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Life and Politics at the Georgian Table

Otar Iosseliani's *Falling Leaves* (*Giorgobistve*, 1966)

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In Otar Iosseliani's *Falling Leaves*, a young man faces a crisis of conscience when he's expected to support a decision irreconcilable with his convictions. Niko, who only recently joined the lab of a local wine collective, is put under pressure to bottle deficient wine. Though he knows the use of gelatin fining could easily fix the product, state-ordered productivity quotas allow for no delays. "Look around you", his superior tells him in a confidential conversation, "this is no time for principles." Even the collective's director says he can tell apart good wine and bad one – it's Niko's signature the winery's after, not his opinion. Before we're introduced to this ugly reality of Soviet-time wine collectives and with it to the film's main story line, Iosseliani reminds us that traditional wine-making is still prevalent in Georgia's rural parts. The film opens with an idyllic pastiche of rural life which throws together scenes from diverse regions and contexts that radiate with harmony and reconciliation. In contrast to the urban reality, which we're told is replete with individualism and mutual mistrust, in the rustic prologue we find no conflict, no industry, no fiddling and no sounds but the melodies of land and traditional music. Where the collective's wine production is so poor that the vintners overseeing it won't have it, wine here appears to wander straight to the table, which we soon learn is an integral life of village life.

This simplistic contrast, fairly typical for Iosseliani's oeuvre, belies the complexity that hides behind the larger narrative of Iosseliani's seminal debut. If Niko and Otar, Niko's friend who starts working at the winery the same day as him, represent two widely dissimilar approaches to life – one embodying (urban) traditionalism, the other Soviet-inspired single-mindedness -, Niko's eventual advent to subversive action is in no way predetermined. Indeed, Iosseliani never sought out dogmatic views which he could subsequently stand in for. Many of the claims implied by *Falling Leaves*, notably that traditionalists possess something which the Soviet elite lacks, or that rural life is superior to

urban reality, are relativized and partly reversed in films he made only years after. Even this film taken in isolation offers viewers many reasons not to draw simpleminded conclusions: the cryptic and much-discussed ending is but one proof that Iosseliani leaves many questions unanswered. That interpreters have generally failed to recognize this attention to nuance on Iosseliani's side may very well point to their own contentment with the narrative of grand dissident attacks on the Soviet regime.

Of course, *Falling Leaves* is also just the moral tale scholars and reviewers have taken it to be – the story of an idealist who's faced with the dictates of Soviet realism[1]. Niko's fate is no doubt presented as the struggle of an individual who tries to resist the fangs of an oppressive society, and it is no less clear what the director's stance on this matter is: we, too, are expected to be on Niko's side from beginning to end. Iosseliani even negotiates a moral alibi for Niko should he not dare to physically resist his orders, as he ultimately does by pouring gelatin into the wine himself. Still the important thing to note is that Niko is not alone in facing a crisis of conscience in the collective and that his is not the only way of life that is presented as being legitimate. The constant contrasts – of Niko and Otar, of the conscientious but compliant vintners and their superiors, of urban and rural life, and not least of traditionalism and individualism – don't necessarily aim to unveil the superiority of the good over the bad (in which case we wouldn't need Niko's final act to establish his integrity). Iosseliani is rather telling his peers what kind of life they're living, and what it is that they can learn from urban traditionalists like Niko or his vintner friends. Similarly, the film's utopian opening does not claim to be either a true representation of rural life, or an idealistic prototype upon which we are to model our life. Rather, it's a hyperbolic embodiment of all the things Iosseliani thinks Soviet citizens lack qua human beings, their human constitution only partly and derivatively being caused by their political authority. *Falling Leaves* is not a black-and-white lesson in dissidence, but rather a meditation on what kind of life one should strive for. It poses a problem that is much larger than political or social systems, though it is also one that is palpable enough to be addressed at and through the table. Because it's ultimately here, at the table – where the alarm bells of any traditionalism-fearing Georgian sound, and where any foreigner unfamiliar with Georgian customs must concede ignorance -, that Iosseliani explains why resisting the regime takes care of only one problem among many.

