East European Film Bulletin

ESSAY

Sleepwalkers

Temur Babluani's *The Sun of the Sleepless* (*Udzinarta mze*, 1992)

VOL. 56 (AUGUST 2015) BY KONSTANTY KUZMA

Given the renewed interest in Georgian cinema in recent years, it is striking that the work of Temur Babluani and his *Sun of the Sleepless* in particular have largely eluded the attention of Western curators and programmers alike. MOMA's ambitious 45-title retrospective *Discovering Georgian Cinema* (2014/2015) for instance, curated by Susan Oxtoby and organized in cooperation with the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Archive, featured but one of Babluani's works, his *Flight of the Sparrows* (1980), thus giving way to a work of aesthetic boldness and political piquancy (*Flight* was banned by Soviet censors) over the popular phenomenon which is *The Sun of the Sleepless*, a stylistically modest film which returned from the Berlinale in 1993 with a Silver Bear and went on to become one of Georgia's most popular and representative post-Soviet product. (Even Gela Babluani, Temur's son, had his French-speaking debut feature *Tzameti* screen at the series in New York alongside many mediocre contemporary films though his inventive crime thriller shows no sign of either accidental or intentional representativeness.) What makes the relative obscurity of *Sun of the Sleepless* still more striking is the fact that it anticipated the chief thrust of contemporary Georgian cinema by capturing a dark decade in Georgia's history that had only then begun.

Babluani's drama depicts the rough times physician Gela and his family face in an environment that visibly displays the marks of 1990s Georgia. The opening fifteen minutes have Gela sheltering a lost, elderly woman at his place, taking home his son Dato from prison and getting beaten up in the process. Gela is a physician who's secretly working on a cure for cancer, a double employment which draws mistrust and incredulity from his peers. Against a hostile environment marked by violence and poverty, his family clings together, though Dato's repeated fallouts with the law strain the cohesion. Upon release, Dato is obsessed with taking revenge on a former warden and soon returns to ordinary looting.

Gela uses much of his spare time (as well as the family's scarce savings) to work on his cancer research, which he conducts on a number of lab rats. When Aristotle, one of his rats, dies, Dato scathingly remarks that "Aristotle the great philosopher has died as well". But Gela insists that his rat is healthy: "Its cancerous cells are gone," he explains with the dead body clutched safely in his hands. Gela's an idealist who doesn't care about the world of appearances. When he visits Dato in prison in the beginning of the film, he's shocked to find him insulting his wardens and refuses to accept that they could really be the abusive people Dato says they are. This is partly because Dato speaks a wholly different language than him. Marked by his rough prison experience, Dato's a realist who's unperturbed by the imaginary workings of his dad – a dead rat is a dead rat, and a warden is a warden. No scientific or moral argument can call into question such brute facts of life.

Later in the film, the outlooks of Gela and Dato are put to the test when Dato presents an appealing syllogism: if people occasionally lose money, as they surely do, then someone must also find it, the logic goes. Dato's eavesdropping mom is immediately suspicious of Dato's drivel and asks him if he himself has by any chance stumbled upon some money, to which Dato responds by producing a hefty sum which he swears to have found on the street. Of course, it's really loot, but from the perspective of Dato's cynical realism, you might as well say that he's saying the truth. Earlier, we saw Dato placing the blood money under a stone and returning to it after walking a few steps away. It's unclear whether that ingenious scene depicts an attempt by Dato to fool himself or his parents. Either way, Babluani unmasks Dato's attitude, whether it is intentional or not, as lazy opportunism that serves him whatever purpose he's pursuing. (Indeed, no less dangerous is the credulous validation he receives from his parents.)

As the story thus approaches its climax, the audience has long been enveloped by Babluani's captivating story. Though Elgudzha Burduli in the role of Gela and non-actor David Kazishvili as Dato give marvellous performances, as do virtually all of the brilliantly cast supporting actors, many of their scenes are exaggerated and theatrical – perhaps another reason why this film seems so old-school. It took a second viewing to remind me how clumsy Babluani's style comes off in the beginning, and how important it is to take seriously the film's humanistic message in order to be able to appreciate its form, which has less to teach film students qua film students than viewers qua humans. The beautiful score, written by the director himself, is a notable exception, as it needs no introduction.

