

THE CINEMA OF THE REPUBLICS

You
all
are the masters
of the Soviet
land.
In your hands lies
the sixth
part
of the world.
From the Kremlin
to the Chinese border.
From the Matochkin Strait
to Bukhara.
From Novorossiysk
to Leningrad.
From the lighthouse at the Arctic Circle
to the Caucasus Mountains.
From the golden eagle on the arm of the Kyrgyz
to the Eider on the cliffs of the Arctic Ocean
to the owls of the North
to the seagulls of the Black Sea.
Everything
is in your
hands.

Dziga Vertov , *Shestaya Chast Mira (A Sixth Part of the World)*, Russian SSR1926

There are times when cinema becomes an existential experience, which changes your own perception of the world so much that not only can you remember the film all your life, but also the very moment that you saw it. *THE COLOR OF POMEGRANATES* was such a film for me. I was just starting my film studies, I'd never heard the name Sergei Parajanov, and I was so exhausted from my day job as an assistant editor that I kept nodding off during the screening. The images, which are already dreamlike, became interwoven in my own dreams, leaving me equally fascinated and perplexed. I'd never seen such images before. I then watched everything of Parajanov's, but I still couldn't figure out the sources of the unique magic of his film language. Much later I had a similar experience with Artavazd Peleshyan's *Menq (We)*. Here as well, it seemed to me as if I were encountering a completely different form of film, unlike anything else in film history.

No one in the west ever took the official name "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" very seriously. The Soviet Union was Russia, augmented by a couple of oppressed and exploited provinces surrounding it. In fact, however, it consisted of 16 republics, which represented a total of 100 different nations. In his analysis on the collapse of the Soviet Union, Manuel Castells points out that Moscow's political oppression of the republics stood in opposition to the economic support for these very same places.¹ They created a system within Soviet film production that was the only one of its kind in the world. While national film productions normally concentrate in a very few places due to their enormous logistical expenditure—for instance, Bombay, Cairo, Hollywood, Paris, or Tokyo—the Soviet Union had at least one film studio in each republic, sometimes several of them. The history of these studios have basic differences. For example, while Armenia, Georgia, Russia, and the Ukraine had film studios even before the October Revolution, also possessing their own film tradition, necessarily mostly short films, the medium of film was completely uncharted territory for the Central Asian republics. Of course it would be naïve to see this support for cinema in the republics as an altruistic instrument for maintaining local, even independent culture; cinema was considered the ideal medium of propaganda in the young Soviet Union, precisely because, due to widespread illiteracy and the multitude of languages, it was easier to reach people through a visual medium. So Moscow always remained the center of Soviet film

¹ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

culture. This was the seat of the central censorship, it was here that decisions were made about which films from the republics should be kept regional, and which should be introduced throughout the union or even abroad—and of course also which films would be shelved away forever. This was also where the central film school was, the famous VGIK (All-Russian State University of Cinematography). Young students came from all the republics to study there, encountering not only the Soviet film tradition, but also international film, to the degree that it was allowed. After finishing their studies, they returned to their republics, creating often very unique film languages that interwove regional, Soviet, and international visual traditions. This very fertile exchange even took place between the non-Russian republics. The Ukrainian Larissa Sheptiko, who had studied with Alexander Dovzhenko, shot her graduate thesis film *Snoy (Heat)* for the studio Kyrgyzfilm, and Peleshyan's *Obitateli (Inhabitant)* was made in Belarus.

Despite this uniqueness, there were many reasons that the cinema of the republics remained relatively unknown abroad. One was that the regionally produced films were always exported by Sovexport in Moscow, and the production country was always uniformly given as "USSR." Only a very few databanks, such as the *Lexikon des Internationalen Films* for instance, at least indicate the production studio, making it possible to do a search under "Armenfilm" or "Odessa Kinostudio." The Arsenal archive indicates two production countries, so for instance "USSR" and "Georgia" for a film produced in the Georgian SSR. Furthermore, within Russian dominated Soviet film there were definite reservations about the "provinces." Sergei Parajanov was imprisoned several times, Otar Iosseliani and Mikheil Kobakhidze emigrated even before Perestroika, and even in 2004 a filmmaker in Moscow told me that only the bad directors had been sent back to the republics after their studies, the competent ones had worked in Moscow. And finally, along with the Soviet Union, the cinema of the republics also collapsed. In the newly independent states there was often neither money for film production nor for preserving their own filmographies, so that their history initially disappeared.²

² There is hardly any literature on the cinema of the republics. Cf. Oksana Bulgakowa [Bulgakova]: *Wie national ist das nationale Kino? Aus der Geschichte der asiatischen Kinematografien der ehemaligen Sowjetunion*, film-dienst 24/1993-1/1994.

To make matters worse, the central film archive Gosfilmfond in Moscow, in which most of the prints and negative of the republics are stored, is extremely inaccessible, so that the entire film heritage of the Soviet Union—with the exception of the already familiar classics—are only available to a limited degree if at all. This gives the Arsenal archive a special significance. Over decades, the International Forum of Young Film and the Arsenal film program had a focus on Eastern Europe and especially Soviet film, fundamentally intended as a politically motivated act of understanding after the Second World War and in the middle of the Cold War. The intense exchange with personalities such as Naum Kleeman (Moscow Film Museum) and Gaga Chkeidze (Tbilisi International Film Festival) as well as direct contacts to many filmmakers created a presumably singular collection, which, in contrast to normal film archives, is not based on any systematic acquisition of certain areas, but on the curatorial selection of single works. Furthermore, the Arsenal inherited several external archives, the most significant for Soviet film being the award winners of the Mannheim International Film Festival, a retrospective of Georgian film at the Centre Georges Pompidou, as well as part of the film archive of the Metropolis Cinema in Hamburg and the Red Army Garrison in Berlin. The archive today comprises a total of about 450 Soviet films, of which around 170 of them come from the non-Russian republics, 80 of them in turn being works of outstanding Georgian film.

Within the context of the Living Archive project, only a very small selection of the cinema of the republics can be presented. The 20 works from ten republics concentrate on the genre fiction film and documentary with a further focus on short and medium-length films.

But what is so particular about these films? What distinguishes their film language from the many other cinemas in film history? The question cannot be answered easily, Asian Soviet cinema cannot be easily compared to that of the Baltic, but there are even basic distinctions to be made between Armenian and Georgian film. What they have in common, however, is that, economically being comparably “small” countries in the era of the analog film, they could hardly have developed their own national film

production. The dependence on the Soviet Union did not only bring them censorship and oppression, but also enveloped them in a fertile aesthetic dialogue with one of the most innovative of world cinemas, because it was not dominated by economic factors.³ As least for the Asian republics, this dialogue was also one between West and East, between a highly industrialized region and many that were still dominated by agriculture. Normally, when such cultures encounter the cinema, they are never the subject of their images, but the folkloristic motif⁴ or ethnographic object of study. The complex studio system of the Soviet Union, however, creates space for a quite different kind of encounter, which also produced quite different images.

³ Even directors whose films had been banned could always shoot new films (for instance Alexander Sokurov), which had to do with the Soviet right to work. This was of course not the case during Stalinism.

⁴ There were, however, plenty of folkloristic kitsch films as well. The filmmaker Tatjana Kononenko told me that Ukrainian television showed several hours of regional dances in traditional costumes every day, and there are countless films that are little more than singing the praises of each of the landscapes in a touristic fashion.