The Many Faces of the Supra

For any cultural product originating from Georgia – be it a film or a novel -, the *supra* (the ritualized Georgian table) is a logical setting to unleash discussions on the human condition, in particular when dealing with wine (though Georgians boast of their wine culture, the urban population mostly consumes wine at the *supra* and thus in large masses). In Georgia, to consume wine

means to be at the table, and to be at the table means to be subject to an elaborate system of rules. Unlike ordinary meals, *supras* are feasting occasions that are linked to fairly rigid rituals and traditions.[2] Notably, any *supra* is led by a toastmaster – the *tamada* -, who sits at the head of the table and structures the *supra* by saying toasts. Only after he has said his toast can the other *supra* participants follow through by saying toasts that are based on the same theme. Though the toastmaster can choose when to administer toasts, they follow a loose chronological pattern which he's generally expected to follow. Often, a general theme like "love" is introduced through a particular person or event, say a newlywed couple or a recent wedding. No one is allowed to drink before saying a toast, and no one is supposed to speak while others perform a toast. Another important dissimilarity to Western feasts is that one can host a *supra* without any occasion whatsover, meaning that there are people who literally join *supras* every other day.

Though I do claim that the *supra* helps us unveil hidden nuances of Iosseliani's debut, it's not immediately clear why this should be the case. If it is in principle logical to address Georgians' attitude to wine through the *supra*, it is also obvious how little time Iosseliani spends depicting it: for a film dealing with Georgian wine culture, *Falling Leaves* appears to display an outward disinterest when it comes to tradition. But clearly this has much to do with the urban setting of the film, which Iosseliani often uses as a contrast to life on the countryside. The city provides Iosseliani with a crucial backdrop for establishing traditionalism's dearth and necessity, whose virtues are thus revealed negatively rather than positively: *Falling Leaves* in many ways proceeds as a story of unanswered promises. In the beginning of the main story line, protagonist Niko presumably starts work at the wine lab to help to produce good wine, but soon finds out that the wine collective's main aim is to meet economical rather than gustatory or cultural demands. When he fulfills his duty by making his superiors aware of his concerns, they scathe him for obstructing the winery's activities. And when he lastly persists, they do, too. If Niko is not alone in opposing the ideology advanced by his superiors, soon befriending the local vintners even though they're considerably older than him, the regime's ideology seems to be happily embraced by his peers. He learns the hard way that Marina, who has half the collective twisted around her finger, is more interested in power play than in straightforward romance, and that Niko's careerist friend Otar does not share his youthful idealism, but is ready to translate orders into practice whatever they may be.

It is obviously arguable whether tradition is the answer to this destitution or even part of it, but this brief sketch of the narrative structure does explain why Iosseliani sees no place for tradition in a radically urban environment which has inherited the dictates of Soviet ideologues. This is why, apart from the prologue, which quickly establishes the *supra* as an integral part of village life, only one scene in the whole film features ritualized drinking in its full-fledged form. A mere 90 seconds long, it shows Niko and his fellow vintners gathered

around a table rife with food and wine; here traditional songs are interjected only by toasts and the raising of glasses, which precedes drinking just as tradition wants it. (Perhaps less conform to tradition is the mood with which vintner Rezo is met by his wife upon returning home, who anticipates his excuses by frowning at his permanent drinking – a clear nod to urban progressiveness). But if Iosseliani's disinclination to indulge in the *supra* in an urban context is by no means accidental – the film is after all about Georgia's loss of traditionalism and collectivism –, there are hidden instantiations of the tradition that are no less symbol-laden than is its general absence. It is through a theme that is itself difficult to recognize that Iosseliani's differentiated stance on tradition and the regime makes itself known.

To begin with, there's the lunch break on Niko's first day of work, in which Niko's employees welcome him in their round by saying brief toasts on his behalf. Though the repast is not a proper *supra* – a wine barrel serves as a makeshift table -, it shares some of its main characteristics (notably toasting and wine as well as their coupling with food) and is thus a tool for further establishing the vintners as urban traditionalists. It also marks the *supra* as a horizontal social instrument that can be used to foster social cohesion: it's at the table that people make acquaintances, where they become friends, and where social and economic affiliations are definitely left behind. By sharing a table with the vintners, Niko introduces himself into the group as an equal, rather than as their boss, thus ignoring the hierarchy dictated by the collective's structure and ideology – one could even go so far as to say that he acknowledges their seniority, though their relationship is never shown to be imbalanced. Lastly, it's here that Niko introduces himself with his full name, enabling the vintners to make inferences about his family history. (In Georgia, it is still common to ask acquaintances to reveal their family name and school history).

