

SOVIET *TABLEAU*: CINEMA AND HISTORY UNDER LATE SOCIALISM (1953-1985)

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University of Pittsburgh, 2019

During the Late Socialism (1953-1985), the geographic peripheries of the Soviet film industry demonstrated an upsurge in both the number of the produced films and in the boldness of the cinematic experimentations. This dissertation focuses on the peculiar cinematic trend that emerged in this context of the artistic reinvigoration of the Soviet periphery. In particular, I analyze films of Iurii Illienko, Leonid Osyka, Evgenii Shiffers, Tengiz Abuladze, and Sergei Parajanov.

I propose that the films of these filmmakers exemplify a distinct cinematic trend and label this trend *tableau* cinema for two reasons: first, to avoid overgeneralization and homogenization of the commonly used term “poetic” cinema; second, to emphasize the predominance of a static painterly quality and integrate my analysis into a broader tradition of visual arts (Chapter 1).

The central stylistic feature shared by the *tableau* films is their avoidance of linear perspective and kinship with non-perspectival painterly traditions, such as Persian miniatures or Orthodox icons. I argue that this stylistic feature is related to *tableau* cinema’s transformation of spectatorship (Chapter 2) and rejection of (Soviet) modernity’s insistence on historical progression, which are underpinned by linear perspective and reinforced by conventional use of cinema (Chapter 3).

This dissertation demonstrates that *tableau* cinema created, by cinematic means, alternative histories to the evidently fragile project of Soviet modernity. In doing so, the filmmakers on the peripheries revive the genealogy of the “primitive” in Russian and Soviet cultural history. Unlike the future-oriented invocation of the “primitive” in the post-revolutionary cinemas, in *tableau*

cinema the invocation of the “primitive” is oriented toward the rethinking of the past and the redefining of the cinematic medium itself. In this sense, the dissertation proposes to consider *tableau* cinema as a case of Socialist Modernism (Chapter 4).

By investigating the history and aesthetics of the *tableau* cinema, this dissertation contributes to the largely understudied field of Soviet ethno-national cinemas and makes a theoretical contribution to rethinking the long-standing opposition between the (Greenbergian) modernism and (Lukácsian) realism in the twentieth-century art.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	xiii
1.0 INTRODUCTION: FROM POETIC TO <i>TABLEAU</i> CINEMA.....	1
1.1 POETIC CINEMA	1
1.2 <i>TABLEAU</i> CINEMA	22
2.0 SPECTATORSHIP IN <i>TABLEAU</i> CINEMA	29
2.1 PERSPECTIVE AND SPECTATORSHIP	30
2.2 <i>TABLEAU</i> CINEMA AND NONLINEAR PERSPECTIVE	34
2.3 “SINCERITY” AND THE SPECTATOR’S CONVICTION	53
3.0 <i>TABLEAU</i> CINEMA’S ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES.....	66
3.1 AN UNDECLARED <i>TABLEAU</i> MANIFESTO: IURI ILLIENKO’S <i>A WELL FOR THE THIRSTY</i>	66
3.2 A GRAVESTONE TO THE PRE-MODERN WORLD: LEONID OSYKA’S <i>THE STONE CROSS</i>	87
3.3 THE REVOLUTIONARY “GOSPEL”: EVGENII SHIFFERS’S <i>PERVOROS-SIANE</i>	102
3.4 ARTISANS AS ARTISTS: TENGIZ ABULADZE’S <i>THE NECKLACE FOR MY BELOVED</i>	125
3.5 THE LAST OF THE <i>TABLEAU</i> : SERGEI PARAJANOV’S <i>THE LEGEND OF SURAM FORTRESS</i>	142
4.0 CONCLUSION(S): <i>TABLEAU</i> CINEMA AND ITS CONTEXTS	158

4.1 HISTORY AS LABYRINTH: CRISIS OF HISTORICAL TELEOLOGY AND TURN TO SPACE	161
4.2 THE GENEALOGY OF THE “PRIMITIVE,” ETHNO-NATIONAL CINEMAS, AND SOCILIST MODERNISM.....	169
BIBLIOGRAPHY	178

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	37
Figure 2	38
Figure 3	38
Figure 4	38
Figure 5	38
Figure 6	40
Figure 7	40
Figure 8	40
Figure 9	41
Figure 10	41
Figure 11	43
Figure 12	44
Figure 13	44
Figure 14	45
Figure 15	45
Figure 16	46
Figure 17	46
Figure 18	47
Figure 19	47
Figure 20	48
Figure 21	48

Figure 22	48
Figure 23	49
Figure 24	49
Figure 25	49
Figure 26	50
Figure 27	51
Figure 28	51
Figure 29	70
Figure 30	71
Figure 31	71
Figure 32	72
Figure 33	72
Figure 34	73
Figure 35	73
Figure 36	78
Figure 37	78
Figure 38	78
Figure 39	79
Figure 40	79
Figure 41	84
Figure 42	84
Figure 43	84
Figure 44	84

Figure 45	85
Figure 46	85
Figure 47	86
Figure 48	91
Figure 49	91
Figure 50	91
Figure 51	91
Figure 52	92
Figure 53	93
Figure 54	93
Figure 55	93
Figure 56	94
Figure 57	97
Figure 58	97
Figure 59	100
Figure 60	102
Figure 61	110
Figure 62	111
Figure 63	112
Figure 64	112
Figure 65	114
Figure 66	114
Figure 67	115

Figure 68	117
Figure 69	118
Figure 70	118
Figure 71	118
Figure 72	119
Figure 73	120
Figure 74	120
Figure 75	120
Figure 76	120
Figure 77	121
Figure 78	129
Figure 79	134
Figure 80	135
Figure 81	135
Figure 82	135
Figure 83	136
Figure 84	140
Figure 85	140
Figure 86	145
Figure 87	146
Figure 88	147
Figure 89	149
Figure 90	152

Figure 91	153
Figure 92	155
Figure 93	155
Figure 94	156

PREFACE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION: FROM POETIC TO *TABLEAU* CINEMA

1.1 POETIC CINEMA

During the 1960s-70s, the geographic peripheries of the Soviet film industry demonstrated an upsurge in both the number of produced films and in the boldness of the cinematic experimentations. This situation occurred in the context of the post-Stalinist atmosphere of relative decentralization and an influx of the young generation of filmmakers to the Union's republic studios. My dissertation focuses on the peculiar cinematic trend that emerged in this context of the reinvigoration of the Soviet periphery. I label this trend "*tableau* cinema," due to the dominance of its static painterly qualities. In the center of my research are five filmmakers—Sergei Parajanov, Iurii Illienko, Leonid Osyka, Tengiz Abuladze, and Evgenii Shiffers. Their works share similar stylistic and thematic characteristics that exemplify what I call a *tableau* trend.

This term sets aside an earlier term more familiar to cinema scholars. Scholars of Russo-Soviet cinema commonly categorize the works of these filmmakers as belonging to *poetic* cinema. More specifically, the films of Parajanov, Illienko, and Osyka are labeled as exemplars of the Ukrainian poetic school, whereas in a broader sense, the works of all five filmmakers are considered to belong to a so-called "poetic cinema," a trend that reemerged as an alternative to the conventional Soviet cinema of the 1960s-1970s. While the category of poetic cinema explains some aspects of the *tableau* trend, it is less helpful when it comes to accounting for the *tableau* trend's stylistic peculiarity, both from a historical perspective and in their contemporary contexts. In this section, I trace the use of the term "poetic cinema" in Soviet critical discourse to

demonstrate the points of convergence and, more importantly, that of divergence between the existing framework of poetic cinema and the newly introduced category of *tableau*.¹

The term “poetic” in Soviet critical discourse has, by and large, two overlapping, but nonetheless distinct connotations: in a more general sense, “poetic” implies a lyrical and elevated mode commonly ascribed to poetry; in a narrower sense, particularly in the vocabulary of Russian Formalism, the word “poetic” connotes a defining feature specific to art. For the sake of convenience, I will call the former the “lyrical meaning” and the latter the “formalist meaning” of the term “poetic.” While partly overlapping, either lyrical or formalist meanings of the term “poetic cinema” prevailed at different times in Soviet film history.

