinema since its inception followed storylines such as war and resistance, family honor and community values. Films had to 'testify' on the Soviet progress of the former subjugated to imperial colonialism societies, especially in the 1930s-1940s (Stalinization). The 1960s was considered as a period of film renaissance, which allowed national authenticity and individual visions to emerge (Radunović 2014: 20).

2 <http://www.tbilisifilmfestival.ge/>, <http://www.cinedoc-tbilisi.com/>, <http://www.biaff.org/>

3 Visual signs have a much stronger reference to reality than linguistic ones.

4 Yuri Lotman who represented the Soviet take on structuralism and cultural semiotics replaced the notion of text with that of semiotic space. In this framework, there is always (in each screening) an active interpretation of film based on “a comparison of the visual image/icon (image as imitation) to its correspondence in ‘real life’” (Grossvogel 1980: 89-93).

5 Marcus and Fischer (1986: 28-30) discuss the different approaches found within structural anthropology.

6 One early exception is the study of Hollywood by Hortense Powdermaker ([1950] 2002). In 1970s and 1980s anthropologists seemed to turn to ‘third’ world cinemas in order to study film as cultural texts, often applying western-centric theories and esthetic models (see Gray 2010: 99-100).

7 This shift also gave a significant push to the development of visual anthropology and ethnographic film.

8 The Caucasus extends in 440 thousand square kilometers expanding between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. It is the natural border between Europe and Asia. The Caucasian ranges lies in 1,100 km in length and 160km in width. The highest summit is Elbruz (5,642 meters) and five other summits exceed the 5,000 meters. The Caucasus hosts 150 languages which belong in five different linguistic family groups (Indo-European, Altaic, Semitic, the North and South Caucasian languages), three monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) and various other less known or popular. Politically, it is divided into two parts. In the North, there are several polities that belong to the Russian Federation, whereas in the South, since the 1990s, there are three independent republics, which, however, comprise disputed territories (Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh).

9 The original music of the film was composed by Niaz Diasamidze.

10 The film’s location is Racha, a mountainous region of Georgia.

11 The Abkhazians are considered as an indigenous group of the North Caucasus known to ancient and Byzantine sources divided between Christianity and Islam, but also with strong animistic traditions. The Abkhazians are included in the speakers of the Cherkess/ Circassians dialects.

12 Ethnic groups who are considered art of the Georgian nation.

13 This alleged inferiority created alliances among the nations of the North Caucasus (the Circassians, the Abkhazians, the Chechens and the others). That is why Ahmed is found fighting on the Abkhazian side.

14 Ivo received an ultimatum to ‘return home’ (to Estonia) but he postponed. His excuse was the tangerines.

15 According to Soviet census data (1989) there were 2,316 Estonians in Georgia of which approximately 1,500 in Abkhazia, and most other Estonians living in other cities of Georgia,

especially in Tbilisi. Due to the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia, most Estonians have left the region, Hundreds of Estonians left the country, and most of them moved to their kin state, Estonia. Worst affected was the Estonian community in Abkhazia, some 1,500 persons in numbers, directly facing the consequences of the civil war. In total, it is estimated there are less than 300 Estonians left in Abkhazia, mostly elderly, who do not wish to resettle to Estonia, while there have also been a few cases of return migration from Estonia to Abkhazia.

16 Matt Grobar Director Zaza Urushadze makes Oscar history with foreign language film 'Tangerines'(February 13 2015) <http://deadline.com/2015/02/zaza-urushadze-director-tangerines-oscar-nominated-foreign-language-film-1201374843/>

17 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2991224/>

18 Co-productions in South East Europe and their relation to ideas about a European identity is the subject of my post-doctoral research at the department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies, University of Macedonia.

19 The term refers to judicial and non-judicial forms of recognizing and alleviating differences after periods of conflicts and political instability or totalitarianism by taking accountability and providing restitution.

20 The Most Important Thing Is to Retain Humanity. Interview with Zaza Urushadze (November 19, 2013) <http://www.eastbook.eu/en/blog/2013/11/19/the-most-importnat-thing-zaza-Urushadze/>

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