A case in point is a similarly informal gathering that also incorporates *supra* elements, but which is less forgiving vis-à-vis the urban rendering of that tradition. It briefly shows a group of young men having a drink (or two) in broad daylight in a so-called *sakhinkle*, an establishment where people go to have Georgian dumplings, beer, and sometimes vodka[3]. When the group asks a fellow friend to join their party, they allow his female entourage –sought-after Marina -, to slip away. This leads to a comic series of formalities which are meant to determine whether they've upset their friend, and if so, how they've managed to. "If we upset you, we apologize," they add by way of anticipation. But all their talk of excuses turns out to merely be a hoax: when their friend Bondo leaves the table shortly after joining, they curse him and continue drinking. In contrast to the senior vintners whose favor Niko wins, these youngsters display dishonesty and intemperance and thus point to an abuse of tradition that Iosseliani shows no interest in defending. In fact, the hedonistic excesses and overall aimlessness of urban Tbilisians is the subject of another of his films, *Once Upon a Time there Was a Blackbird* (1972), which removes

fears that Iosseliani may simply be endorsing conservatism: it takes time to pinpoint what exactly about tradition Iosseliani is out to defend. Even rustic life, which seems so beautiful and innocent in this film's prologue, is subject to unforgiving and scathing critique in the ironically titled *Pastorale* (1975).

A less obvious, and perhaps more interesting allusion to the *supra* in *Falling Leaves* is the wine tasting scene, in which Niko's crisis of conscience is first brought to the viewer's attention. A board meeting of the wine collective is to determine the quality of the ominous 49th barrel, which, though young, is needed to meet state-ordered productivity quotas. A prior scene has already revealed the vintners' dissatisfaction with the wine, which Otar answered by referring to "orders". The director's opening remarks at the meeting only confirm that the wine tasting is a sham, as its maxims are economical rather than gustatory: "Our plan must be fulfilled at the expense of this year's wines. We will only fill up this year's production." Though purists may object to such a parallelization, the board meeting is structured like a *supra*, with the board members seated around a long dining table that is equipped with wine and glasses. The collective's director speaks first and continues to lead the meeting by personally giving his employees the word and is furthermore seated at the head of the table, thus figuring as a sort of *tamada*. Crucially, only one woman is present, who's neither asked to speak up, nor particularly visible. Unfortunately, this too is a key characteristic of the *supra*, which fully embodies Georgian patriarchy by traditionally making it an all-male affair[4].

After the collective's grumpy director has raised his voice and instructed his employees on the productivity quotas, the board members proceed with business. Though the strict chronology of toasting at the *supra* – where one speaks *before* one drinks – is obviously violated, the tasting nevertheless reflects its strictness in assigning people the right to drink. It is only once being asked to that the board members begin raising their glasses; no one sips or speaks at will, and one assessor is even scolded for uttering a prolix statement. Still, the ultimate proof of the meeting's rigidity is yet to follow. When the meeting is declared closed and the skeptics already appear pacified, Niko rises from his chair and proclaims that the wine is deficient: "The wine from the 49th barrel must not be bottled. I've examined it and found fault with its quality." This insolence, though greeted by some board members, is brushed off by the director, who reminds Otar and Niko of their duties and asks the latter to stop his "foolery". Who indeed would dare to question the toastmaster's authority, one might add?

