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Adaptation and Other Demons

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Georgian writer, historian and screenwriter Aka Morchiladze examines the phenomenon of literary adaptations in the Soviet Union, and in Georgia in particular. Recounting the history of "screen versions", as they were known, from under Stalin to the advent of television and the Khrushchev period, Morchiladze shows how aesthetic trends were spurred by force and by convenience. In conclusion, Morchiladze shares some of his personal memories and thoughts on the craft of screenwriting, which he associates with a writer's worldly existence...

The Soviet World Classics

We, the former citizens of one-sixth of the world, spent our Soviet childhood and adolescence watching adaptations. Whether we wanted to or not, we had no choice because adaptations were all around – on TV and in cinemas. In the USSR, they were called 'screen versions'. Adaptations may have constituted a major part of the Soviet film industry. I'm sure Jack London would have been utterly surprised to see an invention such as television, and to discover that practically every family in the USSR had one. In fact, Soviet citizens watched such a number of screen versions of his novels that in a more advanced country it would have been possible to create a separate channel for them, though they were different in genre and of varying quality. This is, of course, an exaggeration, but London would certainly have been stunned to find out that his first screen adaptation was a Russian film made in 1919.

Most adaptations were made for the big screen, but there was a specific genre in the USSR called the TV mini-series. As a rule, these never exceeded one season, but were otherwise similar to the mini-series we know today. All of them were based on Russian and foreign classical novels; it was in this form

that Jack London's adaptations were so frequently shown on TV.[1]

The real boom of the TV mini-series production in the USSR began in the 1970s. Television offered all kinds of adaptations of various genres – Russian and world classics, Soviet domestic dramas, Soviet spy stories and criminal novels. Surprising as it may seem, in the early 1980s, a James Hadley Chase novel, *The World In My Pocket*, was made into a TV series spanning several episodes although the author was neither popular nor ideologically acceptable in the country.

At the same time, Soviet directors made films not specifically designated for television. The entire Russian classical canon, works by authors such as Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev and Ivan Goncharov, populated Soviet cinema, with Chekhov proving an absolute favorite. Not only was he the most staged playwright across the USSR, but his books had been made into films, including an animation, ever since Stalin's time. Chekhov was viewed as a touchstone. Sooner or later everyone turned to him.

Some lesser Soviet directors still remained loyal to world classics, giving preference to the old adventure novels, which were not heavily censored. For this reason, the books by Walter Scott, Alexander Dumas, Thomas Mayne Reed and Daniel Defoe were not only published in huge numbers, but films based on them also dominated the Soviet cinema screen.

Quite understandably, many Soviet film directors, highly experienced in making ideologically appropriate films in the years under Stalin, opted for the Russian classics under Khrushchev and in later periods. For instance, by the 1950s, Ivan Pirev, one of the pillars of Stalin's cinema, was respected for his screen versions of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. It seems that at the time adaptations were considered to be decisive and significant indications of artistic importance. The Soviet authorities must have thought adaptations carried considerable weight, and thus were acceptable.

In the late 1950s, Soviet filmmaking left the confines that had been prescribed to it in earlier times. Ultimately, this meant that sequels as well as films consisting of several episodes were being produced. For instance, Sergei Gerasimov's adaptation of Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* required three episodes.[2]

The 1960s proved to be decisive in this respect because Sergei Bondarchuk, an actor who had directed only one film before (*Destiny of Man*, 1959), based his epic film *War and Peace* on Leo Tolstoy's novel. Released in 1967, the film was in four parts and was absolutely unique at the time considering the production and post-production scale: the project, highly expensive, was difficult to manage and carry out. It was shot on location with large numbers of extras, a truly unprecedented undertaking in the history of Soviet filmmaking.

This colour film was shown not only on big screens, but also on black-and-white televisions. Certainly, it aimed for the highest standards and claimed to stay true to Tolstoy's ideas, reflecting the novel's depths and finding adequate means of transferring them onto the screen. However, the wider public mainly remembered it for the impressive battle scenes and the costs involved in making it. (In fact, Bondarchuk shot so many battle scenes that, for many years to come, he used to offer them for free to other directors working on historical films.)

