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Serge Parajanov and Tengiz Abuladze: two Models of Anticommunist Testimony through Cinema in Soviet Georgia

Abstract

Georgia, the oldest Christian-orthodox country in the world, gained the infamous glory to give mankind one of its most ferocious tyrans: Iosif Vissarionovici Stalin. But also Georgia was one of the first and most combative outposts of the anticommunist struggle.

Georgians' deep spirituality, their love for freedom and beauty and their stoutly patriotism reflected in cinema. After the Soviet Cultural Thaw, two great Caucasian filmmakers succeeded through their brave confession, to break ideological canons and to impose themselves beyond the borders of the Red Empire in the arena of world cinema.



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They are Serge Parajanov and Tengiz Abuladze - two great personalities of the film art, two models of anticommunist testimony through cinema.

We are going to present the essential elements from the biography and work of the two filmmakers, that are relevant to their patriotic and Christian testimony through art and civic attitude.

Keywords

geopolitics, witnessing art, national identity, ethnic spirit

1 Introduction

The double commemorative year of The Holy Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu and those martyred together with him in Constantinople in 1714, and of the divine Eucharist, celebrated in 2014 by The Romanian Orthodox Church, overlaps on the Eastern coast of the Black Sea, with the anniversary of ninety years from the birth of two great dissident filmmakers born in Georgia, two great artists and citizens, fighters for political and religious freedom: Sergei Parajanov and Tengiz Abuladze. We will try to find out the hidden meaning of this coincidence.

Caucasus is a land of paradoxes: the legendary abode of the Golden Fleece and, through Mount Ararat, the keeper of the traces of Noah, the ancestor of all nations, Caucasus is simultaneously, in the mythic memory of humankind, the land of cruel Medeea and the torment altar of rebellious Prometheus. An ancestral land and a core of ethnic, political and religious contradictions, geographically gravitating around a two-headed, eternally polarized peak - the volcano Elbrus -, Caucasus seems to have stored until today an archetypal dowry,

manifested in irreconcilable dualisms. Geopoliticians are talking for a long time about "the Caucasus powder keg".

The way the two Caucasian filmmakers, Parajanov and Abuladze managed, by talent and love for people, for homeland and God, to transform this "powder keg" into a "horn of plenty" of spiritual and artistic values, is paradigmatic for the increasingly conflictual situations in the nowadays world.

Christianity and Islam, Georgian Orthodoxy and Armenian Monophysitism, reminiscences of Zoroastrianism and other pagan cults, which had not been entirely forgotten; sedentary civilization models (of the Armenians and the Georgians) and nomad models (of the steppe peoples, coming from beyond the Caspian Sea), imperial¹, national and tribal models of state; ethnic customs and spirits, joined into complex amalgams of hundreds of races, that are very hard to describe, leading to divergent political orientations: all these configure a unique cultural-geopolitical profile of a planetary region, which is, as locals use to say, "resistant to globalization". Only a healthy and flexible national identity - that is free spirit - can really "resist to globalization".

The phenomenon of bi- or tri-polarity, concentrated in the three Caucasian states, having three different religions (one Muslim and two Christian, but of different confessions), ethnicities, languages and even alphabets, can be easily observed in politics. Between these three bearers of multi-millenary civilizations - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan -, rarely have been lasting friendship relationships.

¹ Both Armenians and Georgians nostalgically remember their periods of glory, when they fearlessly faced the Roman and later the Byzantine Empire.

2 Short Historical Outlook

The oldest Christian Orthodox country in the world, a fervent preserver of its multi-millenary traditions, Georgia gained in the early twentieth century the sad reputation to have given mankind one of its fiercest tyrants: Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. But also Georgia was one of the first and most combative outposts of the anticommunist and anti-Soviet struggle in the world².

Taking advantage of the chaotic situation of the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), Georgia declared its independence, proclaiming the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921); but the independence had been hardly maintained and for a short time, due to the invasion of the Bolshevik armies in 1920, which led to the forced incorporation of Gruzia into the Soviet Union. Even if it lasted little time, the Democratic Republic of Georgia became a symbol of the national feeling, being frequently evoked by the more or less controversial nationalist movements of the late '80s and later, as a glorious moment of regaining the statehood, lost through the vicissitudes of history for many hundreds of years.

The same spirit of independence was vigorously but also chaotically reaffirmed after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., when Georgia declared its independence in 1991.

² View the autobiographical novels of the anticommunist Georgian fighter, Ciabua Amiredjibi, that were translated into many languages ("Data Tutashia", The Bull's Confession, Gora Mborgali or Smile of Destiny) or the film version of the extraordinary autobiography of the prince-hero Ciabua Amiredjibi in the documentary "The Story of the Gulag Runaway" (directed by Kucna Amiredjibi, Georgia, 2003).