The authoritarianism implicit in this scene calls to mind the criticism *supra* has faced in recent years as Georgia's firm traditionalism has come under increased pressure from within. Thus political scientist Ghia Nodia foregrounds the enforcement of vertical hierarchy as a key feature of the *supra*:

> […] for me (as, presumably, for most Georgians) it [the *supra*] is

> […] a rigid set of rules that regulate drinking, speaking, and, often, sequencing and themes of toasts that constitute the essence of a *supra*. They can be summarized as double prohibition: nobody is allowed to drink wine or propose a toast without a sanction from the *tamada*, and nobody (meaning, no participating male) is allowed not to drink once the *tamada* has proposed a toast. Genuinely eloquent *tamadas* are not always available, but no matter how inarticulate a given toastmaster may be, the rules regulating the ritual are to be followed to the letter. It is this set of rules and insistence on their strict observance, rather than the rhetorical quality of toasting, that makes the *supra* a quintessentially Georgian institution […].[5]

Though the last sentence conflicts with Nodia's subsequent observation that "Georgians are never as serious and rigorous in following rules as when they try to get drunk"[6], the main thrust of the argument is clear: in daily life the *supra* manifests itself as an authoritarian, rule-governed tradition that puts blind formalism above skill. Irrespective of the *supra*'s manifold historical and political dimensions which Nodia also discusses in his article, he mainly perceives it as a source of cultural conservatism and destitution.

In Iosseliani's films, too, authoritarianism is loosely associated with the *supra*, though clearly this association is there viewed critically. Thus the party of Niko and the vintners seems to know no toastmaster or rigid toasting chronology, as one vintner is seated at each head of the table, neither of which initiates the drinking we briefly witness. In fact, the drinking here proceeds almost chaotically – glasses are raised at random while one song replaces another. As one would expect, the informal lunch break at work is similarly devoid of hierarchical task sharing. Against such loose celebration of egalitarian collectivism, then, the authoritarian character of the wine tasting stands out. A board meeting though it is, the tasting's hidden symbolism is conspicuously coupled with a display of the board's indifference to wine. This manifests itself not so much in their readiness to bottle poor wine – which seems to be a consequence of political oppression -, but in their strictly professional relationship with that special drink. Where the *supras* in the prologue established the proximity of wine and ritual – the linkage of production and consumption -, the Soviet wine collective embodies the urban, post-industrialist tendency to separate these seemingly inseparable acts. Otar was allowed to join the board after pronouncing that he doesn't drink at all, while the director is said to drink vodka (as opposed to wine) in his spare time.





Screenshot 1 (left): Niko and his vintner friends during their traditional *supra*. Screenshot 2 (right): wine tasting of the wine collective's board.

The wine tasting doesn't only introduce us to Iosseliani's negative stance towards authoritarianism at the table. It also establishes a more profound link between the Soviet regime and a hierarchical organization of the *supra*. Note that the film's non-urban prologue, which appears to be Iosseliani's gold standard, depicts no *tamada*-like figure, and that the only toastmaster *Pastorale* introduces us to is also a Soviet bureaucrat. Recall how Niko and the vintners, who seem to be constantly at odds with the collective's board, work against class division while at the table. In Soviets' hands, the *supra* is a disciplinary mechanism that reflects and reiterates Georgia's political and social hierarchy, reflecting the authoritarian aspect researchers like Nodia emphasize. In their opponents' hands, though, it's a way of preserving social mobility and Georgia's collectivist spirit. Where the former turn the table into a debauched display of power, the latter use it to indulge in their super-individual identity[7]. Iosseliani's contribution to debates concerning a correct assessment of the *supra* is that is neither authoritarian and chauvinistic nor collectivist and egalitarian. Rather than advancing another essentialist argument concerning its true nature, Iosseliani suggests that it is people who turn the *supra* into one thing or another – one should look at them, and not at the table, to infer normative conclusions.

But Iosseliani is far from suggesting, as some ethnologists and historians have recently done,[8] that the *supra* in its current form is an invention from Soviet times. Nor does he employ the *supra* as a binary normative scale that can tell apart good and bad – this should not least be clear from the way he chronicles the abusive drinking of youngsters, especially in *Once Upon a Time there Was a Blackbird*. Even in his private life, Iosseliani has proven able to summon remarkable understanding for his political foes, who after all tried to ban his *Falling Leaves* on questionable grounds (briefly succeeding). If his critique is sometimes directed at individuals, it first and foremost addresses the political, social and normative reality they partake in. *Falling Leaves* is not about a couple of decent guys who're fighting a couple of bad ones: it's about a system

