

**Olga Zhgenti**

**D. Arts.**

### **Georgian Avant-garde Cinema of the Stormy Twenties – from Anarchy to Totalitarianism**

In the avant-garde art of the stormy twenties the interest towards the American mass culture is particularly increasing and the appropriate term for it – “Americanism” has been established. “Lower” genres, such as comedy, pamphlet, satire, circus, are preferred to “high” genres. Owing to Americanism, posters, rhythms of jazz or music hall and elements of adventure novels or tabloid chronicles intrude into the cinematography. Popularity of Georgian futurists’ group and American cinematography considerably speeds up formation of the Georgian avant-garde cinematography.

The ignorant masses of the Soviet Union are attracted by American movie stars adventure films, “westerns” and comedy films by Chaplin or Keaton, by Mary Pickford’s screen portraits. The soviet movie theatres of the twenties were taken over by American Film. In the minds of the masses America was a kind of a movie world, a symbol of technocratic miracle. The soviet spectator was attracted by vast spaces, dynamic cities, Wild West, cowboys and etc.

In 1923 under the influence of American “western” Georgia (of the Soviet period) produced a revolutionary genre movie called “Little Red Devils” directed by Ivane Perestiani and adapted from the short story by Russian writer I. Bliakhin. The director was far more influenced by American popular movie genre than by the original literary source. Perestiani rejected the literary source and shot the movie according to American “western” movie traditions and tricks. The main character of the literary source a Chinese boy was replaced in the movie by the colored Tom Jackson. Like western movie characters the “Little Red Devils” performed complex movie tricks, jumped on high speed trains, rode horses and shot well. The movie actors imitated American movie stars and idealized them more than the Russian revolutionaries they were supposed to portray. An American film star – movie actress of eccentric comedy films Clara Bow came to circus from cinematography. Film director Ivan Perestiani picked up film actors – legendary “group of three” – from circus and turned them into starring mythical creatures of a young Soviet cinema. Perestiani’s choice stopped on the colored character type that can be explained by popularity of an American jazz, Negro rhythms and Americanism... The popularity of the American movie myth proved that during the so called “NEP” illusion of harmonious coexistence of Socialist and Capitalist systems still existed.

America is identified with “the country of future”, with technical progress and cinematography idealized by Georgian futurists. The play “An American Uncle” on stage of Rustaveli theatre by the director Sandro Akhmeteli, 1926, becomes very popular. The main character of this play is a poor

Georgian emigrant – a real villain who pretends to be an American bourgeois. The typewriter on which Bolsheviks type revolutionary proclamations is called “**Americanka**” in the film of the same name {1930, directed by Leo Esakia}.

In the manifesto of “**Faxes**” {translated as “The Studio of an Eccentric Actor”} “Parade of an Eccentric” {1922} it’s idealized the speed of modern life, rhythm of cars or technology, “concentrated by America and brought to life by gutter press”. Theories of “The Studio of an Eccentric Actor” have been taken up by Georgian futurist groups that were searching for national roots in folk art {folk dancing, traditions of folk theatre, carnival performances in the country from which derived the circus – mass or collective show as well as sports performances – galloping, horseracing, fencing etc.}. Thus, futurists preferred “Georgian primitive” or “folk art”. In 1924 the project of the Georgian circus drawn up by the artist Irakli Gamrekeli and the film director Nikoloz Shengelaia was based on the principle of “Georgian primitive”.

The project visually represented combination of parallel lines, verticals or circles and abstractionist composition.

The project of a futuristic circus was practically carried out in large-scale scenes of “Buffalo Bill”-s American circus from Aleksandre Tsutsunava’s film “Who is Guilty?” - {1925}. The film introduces the free cinematographic version of screening the play or the literary text. In difference with the play, in the film Gurulian riders’ travel is reflected by cinematographic means. The film director broke the principle of a drama, opened the locked space - environment of a country limited with a few characters, transferring the mass activity and sports show into America. He let the virtuosic items of Georgian riders have “Bufflao Bill’s” circus arena. There was a great, festive show where the people of different nations and different civilization - American Indians, cowboys, African tribes, Georgian riders etc. were presented in their national clothing. Thus the model of an American circus in the film was based on “folk primitive”.

It should be noted that the second name of the film “Who is Guilty?” was “Wild West Riders”, which was associated with America and Western due to the lifestyle in a Georgian village. By means of parallel editing camera-lyrical scenes were changing into mass episodes of an American circus {a huge construction of circus was specially built in the pavilion of Tbilisi studio}. Georgian riders’ virtuosic plasticity, fiery temper and national rhythm were demonstrated on the circus arena. Cheerful and eccentric horsemen from a Georgian village, having turned up in a megalopolis, managed to adapt easily to modern rhythms of New York – in “Music Hall” they rhythmically adjusted the national dance skills to foxtrot. They used to have fun, to joke and surprise people with quick and unexpected movements or fast tricks fitting to jazz-band rhythms.