In Khrushchev's times, *King Vidor*'s 1956 American version was shown in cinemas, turning out to be highly popular among Soviet viewers. At the time American movies carried cult significance, so it is not at all surprising that the Soviet authorities wanted to present domestic classics to their people.

It was decided that *War and Peace* was to be directed either by the highly experienced Pirev or the less experienced Bondarchuk – the latter was chosen after the former declined the offer. All in all, the film made such a name for Bondarchuk in the world that he gained the Communist Party's trust and was invited to participate in several international projects – an unprecedented achievement.

At any rate, *War and Peace* marked a turning point, a kind of an impetus for a large number of series made for television as well as the big screen. They truly took over the Soviet film industry in the final period of Khrushchev's era and during Leonid Brezhnev's regime.

It is a well-known fact that Stalin wasn't particularly fond of screen versions – not only because he didn't like adaptations as such, but mainly because the films of the Soviet era had completely different aims. Considering the ideological and confrontational conditions whereby the USSR opposed the rest of the world, adaptations were viewed as a waste of time and resources. Generally, Stalin was an avid movie fan. He was particularly fond of American gangster and Western films, which he regularly watched in his private cinema. For him such works were mere fun and acceptable as entertainment, but he would never have allowed anything similar to be made in his country. (Allegedly, he even once wanted to have John Wayne assassinated.)

The film industry of the Soviet Union was closely controlled by Stalin himself, who read and edited screenplays in person. If for some reason he had not done so, he demanded to see the footage, and if he had had no time to see the working material either, then of course he had to approve of the completed film. He decided whether this or that film could be released across the country. If he happened to miss the opportunity, he would watch the released film and express his personal, authoritative and unequivocal opinion about it. It did not matter whether it was a comedy, a drama or a historical film. The decisive factor was that the film had to suit Stalin's taste and judgment and thus be deemed useful and appropriate for the wider public.

Lenin once said that cinema was one of the most important among the arts, but even if he hadn't said so, Stalin would surely have been confident that it was true. For instance, he could tell Sergei Eisenstein that a character was kissing another for an inappropriately long time, which was enough to ban kisses from the Soviet screens for more than fifteen years. Even after his death and the denunciation of his cult of personality by Khrushchev, the ban was still in place. Stalin also used to read several screenplays of a single film if he considered it to be significant, personally choosing his favorite.

That is exactly what happened when he selected Anna Antonovskaya and Boris Cherniy's screenplay for a film about the Georgian medieval commander Giorgi Saakadze. He thought that the other versions under consideration were too romantic and ideologically faulty. He may also have read the first volumes of Anna Antonovskaya's lengthy novel about Saakadze.

Giorgi Saakadze (1943), an epic, was a large-scale production, the biggest that had been produced by the Georgian film studio. The two-part epic had many impressive battle scenes and was regularly shown in cinemas across the war-torn country, as well as in the makeshift theaters on the front lines. Most extras were actual Georgian soldiers. For this reason, mothers watched the film over and over again, hoping to recognize their sons behind the medieval costumes.

Though the blockbuster's monumental figure was defeated in the end, Stalin sought to inspire soldiers, assuring them of the necessity to keep fighting. In a sense, it was an indirect adaptation of Antonovskaya's book, a kind of a concise version of her several-volume epic.

Following Stalin's death, his favourite directors reverted to adaptation, which was the safest and most practical way of staying in the profession. At least some of them, like Pirev, succeeded. The most impressive among them was Mikheil Chiaureli, a Georgian director, author of several films about Stalin. Having encountered difficulties after the leader's demise, he turned to the Georgian classics: two of his last four films were adaptations. And thus screen versions of well-known books prevailed in the Soviet film industry.

The most popular Soviet mini-series, *17 Moments of Spring* (1973), revolves around Maxim Isaev, an extremely likeable spy working in the heart of Nazi Germany. The production, financed by the KGB, was based on a Yulian Semyonov novel. Before that, another very popular mini-series caught viewers' attention: *Shadows Disappear at Noon* (1970-71) was an epic story about several generations in a Siberian village, also based on an eponymous book. The author, Anatoli Ivanov, wrote the screen version for *Eternal Call*, yet another epic TV series (1973-83). Vying for popularity with the spy hit was the criminal mini-series *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (1979). Directed by Stanislav Gogorukhin, it was based on the novel by the brothers Arkady and Georgiy Vayners (released in the West as *The Age of Mercy*). Vladimir Vysotsky, the actor and singer-songwriter, unacknowledged by Soviet

authorities, played the part of an investigator in post-WWII Moscow.