which Iosseliani thinks is built on faulty principles. The collective's director – whose character resembles a caricature of the abusive, capitalist manager who is obsessed with making his employees subdue to his will – turns out to be happy with Niko's subversive action. When Niko's act is revealed to him and the board members expect him to take decisive action, he calmly praises the boy and pats him on his shoulder. Akaki Bakradze is right in saying that we don't know the real price of Niko's courage (is it this month's pay, his job, or even more?),[9] but we do find out that the board director is pushing through a policy he himself does not believe in. If, then – as Bakradze claims somewhat exaggeratedly -, everyone in the film is really on Niko's side, what is it he possesses that the others lack?

Two Ways of Life

This question takes us back to the beginning of the main story, when we get to know Otar and Niko in a revealing juxtaposition. It's a Thursday morning – the very first day of the film's story – and Otar is seen trying to leave for work. Trying, because his mother refuses to let him go, insistent that he eat breakfast before leaving. After a short altercation which also incorporates the color of Otar's shirt ("why isn't it white?") and Otar's father who's unhappy with his son's overall attitude, Otar finally returns to the table only to start arguing again, first about what he perceives as haranguing, then about having to eat bread. Iosseliani then switches to Niko, who starts his day by waking his sisters, mother and grandmother before putting on the tea kettle and watering the family's balcony flowers. Breakfast is eaten without further ado (even if Niko is not a big eater himself).

The rest of the day proceeds in similar fashion, with Iosseliani using scene after scene to contrast Niko's and Otar's personality. When they meet in the morning to go to work, Otar comments on Niko's nonchalant appearance, stating that it's a disgrace to walk next to him. At work, whenever Niko reaches out his hand and greets, smiles, or thanks, Otar does the "right" thing – he hands out the appropriate documents, asks the right questions, and gives the right answers. When being interviewed by the collective's director, Niko admits to occasionally playing cards and drinking, whereas Otar claims to do neither. Otar even has a lighter on him at all times though we never see him smoking a cigarette. Most importantly, Otar is guilty of the social hierarchization which Iosseliani associates with the Soviet regime. He heeds one of his superior's advice not to befriend workers, who are said to only be workers after all, and treats his superiors, Marina and his cool friends from town with exceptional cheerfulness. This contrasts starkly with Niko, who seems to treat everyone with equal respect and befriends those whom he likes whoever they may be.

Intuitively, one is inclined to agree with Bakradze claiming that the only thing we know about Niko is that he's decent – which, as he adds, is both a lot and

very little.[10] It's a lot, he explains, because it's all that matters, and very little because it's also a general attribute (how well do we know a person if all we know about her is that she's principled?). Of course, Bakradze doesn't think Niko's the only decent guy in *Falling Leaves*, adding that there's both *active* and *passive* decency. This helpful further distinction not only allows us to conceptualize Niko's move from "passive" decency to his brave act in the end of the movie. We can also use it to characterize the urban traditionalists or the collective's director as passively decent people who have the right principles, but are afraid to assert them when facing resistance. (The fact that Niko as a young man is in a different position to instigate revolutionary acts than the vintners or the director, who all seem to have families, is certainly worth pointing out.)

But on second thought, Bakradze's narrative risks undercutting the film's complexity. The issue with his characterization of active and passive decency is not just that it is binary. More problematically, it assumes that there is an objective standpoint from which one can hold apart decent from indecent behavior. What I want to question is not whether one can condemn evidently amoral behavior – this would amount to relativism. Rather, I think that *Falling Leaves* shows us how different conceptions of life can yield conflicting behavior that doesn't necessarily yield different moral judgements. If Niko is surely decent on one conception of decency, Otar is decent on another. It is not that Otar constantly ignores his conscience, or that he is an egoist who has no motive other than to advance his own well-being. On the contrary, one can see that he's trying to do the right thing. He finished school with excellent grades, he always listens to his superiors, and if he doesn't go out of the way to be nice, he's not ignorant of general rules of conduct either. Even his relationship with his parents could be excused by his age. The question the film poses is not "who's decent and who's not", but "what *is* decency"? Rather than producing winners or losers, the film exemplifies two different ways of life which spur us to question our own. On one side are Niko and the vintners, on the other are Otar and the board members (as well as Marina and her female friend).