The Georgian avant-garde cinema was influenced by American musical comedies as well as by jazz. Musical films as a genre began to develop in this period. In 1927 there appeared the film “The

Jazz Singer”; then “Our Dancing Daughters” {1928}, whose cinematographic hero – **Jazz Baby Joan Crawford** was famous for her eccentric Charleston dancing in twenties; and “King of Jazz” {1930}, whose plot consists of different musical items.

In the film “My Grandmother” Georgian futurists’ “theories” are often quoted {**from the journal H2SO4**}; that’s why we should consider the film to be the manifesto of futurist aesthetics. Futurists called their journal the organization of cinematographic rearrangements and discoveries.

Mikaberidze’s comedy film was constructed upon the pulp chronicle and it involved lots of absurd, eccentric tricks. Futurists demanded to turn theatre into cinematography; cinema, “Music Hall”, circus, boxing were intruding into theatre. Georgian futurists adored techniques instead of “muses”; they worshipped adventure, industry, Chaplin and Dadaism instead of “noble poetry”.

“My Grandmother” turned out to be the last film in which freedom, experiments, artistic searches and courage characteristic of avant-garde were still “admitted”.

The painter of the film “My Grandmother” was futurist Irakli Gamrekeli, who was the editor of the **journal “H2So4”**. Abstracted workrooms of the Soviet “Trust” constructed by him – a huge round table with geometrical chairs around it – looked like a circus arena demonstrating futurist ideas. The interior of the Soviet Trust (office) was constructed in accordance with the analogical project of the circus.

According to Irakli Gamrekeli’s project, the Georgian project represents “Freedom square” where utilitarianism and acrobatics prevail, where a human matches with a car.

The influence of cubism and constructivism is felt from the very first shots of the film – facades of the modern Trust building are given from different view-points. Shop windows of the building reflect the rhythm of a city, “mechanism”, movement of traffic like a mirror.

Constructional motive of a circle is underlined in the film. In exposition of the film the circular form of the clock turns into the round form of the Trust, then into the form of a child’s toy ball; playing with some things in a Dadaistic way is futurists’ favorite mode. Ignoring ornamentality from stage and complete schematization is a futuristic method. Heavy decorations of a pavilion, fake and decorative surroundings have disappeared from a film, the composition of a traditional interior has been ruined; instead of workrooms backs of chairs are used on which positions and numbers of rooms have been conventionally pointed. Thus, in futuristic interiors architectural minimalism and functionalism are underlined.

The Trust - the Soviet institution – has been constructed on the mechanism of absurd. Film actors play the roles of bureaucrats and lazybones, but it’s the system that has made them like that; the allegory of the system is introduced in the film as a huge circular table.

The film presented the satire on bureaucracy that had to be applied against the social viciousness – protectionism, but the film, instead of exposing society, turned into the pamphlet and satire on the

Soviet system. Mikaberidze's film was banned being charged with formalism and was restored only in the sixties of the XX century, in the period of "thaw" {"otepel"} or Khrushchov. At that time it already became a tendency to criticize Stalin and the film became associated with the Soviet totalitarianism.

In this film the brilliant synthesis of "lower genres" - comedy, variety art, choreography, pantomime, circus, clownery, pulp novel, anecdote, slapstick comedy - became obvious.

The plot was ignored in the film; separate tricks and circus items made up dramaturgic structures. According to the futurists' "theory", movement without any details would "ruin the plot", that's why stationery – pens, paper, typewriters, eye-glasses, ties, caps are moving in the film; newspaper caricatures have revived.

For futurists an actor was acceptable as an improvisator. An actor's mime, grimace and plasticity were demonstrated on the screen instead of a word: "A word is associated with falsehood. There will be no falsehood in cinematography where a word is rejected... Modern humans demand fewer words and more movement" {journal "H2SO4"}. In accordance with this, in the film "My Grandmother" the Trust juggle with things – the smoke of a cigarette, the waiter's trays, plates, stationery; they amuse themselves with toy cars, apply eccentric tricks – running, chasing, climbing down the handrails of the Trust, jumping out of the window, flying, boxing, Charleston...

Georgian futurists put forward the question of "synthesis of movement" which involved acrobatic, sports, dancing skills, built on the rules of constructivism and mechanics. From the futuristic view-point, the principle of the play was "heaping up the tricks" that conditioned such a peculiarity of the film dramaturgy.

"New rhythms" and detective elements turned up in a film: characters of the film run as fast as cars do, chase and watch each other, move automatically. Speeded up and mechanized rhythm of typewriters and "workrooms" is emphasized.

For futurists it was acceptable to use such methods of fight as terror, protest etc. The characters of the film were protesting against dismissal from office, behaving like hooligans at work and putting up a fight {the influence of Chaplin and Dadaism}.

Futurists treated an actor to be an adventurer: "Earlier there was poetry – nobility, nowadays there's an adventure" {Jango Gogoberidze}. In the film "My Grandmother", the trust manager's wife {actress N. Chernova} is distinguished by eccentricity and witty tricks. She adores "Bourgeois fashion", dances Charleston virtuously to the rhythms of jazz. Since the thirties, such a careless, unsocial, "Americanized" character hasn't fitted any longer to the social type of the Soviet woman, mother or wife.