3 Politics and Cinema

The Georgians' deep spirituality, attachment to ancestral values, stoutly patriotism and love of freedom and beauty, arising from the Hellene and Byzantine cultures (from whose substance Georgia nourished itself for several centuries), but which were also potentiated by the national spirit, reflected in cinema. Even though in the seven decades of the Soviet period it is hard to talk, strictly speaking, about a national cinema, while this was tributary to the Russian School film, in whose crucible it was formed, and from which it is difficult to be separated, Georgian cinema always had its own touch, characterized by a certain easiness, innocence, tender nonconformism and love for life - attributes that belong to the genetic heritage of the small and brave mountainous nation.

More or less coherent and recognizable anticommunist testimonies were possible, as everywhere in the East European cinema of the Socialist Bloc, after Khrushchev's cultural thaw, but especially later, in the Glasnost epoch. Although discrete critical accents against the flaws of the socialist system could be found at many directors (like Eldar Shengelaia³), two great names of the Soviet cinema, formed in Tbilisi, managed through the courage of their confession to break the ideological canons and to impose themselves in the arena of world cinema, beyond the borders of the Red Empire.

They are Sergei Parajanov (1924-1990) and Tengiz Abuladze (1924-1994), two great personalities of film art, two models of resistance and anticommunist testimony through cinema. Both were born in Soviet Georgia, in the same year 1924, and even in the same month (on 9 and 31 January, respectively) and both would have been celebrating in 2014 ninety years from their birth.

³ For instance in his comedy "Blue Mountains" (1984).

It is no accident that the year, designated by Romanians as the commemorating year of the Brâncoveni Martyrs, coincides in Caucasus and in the history of world cinema with the double commemoration of Parajanov and Abuladze. A mecenat-prince, promoter of a cultural Wallachian renaissance, conceived in the spirit of Byzantine Christianity, martyred for the European magnitude of his cultural and political demarche, versus two filmmakers, witnessing for celestial beauty, civic and religious freedom. Here are two models of different calibers, born in different historical contexts, two models of fighting against oppressive ideological systems and sacrificial testifying through art, culture and civilizing effort, of the national, European and Christian identity of a people. Because the Christian and national ideal for which the Holy Martyr Constantin Brâncoveanu, and the two Caucasian filmmakers respectively, have struggled, with their specific weapons, is the same.

4 Parajanov and Abuladze - artistic genius and Christian Testimony

We shall present the key elements of the two filmmakers' biography and creation, relevant to their testimony of patriotism and faith through art and civic attitude. Although the creation of both is well anchored in their ethnic tradition and deeply innovative at the same time, their human and biographical profiles are quite different.

Sergei Parajanov, an Armenian filmmaker born and raised in Tbilisi, is, from all points of view, a great nonconformist. From his youth he felt the need to constantly show through gestures of witticism and rebelliousness (carnavalesque rather than aggressive) his civic anticommunist and anti-Soviet attitude. This caused him a permanent conflict with the authorities, resulted in three harsh detentions in the Soviet prisons, the prohibition to practice his profession, and a constant political harassment.

The Georgian filmmaker *Tengiz Abuladze* was not a dissident in the classic sense of the word. But his movies, especially his trilogy "*The Plea*" (aka "*The Supplication*", original title: *Мольба*, 1968), "*The Tree of Desire*" (original title: *Древо желаний*, 1976), and "*Repentance*" (original title: *Покаяние*, 1987), exalting the valences of the archaic world and the profile of the "ancient man", had marked a major moment in expressing the national identity of the Georgian people in a regime of forced Sovietization, when all the manifestations of non-Russian nationalisms were rejected in USSR. Therefore Abuladze's movies were already an act of courage and tacit politic resistance. His masterpiece, "*Repentance*" (produced in 1984, but immediately banned and screedend only in 1986) is the most disturbing anticommunist and antitotalitarian testimony in the worldwide art cinema. After "*Repentance*", the director no longer shot any film until the end of his life (1994).

Until shooting "*Repentance*", Abuladze did not publicly manifest as a dissident. He was a university teacher (since 1974) at the Tbilisi Theatre Institute - a position that can not be occupied in a totalitarian system without a minimal ideological complying to the political system; he was a member of the Communist Party (since 1978) and even a deputy of the Soviet Union. In 1980 he received for his movies the title of The People's Artist - a quite widespread title in the Soviet artistic guild, but a title that Parajanov, for instance, will receive only in the year of his death, 1990 (and then, ironically, at the same time from the Ukrainian and Armenian Soviet Socialist Republics, in whose studios he had made two of his masterpieces⁴).

