East European Film Bulletin

ESSAY

The Language of Ideology

Eldar Shengelaia's *An Unusual Exhibition* (*Arachveulebrivi gamofena*, 1968)

VOL. 51 (MARCH 2015) BY KONSTANTY KUZMA

The many ethnic, national and religious conflicts that have seized post-Soviet countries since the fall of the Iron Curtain tend to conceal that *language* can be a dangerous political issue. While the establishment of Russian as a common lingua franca in the 15 Soviet republics brought unquestionable practical merits, it also became a major cause of political unrest among those nations who feared it could undermine their cultural identity. In April 1978, thousands of protesters took to the streets in Georgia's capital Tbilisi in response to constitutional changes that stripped their mother tongue of its status as sole official language in the Georgian SSR. Then-secretary of the Georgian Communist Party Edvard Shevardnadze was able to broker a deal with Moscow, averting imminent clashes between protesters and the police. The crisis was a symptom of rising national ambitions on the Caucasus that, from the 1970s onwards, not only exacerbated tensions with Moscow, but internal ones as well. Abkhazians responded furiously to the concessions the Kreml made vis-à-vis Georgians and demanded to leave the Georgian SSR for the Russian SSR, while anti-Abkhaz (like anti-Russian) powers resurged among Soviet dissidents from Georgia.

Though directors were subject to greater state control than your ordinary Soviet citizen, nationalist sentiments are hard to overlook even in Georgian films of the time. Besides emphasizing the diverse identity of the local population in the Soviet republic's different regions (e.g. *The Eccentrics*, 1974; *Pastorale*, 1975; *The Swimmer*, 1981),[1] contemporary directors took particular interest in Georgia's specific cultural and historical heritage (*Pirosmani*, 1969; *Stepmother Samanishvili*, 1977; *The Way Home*, 1981; *The Wishing Tree*, 1977). In exceptional cases, that seemingly harmless prioritization led to bold scenarios, like when two Georgian villagers resist detainment from a local Soviet police commander in Eldar Shengelaia's *The Eccentrics*. The familiar image of the two peasant inventors flying to safety on a self-built plane was recently invoked by Georgian ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili, who promised during a jubilee for Eldar Shengelaia's 80th birthday in 2013 that "we will all fly away, the whole country, in defiance of those who are trying to put us down".

Having been shot in the late 1960s – i.e. before the systematic nationalization of Georgian cinema – and hardly claiming either providence or revolutionary instigation, *An Unusual Exhibition* is an unlikely candidate for retracing such efforts at cultural codification. The film's plot, which revolves around a sculptor and his struggle to live out his creativity in a hostile environment, should ring true with viewers wherever they are from. The film neither appears to emphasize Georgia's regional identity, nor does it dwell on the nation's specific heritage. Set in a city, for the most part in Kutaissi's less individual parts at that, there are few signs of local customs apart from a school reunion that figures national feasting rituals. Notably, many of Shengelaia's characters have fictional names, including protagonist "Aguli" and his father "Pipinia", while explicit artistic references are solely made to international authorities like Paganini, Picasso and the Greeks. Moreover, at least a third of the film's dialogue is in Russian, mainly due to the Georgian-Russian love story between Aguli and Soviet soldier Glasha which itself appears to work against cross-regional divides. In short, it seems that *An Unusual Exhibition* would have just as well worked had it been set outside of Georgia, and that authentically Georgian elements were included to allow recognition, not in order to exact identification.

Still, one can't help but wonder why protagonist Aguli's class reunion towards the end of the film takes place amidst the *ruins* of a Georgian church. Why it is here that – in full view of Georgia's cultural remains, and on an occasion that brings to mind Aguli's lost youth – Georgian dancing and toasts belatedly remind us that this story takes place in Georgia. Why, lastly, throughout the film it is Russian-speaking characters who threaten Aguli's individuality by propagating the views of the Soviet authorities. If fostering national sentiments does not come first on the film's agenda, they neither appear to fall wayside. Maybe, Shengelaia's *An Unusual Exhibition* is not all that remote from the 1970s after all?