Owing to influence of "Americanism" and futurism, traditional dramaturgy has been deconstructed. Because of "throwing away" the plot, the story was maximally reduced; the law of

plot development was broken and it was completely surrounded by the cascade of tricks. An actor's psychologism, misery, "tear and ceruse", mystic, lofty sentiments, which took place in melodramas and tragedies of pure genre, are ignored and caricatured in the film.

"Earlier there was a muse, now there's techniques" (journal H2S04) sculpture of a boy standing on a pedestal in an antique style unexpectedly begins to "move", comes down the pedestal and applies to the Trust staff, calling to order {caricature on high art}.

"Futurism received the structure of a staircase from American magazines and newspapers and aspiration defines futurism; towns brought geometrical corners instead of mystic" {Niogol Chachava}.

In the film "the structure of a staircase" is the leading artistic component in an architectural space and it becomes involved in the tempo and rhythm of activity.

For futurism it was only admissible to mix up "low" genres. Instead of literary plot there appeared a light and "foolish" intrigue of a high-ranking official of the Soviet Trust to attempt in a "ruffian-like" way to return to his position owing to his "protector" grandmother {the main point of the film was actual in the Soviet Union - to condemn protectionism}. And really, the plot of the film demanded neither a word nor a literary comment or long subtitles. Activity of the Trust was constructed upon the absurd behavior and anecdotic situations whose just description would better expose complete absurdity and "idiotism" of the plot {to Georgian futurists' opinion, the plot of the script had to be "idiotic"}.

Things, animated characters, dolls etc. "took part" in construction of the plot. The method of graphical animation had been applied in a Georgian film for the first time; it gave the film an effect of collage. The film included lots of newspaper articles and caricatures, Soviet placards and slogans, pioneers' wall newspapers – inseparable attributes of the Soviet mode of life.

"Destruction" of the literary text changed the construction of the script as well; instead of dialogues and an announcer's text there was just an actor's remark, retort, crying, movement and trick... Futurists brought into the cinema the term "a dynamic actor", according to which an actor is "athletic, quarrelsome, vagabond, bandit, adventurer, brigand".

An effect of constructivism and cubism is notable in the scene of "typists". Glass construction made of squares reflected "the typist's" figures and created an illusion of the endless perspective in the shot or of reproduction of an item {futuristic method}. An item is the means of juggling in an actor's hands; an actor's behavior was mechanical, automatic and eccentric.

Circular construction of a table displayed the dangerous state mechanism and transmitted the Soviet myth: a worker, who gets a Trust manager, becomes indifferent to the tyrant and dictator.

An average worker {the actor Akaki Khorava} – a monolithic figure with its plasticity and build – was associated with the poet Mayakovski – Georgian futurists' favorite poet and leader. His

revolutionary pathos affected the tempo-rhythm of the film and the characters' remarks. An ordinary Soviet worker becomes a high-ranker – a new Trust manager {a caricature on a revolutionary government}. It made every effort to liquidate and destroy physically separate individuals.

An invisible member of the proletarian class turned up in a director's armchair having taken power and strictly limited anarchy and liberty prevailing in the Trust. Thus, power became monopolized, liberty came to an end. Instead of individuals, impersonal masses started reigning over the state – such is the formula of totalitarianism. One more aspect came to life in the film which revealed signs of tyranny of the Soviet authority as the “oppressor”. Atmosphere prevailing in the sovietic organization {Trust} mentally stupefies the employees and sets a limit on their liberty; that's why their carelessness and idleness have been perceived as a sort of protest – they don't care for time, don't obey regime and have fun like children. They are not as “bad” and “disgusting” as the Soviet ideology demands from them. That's why the audience isn't too much critical towards them; on the contrary, they are more perceived as the victims of the Soviet tyranny. That's why anarchy and liberty seems more attractive in the film than tyranny and diktat which has eventually been established in the Trust by this proletarian. The film has exposed the secret mechanism of this system which turned into the violent, totalitarian system in the thirties.

Director of the film “My Grandmother” K.Mikaberidze was a talented caricaturist and it has been well revealed in appearance and plasticity of film characters – adventurers and careerists. Danger of totalitarianism is predicted in the film and it comes true just from the thirties. At this time America is no more realized as the synonym of liberty and cinematography. The Soviet Union openly opposes to the imperial and capitalistic America. The Soviet machine producing myths begins to work powerfully. Myths about wreckers, betrayers, agents of imperialism are being fabricated. America is no longer the symbol of either technocracy or the Cinema Land, neither is Americanism the synonym of freedom. An “American Dream” conflicts with the myth of “Communist Eden”. So, the dynamic process related to the stormy years of creative freedom and artistic experiments came to an end. Kote Mikaberidze wasn't forgiven the cinema experiment and creative “hooliganism”. He was set a strict limit for working in cinematography and finally taken away the right of film directing.