The first Russian-language instances when the term was used systematically with regard to cinema were in the collection of essays *The Poetics of Cinema* (*Poetika kino* [1927]), edited by Boris Eikhenbaum. As the title of the collection already suggests, the term “poetic cinema” had more to do with poetics as a Formalist aesthetic system than as a traditional genre in literature. “Poetic cinema” was another variation of the fundamental distinction for the Formalists between poetic and prosaic language. In Formalist discourse, the poetic in general, and the poetic cinema in particular, mean primarily two things. First, it means a distinction from, and subsequent reorganization of, the prosaic everyday routine. Second, it implies the dominance of form over content, with an orientation toward form itself. These features of the poetic correspond to what Roman Jakobson later defines as the poetic function of language.²

¹ The overlap between Soviet and Western discourse on poetic cinema is outside the scope of this chapter.

² “The set [Einstellung] toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language” (Jakobson 356, emphasis in the original).

In “Problems of Cine-stylistics” (“Problemy kinostilistiki”) Eikhenbaum foregrounds this distinction between the poetic and prosaic as follows:

Art lives by being abstracted from everyday use in that it has no practical application. The automatism of everyday usage of words leaves masses of phonic, semantic and syntactic shadings quite unexploited—but these find their place in the art of literature.... The dance is built on movements which have no part in a person’s normal gait. If art does employ things then it is as material—with the aim of presenting it in an unexpected interpretation of displaced form, in an emphatically deformed shape. (Eikhenbaum 7)³

With regard to cinema, Eikhenbaum establishes this dichotomy between poetic and prosaic by contrasting cinema to photography. He writes: “The relationship between the photograph and cinema is rather like the relationship between practical and poetic language” (6).⁴ To support this claim, he offers a deeply Formalist reading of Delluc’s *photogenie* as the equivalent in cinema to “trans-sense” (*zaum*). Although his linking of photography to practical language is easily contestable, the second part of his analogy, the one that links cinema to poetic language, is what interests us here. As another variation of poetic language, cinema in general and poetic cinema in particular has an enhanced potential to reorganize the material of everyday life and acquire the

³ “Искусство живет тем, что вычитывается из обихода как не имеющее практического приложения. Обиходный автоматизм словоупотребления оставляет неиспользованными массы звуковых, семантических и синтаксических оттенков – они находят себе место в словесном искусстве. Танец строится на движениях не участвующих в обыкновенной походке. Если искусство пользуется обиходом, то как материалом, – с тем, чтобы дать его в неожиданной интерпретации или в смещении, в подчеркнуто деформированном виде” (Eikhenbaum and Kopylova 15).

⁴ “Отношения между фото и кино – нечто вроде отношением между практическим и поэтическим языком” (Eikhenbaum and Kopylova 14).

status of art. But, of course, art is understood here in a specifically Formalist sense, as a self-sufficient form that was felt anew by means of defamiliarization.

Shklovsky, in his oft-cited essay “Poetry and Prose in the Cinema” (“Poeziia i proza v kinematografii”), emphasizes the dominance of the formal aspect in poetic cinema. On a more literal level, he uses the term “poetic cinema” to identify rhythmical, non-narrative cinema. However, what is more important for identification of the cinema as poetic, in Shklovsky’s view, is the prevalence of the formal element over the semantic:

[T]here exist both prose and poetry in cinema and this is the basic division between the genres: they are distinguished from one another not by rhythm, or not by rhythm alone, but by the prevalence in poetic cinema of technical and formal over semantic features, where formal features displace semantic and resolve the composition. Plotless cinema is ‘verse’ cinema. (Eikhenbaum 89)⁵

In other words, the term “poetic cinema” in the Soviet critical discourse of the late 1920s (particularly in Formalist theory) had little to do with the lyrical mode of poetry as an established literary genre that would endow cultural respectability to a newly emerging art form. Rather, the term “poetic cinema” was another name for montage cinema and implied theoretical justification for the appropriation of montage cinema within the new radical aesthetic system that was articulated in Formalist theory. This new aesthetic that dominated the artistic avant-garde of the period was based on the fundamental distinction between poetic and practical language, and by implication between art and life.

⁵ “[C]уществует прозаическое и поэтическое кино, и это есть основное деление жанров: они отличаются друг от друга не ритмом, или не ритмом только, а преобладанием технически-формальных моментов (в поэтическом кино) над смысловыми, причем формальные элементы заменяют смысловые, разрешая композицию. Бессюжетное кино—есть ‘стихотворное кино’” (Eikhenbaum and Kopylova 142).

By the early 1930s—the formation period of Socialist Realist prescriptions—the dominance of poetic cinema with its formal experimentation comes to an end. The debates in the early 1930s concerning the new trajectories for the development of Soviet cinema, to a large extent, were an attack on poetic cinema’s formalism. Among the defenders of poetic cinema was the theoretician and practitioner of montage, Sergei Eisenstein. In his 1934 article published in *Soviet Cinema (Sovetskoe kino)*, he retrospectively analyzes and evaluates the cinematic accomplishments of the second half of the 1920s, while commenting on the present state of filmmaking. Eisenstein defends poetic cinema and insists on the development of its legacy in present-day cinema:

The screen has ceased to be the screen. It has become a canvas square that is suspiciously blank – and nothing more. The grey images of people flit across it. Sometimes there is a sound accompaniment. And everything that is missing, everything that gave the screen its earlier poetic and visual [charm], everything that the audience’s perception lacks, regardless of the plot, for complete emotional involvement, all this is exactly what the preceding period of cinema shed its “sweat and blood” on. (Taylor 232)⁶

The adjective “poetic” here is used to describe montage cinema and bears formalist meaning, but the lyrical meaning of the word is also implied. The fact that the adjective “poetic” is attributed to the noun “charm” [*obaianie*] strengthens the lyrical meaning.

⁶ “Экран перестал быть экраном. Он стал холщовым четырехугольником подозрительной белизны, и только. По нему двигаются серые изображения людей. Иногда это сопровождается звуком. И все, чего нет, все, что давало прежнее *поэтическое* и образное обаяние экрану, все то чего не хватает восприятию зрителя, не смотря на сюжет, для полного эмоционального захвата, все это – именно то, за что «пот и кровь» проливал предыдущий период кинематографии” (Eisenstein *Sovetskoe kino* 11-12; also *Izbrannye proizvedenia* t. 5, 77, my emphasis).

In this article, the aesthetic principle that Eisenstein exemplifies through the relationship between shot (as material) and montage (as organization of this material) is traced through his early theatrical works and is projected onto narrative cinema. He criticizes the contemporary narrative (“prosaic”) cinema that has overtaken film production and insists on formal experimentation on the level of plot:

The culture of the plot will not fall from Heaven. The culture of the plot has to be created.

In its adolescent mischief the new plot-based cinema has, of course, definitively rejected all the accumulated experience of the preceding period. The shot is unadorned. The [emotional] experiences are poetic. But the exposition is ham-fisted.