The Georgian Stories

Georgia was a small republic of the USSR. Its film studios, unlike those of larger republics, were rarely given a chance to produce big TV or cinema screen projects.

Ever since the era of talking movies under Stalin, the Georgian film industry was well-known for its rural comedies, popular in the Soviet Union, as well as two ideologically suitable historical thrillers about outlaws, two musicals and two biopics about the Georgian poets.

Film director Eldar Shengelaia recalls that when he told his mother, famous film actress Nato Vachnadze, about his dream of becoming a director, she discouraged him, saying that years could pass before he would get any chance of making a film in the Georgian studio. Financial and technical limitations were the reality for the small film studio in Stalin's era.

Still, Georgian film during Stalin heavily depended on literature. In 1928 Nikoloz Shengelaia made an exceptional silent film *Eliso*, based on Alexandre Kazbegi's book. Later, Siko Dolidze based his film *Dariko* (1936), about a revolutionary couple, on stories by the 19th-century writer Egnate Ninoshvili, while Mikheil Chiaureli's *Arsena* (1937) was based on a poem about a Robin Hood-type outlaw from Georgian folklore.

The breakthrough for the Georgian film industry was the 1955 drama *Magdana's Donkey* by Tengiz Abuladze and Rezo Chkheidze, which was the first Soviet film to receive a foreign award – Best Short Film at the Cannes film festival in 1956. It was based on a 19th-century classical story, though the ending was original. Two other famous films by Tengiz Abuladze, *The Plea* (1968, adaptation of Vazha-Pshavela's epic poems) and *The Wishing Tree* (1971, adaptation of Giorgi Leonidze's short stories) were likewise based on works of Georgian classical literature.

It is only fair to say that in the following years, Georgian adaptations failed to be made into the mini-series that could have become a leading feature of the national film industry. There are several reasons that might explain this trend.

For instance, because it was acceptable to regularly produce ideologically suitable screen versions of American and European classics, priority was given to the settings and actors of the Baltic republics, as these looked more Western than others in the Soviet Union. Sometimes this tendency to resort to the Baltics went too far, creating a comical effect, for example when Tallinn streets

were constantly being transformed into the streets of various European cities, giving the impression that London, Paris and Berlin were identical. Georgian actors were rarely invited to participate in such productions, mainly due to their southern looks. Instead, they appeared in films based on books by Carlo Goldoni, Molière and O. Henry.

The Georgian mini-series that reached every home TV screen in the USSR and was awarded the country's State Prize was *Data Tutashkhia* (1978, dir. Giga Lortkipanidze). Made up of seven episodes, it was based on Chabua Amirejibi's recently published novel about a 19th century moralist outlaw – a controversial fictitious figure – and his many adventures. The series was dubbed into Russian and released under a different title. Unlike the novel, the screenplay contained several ideological clichés which were vital to ensuring the film's release and its approval for production, allowing it to be made at all.

The process of approving a film was a specifically Soviet phenomenon, complete with screening for a limited number of select viewers, secret reviews and so on. All national films were dubbed twice: in the national language and in Russian. Describing the approval process is itself a lengthy undertaking and will not be explored here.

In the Soviet Union, Georgian film was regarded as having a distinct style and vein. In the 1960s and 1970s, the diverse citizens of the USSR fell in love with this micro-world full of exotic characters, a particular strand of humor and sadness, and a universal disposition.[3]

For a long time, Georgian filmmakers reverted to an ingenious method, interesting and flexible at the same time. Very often, screenwriters and directors would choose a piece of foreign literature and transpose the action onto Georgian soil, so that everything except the plot outline was Georgian. The transformation or adaptation was so skillful that in most cases an otherwise ordinary story that might have gone unnoticed suddenly became an interesting and memorable film, very distant from the original. It did not matter whether the source was modern or medieval, Russian or Czech, Spanish or of some other national literature.

