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Dystopia and Utopia

Soviet Politics and the Musicals of Tajikistan

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Soviet musicals represent a bright page not only in the history of Russian cinema, but also in the cinema of Tajikistan. This republic in Central Asia is bordered by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to the North and West, by Afghanistan to the South, and by China to the East. Tajikistan became a part of the Soviet Union in 1924 as an autonomous Soviet republic within the Uzbek SSR, and from 1929 as a full member state – the Tajik SSR.

Musical films were dearly loved by the Soviet people, but the Tajikfilm studio that opened in 1930 in Stalinabad (an earlier name for Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan) was perceived by the Soviet government as a production hub mainly of musical and fairy-tale content. This is demonstrated by the prevalence of films of these genres over the production of serious genre films in Tajikfilm's filmography. The golden age of the Tajik musicals took place in the mid-1950s–1970s. Serious genre films of the time dealt with the establishment of Soviet power in the mountainous regions of historical Tajikistan, as well as the military-patriotic theme about life on the home front during the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945). Tajikfilm was given an unofficial nickname by other film studios – Basmachfilm – a reference to the frequent creation of films about Basmachi – the peasant fighters of the national liberation movement in Central Asia in the 1920-30s that opposed the establishment of Soviet power. However, Basmachi were presented in these films as foreign intelligence agents, religious reactionaries, and supporters of social inequality. Basmachi films exploited the structure of the American Western and represented the Central Asian region, specifically the territory of Tajik SSR, as a Wild East flavored with exoticism and mystery. Here, Soviet revolutionary heroes struggled for new lives and a new world order. The films, intended for a mass Soviet audience, performed the task of mythmaking. Through the vast Soviet film distribution networks, these films were available to countries across the Soviet Republics.

The East was perceived as a space of Dystopia and Utopia.[1] If the Tajik movies about battles with the Basmachi presented a myth of the long-gone past and

were filled with patriotism and heroism, then the often optimistic and dreamy musical films reflected a utopian dream. Though they took place in contemporary settings, they abstracted from actual life. The filmmakers of Tajikfilm easily created a comedic effect in several musical films by placing the fairy-tale characters in modern circumstances, for example, to ridicule the corruption of the bureaucratic elite, the conservative mentality, and the oriental respect for social hierarchy.

In my opinion, Tajikfilm could be interpreted as a fairy-tale factory. It produced a significant amount of fairy tales, for example, the '*Scheherazade' trilogy*, based on the fairy tales of the 1001 Nights, directed by Tokhir Sabirov, as well as various films about folklore hero Khwaja Nasreddin, a sarcastic wise man riding a donkey. These fairy tale titles include Muqaddas Makhmudov's O*ne thousand and two nights (Tisyacha vtoraya noch*, 1964), Clementiy Mints' *The twelve graves of Khwaja Nasreddin (Dvennadtsat' mogil Hodji Nasreddina*, 1966) and Marat Aripov's *Look more cheerful (Glyadi veseley*, 1982). These films created the image of a fabulous country inhabited by giants and heroes, Amazonian beauties, cunning *viziers* (government officials), narrow-minded sultans, and poor men who marry princesses. The film characters often sing or witness inserted musical dance numbers, for example, in harems. According to Yakushenkov, this Utopian image of the Soviet East was created from a variety of patchwork stripes that did not allow the viewer to see the true "face" of this Other.[2] As for the Tajik people, the thirst for an authentic display of their own culture had been evident since the 1980s and was expressed in the revival of the national culture in the form of the adoption of the Tajik language as the state language.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the traditions of the Tajik musical films that were scored by invited well-known Soviet composers, like *The Tajik Film Concert (Tadjikskiy Kinokontsert*, 1943), *I met a girl (Ya vstretil devushku*, 1957), *Love me, Love me not (Lyubit ne Lyubit*, 1963), *The White Piano (Beliy Royal*, 1968) and *The Cook and the Singer (Povar i Pevitsa*, 1978). It is important to note that musicals were a purely Soviet phenomenon in Tajik culture because they ceased to exist with the collapse of the USSR. This was primarily due to the multiculturalism of this genre of cinema, due to the close cooperation between celebrated Soviet composers and singers from across the union, as well as the availability of the technical support of the Orchestra of the State Committee of the Council of Ministers of the USSR for Cinematography. The Tajik SSR alone didn't have such resources. Tajik musicals were the product of cross-regional co-creation: sometimes the script was developed at another Soviet studio, or ordered from a scriptwriter who lived in Moscow. The music was written in Moscow too; with original lyrics by Tajik poets written either in Tajik or Russian, and then translated into the other language. During post-production, the film's dialogues were dubbed in Russian, and the songs were re-recorded with famous voices for the all-Union distribution. Thus, a complex production mechanism was established to coordinate the creation of

the musicals in a universal film language. The desire to create a universal film language for Soviet audiences also meant that musicals were not an expression of the mentality of people in the Tajik SSR, but a reflection of the way others envisioned it.