A discreet presence in the public arena, leaving his words to speak only through his movies, Tengiz Abuladze enters into the goal of our conference through a single film, but a film like an

⁴ "*The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Тени забытых предков*), and "*Sayat-Nova*" (*Саят Нова*), respectively (aka "*The Color of Pomegranates*").

entire career: "*Repentance*". Just like Parajanov, Abuladze appeals to tradition (Caucasian and European, medieval, biblical and evangelical) and to archaicity in order to discover fundamental human values of the "ancient man", like freedom, pure beauty and sacrificial power, values that are rejected by the society of the "new man". The same as Parajanov, Abuladze contests the totalitarian political system, regardless of its underlying ideology, as a system that cancels freedom and crushes human personality. What could be more contesting for an Marxist-Leninist ideologized art, but to talk about the richness of the Middle Age values, as does Abuladze from the moment of his film "*The Plea*"?

The two filmmakers defy official Soviet culture both by film language, and by the evocation of supposedly outdated and "reactionary" universes and themes, that are strange to socialist realism and to progressist (liberal) ideology. His films (beginning with the neorealist "*Magdana's Donkey*", 1955) speak about the intolerance of a leading traditional group and the silence of the people, or about its inability to improve its social situation. Like Parajanov, Abuladze felt himself brother of suffering with his people. His filmography investigates the problem of social freedom, seen in the relationship between individual and collectivity, between the voice of the soul and the voice of the city - a relationship, that is pursued in traditional patriarchal societies, whose intolerance to alterity is seen like a metonymy of the communist regime's intolerance. This attitude is clearly configured in the filmmaker's trilogy: "*The Plea*", "*The Tree of Desire*", "*Repentance*".

Whether neorealist (as in "*Magdana's Donkey*"), symbolic (as in "*The Plea*"), or avant-gardist-postmodern (as in "*Repentance*") Abuladze's filmic language is born not from derision, but from suffering, from the transfigurative overcoming of the humanly bearable threshold of suffering, beyond which there is nothing but madness, inferno and chaos... or the salvation of God. In "*Repentance*", the belief in God is the only one that puts limits to dehumanization. While history exists, Abuladze can not afford

to situate himself beyond the community he belongs and beyond the suffering of his people; and his art, grafted on to the open wounds of the world, transfigures in Christ this suffering. What Western Theater of the Absurd produced in response to the horrors of war and fascism, Eastern European contestant artists have conceived as a response to the much more subversive crime produced by the communist regimes. To this day, their art is far too little known.

Sergei Parajanov is an innovator of filmic language in the highest degree: his films are visual poems about the sacrificial meaning of creation, founding sacrifice and sacredness of love, inspired by the great liturgical culture, the ancient literature of manuscripts (defining for Armenians), ancient Eastern and Western culture and civilization, with everything they have more vivid and sacred. This act of cultural recovery would have seemed bookish, boring or simply exotic in the liberal West, but it became a form of active spiritual and civic resistance in a totalitarian ideological system, whose original crimes are the destruction of the past, parricide and Deicide.

Parajanov's dissidence, his revolt, expressed both against Socialism and Capitalism - two forms of society equally secular and Deicide - is publicly manifested in iconoclastic speeches about the freedom of the artist, and is perceived as an act of aggression by the Soviet cultural officials, who will condemn him three times to political prison and will permanently harass him. The story of his tensioned relations with the Soviet politics and cinema authorities is itself a modern saga, a tragic-comic absurd drama, like the filmmaker's movies and collages. We briefly present this story.

Parajanov's first arestment happens in 1947 in Tbilisi, for public nuisance, when the 23 year old young man is imprisoned for seven months in the Ortacialsjk jail from Tbilisi.

Over 24 years, on 1 December 1971, while presenting in Minsk his masterpiece "*Sayat Nova*" (1968), Parajanov speaks to the Belarusian students, exposing with his characteristic nonchalance and humor, his artistic credo and opinions about

the state of the Soviet cinema. But naturally, humorless KGB informers were present in the university hall. As a result, the acting President of the KGB, Yuri Andropov made a 23-page report about Parajanov's speech, addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. From now on, any filmmaker's screenplays, proposed to the Kiev, Yerevan, Vilnius, Riga studios, are systematically denied. His homosexuality, known in his close circles, but never explicitly declared, makes him more undesirable in the eyes of the authorities.