But the era described above is gone and seemingly forgotten. The Soviet system ceased to exist twenty-five years ago and Georgian films of today differ from those of the past. Nowadays there are few adaptations and very few costume dramas. Film directors are different, they have different viewpoints, and, in general, times are very different.

It just so happened that I've had to write screenplays in this new era, all kinds of screenplays at that: series, mini-series and adaptations, many of them based on my own books. I did this three times and in three different ways. Georgia is a small country, and so writers are obliged to accept any writing offer because cinema and TV are financially more profitable than books that are waiting to be

bought.

My first offer was to write a screenplay for a detective mini-series about fifteen years ago. The series was not shot at the time, but later someone else continued to work on it and several episodes were released. Next it was decided to make a screen version of one of my novels. I refused to write the screenplay, so the book was adapted by an excellent writer. However, in the never-ending process of shortening and lengthening the screenplay, I had to get involved, eventually becoming the co-author. The film had two sequels, but I had nothing to do with their screenplays.

Another of my novels was chosen to be made into a mini-series for which I wrote the screenplay. It was released, unlike another series which I worked on together with a co-author. Later there were other projects: one based on my novel, an independent screenplay, one for a short film, one which involved adapting the Georgian scenes in a long Lithuanian mini-series, and so on. I might have missed something, but I have the feeling I am still writing for television.

It might not seem to be a great deal of experience, but it did take a lot of time.

I believe that if one enjoys writing novels, then one will rarely enjoy writing screenplays, especially if these are based on one’s own books. Basically, writing screenplays based on one’s own novels or even plots can never compete with the pleasure of writing the novels themselves.

I certainly do not intend to stress creative dominance or superiority in any way. I have seldom come across anything as professional as the dialogues from the old American films, even in the best novels. I suppose my statement is determined by my personal preferences.

Above all, writing screenplays is a separate profession. Had one wanted to choose it, one would have started with screenplays and not with novels. However, a writer sometimes has to get involved in writing a screenplay as well, or become a co-author, especially if it is an adaptation of his own book.

Screenwriting and novel-writing are definitely very different professions, especially if you look at the working atmosphere and disposition. In most cases, novels are written in solitude. It can be said that novelists write for themselves. But if you are commissioned to produce a screenplay, it is impossible to work on your own.

Film production is a collective undertaking and writing a screenplay most often presupposes collective work. Moreover, the screenplay frequently undergoes changes right on set, during shooting. Directors and producers constantly introduce changes because they might think of better, more appropriate or elaborate scenes or other improvements. They phone with a suggestion to set

fire to the house. ‘Which house?’ you ask. ‘The one in the final scene’. ‘The one on top of the hill?’ ‘Right’. ‘But that might look like Tarkovsky’. ‘Not at all. It’s a different ball game’. ‘True, but it’s still the visual perception, the memory kept in the mind’s eye’.

That is how it is: films are about eyes and then ears. That is how I feel and many others do too, I suppose. There is an old, and I believe fair saying that a good film is one you can watch and understand with the sound turned off.

For all these reasons, a screenwriter is among the four people making a film, but not among the first three.

It was Stalin who thought the screenwriter held the primary position. He belonged to the old, literature-reading generation, considering films to be illustrations of books or their dubbed versions, though he did not particularly enjoy film adaptations as such.

Allegedly, once, after watching a film, Stalin severely criticized its screenwriter. He was timidly reminded that the fault lay with the director more than with the writer, at which time he replied: ‘Nonsense! He just filmed what was written.’ And he imitated the rotation of the handle of an old film camera.

That’s an interesting idea. Had I been a director, I would surely have tried to write the screenplays for my films. In the worst scenario, I would want to write them together with my closest colleagues, people who think like me and are on the same wavelength.

Sometimes, while working on an adapted screenplay, you can discover certain things which could have been extremely useful for the original book. Once when I was writing a screenplay for a mini-series based on my novella, it transpired that the initial plot was not enough for the intended length of the series. The plot had to be extended and in the process I thought it suited the novella wonderfully. Of course, later on I did not alter the original for the subsequent publication, but I utterly enjoyed translating the emotions and first person narrative into dialogues.