The origins of the Tajik musical can be traced back to traditional music culture. Improvised song duets, called *badekha*, were performed to the verses of folk poets, and to those of classical poets of Tajik-Persian literature like Rudaki, Saadi and Jami. Simultaneously there were dramatized comic songs intended for entertainment, as well as songs of a practical nature that accompanied agricultural work and expressed a certain kind of ritual magic associated with the cult of fertility. Thus, songs have become a permanent attribute of Tajik films, with the characters singing while working or idling. The first professional composers working in musical theaters (who would later turn to film music) used this opportunity to include authentic Tajik folk songs, or songs from Tajik operas based on folklore. For example, Sergei Balasanyan, who was born in Armenia, became the first invited film composer of Tajik cinema. He created *The Uprising of Vose*, the first Tajik opera about the national hero from Baljuvan in Southern Tajikistan, who started an uprising against the Emir of Bukhara in the 19th century. Balasanyan used the folk song about Vose from his aforementioned opera in the film *Dokhunda* (1956), directed by Tokhir Sabirov. Sergei Balasanyan based the music of the opera *The Uprising of Vose* on vivid folk melodies including several original folklore themes.

The Soviet government took measures to both develop music education and preserve the national musical heritage in the newly formed Tajik SSR. Subsequent research and efforts to further popularize Tajik traditional music were initiated withe the creation of the Research Folklore Department of Music in 1937 in Stalinabad.[3] One of the consequences of the development of the musical art of the peoples of the East was the revival of their self-awareness and the recognition of theirs as one of the significant components of world musical culture.[4] Thus the folk music and songs of Sergei Balasanyan, as well as the traditional Tajik dancing art of Gafar Valamatzadeh, the first professionally trained dancer and choreographer domestically, were reflected in Tajikfilm productions. It was considered that musicals, like cinema itself, speak in a universal language understood by the masses, because the songs had to motivate, inspire, educate, entertain, and direct the viewers towards socialist values.

Thus, Mukhamadjon Rahimi, the Tajik-Soviet poet and one of the first locally educated screenwriters, was involved in composing lyrics for the songs of the first Tajik musical, titled *The Tajik film-concert (Tadjikskiy kinokontsert*, 1943). *The Tajik film-concert* became the eighth film of the Tajikfilm studio, which had initiated its film production in 1932. Rahimi's work in *The Tajik film-concert* demonstrated how new socialist content could be shaped into traditional poetic imaginary and structure. *The Tajik film-concert* was directed by Clementiy

Mints, an invited director from the Stalinabad film studio, which had been combined with Soyuzdetfilm (formerly the Maxim Gorky film studio) during the evacuation of the lead film studios in Central Asia during the Great Patriotic War. The film entirely consisted of musical numbers performed by the artists of the newly established Tajik musical theater, ballet, and philharmonic, and was intended to entertain Soviet soldiers at the front. This intention justified Mints' desire to surprise the viewer and exotically present the material. For example, the opening scene of the musical features a theater curtain opening onto a silver screen; the elderly folk storyteller, called *hafiz* in Tajik, begins a story about the ancient culture of the Tajik lands and presents a train of female camel-riding *rubab*-players (the *rubab* is a lute-like instrument) along the Great Silk Route. The music for *The Tajik film-concert* was written by Balasanyan based on Tajik folk melodies, with Gafar Valamatzadeh choreographing the dances and songs and performing in two of the dance numbers himself.

The Tajik film-concert was schematic in structure and rather resembled a theatrical show whose musical numbers were announced by the Emcees, the old storyteller, the smart dancer, or the cute child. It is also noticeable that each of the eleven subsequent musical numbers didn't develop the narrative. In general, the musical's structure was created as a patchwork: there were the harem costumes, an excess of jewelry, sensual dances, traditional musical instruments carried as props, saber dances coexisting with folk pantomime dances, as well as the dove dance, the stork dance, and the snake dance. The orientalist gaze on Tajik culture here is similar to that of Sergei Diaghilev's famous "Russian Seasons", the Ballets Russes' performances in Paris in the early 20th century.