In December 1973, two years after his speech in Minsk, Parajanov is imprisoned without a trial in Lukianovskaia prison from Kiev. He is secretly judged only in April 1974, when he is sentenced to the confiscation of his property and five years of severe prison, that he spends in the Ukraine camps (Gubnika, Strizhavka, Perevalsk). In Western Europe starts the protest against Parajanov's imprisonment; the action is initiated by his octogenarian friend Lili Brik⁵, a great admirer of the filmmaker, and her brother in law, the poet Louis Aragon, a representative figure of the official culture and also a prominent member of the French Communist Party, who went especially to Moscow and had a personal meeting for this purpose with the Kremlin leaders.

Parajanov is anticipatedly released on 30 December 1977. Losing the right to residency in Kiev, he comes back to Tbilisi. Here, his apartment being confiscated by the authorities, he lives in his parental house. All studios refuse his cooperation. He spends his time writing screenplays (most of which will be become movies), drawing and making collages.

⁵ Lilia Yurievna Brik (1891-1978): a Russian sculptor and writer, a visible member of the avant-garde literary and artistic circles from the first half of the twentieth century. Mayakovsky's beloved. Married to the writer Vasily A. Katanian, a biographer of Parajanov.

When in April 1980 he is officially invited to the Cannes International Film Festival, the envelope with the invitation remains locked in the Goskino⁶ offices.

Over a year, on 31 October 1981, at the Taganka Theater in Moscow, before the representation of a prohibited drama, entitled "Vladimir Vysotsky", dedicated to the great actor, singer and songwriter, Parajanov held a public speech. The subject of the play was paradigmatic for Parajanov, but terribly politically inconvenient and dangerous: the life of an unemployed Soviet filmmaker! The Gruzia branch of the KGB receives from Moscow the indication to arrest Parajanov under any pretext. This happens over four months, on 12 February 1982, when Parajanov is arrested again and imprisoned without a trial in the Ortacialsk Prison in Tbilisi. But we are now in the era of Glastnost, a political relaxation never known before in the USSR. Thus the filmmaker is judged on 4 October and released.

Only in 1984, after 16 years of imposed inactivity, Parajanov is approved to shoot at Gruzia-Film "*The Legend of Surami Fortress*" (*Легенда Сурамской крепости*), but from now on he is not allowed to put his name on the credits alone. From now on he will co-direct (formally) together with the director and actor Dodo (David) Abashidze. The film had a great success at the Pesaro Film Festival.

Only in 1987, at 63 years old, Parajanov is allowed to make his first trip abroad, to the Rotterdam Film Festival, who offers him the Award "Twenty directors of the future".

But his days are coming to their end. In May 1989, due to a malign tumor at the right lung, produced due to the inhumane conditions in the prisons, his lung is extirpated. The filmmaker

⁶ Goskino: The State Committee for Cinematography, an administrative institution of the Soviet Union, later of Russia, coordinating film production. In U.R.S.S was also responsible for censorship. In 2004 was renamed the Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography (Roskultura). It was abolished in 2008.

dies on 20 July 1990 in Yerevan and is buried in the Central Pantheon of the city. His international glory will widely increase after his death, when Parajanov will effectively turn into the legen, he has built with his own sweat and blood in his lifetime.

Conclusions

Eucharist and martyrdom, communion with God and crucifixion for the divine love - the inseparable interplay between these two is nowhere more obvious in all the film history as at the two Georgian filmmakers, Abuladze and Parajanov.

Under the conditions of the strict regime Soviet prisons - places of physical and moral extermination -, Parajanov survives through drawing and through his unbeatable charisma of a storyteller, but also through the cult of friendship, by which he tames the severe guardians and the fierce prisoners, transforming thus the prison into a school of life, humanizing what seemed impossible to humanize, and becoming, with the means of his art, a "fisher of men". The most vicious criminals become humanized and more gentle after listening to Parajanov's incredible stories.

His drawings, assemblages and collages, made in prison, as well as in the long years of unemployment, are acid pamphlets, full of intelligence, sadness and humor, to the flaws of the socialist system, but also of the capitalist hypocrisy, false prudishness and values. Most of them are kept in the "Parajanov" Museum in Yerevan, but also in private collections and have been exhibited, especially after the filmmaker's death, in many cultural capitals of the world.

The work of the two Caucasian filmmakers, exalting the love for people, homeland, God and tradition and confessing the power of pure beauty, is the best prove of the power of survival of Christian values in a communist, totalitarian regime.

The appreciation enjoyed by their films in the last years of the life to the two directors, and the constant growth of their notoriety, especially after their death and till today, proves the growing need of authentic values, anchored in God, in a world axiologically disoriented and increasingly globalized.

When Tarkovsky asked him what he lacked to be a genial artist, Parajanov replied to him: "Five years of imprisonment in a maximum security prison!"

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