This helps us explain why food figures so prominently in Iosseliani's films: intrinsically, our eating habits are normatively neutral, though they reveal *something* about what kind of people we are. When Iosseliani depicts Otar as not liking eating or drinking, he's not suggesting that Otar is therefore indecent, let alone amoral. Otar's reluctance to eat is simply an indication of the way of life he leads, a symptom of his being a particular kind of person. This has nothing to do with his living a super-individualistic life, either – as mentioned, Otar seeks company, if selectively. It's Otar's strength of purpose and his unlikely preparedness that are decisive here: Otar cares about efficiency. When he does something, he wants to do it by the book. That's why he has good grades, why his superiors like him, and why the epilogue suggests that it is ultimately he who goes off with Marina: Otar represents a very particular conception of success. The *supra*, which is associated with

indulgence and excess, stands in the way of that conception, and so do drinking and eating in general (hence his reluctance to eat his mother's breakfast).

Niko is not driven by such "higher" motives. Instead, he lives from moment to moment, following his intuitions in all that he does. That's why he enjoys a good meal or playing football during breaks at work – the point for him is not to get something out of it, but to enjoy himself in the company of others. In general, for Niko, a social person, enjoyment means enjoying himself along with others. Collective well-being is to Niko what results are to Otar: it's an essential purpose of being. Thus staying up with friends all night is virtuous for Niko, and off-putting for Otar. If the film leans towards Niko's way of life, it's not in virtue of having definitely proven Otar wrong. Iosseliani simply wants to remind his viewers of the virtues of being a laid-back and social person who's decent in an old-school way, characteristics which he thinks are threatened by the prevailing political and social order – there is a *Big Lebowski* element in his film. By lacking the ability to appreciate food and company, Otar seems to lack something that is essentially human, something which we shouldn't want to lack.

Otar and the board member's negative attitude towards the *supra* in *Falling Leaves* recalls the Soviet regime's campaign against "pernicious customs", which tried to curtail that tradition on the grounds of it being a waste of both time and energy. In 1966 or roughly a decade before that campaign, Iosseliani already deemed it necessary to remind his compatriots of the negative effects their loss of tradition could have on the public good. What he feared most was that Georgians would at some point lose its collectivist spirt, that society would consequently individualize, and that those isolated individuals would eventually be led only by notions of efficiency and competition.[11] Yet *Falling Leaves*, a film which was temporarily banned by Soviet censors, might never free itself of its reputation as an anti-Soviet film, and it's precisely such inability to look beyond the grand narrative and towards nuances that has kept people from acknowledging that Iosseliani's film is not simply a diatribe against Communists. If anything, it is the principles upon which the Soviet Union were built which Iosseliani takes issue with (principles which are sufficiently similar to those of neo-liberalism to project his critique on today's Georgia, too). It is not intrinsically wrong for an individual to endorse efficiency, or intrinsically better not to – Iosseliani himself points to the bad effects over-indulgence can yield.[12] Yet subscribing to one way of life rather than another can have deep implications which are often overlooked, and it's nothing less than pointing towards those consequences that Iosseliani should be credited with.

Having said that, it is true that there is a point in *Falling Leaves* when Niko does prove to possess a fairly objective virtue, and that is indeed when he moves from "passive decency", as Bakradze calls it, to agency. Otar, the collective's director and many other board members share Niko's skepticism

about their wine, and yet they refuse to voice their misgivings for fear of repercussions. So do the vintners, whom most interpreters have taken to be objectively “better” than their Communist superiors. Everyone at the winery faces the same crisis of conscience as does Niko, only that everyone but Niko settles it by outsourcing his responsibility to the next-highest authority. The vintners blame Otar, he refers to orders, and even the collective’s director must be receiving the productivity quotas from somewhere. It is therefore not entirely amiss to see this film as a plea to viewers to question their principles and to listen to their conscience. And it’s only at this level that one may ask which of the two philosophies is likelier to produce independent-minded individuals, people who are capable of overcoming crises of consciousness – that which endorses compliance and servility, or that which celebrates equality?