The film opens with Aguli leaving Georgia on a train decorated with Communist ornaments and a sign that reads "Death to Hitler!", though the farewell-dialogue between our protagonist and his father Pipinia eludes WWII pathos:

> Pipinia: Say as I tell you: "I want to be in the cavalry!".
>
> Aguli: Take care of the marble, just leave it where it is.
>
> Pipinia: Yes, yes, right. Tell them, "The cavalry runs in my blood!"
>
> Aguli: Pipinia, take care of Peri! [followed by shot of dog]
>
> Pipinia: Right, tell them, "I am the son of a cavalry colonel". Don't be ashamed, it's the truth!
>
> […].

As anticipated in this comic dialogue, Aguli doesn't take much interest in the war, taking advantage of the first opportunity to leave the front and immediately making plans for turning his mentioned block of marble into art. If a war is being fought, he doesn't act as if it had anything to do with him. Which fact Pipinia doesn't fancy, who reminds Aguli that "war is war!", seemingly expecting more sternness from his son. Suspected of desertion, Aguli is briefly arrested by a young female soldier from Russia who he falls in love with.

As the love story between Aguli and Glasha unfolds, we are introduced into Aguli's unprosperous artistic career. Struggling to make ends, he is forced to accept assignments for cemetery busts that decorate the graves of the deceased, consequently having to delay work on his own project (Aguli's ominous marble block – untouched throughout the film – speaks for itself). The request of a gentle widow who wants a bust for her deceased husband cunningly illustrates how Aguli must gradually step down from his aesthetic ideals in order to comply with the demands of his clients. In a way, Shengelaia here complies with party ideology. After all, Aguli's antique aesthetic ideals are both absurd (at one point, he suggests inserting a third eye in the widow's bust) and deficient (a first draft – seemingly Roman-inspired – does not resemble the deceased) – it is only logical that the final, satisfactory bust be a paradigmatic example of Social realist art.

Yet, in another way, one could find it troubling that an artist is forced to disallow his creative intuitions, that he has no time or place to live out his individual self. If not having used one's material means being able to give it away to other artists, the collective – as Aguli does with his beloved marble block in the final scene of the film -, it also raises the question what good that gift is if it cannot be made proper use of? The title-lending "exhibition" that preludes Aguli's giving away his marble encourages that question: after joining in on his class reunion, Aguli takes Glasha to the local cemetery and presents his busts with scandalous pompousness, serving as author, presenter and model to the improvised show all at once. Needless to say, the performance is a farce, a cemetery hardly being the place to have one's work exhibited, never mind if conceived of metaphorically – it turns out the drama goes much deeper than a cursory glimpse behind the film's (admittedly brilliant) comedic façade reveals.

Still, one shouldn't neglect that Shengelaia's film stays consistent with Soviet ideology to the very end – Aguli even contradicts any easy excuses for his obstinate behavior offered by a client ("He's drunk!") by exclaiming that he is an egoist. Whether people approve of his individualistic deeds or not, Aguli wants to be identified with them – it's conviction that makes him deviate from collectivist behavior, not intoxication. Maybe, then, it's this "selfishness" that is being exposed (or made fun of) in the graveyard scene, not the unfortunate development of his artistic career? Only in the end does Aguli mention fatigue to account for his sudden creative outburst on the graveyard. Which could in turn either be taken to mean that his peers were right all along in explaining his individualistic behavior by temporal incapacity. Or that he has at last given up on both his individualism and artistic ambitions, at least those that would license the possession of a block of marble.

What makes a recognition of critical tendencies in Shengelaia's film difficult is not just the relative disregard of Georgia's local identity mentioned above, but likewise the fact that it tells two stories at once. One is that of an artist learning to serve the collective, another that of a collective subduing its individuals. One talks about the merits of Social Realist art, the other illustrates how a nation's cultural identity falls prey to ideological dogmas. Similarly, the Georgian-Russian love story can both be read as a quest for a common language, and as an encounter that unveils unbridgeable divides. It's the first kind of story that is easy to recognize and that could have been set anywhere, and the latter whose recognition requires a closer examination of the cultural and political context in which the film was made. What *An Unusual Exhibition* does is not just to emphasize those problematic parts of the Soviet system neglected or concealed by propaganda. By constructing a story that can be read either way – as being pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet – Shengelaia illustrates that the divide between these two interpretations is in large part normatively motivated. Viewers decide how to interpret the story, not Shengelaia on his own.