Only the last musical numbers from *The Tajik film-concert* reminded viewers of Soviet power. It featured Rena Galibova, the famous Tajik singer and People's Artist of the Tajik SSR who initially sang a song called *Dear Moscow* in Tajik while wearing the Tajik national costume. She climbed onto the rooftop of an airplane parked in an airport. Her change to Western clothes and hairstyle marked a linguistic shift too: the song was performed in Russian, of course, with a tangible Tajik accent, which was fully justified by the subtext of this scene demonstrating the transformation of the Tajik woman into a liberated woman of the East. If the previous musical numbers almost did not mark the exact time and took place in a fantasy world, then the scene with the airplane indicated the onset of modernity, a change in self-awareness, and the acquisition of freedom. Of course, this song narrated the freedom the Tajik people gained thanks to Mother Russia.

The Tajik musicals of the 1940-1950s were influenced by the European musical theater and the Russian film musicals of the Stalinist period with the strong presence of songs and *Atracttsioni* ("*Attractions"*), amusement elements in cinema as termed by Sergei Eisenstein. Another trend in these works involves the creation of an imaginary Soviet Tajikistan. The songs that were heard in

Tajik musicals produced from 1956 to the 1980s (for example, the “Road Song” sung by Aida Vedishcheva in *White Piano*) depicted Tajik SSR as a sunny country with a constantly clear blue sky, the city streets filled with flower beds, and girls looking beautiful and proud like the inaccessible snow mountains of Pamir. The music by Alexander Zatsepin, the famous Soviet film composer, and the lyrics by Onegin Hajikasimov, the famous Soviet song lyricist of Azerbaijani origin, contributed to the establishment of such an aura of old Dushanbe in several musicals. The old Dushanbe and its authentic appearance have almost disappeared today, giving way to the high-tech multistory buildings. But the atmosphere created by the songs about old Dushanbe played in the musical *White Piano (Beliy Royal*, 1968) by Tajik director Muqaddas Makhmudov still evokes strong nostalgia among Tajiks of all generations inside and outside the country, like a longing for utopia, for a lost paradise. The song was performed by the Soviet singer Aida Vedishcheva and contained the following lines: “Let there be cities of wondrous beauty somewhere, but I will keep only Dushanbe in my heart forever”. The irony was that the composer Alexander Zatsepin had never been to Tajikistan before writing the music for *White Piano*.

The story of *White Piano* follows a rather schematic scenario. An art critic from Moscow sets out on a journey to Tajik SSR to find the white piano belonging to a foreign concubine in the harem of the last Emir of Bukhara. The critic’s boss advises her to avoid traveling, but she accepts this challenge to get acquainted with the tourist attractions of Dushanbe, the national flavor, and the foreign mentality, which creates a series of comic incidents, allowing Makhmudov to make fun of local peculiarities. For example, there is a scene depicting the adultery of a married Tajik composer, father to ten kids, played by Frunzik Mkrchtyan, a Soviet actor of Armenian origin. The musical includes a dream sequence (“Song of the Art Critic”), in which the art critic dreams of being welcomed in a harem, guarded by eunuchs singing a song about being assigned to this work by the Labor Department and being paid a good salary. In her turn, the art critic retrains concubines to dance the rock-n-roll rather than belly dances. There is another song in this film, which is performed by the romantic heroine played by Stalina Azamatova, the Tajik ballerina who was a Tajik movie star in the 1960s. Her song painted images of a harsh wind in a desert, of a caravan of camels, of dunes and a palm tree at a crossroad where the heroine promises to wait for an imaginary lover. Once again, these images, like the one of the harem, were detached from the realities of the Tajik SSR, where palm trees never grow, presenting it as a territory dominated by feudal-patriarchal remnants. In turn, the modern art critic in search of the historical piano among ignorant people who do not realize the true value of their cultural treasure, personified the mission to enlighten and preserve the cultural heritage of the so-called ‘Younger brother’, as all union republics were called within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

The creation of the musicals required simultaneous work on the script, lyrics, and music. One of the main difficulties consisted in the fact that the Russian

lyrics had to be put to already-composed Tajik music that had a different tempo-rhythm. In this regard, especially under the influence of popular comedies by Leonid Gaidai, like *Prisoner of the Caucasus (Kavkazskaya Plennitsa)* or *Ivan Vasil'evich changes his occupation (Ivan Vasil'evich menyaet professiyu)*, priority was given to the Soviet composers and songwriters who already had experience in making music for this type of film.

