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მზის ქალაქი

Mzis qalaqi

City of the Sun

Rati Oneli

Producer Dea Kulumbegashvili, Rati Oneli, Jim Stark. **Production companies** OFA/Office of Film Architecture (Tiflis, Georgia), Jim Stark (New York, USA). **Director** Rati Oneli. **Screenplay** Dea Kulumbegashvili, Rati Oneli. **Director of photography** Arseni Khachaturan. **Editor** Ramiro Suarez. **Sound design** Andrey Dergachev. **Sound** Sonia Matrosova, Alexey Kobzar.

Colour. 104 min. Georgian.

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Up to 50 percent of the world's manganese, a vital metal across the globe, used to be mined in Chiatura, in western Georgia. Today, it resembles an apocalyptic ghost town. *Mzis qalaqi* portrays a few of the remaining inhabitants. Music teacher Zurab dismantles ramshackle concrete buildings and sells the iron girders to make some money on the side. Archil still works in the mine but his real passion is the local amateur theatre group. Despite being malnourished, two young female athletes still train stoically for the next Olympic Games.

In his documentary debut, director Rati Oneli provides fascinating insights into a living environment whose bleak industrial ruins appear at once colossal and like a film set. A jumble of clapped out electric wires and aging cable cars runs through the city like the clogged-up arteries of an ailing organism that resists the flow of life in untiring fashion. *Mzis qalaqi* brings home the ephemeral nature of utopias. In a city where the sun never shines, it's only the inhabitants that generate warmth. Oneli succeeds in achieving far more than the mining companies are capable of: His camera brings that most valuable of resources to the surface – humanity.

Ansgar Vogt

Surrender and defiance

In 1932 after a visit he made to the Soviet countryside, Boris Pasternak wrote in shock: 'What I saw there cannot be described in any words. It was such inhuman, unimaginable misery, such horrifying disaster, that it became somewhat abstract and wasn't possible to grasp mentally. I became sick.'

When I visited Chiatura for the first time in the summer of 2014, Pasternak's words immediately came to my mind. Even though it was a different place and time, I instinctively understood what he meant by abstract. The surreal beauty and grand devastation dismayed me. But I was as shocked by the inhabitants' apparent nonchalance and sense of humour about the situation they found themselves in: their simultaneous defiance and complete surrender. They walked on land filled with immense wealth, yet they possessed nothing. They looked death in the eye while riding corroded steel cable cars to work, but spoke of human beauty and love while covered in mud inside the dangerous mines. I couldn't think in any other terms but abstract.

I lived and researched alone in Chiatura on and off from August 2014 to May 2015. When I arrived in Chiatura for the first time, the city was entirely taken over by lush vegetation: it was literally swallowed by the jungle. I felt like I had accidentally discovered remnants of a great, ancient civilisation that had been swallowed up ages ago. It's as though the people who live there now had no direct relation to the once-great city lying in fragments around them. Compared to the ancient mountains and the grand architecture, the inhabitants of the city seemed small, both literally and figuratively. They didn't influence the environment at all, but were actively and violently influenced by the city itself, which shaped their mentality and daily lives.

A natural imperative to survive

In 2014, I had already lived in Chiatura for several months but I wasn't sure if I could make a film there. I knew that the magnitude of human misfortune that I witnessed demanded much more from me than just a desire to tell a 'story' or document physical destruction. The sense of responsibility was overwhelming and paralysing at the same time.

A dying city presents an altogether different realm of human existence. Here the relativity of time flow is felt strongly; time slows to a crawl and attains almost physical viscosity. A sense of despair and impending doom, mixed with a natural imperative to survive, shapes the inhabitants in unconventional ways. Here one can make peace with death, but still find purpose in performing rituals that re-affirm life; here complete surrender and defiance co-exist without contradiction. As an outsider, it was impossible to enter this world just by analysing it or by following standard logic.

The only way to gain access into their world was through pure contemplation. Not observation, but contemplation. Living in the city, being part of daily life and rituals, just gazing for as long as necessary, were some of activities that allowed for my own version of truth to emerge from the reality. As a result, *Mzis qalaqi* is my subjective impression of Chiatura.

The characters of the film are bodies existing within the peculiar space-time of this spectral place. They use their bodies to project themselves down the unknown narrative spiral of their lives. Several improbable but true stories intersect in the film. Athlete sisters run methodically, like robots, and it is the only thing they can do to survive. It also seems, however, that if they were to

stop running, a spell would be broken, a catastrophe would strike and the entire city would come to a grinding halt. Zurab keeps destroying the city to build a new life for himself and his family, and Archil moves in limbo, unable to make a decision between his passion (theatre) and money (working in the mines).

A peculiar space-time

The characters of the film seem to be violently thrown into a life they didn't choose and cannot escape. The question is whether they will wake up one day or just continue existing in a state of hypnagogia, somewhere between dreaming and wakefulness. The futility of their efforts and the authenticity of their lives are in the balance. Chiatura itself is the main character and it connects Zurab and the other characters. The city is a living organism, where cable cars crisscross in the air above it like blood vessels. It reminds us of an alien outpost, a colony where people are enslaved to provide fuel for the mother ship.

Chiatura itself is a fantastical space where time is frozen and people live in a hypnotic state. The city and the characters in *Mzis qalaqi* exist in a timeless dimension, rather than a specific locale of a post-Soviet nation. The lives, dreams and hopes of the protagonists are interwoven into the fabric of the decaying city and their destinies are bound with it.

Rati Oneli



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Rati Oneli was born in 1977 in Tbilisi, Georgia. From 1994 to 2000, he earned a Master's degree in Middle East Studies at the Free University Tbilisi. From 1999 until 2014, he lived in New York, where he studied International Relations (M.A. 2005) and International Media (M.A. 2011) at Columbia University. He made his first short film, *Theo*, in 2011. Since 2013, Rati Oneli has been pursuing a PhD at the European Graduate School in Saas Fee, Switzerland. He has been a lecturer at the University of Georgia since 2014. He also works as a producer and editor. *Mzis qalaqi* is Oneli's first feature-length film.