The poetic quality of the film form has disappeared. We are confronted with a record of the actions of the characters and the misdemeanors of the people who personify them. (Taylor 232)⁷

While acknowledging the inevitable advance of plot-based prosaic cinema, Eisenstein does not give up the aesthetic principles of the period of montage (“poetic”) cinema. Although he does not explicitly mention Formalism, the values he defends in this article are in line with Formalist aesthetics. Instead of the poetic quality of emotional experience [*poetichnye perezhivaniia*], he demands poetic quality of film form [*poetichnost' kinoformy*]. Not surprisingly, Eisenstein is in favor of the Formalist sense of the word “poetic” rather than the lyrical one. It is important to

⁷ “Культура сюжета с неба не придет. Культуру сюжета надо делать. Новое сюжетное кино, конечно, в своем младенческом озорстве вчистую отрицало все накопления предшествовавшего периода. Кадр безобразен. Переживания поэтичны. Но изложение топорно. Поэтичность киноформы исчезла. Перед нами протоколы поступков действующих лиц и проступков их воплощений” (*Izbrannye proizvedeniia* t. 5, 76).

notice, however, that the possibility of the lyrical meaning of the term “poetic” becomes more evident in Eisenstein’s text compared to, for example, Shklovsky’s use of the term.

The major opponent of both Eisenstein and of poetic cinema, Sergei Iutkevich, explicitly targets Formalist theorizing on poetic cinema while remaining ambivalent toward the practice of montage filmmakers themselves. In the speech entitled “Our Artistic Disagreements” (“Nashi tvorchesknie raznoglasiia”), which was delivered at the All-Union Creative Conference for Soviet Film Workers⁸ in 1935, Iutkevich states:

Back then Viktor Shklovsky wrote in *The Poetics of Cinema*, an article about poetic cinema and juxtaposed *Mother* to Dziga Vertov’s *The Sixth Part of the World*. He asserted that *Mother* is a peculiar centaur, whose fate saddens him very deeply. He claimed that the film is prosaic and therefore is bad, and only one fragment in it is poetic and therefore is good – it is a final scene with superimposition of the Kremlin walls. Quite the opposite! ...

It seems to me that the achievement of the film [*Mother*] is in its monumentality, in the absence of directorial flirting, in its boldness, in its realism, in its simplicity, in the lack of “poetic” trinkets. (27)⁹

⁸ The conference was the venue at which Socialist Realism was proclaimed the official aesthetic system for Soviet cinema.

⁹ “Тогда В. Шкловский написал статью в «Поэтике кино» о поэтической кинематографии и противопоставлял «Мать» фильму Дзиги Вертова «Шестая часть мира», утверждая, что фильм «Мать» есть своеобразный кентавр, судьбой которого он очень и очень опечален. Он говорил, что фильм прозаичен и поэтому плох и только один кусок его поэтичен и поэтому хорош – это финал с экспозицией кремлевских стен. Все наоборот! ...

Мне кажется, что заслуга ее [*Мать*] в монументальности, в отсутствии режиссерской кокетливости, в смелости, в реалистичности, в простоте, в отсутствии «поэтических» завитушек” (Iutkevich 27).

This passage is one example of a broader shift in the preferences in the 1930s from poetic cinema to prosaic cinema.¹⁰ Instead of poetic cinema that was based on montage and was praised by Formalists, Iutkevich demands Hollywood-style cinema with solid acting and dramaturgy, which would be accessible to the audience.¹¹ In this context of disapproval of poetic cinema, Iutkevich's use of the word "poetic" primarily implies the Formalist meaning of the term. In Iutkevich's interpretation, this Formalist meaning has a negative connotation of unnecessary decoration and elitist complexity.

There is, however, a different use of the term "poetic" in Iutkevich's article. In his evaluation of the three major directors of the time—Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, and Eisentstein—Iutkevich states that Dovzhenko has a "poetic way of creative thinking"¹² (61) and that Dovzhenko is "a true poet" ("*nastoiashchii poet*"). The words "poet" and "poetic" with regard to Dovzhenko have a different meaning, without the negative connotations of the Formalist use of the term. Here Iutkevich seems to have in mind the lyrical meaning and marks it positively. He emphasizes the uniqueness of Dovzhenko's style: "Dovzhenko is a unique artist and cannot be imitated" (61).¹³ In other words, he clearly differentiates Dovzhenko from other masters of poetic cinema.

¹⁰ Although Shklovsky in his article did not explicitly declare poetic elements as positive and prosaic elements as negative, Iutkevich's radicalization of Shklovsky's earlier position is not ungrounded. For Shklovsky and other Formalists, poetic cinema had presented greater value within their aesthetic system. Iutkevich's attack on the theoretical underpinnings of poetic cinema is not merely an empty rhetoric of accusation in the spirit of high Stalinism. In this article, he points out that underneath the division between poetic and prosaic cinema lie a greater fault line between art and life (Iutkevich 60).

¹¹ See Iutkevich "Nashi tvorcheskie raznoglasii," 53-55.

¹² "У него поэтический склад творческой мысли ..." (Iutkevich 61).

¹³ "Довженко своеобразный художник и из подражания ему ничего не выйдет" (61).

In the 1930s debate over poetic cinema, epitomized in Eisentstein's and Iutkevich's essays, the Formalist meaning of the term "poetic" was still tangible but was eventually criticized for separation from everyday reality, and inaccessibility to the masses. At the same time, the lyrical meaning of the term "poetic" continued to be used positively, particularly with regard to Dovzhenko's style. After the denunciation of montage cinema in the 1930s, the lyrical meaning of "poetic" was the only acceptable meaning in official discourse.

As for Dovzhenko himself, he mentioned several times in his autobiography the poetic quality of his work. He describes his early Ukrainian trilogy as follows: "The grandeur of the events portrayed forced me to compress the material. This could have been achieved by using poetic language, which seems to have become my specialty. Yet I never thought of symbolism" (15). When he writes about his later work, he still refers to it as poetic: "In the film about [horticulturalist Ivan] Michurin, I wanted to take on this task and to show the poetry of the seasons and times of day in central Russia. I wanted to find something beautiful and lyrical in that nature, something that would make the heart rejoice" (20).

In both instances, and especially in the second, the lyrical meaning prevails over the Formalist one. Soviet film critics would often refer to Dovzhenko as a poet of cinema in the lyrical sense. In the article about Dovzhenko entitled "Thinker, Poet, and Innovator" ("Myslitel', poet, novator"), Rostislav Iurenev, for example, writes: "Dovzhenko continued to work in the realm of poetic epos, in passionate and elevated tone that tackled urgent contemporary themes (Iurenev 119)."¹⁴ Iraklii Andronikov in "Dovzhenko's Poetry" ("Poeziia Dovzhenko") writes "He

¹⁴ "Довженко продолжал работать в области поэтической эпопеи, в патетических, возвышенных тонах решающей актуальные темы современности" (Iurenev 119).

[Dovzhenko] is a poet in a literal and lofty sense of the word” (qtd. in Dobin 16).¹⁵ These examples demonstrate that in Soviet discourse Dovzhenko’s poetic cinema had little to do with the visual complexity implied in the Formalist sense of the term.

In his overview of the concept of poetic cinema, Joshua First rightly points out that “despite his penchant for visual metaphor and nonlinear narration, Dovzhenko’s association with ‘poetic cinema’ in no way identified him with the Russian Formalists, or with any in the Moscow avant-garde during the 1920s” (“Ukrainian National Cinema...” n.p.). This observation leads him to argue that Dovzhenko’s style has nothing to do with the term “poetic.” First writes, “despite the numerous occasions during [Dovzhenko’s] life that he was called the ‘poet of cinema,’ few articulated the particulars of his style that made this seem plausible” (“Ukrainian National Cinema...” n.p.). Instead, according to First, the term “poetic” starts to signify Dovzhenko’s peasant origins and ethno-national belonging.¹⁶

Although Dovzhenko’s films were not called “poetic” in the strictly Formalist sense, I claim that they were referred to the term “poetic” in the lyrical sense. As lyrical meaning came to overshadow the Formalist meaning during Stalinism, this was also the case for interpretations of Dovzhenko’s films. Thus, the sense of Ukrainian national tradition does not randomly replace the Formalist meaning of the term “poetic” in Dovzhenko’s films, as First’s interpretation might suggest, but rather acts as an extension of the lyrical meaning, which implied a pastoral and idyllic sense of the word. By late Stalinism, this meaning of “poetic” will mutate into a lofty style with a kinship to the tradition of the ceremonial ode. If the elevated and lyrical meaning was the only

¹⁵ “Он поэт в высоком и прямом смысле слова” (quoted in Dobin 16).