All Tajikfilm productions were usually planned in two languages: the film was shot in Tajik with songs sung in Tajik, and later re-dubbed and re-sung in Moscow in Russian. For example, the role of Zukhra, the female protagonist in *The Cook and the Singer* (1978), another musical by Muqaddas Makhmudov (codirected by Valery Harchenko, the Soviet filmmaker), was performed by Makhfirat Khamrakulova, the popular Tajik singer of 1970-1980s. Since she was the one to sing all the songs, it can be assumed that she was cast because of her singing skills. However, when the film was dubbed into Russian in Moscow, her songs were re-recorded by Alla Pugacheva, the popular Soviet and later Russian singer. The two songs from Pugacheva's first album that was released in the year of the film production (1977), were used in the film too. The choice of an acclaimed singer, like Alla Pugacheva, Muslim Magomayev, Aida Vedischeva, Mikhail Boyarsky, and of film composers such as Alexander Zatsepin, Andrei Babaev, and Eduard Artemyev, ensured the release of the film's songs on gramophone records for all-Union distribution. As the film director Muqaddas Makhmudov has admitted, Tajik cinema had to have universal appeal to be understood throughout the USSR. The internationalization of the music was understood as reflective of this universal appeal. In the context of the commitment to internationalizing Soviet art back in the 1940s, Sergei Balasanyan wrote an article entitled "What prevents the development of Opera in Central Asia?". The article was eventually banned because it stated that while most of the works created by the composers visiting Central Asia pretended to be national, they were in fact Russian operas on Central Asian subjects, written according to the typical opera templates of the 19th century. It added that no national art can be created by *Varyagi* (a derogatory term for aliens, foreigners).[5] Some representatives of the local Tajik intelligentsia in the 1950s were accused of nationalism for opposing the active creation of new music pieces in European genres, and for arguing that their own domestic culture should be developed instead of propagating foreign music. The discussion around European genres of music entirely illustrates the approach taken in the creation of the Soviet musical, the efforts to bring Soviet musical culture to a common denominator as an artificial organism.

The pinnacle of the Tajik musical cinema is its second musical, *I Met a Girl (Ya vstretil devushku*,1957), created 14 years after *The Tajik film-concert*. It was directed by Rafail Perelstein, a Soviet filmmaker who was invited to Tajikistan to complete an important task – to film the musical that was supposed to represent the republic in the *Second Decade of Tajik Art* in Moscow in 1957. The music of *I Met a Girl* was composed by Andrew Babayev, the Azerbaijani

composer. The Tajik lyrics were written by Mirzo Tursunzadeh, the Soviet Tajik poet. But the film's signature song "Ya vstretil devushku" *(*translated as "I met a girl" in English and "Didam jamole" in Tajik*)* became well-known because of its Russian lyrics that were written by Gabriel El-Registan, the Soviet Armenian poet, and sung by Rashid Beibutov, the Azerbaijani singer. The confusion about the identity of the widely-known song (it being debatable whether the song is Azerbaijani, Armenian, Tajik, or Russian) reflects the multiculturalism of the Tajik Soviet musicals. Later, multiple remakes of this song were made in many former Soviet republics.

The plot of the musical *I Met a Girl* is that Lola, a talented young girl, is encouraged not to continue with her education after graduation, and not to sing and dance in the city ensemble. Singing and dancing were considered indecent activities if performed publicly by a traditionally raised girl. However, many active Komsomol workers persuade Lola's father to allow his daughter to perform on the stage.

Interestingly, the musical *I Met a Girl* is perceived as a national film by the Tajik people thanks to the creative use of the Tajik folk melody by Andrew Babayev, which was close to his own Azerbaijani culture. Mirzo Tursunzadeh merged the characteristics of the folk temperament, his knowledge of local life, and the lyrical tradition of the Tajik classical poetry in the composed song lyrics. Unlike *The Tajik Film-concert*, the musical *I Met a Girl* was characterized by a three-act structure constructed around entertaining intrigues. The national dances that were choreographed by Gafar Valamatzadeh were used as a sort of proto-language, replacing dialogue. For example, in the scene where the former classmates start dancing, they hereby request Lola's father to let her go for a walk with them. The usage of the songs was justified in the film, meant to express the emotions of the characters or narrate a memory. For example, Lola's aunt, a housewife, talks about her tragic love in teenagerhood and her early forced marriage. Some of the film songs were stylized labor songs, like the song of Chaikhanshik, the Central Asian tea house owner, or the song of a shoemaker that were spectacularly choreographed with national flavor. Thus, each film scene and song further developed the plot.