In spite of occasional gleams of hope, Gela's research advances slowly, and it doesn't take long before his daughter voices the same sort of anger as their neighbors, who are unwilling to put up with the rats any longer. One day, the lab is vandalized and the rats escape, a crucial turning point of the story in which Dato first proves that he's starting to acknowledge his father's deep-

rooted humanism. “Academics are academics,” he remarks as if to rehearse a view of his earlier self, only to add that “if you believe that you’re right, that’s all you need”. Dato no longer doubts Gela’s project, which has long grown bigger than himself. In a world devoid of compassion and meaning, Gela’s goal of beating cancer, however unrealistic, has become valuable in its own.

Gela’s determined to complete his research in spite of his critics, but he’s troubled by pains and finds out that he needs an appendectomy. Here his idealism finally gets the better of him as he decides to conduct the operation himself, a daring and ultimately fatal decision that finally has him lose all confidence in his powers. At Gela’s deathbed, Dato watches with disbelief as his father says his last words. But though Gela’s auto-operation leads to his death, his benevolence and scientific curiosity survive him in his son, who’s become as convinced of Gela’s project as Gela himself used to be. He holds on to Gela’s manuscripts and tries restlessly to get his work acknowledged posthumously.

Where contemporary films from Georgia struggle with a common problem of noncommercial filmmaking, which is that they are consumed by the very same elite which produces them, Babluani may be the last Georgian filmmaker to have reached a cult following beyond the country’s intellectual class. As is the case with many Georgian films thus cherished (notably *Keto and Kote*, 1948 or *Mimino*, 1977), it’s not immediately clear to foreign viewers why *Sun of the Sleepless* or *Flight of the Sparrows*, out of all films, should defy Georgia’s elitism to keep reappearing on the country’s TV sets. Neither film is marked by stylistic maturity or the narrative formulas that ordinarily produce mass following, and neither has the positive demeanor of your classical mass sedative. But they don’t pretend, either. Boldly honest, Babluani’s films admit to a firm belief in humanism that, amazingly enough, survived Georgia’s wretched 1990s and is still able to ensnare viewers: his films touch where others point, introducing songs or avowals where one would expect conflict and catharsis. The works thus echo a time when pathos had not yet been borne down by self-consciousness (whatever his flaws in craft, Babluani makes up through emotion), and clearly it’s this emotional tone that is both a characteristic shared by Georgians’ favorite films and a notable antipode to the new rationalism that contemporary Georgian filmmakers have picked up in recent years.

Of course Georgian cinema’s transition from emotional filmmaking to intellectual cinema has not been complete. The work of Levan Koguashvili in particular reflects a residual interest in building stories around emotional rather than narrative advancement. *Blind Dates* (2013) and *Street Days* (2010), perhaps even his documentary *Women from Georgia* (2009) about a group of illegal workers in the US, are flip-books of recurring routines which reveal no sign of deeper purpose. Yet Koguashvili struggles to produce anything beyond reserved compassion in viewers, who feel quickly that it makes no difference

whether his symbol-laden sequences will culminate in relief (*Street Days*) or replication (*Blind Dates*): too firm is the metaphysical grip that fate has over the lives of drug addicts and good-for-nothings. Koguashvili has us understand people's problems, as does Babluani, but he can't make us feel them, and at times it feels like the latter was up there fighting on screen with his characters where the former can only watch. Where Dato's father's deathbed is a source of higher-order reconciliation, Checkie's death in *Street Days* – which he suffers in front of a TV set while high and lonely – is as touching as it is programmatic, as Koguashvili uses it to deploy last-minute signifiers to bloat his film's interpretatory scope.

If it's true that Babluani – through his human characters, his self-written music, even his fallible and gritty style – is able to speak for a generation in a way that Georgian filmmakers haven't been able to since, it is also true that Georgia has now reached a socio-political reality which no longer possesses a homogenous identity. And now that a capitalist system has been adopted, who will listen to calls for communitarianism anyway? (Indeed, it is unlikely that the popularity of *Sun of the Sleepless* will be passed on to the next generation.) To this many contemporary filmmakers respond with relativism in judgement and morals alike, feigning the same kind of diversity in analysis that today's world sees in its outlooks. "How are we to judge others?", they, like Dato, might ask. "But we don't have to," Babluani could have Gela retort, who observes late into the film that everyone has something for which he deserves to be loved, and that one shouldn't be too quick to write other people off. Contemporary artists, who are often content with trying to make us accept other's people's point of views, are wrong in thinking that the quest for truth irrevocably involves misjudging other people. The moral messages Babluani dispenses pertain to one's relation to oneself: the goal is not to learn something with which to judge other people, but to gain insight that one can put to good use in one's own life. That this approach feels almost archaic today only shows how bad artists and viewers have become at identifying with, as opposed to merely understanding, the characters of their books and films.