¹⁶ I use the word “ethno-national” as an equivalent for Russian word “natsional'nyi,” which is used in Soviet discourse as an ambiguous hybrid concept of ethnicity and nationality. See Martin.

meaning of the poetic acceptable during the Stalin era, then in the era that followed, this meaning was itself criticized as pompous and insincere.

This shift is well captured in Viktor Nekrasov's article "Grand Words and Simple Words" ("Slova velikie i prostye"), published in *Art of Cinema [Iskusstvo kino]* in 1959. This article played the role of a Thaw manifesto in cinema and this role is comparable to that of Vladimir Pomerantsev's article "On Sincerity in Literature" (1953) in the field of literature.¹⁷ The article compares the sincerity of Marlen Khutsiev's "simple" style in *Two Fedors (Dva Fedora, 1959)* to the artificiality of Dovzhenko's "grand" style in *Poem about the Sea (Poema o more, 1958)*.¹⁸ Nekrasov criticizes the established view on Dovzhenko's poetic style in favor of prosaic simplicity, which he finds in Khutsiev's film. To challenge the established view on Dovzhenko's elevated style, Nekrasov quotes the following paragraph from critic Iakov Varshavskii:

Our art is often afraid of "grand words" and avoids them, frequently preferring everyday chat to them. Many directors and scriptwriters consider grand words that summon pathos as "pompous," "high-flown," and prefer the so-called detached narrative to them, which is considered to be an indicator of artistic restraint, modesty, and simplicity. Dovzhenko always fought against such an earthly simplicity, he believed that great deeds require ardent words, and he sought for such words. (qtd. in Nekrasov 61)¹⁹

¹⁷ See, for example, Semerchuk 60, Kovalov 313-319.

¹⁸ Nekrasov, of course, is inaccurate when he attributes the film entirely to Dovzhenko. Dovzhenko wrote the scenario for *Poem about the Sea*; Iuliia Solnetseva, Dovzhenko's wife, directed the film after his death.

¹⁹ "Наше искусство ... порой боится, избегает «великих слов», нередко предпочитает им бытовой разговор. Многие режиссеры и драматурги считают великие слова призывной патетики «громкими», «высокопарными», предпочитают некую бесстрастную повествовательность, которая

Although the critic quoted here does not use the word “poetic” directly, it is not difficult to see how these characteristics branch out from the lyrical meaning of Dovzhenko’s style, which was commonly labeled as “poetic.” Nekrasov associates these characteristics with the pompous monumentalism of the late Stalinist period, an extreme case of which he finds in Mikhail Chiaureli’s *The Fall of Berlin* (*Padenie Berlina*, 1950). To this style he juxtaposes the sincere and ordinary qualities that characterize Khutsiev’s film.

Yes, Dovzhenko loved “grand words.” But is it necessary to have only these words for great deeds? Why should “everyday chat” and “detached narrative” be juxtaposed to these “grand words”? There is another kind of words: passionate, but not high-flown, truthful and not worldly, words that are spoken by ordinary people who sometimes do those great deeds. I, for one, am more touched by such simple, human words than by ardent words that leave your heart cold and your mind indifferent. (61)²⁰

On the surface, this rhetoric that advocates the simple and ordinary against the lofty and lyrical style is very similar to Iutkevich’s diatribes against “poetic cinema” that took place in the 1930s. The difference, however, is that in the 1930s, Iutkevich attacked the Formalist aspect of

считается признаком художественной сдержанности, скромности, простоты. Довженко всегда воевал против такой приземленной простоты, он верил, что великое дело требует пламенного слова, и искал такое слово” (qtd. in Nekrasov 61).

²⁰ “Да, Довженко любил «великие слова». Но так ли уж обязательно великие дела требуют именно этих слов? И почему этим «великим словам» противопоставляются «бытовой разговор» и «бесстрастная повествовательность»? Есть и другая речь — страстная, но не высокопарная, правдивая и неприземленная, речь, на которой говорят обыкновенные люди, те самые, которые делают иногда и великие дела. Меня, например, такая простая, человеческая речь трогает куда больше, чем пламенные слова, оставляющие твоё сердце холодным, а разум непоколебленным” (Nekrasov 61).

poetic cinema, whereas in the late 1950s, Nekrasov debunked the mutated lyrical side of it.²¹

While the elevated, lyrical meaning of the term “poetic” falls out of favor in the beginning of Thaw, due to its direct association with the lofty monumental style of late Stalinism, the Formalist meaning, on the contrary, regains its validity in intellectual discourse. This revalidation of Formalist meaning occurs with regard to both the original poetic cinema of the 1920s-1930s, as well as with the newly emerging poetic cinema of the 1960s. These two tendencies in the revalidation of Formalist meaning are well captured in the works of Efim Dobin and Maïia Turovskaia.

Dobin’s *Poetics of Cinema Art: Narration and Metaphor* (*Poetika kinoiskusstva: povestvovanie i metaphora*, 1961) is the first study that revives the Formalist meaning and partly rehabilitates the theoretical and aesthetic underpinnings of poetic cinema of the 1920s-1930s. After tracing the genealogy and variations of silent-era poetic cinema and analyzing its aesthetic potential through the concepts of metaphor, atmosphere, and rhythm, Dobin suggests a rather trite solution of a synthesis between poetic and prosaic tendencies as the best pathway for cinema to take. The significance of Dobin’s study for our purposes here, however, is not in his unoriginal solution to the long-standing opposition between poetic and prosaic, but in his reanimation of the Formalist meaning of poetic cinema in the critical discourse of the Thaw. Although Dobin does not use the term “poetic” in a strictly Formalist sense, visual complexity and poetic structure play a significant role in his discussion of poetic cinema.²²

²¹ Critics often lump together the two meanings of “poetic” and fail to explain the almost simultaneous critique and emergence of poetic cinema in the early 1960s. See, for example, Semerchuk, Dobin, First.

²² While invoking poetic cinema’s aesthetic principles, Dobin substitutes the terminology from a “poetic/prosaic” pair to a “metaphoric/ narrative” pair. This shift in terminology makes the category of

If Dobin brought back the meaning of “poetic” from the early Soviet avant-garde, Turovskaia revived the concept by applying it to the new trend of the 1960s. Her “Two Films of One Year” (“Dva fil'ma odnogo goda,” 1962) is a landmark essay on the poetic cinema of the 1960s. In this essay, she proposes as examples of the newly emerging poetic cinema such films as *A Man Follows the Sun* (*Chelovek idet za solntsem*, 1961) and *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962). Similar to the proposed distinction between lyrical and Formalist meanings, she distinguishes between the two meanings of the word “poetic,” which in Russian have two adjectival forms *poeticheskii* and *poetichnyi*. Turovskaia states that whereas *poeticheskii* is closer to the formalist meaning, *poetichnyi* implies colloquial use of the word.²³ To support this distinction, she provides examples from the abovementioned article by Shkolvsky. She mentions Charlie Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* (1923) as prosaic, despite the fact that colloquially we can refer to it as *poetichnyi*. In contrast, she refers to Vertov's state-commissioned documentary *Sixth Part of the World* (*Shestaia chast' mira*, 1926) as *poeticheskii*. Two things can be taken away from this distinction. First, in her discussion of the newly emerging poetic cinema, Turovskaia's position is very close to that of the Formalist. Second, the poetic cinema she talks about is clearly different from the Stalinist version of poetic cinema.