That the fate of the individual in the Soviet Union could be analyzed in different ways, then, and that individuality should in this context be understood nationally as well, is something also made clear by the film's peculiar use of language. As I mentioned above, the film is practically bilingual, with Aguli's and Glasha's dialogues exclusively performed in Russian, and Pipinia making frequent Russian-speaking insertions. Which means that Russian is the language of romance (through Glasha) and comedy (through Pipinia), and Georgian is that of Aguli's fate. Or that Russian is the language of idealization and ideology,[2] and Georgian is the language of problems. Indeed, though most scenes are consistent with a pro- and anti-Soviet position, *An Unusual Exhibition*'s "Georgian" sequences are those which arguably rise more serious questions than the lengthy romantic interludes. What should we make of Pipinia looking forward to Aguli's being able to "polish his Russian" once Glasha moves in?

A subtle linguistic imbalance can also be observed in the title. Though "arachveulebrivi" literally translates into "unusual" or the Russian equivalent "neobyknoveniy", in Georgian the adjective not only connotes idiosyncrasy, but is more commonly used to emphatically commend. The original title thus imposes a strong feeling of irony that is entirely absent from the purely descriptive Russian or English translations: Aguli's farcical exhibition of his work in the graveyard scene may be *unusual*, but certainly contradicts any of the greatness evoked by the Georgian wording.

Language thus is key to acknowledging that Shengelaia's film doesn't embrace cosmopolitanism without further ado, drawing an intriguing parallel to the pro-Georgian protests that struck Tbilisi ten years later. A closer look at *An Unusual Exhibition* proves that the nationalist sentiments that would become exigent in Georgia in the 1970s on and off screen were already forming a decade earlier, and that they were associated with linguistic questions even then. Whether the Moscow-based censors were aware of this or the film's ambiguity can only be conjectured. Ironically, Shengelaia claims that the film eluded greater scrutiny as officials were preparing for

the 100th anniversary of Lenin's birthday in 1970.

At any rate, our observation resists a shifting of focus from *when* Russian is used to *what* it is used for. After all, it is Glasha and Pipinia – two Russian-speaking army veterans – who exert such pressure on Aguli to comply with his clients' wishes that he deems it impossible to work in his house and finally flees. Who does he turn to? Shalva, an ex-classmate and actor (!) whose Cyprian lifestyle Aguli shortly takes part in, and Tina, his first love from school whom he convinces to marry him. Submerged in his home, he returns to his (Georgian-speaking) roots, if only to find out that his individualism isn't allowed to unfold here either. When he is beaten up by Tina's brothers who object to Aguli's plans (on the plausible grounds of him already being married), he finally returns home to Glasha and Pipinia, this time feeling unable to fend off their demand to gratify his clients' expectations.

Strikingly though, Shengelaia offers us no insight into Aguli's emotions: did he miss Glasha, Pipinia, or his children? Did he regret having left them out of "egoistical" motives? The fact that Aguli's decision to leave behind his family isn't rationalized, at least not independently of his artistic ambitions, is yet more proof that the pro-Soviet narrative is not forgotten, as it becomes increasingly difficult to sympathize with the protagonist. Viewed from this perspective, the film fulfills all the criteria of a classical comedy, even offering party-conform interpreters a happy ending: in the end, Aguli finally acknowledges that individuals should serve the collective, or how he was blind and selfish to leave his close ones behind. Indeed, he is given a chance to seek redemption (and perhaps polish his Russian).

Yet, there are strong reasons to think that the seemingly hilarious ending of the film is rather tragic: everything that follows Aguli's return to his family is marked by his death as an individual; what looks funny and joyful on the outside, turns out to be profoundly stern on the inside. That Shengelaia made a man's return to his family seem like such a cause of individual ruin – or that he has his protagonist show no interest in a war that cost millions their lives – should make us wonder whether *An Unusual Exhibition* is really just about Aguli's artistic existence, or whether Aguli's emotionally alienating stance towards his family and the war is meant to stress that he perceives nothing that surrounds him as *his*.

References

That is of those parts which they deemed to be culturally theirs, i.e. ethnically Georgian.

Similarly to German, which figures twice in the film – once when a speech of Hitler is played back during a scene of fighting, and another time when a randomly performed German verse about a rabbit and wolf is followed by people coordinately jumping around like bunnies.