References

Ironically, this gives his film a moralizing touch which is reminiscent of contemporary propagandist films of the “Ottepel” period, which depicted the tales of working-class heroes (“Abezara”, 1956; “Good People”, 1961; “Sabudareli Chabuki”, 1957).

For a short survey of the supra, see: Mühlfried, Florian . “Sharing the same blood – culture and cuisine in the Republic of Georgia.” in: Anthropology of food 12/2007.

At any supra, one generally eats while performing ritualized toasts, rather than before, so that even gatherings at cafe-like restaurants like the sakhinkle in this scene can take hours.

Though female-only supras have been documented for a long time, these are uncommon and don’t come anywhere near to questioning the patriarchal founding of the tradition. In recent times, though, some mixed supras have emerged, but it is worth stressing that they, too, are usually headed by male tamadas.

Nodia, Ghia. “The Values of the Georgian Supra: Nationalist or Nativist?”. in: Ab Imperio 4/2014, pp. 69-74.

If Georgians are not rigorous about rules, as the cliché Nhodia is here alluding to suggests, then how can the supra’s rule-conformity be the feature that makes it “quintessentially Georgian”?

The vintners’ performance of Georgian traditional music, which is polyphonic

and thus qua definition super-invidivual, may also be taken to allude to their ideological commitment.

For surveys of recent debates concerning the history of the supra, see especially: Ram, Harsha. “The Literary Origins of the Georgian Feast: The Cosmopolitan Poetics of a National Ritual”. in: Ab Imperio, 4/2014, pp. 19-52. Mühlfried, Florian. Postsowjetische Feiern. Das Georgische Bankett im Wandel. ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart: 2006.

Bakradze, Akaki. Kino. Literasi, Tbilisi: 2012.

Bakradze 2012.

Ironically, it’s precisely these two principles – efficiency and competition – which Florian Mühlfried thinks guide Georgia’s so-called new intelligentsia today. In fact, he also thinks that a negative attitude towards the supra has become a “hallmark feature of the new Georgian post-Soviet intelligentsia and their allies”, which means that neo-liberals appear to be following in the Soviets’ footsteps in this regard: “Both in Soviet and neoliberal logic […] extensive feasting indicates economic irrationality.” (Mühlfried, Florian. “A Taste of Mistrust.”. in: Ab Imperio 4/2014, pp. 63-68.). Implausible as this may sound, in Georgia capitalism has really proven a loyal heir to the Soviet regime’s miserable legacy, reiterating policies to similar effect and perpetuating rather than introducing the prevalence of selfish and dishonest values. The extent to which “Falling Leaves” addresses problems that trouble Georgia today is striking, though it is more than unlikely that the country should embrace it as a critique of their own way of life, or that this has ever really been the case. While it is true that the Soviets called the film anti-Georgian for all the wrong reasons, it is also true that this has prevented Georgians from acknowledging what Iosseliani has to say to them.

That said, it is probably true that Iosseliani tends to over-emphasize the positive aspects of tradition, and that there are countless reasons other than neo-liberal or Soviet logic that motivate people to reject the supra (this is something I’ve had to learn in private conversations with my friends). It is also worth asking whether Iosseliani in particular is not guilty of romanticizing the Georgian supra by suggesting that one can have its good features (collectivism) without its poor ones (authoritarianism, rigidity, gender imbalance etc.). But given recent findings that the supra in its current form – ritualized through toasts and a toastmaster – is an invention from the 19th century rather than the ancient tradition many take it to be, it is not entirely implausible to suggest that this tradition can change again. Whether one endorses tradition or not is often a matter of context – I myself have actively

avoided supras when traveling to Georgia because they really do feature chauvinism of various hues and colors. But facing the issue of urban and post-industrialist catastrophes (be they capitalist or Soviet), I am ready to stand in for a tradition that I am in private not always happy to take part in due to the way it is often conducted. In addition, one could argue that Iosseliani merely uses the supra as a symbol for collectivism, and that this does not touch upon the question of how one should generally view that tradition.