For Turovskaia, the defining feature of poetic cinema is its ability to trigger intellectual

poetic cinema more slippery than it already was, for it seamlessly blends together the Formalist and lyrical meanings.

²³ “*Poeticheskii* in this case is not the same as *poetichnyi* (film, episode, or shot) in a colloquial sense of the word. [«Поэтический» в данном случае вовсе не то же самое, что «поэтический» – фильм, эпизод или кадр – в житейском смысле этого слова]” (Turovskaia 83).

effort and emotional tension in the audience.²⁴ This effect, she claims, can be achieved through various cinematic devices that invoke metaphorical ambivalence and bear polysemy of interpretation. Particularly, Turovskaia points toward the devices that are related to experimentation in composition and camera work, i.e. formal aspects of film. She writes that poetic potential occurs “out of the capability of the camera in the hands of a cameraman or director to convey a certain polysemy, which cannot be exhausted by its direct narrative content; a certain aura of associative repercussion, which in connection with the whole give birth to a poetic image” (83).²⁵

After comparing a typical prosaic film (Raizman’s *What if it is Love* [*A shto esli liubov'*, 1962]) to a typical poetic film (Tarkovsky’s *Ivan’s Childhood*), which premiered in the same year (hence the title of Turovskaia’s essay), Turovskaia draws on parallels between poetic cinema of the 1920s and that of the 1960s. In terms of similarity, she points at a metaphorical use of montage with weak causality and at the rejection of ordinary everyday themes (*byt*). In terms of difference, she argues that, while the 1920s poetic cinema is more intellectual and infused with the pathos of a collective, the 1960s poetic cinema is more emotional and is concerned with the introspective individual. She ties visual complexity of the poetic cinema of the early 1960s to the interiority of the subjective world. Thus, Turovskaia offers a new version of poetic cinema that distances itself from both late Stalinist lofty poeticism and the poetic cinema of the avant-garde of the 1920s. In

²⁴ “Он [конфликт фильма Иваново Детство] потребовал от авторов – требует и от зрителя – интеллектуального усилия и эмоционального напряжения, которые являются непременным условием «поэтического экрана»” (Turovskaia 109).

²⁵ “Это [поэтические возможности] возникло из способности камеры в руках иного оператора или режиссера сообщать кадру некую многозначность, не исчерпываемую его прямым повествовательным содержанием; некий ореол ассоциативных откликов, которые во взаимосвязи с целым рожают поэтический образ” (Turovskaia 83).

Turovskaia's interpretation of the poetic cinema of the 1960s, Formalist aesthetics is not an end in itself but is deployed to express, through intricate form, the complexity of human interiority. This version of poetic cinema will later serve as a model to account for formally complex films that occurred in the Soviet peripheries from the mid-1960s on.

The next stage in the Soviet discourse on poetic cinema is the integration of a number of visually sophisticated films produced in the republican studios during the 1960s-70s. Soviet critics unanimously named the new wave on the Soviet periphery "poetic cinema."²⁶ While many critics pointed out the emergence of ethno-national themes in this new version of poetic cinema, few of them were interested in inquiring into the relation of ethno-national characteristics and its aesthetics.

In the article "Between Poetry and Prose" ("Mezhdue poeziei i prozoi," 1975), which traces the line of development of poetic cinema since the Thaw, Valerii Fomin considers the shift to ethno-national themes simply as an addition of another characteristic. After briefly accounting for the early 1960s poetic cinema, which includes *Ivan's Childhood* and other films with the child's defamiliarizing perspective, Fomin claims:

At the new stage of search for innovation, the films of the trend were marked by one more new characteristic—reference to ethno-national folklore. Starting from *The Contest*²⁷ and *Red Meadows*,²⁸ poetic cinema began more decidedly to gravitate towards the pure and revitalizing springs of folklore and to actively absorb the

²⁶ See, for example, Margolit, Fomin, Semerchuk among others.

²⁷ *Sostiazanie* (1964, dir. Bulat Mansurov)

²⁸ *Krasnye poliany* (1966, dir. Emil' Lotianu)

traditions of ethno-national culture.... This extremely active invocation of folklore, ethnography, and everything that constitutes the basis of each ethno-national culture, became almost a defining feature of the poetic films made in the second half of the 1960s. (119-120)²⁹

Nowhere in the article does Fomin attempt to explain the sudden emergence of ethno-national motifs in what he calls “poetic cinema.” Fomin treats these motifs as a purely aesthetic category, devoid of any ideological or political implications. He, for example, deemphasizes the role of the ideologically controversial Ukrainian poetic school and suggests that the ethno-national turn in poetic cinema was an all-Union phenomenon, which included both central and peripheral studios:

It became a commonplace to consider that the harbingers that announced to a cinematic world the emergence of a new wave of poetic films first appeared in Ukrainian cinema. This is not exactly so: a new wave of cine-poetry simultaneously surged in Moldovan, Georgian, Lithuanian, and Russian cinemas. (117)³⁰

I do not suggest that Fomin deliberately took the homogenizing position of the center. Rather, I want to emphasize that for Fomin, as for many Soviet film critics of the time, poetic

²⁹ “На новом этапе поисков фильмы направления оказались отмечены еще одной новой и характерной чертой—обращение к национальному фольклору. Начиная с «Состязания» и «Красных полей», поэтическое кино все более настойчиво стало тяготеть к чистым и живительным родникам фольклора, активно впитывая в себя традиции национальной культуры. ... Эта крайне активная апелляция к фольклору, к этнографии, ко всему тому, что составляет первоосновы каждой национальной культуры, и стала едва ли не самой характерной особенностью поэтических лент, созданных во второй половине 60-х годов” (Fomin 119-120).

³⁰ “Как-то уж повелось считать, что самые первые ласточки, возвестившие кинематографическому миру о начале приближающихся перемен и о новом всплеске поэтического кино, впервые дали о себе знать в кинематографе Украины. Это не совсем так: очередная волна кинопоэзии одновременно вздымалась и в молдавской, и в грузинской, и в литовской, и в русской кинематографиях” (Fomin 117).

cinema was considered as a predominantly aesthetic phenomenon, an avenue for personal artistic expression decoupled from politics and ideology. The ethno-national variations of poetic cinema were regarded within that framework. Of course, within the context of Soviet culture an artist's sophisticated personal expression is already subversive enough, but to reduce the ethno-national cinema of that period to an artist's personal expression is to miss the point.

In his survey of Thaw period film criticism, Vladimir Semerchuk expresses a similar position:

A new dramatic turn occurs in the second half of the 1960s, when "poetic cinema" (mainly Ukrainian, Georgian, and Uzbek) suddenly turned away from contemporary reality and began to build its imagery on the traditions of ethnography, folklore and mythology, literature, and painting. Accordingly, the problematic of poetic cinema changed; the ideological component disappeared from it. (81-82)³¹

He describes the shift to ethno-national themes in the poetic cinema of the mid-1960s as a sudden turn that lacks an ideological component. By "ideological component" he means the confrontation that occurred between the late Stalinist version of poetic cinema and the prosaic cinema of the early Thaw. In other words, Semerchuk emphasizes that the poetic cinema of republican studios was no longer accused of the pompous, lofty embellishments characteristic of the poetic cinema of high Stalinism. This implies that the only ideological component Semerchuk seems to have in mind here is the confrontation between Stalinism and the Thaw. Like Fomin,

³¹ "Новый крутой поворот происходит во второй половине 60-х, когда "поэтическое кино" (в основном, украинское, грузинское и узбекское) резко отвернулось от современной реальности и стало строить свою образность на этнографических, фольклорно-мифологических и литературно-живописных традициях. Соответственно изменилась и проблематика поэтического кино, из которого исчезла ее идеологическая составляющая" (Semerchuk 81-82).