Tajikfilm, the 'fairy tale factory', was seen as broadcasting cinematic mythology. Allegory, folklore and a tendency for lending a theatrical foundation to the film language still manifested themselves in the cinema of Tajikistan. Medieval Persian love-tales, such as that of Layla and Majnun, of Takhir and Zukhra, and of Komde and Madan, were often brought on screen in the history of the Tajik musical and film-ballet. The creation of the aforementioned musical *The Cook and the Singer* (1978) was a contemporary adaptation of Takhir and Zukhra's tale. It was preceded by another contemporary adaptation of the same tale, *Love me, Love me not (Lyubit ne Lyubit*, 1963) directed by Ali Khamraev, a guest Uzbek director. It is necessary to mention that Ali Khamraev and Muqaddas Makhmudov studied together at VGIK (the All-Union State

Institute of Cinema) and experienced similar cinematic influences, as expressed in their musicals later. Thus, both of them tried to create another Tajikistan that was different from how it was traditionally portrayed. They actively included fashionable music and dances, strove for an international cast and popular playback singers, and were fond of costumes and exotics. For example, there were African musicians and dancers as well as stylized flamenco dancers in *Love me, Love me not*. These outside influences came from their experience of the metropolitan environment of Moscow, where Khamraev and Makhmudov were formed as film students. The film plot of *Love me, Love me not* about Takhir and Zukhra, childhood friends and foreign students in Moscow, allowed them to design the film using the aesthetics of Western European and progressive Russian cinema. The details about the lovers being Tajiks, as well as the later geographical shift to the Tajik SSR, were only hinted at (by the national skullcaps and Ikat dresses) and were used concisely without spoiling the overall concept of creating a musical influenced by the famous films of the Thaw period such as *The Cranes are Flying (Letyat Zhuravli*, 1957) by Mikhail Kalatozov. In turn, Grigoriy Jungvald-Khilkevich, Soviet filmmaker and artist, became the production designer of *Love me, Love me not*.

The protagonist's friend, called Kudrad, recites improvised poems, and in his artistry, he reminds us of the Soviet poets of the sixties. The visuals created by the wide-angle lens and the Dutch angle were innovative for Tajik cinema. In general, the plot of the film was that of a typical sitcom: the parents of Takhir and Zukhra, collective farm chairman and his accountant, had arranged for their children to marry when they were still in the cradle. But time has passed and the parents now fear accusations of cultivating the feudal-patriarchal remnants if they still insist on the marriage. The intrigue of the musical develops from their doubts about whether their children love each other or not, a source of confusion for the two romantic couples, Takhir and Zukhra, and Kudrad and Gulnora (Takhir's friend and his lover). The male playback singers in the film were Vladimir Troshin and Muslim Magomaev, while the female playback was sung by Elmira Urazbayeva (an Uzbek popsinger from the 1960s) to the verses of El-Registan. The oriental tango-style film song "Where are you my Gulnora?", performed by Muslim Magomayev, was used as a leitmotif that expressed the love doubts of Kudrad and warned the viewers of the impending mess. It was also expressed by the masquerade dance in the mountains when true faces and intentions remained hidden behind the protagonists' masks.

Tajik musicals were a complex phenomenon in the creation of an internationalized cinema, which was distinguished by Orientalism and exoticization at first, and subsequently, starting from the 1960s, by Westernization, all in an attempt to entertain Tajik filmgoers and to unify national cinema as a component of the Soviet Union's overall film industry. It is impossible to imagine the creation of such a national musical as *I Met a Girl* in the 1960-1970s. Firstly, because a new generation of filmmakers came to Tajik

cinema in the 1960s, striving to create a new Westernized musical cinema that focused on the demands of film distribution. Secondly, the policy of ‘developed socialism’ was adopted to further blur national differences. Having said that, the search for a national cinema that expresses local identity continues to remain an open question, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in view of globalization.

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