The Screenplay

Once I had an amusing experience:

I was offered the chance to write a screenplay. Some of it was to be from one of my books, but the plot was different – a somewhat surreal spy story.

I knew the director personally, as well as his films and style. He also knew me quite well, so our relationship could broadly be called friendship. I still like his films, and often watch the old as well as the new ones. He used to write

screenplays for his films himself and they were always marked by his individual aesthetics. I was wondering what I could add to his otherwise complete and well-established film world, especially since my books are rather different.

I started to work on the screenplay, but what the director and the producer discussed with me refused to be transferred onto paper.

In the end I felt like Barton Fink, without having a maniac for a neighbor. The hall was quite similar though, so I just wrote what came naturally at the time.

The result was a kind of a parody of film noir, with many characters, a complicated plot that led nowhere, mobsters and spies, actors, a homeless boy, a femme fatale and diamonds. In short, it was a tangled non-linear narrative. It would have been better if written as a novel.

I sent the screenplay to the director. He called me: ‘Good job. At one point you abruptly stop, saying the film snapped. It’s an excellent idea, sadly already used. I’ll work on the screenplay, add a bit of intensity, some blood and sex. Hope you don’t mind’.

I did not. In fact, I was quite relieved.

The director came to see me in several months, bringing along the screenplay. He asked me to look at it and, if possible, to enliven the final dialogue.

As soon as he left I decided to look at the final scene. The problem was that none of the characters were familiar. At that point I started to read the piece backwards, retracing the scenes, until I arrived at the beginning of the script.

He had written the whole play anew. All characters were different and so attractively unfamiliar that I could not stop reading. The plot line was different too. Actually, everything was different. It was a gripping reading, skillfully written, without unnecessary details and embellishments. I believe I changed only one word in the final dialogue. When I watched the film, I really liked it.

It was an interesting, highly instructive experience, despite a certain comical element to it, despite the embarrassment and novelty. The main, most unexpected thing was discovering that a man used to writing novels is a man accustomed to complete freedom. He is perfectly aware that writing a screenplay is a collective job, but when stuck, he still writes what he considers to be appropriate. This is unacceptable with screenplays. It is paramount not to get stuck, which one somehow avoids while working.

I guess a good film could be made about my experience. Sadly, I have lost my original screenplay, so I do not really remember it well.

At any rate, I suppose writing screenplays based on your own novels is not

much fun. Struggling with familiar, experienced emotions and stories and turning them into dialogues never compares with the sensation of writing the initial novel. The rest is all about the film and its rules.

At this point one can recall William Faulkner and the amusing episodes of his cooperation with Hollywood. The petty movie projects of that great man of letters were retold by Faulkner himself with an exquisite sense of humor, and can prove extremely helpful.

Faulkner did the screen version of Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, with Humphrey Bogart starring as Harry Morgan. But Faulkner did not consider Hemingway to be 'his' writer and often criticized him, adapting his stories for rather material reasons. Hemingway himself violently disliked his film adaptations, but agreed to have his books made into film one after another – for equally prosaic and worldly reasons.

In short, there might be a lot to talk about, or maybe not. Just how it is in real films.

References

Not all screen versions of his books were made in the USSR. Some were foreign, for instance Hobart Bosworth's "An Odyssey of the North" (1914).

Some sequels and multi-part films had been tried earlier. The well-known ideological film "The Great Citizen" (dir. Fridrikh Ermler), released in 1937-39, was in two parts, as well as "Giorgi Saakadze", which was filmed during WWII. Still earlier than that, Grigori Kozintsev's "The Youth of Maxim" was divided into three parts and took several years to make.

From Stalin's times onwards, it was rather typical for a Georgian with a dark moustache to appear in supporting parts in very different Soviet films. As a rule, it was a cheerful fellow with a memorable face, not particularly brainy, but jovial and ready to show loyalty, even selflessness. With time this strange character, a kind idiot, completely vanished, only to be replaced by a vicious idiot in the period when Georgia began fighting for its independence.