Semerchuk tacitly discards the possibility of any other ideological components in the ethno-national turn of poetic cinema, seeing the phenomenon as purely aesthetic. Following a traditional Soviet critique of poetic cinema, he concludes that the elitist aesthetics of ethno-nationally colored poetic cinema became inaccessible to the ordinary audience: “The ‘grand words’ of this cinema began to speak of abstract truth in a complex language. Upon obtaining its cerebral and allegorical aesthetics, this cinema became difficult to understand; it became elitist”³² (81-82).

Both Fomin and Semerchuk consider visually sophisticated ethno-national cinemas produced from the mid-1960s on as a variation of poetic cinema that was primarily characterized by aesthetic sophistication at best or elitist complexity at worst. This framework, which integrates the ethno-national cinemas into a poetic category, has several problems. First, it decouples aesthetic issues of the ethno-national cinemas from an ideological set of concerns and produces a sanitized version of poetic cinema solely interested in new ways of artistic expression. This orientation is redolent of an auteurist interpretation of poetic cinema. I do not mean to deny that the filmmakers under consideration could be considered *auteurs*. Rather, I propose to focus on a question that Bazin famously posed in his polemical essay on auteurism: “*Auteur*, yes, but what *of*?” (258). Second, this framework brings under one umbrella too broad a range of films that are united only by visual complexity and the rejection of everyday (prosaic) narratives. Stemming from these two problems is the problem of a disregard for the stylistic, thematic, and ideological differences between poetic films made during different periods and in different regions of the Soviet Union. In other words, the existing critical framework that gathers the ethno-national cinemas of the 1960s-1970s into the category of the poetic cinema, consciously or otherwise, is

³² “‘Великие слова’ этого кино стали говорить об абстрактных истинах и на усложненном языке. Обретя свою очень рассудочную и аллегорическую эстетику, оно стало трудным для восприятия, стало элитарным” (Semerchuk 81-82).

complicit in the sanitizing and homogenizing process of dominant culture. To be clear, I am not proposing to substitute the category of *poetic* with that of *tableau*. Rather, the category of *tableau* is introduced to carve out historical and geographical specificity in the all-encompassing term “poetic.”

At the other extreme of this problem is an inclination toward essentialist nationalism with regard to the concept of poetic cinema. Among the Soviet republican studios in the 1960s, Dovzhenko Studio was one of the most prolific in producing so-called poetic films. The success of *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Tini zabutykh predkiv*, 1964) in a way initiated the future grafting of Ukrainian national themes on to the aesthetics of poetic cinema. A number of similar films that were made afterwards led to the emergence of the term “Ukrainian poetic school.”³³

In the process of ascribing poetic cinema to a specific territory and nationality, Dovzhenko’s legacy reemerged with new significance. As First points out in his overview of the term “poetic cinema” with regard to the Ukrainian poetic school of the 1960s, Dovzhenko and the concept of poetic cinema were appropriated in two forms: “one which defined an aesthetic system and principle of personal expression, and another which demanded a national and folkloric orientation under the banner of ‘Ukrainian national cinema.’” The former way of appropriation is aligned with the dominant mode of interpretation of poetic cinema in Soviet critical discourse and inherits its set of problems outlined above. The latter way of appropriation is what I want to problematize here. This way of appropriation ascribes in a rather heavy-handed fashion a narrowly nationalist meaning to the concept of “poetic.” In the attempt to argue that poetic cinema is a uniquely Ukrainian phenomenon, such poets as Dmytro Pavlychko went so far as to claim Dovzhenko as the very “inventor” of “poetic cinema” (*First Ukrainian Cinema* 40). This position

³³ See Gazda 184–86.

is problematic not only for its essentialist nationalism but for its failure to explain the emergence of similar trends at other republican studios around the same time.

Larysa Briukhovets'ka's edited collection *Poetic Cinema: The Banned School* (*Poetichne kino: zaboronena shkola*) is representative of this heavy-handed appropriation of poetic cinema by nationalist narratives. In the editor's foreword, Briukhovets'ka seems to acknowledge that it is impossible to limit the scope of poetic cinema to Ukrainian films:

To be sure, in giving an overview of this artistic phenomenon [poetic cinema], it is impossible to limit ourselves to Ukrainian films. After all, to this school belong such films as *The Plea* by director Tengiz Abuladze and Ukrainian cinematographer Oleksandr Antipenko; also the Armenian *Sayat Nova* by director Sergei Parajanov and cinematographer Suren Shakhbazian (both are from Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kiev). (6)³⁴

While acknowledging Abuladze's and Parajanov's films as non-Ukrainian poetic works, she underscores at the same time the Ukrainian ties in these two films. What underlies her seeming caveat (that poetic cinema is not restricted to Ukrainian soil) is a sort of "diffusionist" model, with a Ukrainian origin at its core.³⁵ Ascribing a particular origin and territory to poetic cinema is an equally if not more problematic error than homogenizing it to an all-Union phenomenon.

³⁴ "Зрозуміло й ту, що, подаючи панораму цього мистецького явища, не можна обмежитись лише українськими фільмами, адже до цієї школи належав фільм грузинський «Благання» Тенгіза Абуладзе, знятий українським оператором Олександром Антипенко та вірменський «Саят-Нова» Сергія Параджанова та оператора Сурена Шахбазяна (обидва – з Київської кіностудії ім. О. Довженка" (Briukhovets'ka 6).

³⁵ The following phrasing also underscores her diffusionist position: "Films of Ukrainian poetic cinema and its followers in Georgia." ["Фільми українського поетичного кіно та його послідовники в Грузії"] (Briukhovets'ka 6).

1.2 *TABLEAU* CINEMA

This set of problems, related to the concept of poetic cinema, leads us to the introduction of a new concept. I propose here the concept of *tableau* cinema for two reasons. First, it avoids the historical legacy of multiple and internally contradictory meanings related to poetic cinema. In particular, my intent is to avoid overgeneralization of a sanitized and homogenized version of poetic cinema, as well as to keep distance from the default narrative of nationalist subversion. The second, and more important reason is that the category of *tableau* cinema creates room to analyze a shared painterly style of the five filmmakers in relation to the ideological concerns of the Soviet peripheries. More specifically, as an intermedial category that brings together methods of film theory and art history, the concept of *tableau* is useful for thinking through the aesthetic and political implications of *tableau* filmmakers' use of non-linear perspective within a broader tradition of visual arts.

My use of the term *tableau* cinema primarily draws on two traditions: early cinema and painting. With regard to early cinema, the term *tableau* was initially used in French catalogues of early films “in a sense corresponding more or less to the modern ‘shot’” (Brewster and Jacobs 38). Scholars of early cinema like André Gaudreault point out that for early filmmakers the term *tableau* in the sense of “shot” implied the “*autonomous and self-sufficient*” (12, emphasis in the original) quality of it. Noël Burch emphasizes the visual flatness of early film *tableau* pointing out their “objective resistance to illusionistic perspective” (164). It is worth pointing out that both Gaudreault and Burch are interested in associating these stylistic features with the pre-narrative qualities of early cinema. In a more general sense, the term “*tableau*” for modern cinema historians means both a type of shot characteristic of early films and a type of construction that relies on that type of shot. According to Brewster and Jacobs: “This is the centered axial long shot, looking at

an interior as if at a box set on stage from the centre of the theatre stalls. Many early films consist largely of such shots, linked by intertitles; they lack scene dissection, or even alternation between simultaneous scenes” (38).

Alluding to this tradition of early *tableau* cinema, which in turn is rooted in pictorial and theatrical traditions, I use the term *tableau*, on the one hand, in a practical sense to designate a set of stylistic markers: a self-sufficient shot, usually static camera, and flat construction of space. An important difference from the early *tableau* cinema is that these stylistic markers in Soviet *tableau* are related to the rejection of linear perspective. On the other hand, I use the term *tableau* here to invoke a conceptual genealogy of pictorial *tableau* that entails issues of beholding. In developing the concept of *tableau* within the context of cinema, I build my argument primarily on Michael Fried’s interpretation of the pictorial *tableau* form and its long-standing connection to issues of beholding in art history.

The term “*tableau*” is one of the key concepts in Fried’s project that traces antitheatrical pictorial practice and critical thought from Diderot’s time to contemporary art photography.³⁶ Fried defines “antitheatricality” in pictorial art as the capacity of artwork to maintain independence from a beholder’s objectifying position. In other words, it is the capacity of a pictorial work to avoid or overcome both staginess (theatricality) and readiness for beholder’s consumption. Fried’s initial use of the term “*tableau*” goes back to what he calls the Diderotian project of “effectively denying the presence before the painting of the beholder” (*Why Photography Matters...* 100). According to Fried’s interpretation of Diderot’s use of the term: “A *tableau* was visible, it could be said to exist, only from the beholder’s point of view. But precisely because that was so, it helped persuade

³⁶ See his trilogy: *Absorption and Theatricality*, *Courbet’s Realism*, and *Manet’s Modernism* as well as *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.

the beholder that the actors themselves were unconscious of his presence” (*Absorption and Theatricality* 96). Based on this assumption, Fried argues that “the primary function of the *tableau* as Diderot conceived it was not to address or exploit the visibility of the theatrical audience, so much as to neutralize that visibility, to wall it off from the action taking place on stage” (*Absorption and Theatricality* 96). Fried summarizes the Diderotian *tableau* as “a deliberate construction directed toward the beholder within which the individual personages appeared not just absorbed in what each was doing, but also collectively absorbed in the overall dramatic action represented by the construction as a whole” (*Why Photography Matters...* 26-27). Three points are worth emphasizing here: (i) while *tableau* is able to maintain the “ontological fiction of non-existence of a beholder,” (ii) it is nevertheless a construction that exists for a beholder, and (iii) it is marked by compositional wholeness.

By the time of Manet’s generation, according to Fried, the Diderotian project of ignoring the presence of the beholder by classical pictorial forms becomes no longer feasible. In other words, the antitheatrical purpose of the *tableau* remains but the means by which it could be accomplished change radically from Manet on. This is the point, which he marks as the beginning of modernist aesthetics.

Fried argues that the problem of a beholder becomes pivotal in the modern period and traces this problematic in works of Manet, in high modernist art of the 1960s, as well as in art photography of the 1970s-1980s. In his book dedicated to art photography of the 1970s-1980s, he redefines the term *tableau* by rearticulating Jean-François Chevrier’s account of this trend as a new *tableau* form. Fried accepts Chevrier’s position, wherein Chevrier characterizes a new *tableau* form by (i) a large scale that summons “confrontational experience” on the part of the spectator; (ii) “enforced distance between work and viewer”; (iii) constructedness that implies it as being a

product of an intellectual act; and (iv) restitution of the traditional *tableau* form to which art of 1960s-70s (conceptualist photography) was opposed.

What Fried disagrees with is the second part of Chevrier's argument about the restitution of the *tableau* form. Chevrier claims that this restitution is meant "to reactivate a thinking based on fragments, openness, and contradiction" (117). Fried points out that Chevrier's claim is in direct opposition to what might be loosely called high modernist ideals of "wholeness, compositional closure, and internal consistency" (*Why Photography Matters...* 145). To put it more straightforwardly, while Chevrier claims that the restitution of *tableau* has nothing to do with modernism, Fried argues that the new *tableau* form shares with modernist art not only the problematic of antitheatricity and beholding, but also some solutions that modernist art offers. My main point here is not to argue whether the new *tableau* form they discuss is modernist or not. Rather, my focus is on the *tableau* form's relation to beholding and antitheatricity, which, in Fried's interpretation, are central to modernism.

Seen in Fried's terms of affinity with the modernist problematic of beholding and antitheatricity, the new *tableau* form has a dual nature. On the one hand, it is marked by an acknowledgement of "to-be-seenness" by a beholder, since an "unproblematic or 'naïve' return to the absorptive strategies of the pre-modernist tradition" is no longer possible (*Why Photography Matters...* 59). In this sense, *tableau* challenges beholder's attempt at conventional reading. On the other hand, it is marked by the preservation of autonomy from the beholder, or to borrow Fried's own words on Manet, it is marked by "reserving an imaginative space for [painting] itself that was not wholly given over to soliciting the applause of the Salon-going public" (*Why Photography Matters...* 43). Hence, its absorptive potential is preserved. In other words, it could be argued that the characteristics of the new photographic *tableau* form described by Chevrier and

Fried—confrontational experience, enforced distance, and constructedness as a product of an intellectual act that requires an attentive beholder—manifests this dual function of *tableau* that defies theatricality and secures absorption by both acknowledging the beholder’s presence and by demonstrating a certain autonomy from the beholder.

It is tempting to suggest that this duality of the *tableau* form with regard to theatricality and beholding is applicable to Soviet *tableau* cinema. Before drawing the analogy, however, I need to address the question of difference between theatricality in static pictorial art and in the moving-image medium. Fried asserts that cinema, unlike painting and photography, automatically avoids theatricality. In “Art and Objecthood,” which contrasts the theatricality of Minimalist art (he calls it literalist) to the antitheatricality of high modernist art, he states,

There is, however, one art that, by its very nature, escapes theater entirely—the movies. This helps explain why movies in general, including frankly appalling ones, are acceptable to modernist sensibility whereas all but the most successful painting, sculpture, music, and poetry is not. Because cinema escapes theater—automatically, as it were—it provides a welcome and absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theater and theatricality. At the same time, the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge—more accurately, the fact that what is provided is a refuge from theater and not a triumph over it, absorption not conviction—means that the cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art. (164)

In his later work, Fried maintains this position towards cinema while adding a minor caveat to the cited passage: “Today I perhaps want to qualify the final conclusion, but my basic claim, that the absorption or engrossment of the movie audience sidesteps, automatically avoids, the question of theatricality, still seems to me—very broadly—correct” (13). Several points can be

drawn from Fried's assertion: (i) the defeat of theatricality is one of the central issues of modernist art; (ii) serious modernist art overcomes theatricality, whereas "movies" avoid it automatically; (iii) accordingly, there is a certain conviction of the beholder in modernist art and an absorption of the audience in "movies."

Like Fried, Stanley Cavell in *The World Viewed* admits that from its inception cinema avoided theatricality, and with it, "modernism's perplexities of consciousness, its absolute condemnation to seriousness" (118). Unlike modernist art, he argues, cinema had neither the need "to deny or confront audience" (since it was screened), nor the need "to defeat or declare the artist's presence" (since it was recorded automatically), nor did it have "to establish presentness to and of the world" (since the world is there) (118). Pointing at the difference between theatricality in photography and cinema Cavell writes, "Setting pictures to motion mechanically overcame what I earlier called the inherent theatricality of the (still) photograph" (118-119). By "inherent theatricality of the still photograph," he means the impulse to theatricalize its subjects in the pose: "The photographer's command, 'Watch the birdie!' is essentially a stage direction" (90). By contrast, he states, "[I]n motion, the photographic subject is released again. Or the viewer is released, in face of a presenting of the past, from the links of nostalgia" (119). This claim, however, does not lead Cavell to the conclusion that cinema automatically avoid any theatricality at all times. Perhaps in the beginning cinema could secure spectator's absorption automatically and avoid the theatricality inherent to painting or still photography but then, he argues, "another region of theatricality overtakes the image: the presenting of the past world becomes a presentation of it" (119). The shift from "presenting" to "presentation" of the "past world" elsewhere in the book is explained as turning from cinema's ability "to reveal all and only what is revealed to it" (146) to cinema's "taking over the task of exhibition" (132). Through this shift, Cavell describes the "loss

of conviction in the film's capacity to carry the world's presence as a new theatricalizing of its images" (131). He observes this change mainly in traditional Hollywood cinema and points to the concurrent rise of modernist cinema in the 1960s. Cavell argues that roughly around this time cinema starts to respond to an "altered sense of film, a sense that film has brought itself into question and must be questioned and openly confessed" (123). In other words, he describes the situation when cinema as art had to tackle "the modernist predicament in which an art has lost its natural relation to its history, in which an artist, exactly because he is devoted to making an object that will bear the same weight of experience that such objects have always borne which constitute the history of his art, is compelled to find unheard-of structures that define themselves and their history against one another" (72). This is a situation equivalent to what Fried described as the "crisis of unsustainability in the art" that reached its peak in Manet's generation, when a painting, in order to survive, had to acknowledge its to-be-seenness while "reserving imaginative space for itself" (*Why Photography Matters...*43). In short, Cavell's argumentation offers the possibility to consider cinematic spectatorship within the modernist problematic of anti-theatricality and beholding in the visual arts.

This dissertation suggests that *tableau* filmmakers grapple with issues similar to anti-theatricality and beholding in the context of Soviet as well as European cinema of that period. I am less interested in claiming that, therefore, *tableau* cinema is a serious modernist art (although it is a part of my claim). Rather, I am interested in the explanatory potential this approach provides. Through this approach, *tableau* cinema's aesthetic experimentations can be understood more productively, and not simply reduced to the *auteurs*' personal expression or their elitist complexity.

2.0 SPECTATORSHIP IN *TABLEAU* CINEMA

The self-sufficient shot, the predominantly static camera, and the flat construction of space—these are the stylistic characteristics that Soviet *tableau* films share with early *tableau* cinema of the silent era. Unlike in the early *tableau* cinema, however, in Soviet *tableau* films the absence of linear perspectival depth is an aesthetic choice. The frequent allusions to such non-perspectival traditions as Orthodox icons, Persian miniatures, children's drawings, decorative art, or early twenty-century modernist art can be interpreted in the light of a deliberate avoidance of linear perspective.

My hypothesis is that the avoidance of linear perspective in Soviet *tableau* cinema has to do with the interrelated issues of spectatorship and the cinematic reimaging of alternative histories to Soviet modernity. In this chapter, I will focus mainly on the issues of spectatorship. Along the lines of Fried's interpretation of beholding of *tableau* forms, I propose that the avoidance of linear perspective in *tableau* cinema, on the one hand, undoes habitual perception of linear perspectival construction and acknowledges the constructedness of their representation. By doing so, *tableau* cinema resists immediate understanding and conventional reading. On the other hand, the possibility of absorption in and intelligibility of *tableau* cinema is not entirely foreclosed. *Tableau* cinema creates new aesthetic possibilities that invite the spectator to engage with its cinematic world. To think through this hypothesis, the following question needs to be addressed first: What do linear perspective and its absence have to do with spectatorship?

2.1 PERSPECTIVE AND SPECTATORSHIP

Linear perspective as the main visual system of Western Europe was canonized during the Quattrocento, particularly in Leon Batista Alberti's *On Painting* (*De Pictura*, 1435).³⁷ It dominated the Western painterly tradition up until the nineteenth-century. Based on Euclidian geometry, Alberti's work provides a set of practical instructions for the implementation of linear perspective. According to Alberti, linear perspective requires a monocular point of view from a fixed position, which was supposed to resemble the point of view from "an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen" (54).

Linear perspective has been widely accepted not simply as a practical formula for painters, but also as specific to a particular period and cultural way of representing and perceiving space—a sort of epistemological metaphor.³⁸ Among scholars who advocate this view, Erwin Panofsky writes that linear perspectival construction is "a construction that is itself comprehensible only for a quite specific, indeed specifically modern, sense of space, or if you will, sense of the world" (34). As a specifically modern sense of the world, linear perspective, according to Panofsky, is foreign to the direct experience of space. He writes, "In a sense, perspective transforms psychophysiological space into mathematical space. [...] It forgets that we see not with a single fixed eye, but with two constantly moving eyes, resulting in a spheroidal field of vision" (31). This

³⁷ Three events traditionally are considered crucial in establishing the origins of linear perspective: Brunelleschi's experiments (shortly before 1413); Masaccio's *Trinity*, the first surviving perspective picture (1427-1428); and Alberti's book, the first written record in 1435 (Elkins 7). As James Elkins points out, "this unified origin was not perceived as such in the Renaissance and that Renaissance artists and writers saw many techniques where we see a single discovery" (8).

³⁸ Although some scholars are inclined to take perspective more as a practical formula (Martin Kemp, Samuel Edgerton, Cecil Grayson), in my analysis of the perspective in *tableau* films I side with the scholars who interpret perspective in relation to a particular *Zeitgeist* (James Elkins, Erwin Panofsky, Anne Friedberg).

reading of perspective leads Panofsky toward the metaphysical interpretation of linear perspective as the “objectification of the subjective” (66). He states that the “history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real and as triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control” (67). Along similar lines, Pavel Florensky ascribes perspectival painting to the Euclid-Kantian worldview (254), which distances itself from psychophysiological reality in favor of the abstract subjectivism of Modern times. What is important about linear perspective here is that, conceptually, it is specific to modernity’s mode of perception and representation of the world, whereas, technically, it is a formula that creates with scientific precision an illusion of depth from a singular fixed point of view.

This interpretation of linear perspective was largely accepted by the post-1968 film critics in France and Britain. Particularly, the conditions of linear perspective were criticized in works of apparatus theorists like Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Stephen Heath, and others in the 1970s. Apparatus theorists underscored the genealogical continuity between Renaissance perspective and cinematic apparatus, and criticized the spectatorial effect of this perspective.

In “Ideological Effects of Basic Cinematic Apparatus,” Baudry writes that it is the perspective construction of the Renaissance that served as the model for future optical instruments, including the movie camera. Therefore, he argues, the cinematic apparatus inherits an ideological effect pertaining to perspective. This ideological effect of perspective stems from the centered position of a subject. He explains it as follows: “It [cinema] constitutes the ‘subject’ by the illusory delimitation of a central location—whether this be that of a god or of any other substitute. It is an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a fantasmaticization of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism” (46). In other words, the cinematic apparatus, to borrow Anne

Friedberg's recapitulation of Baudry's theory, brings about "a culmination of a Western philosophical tradition of a transcendental idealist—hence, disembodied—observing subject" (80). Baudry's argument that focuses on the ideological effects of the camera's perspectival property has at least two potential pitfalls. First, by attributing ideological effect to the technology of the medium itself, he doesn't leave space for any divergence from it by particular films. Second, Baudry hardly addresses the issue of movement and editing in cinema's perspectival construction. He only vaguely mentions that the potential multiplicity of points of view—which camera movement and editing enable and which can nullify the fixity of a subject-spectator—is denied by the illusion of continuity restored through projection.

Stephen Heath in "Narrative Space" offers a more nuanced reading of cinema's inheritance of Renaissance perspective. Like Baudry, he acknowledges that the movie camera is constructed on the model of the scientific perspective of the Quattrocento and states that through identification with the camera the subject-spectator occupies the central position. At the same time, he offers a view that complicates the default ideological effect of the camera by elaborating on the possibilities of movement in cinema. Heath points out that mobility in film can be complicit as well as subversive to the ideological effect of Renaissance perspective. He writes that, "cinema is not simply and specifically ideological 'in itself'; but it is developed in the context of concrete and specific ideological determinations which inform as well the 'technical' as the 'commercial' or 'artistic' sides of that development" (33). He argues that, whereas movement in cinema could radically disturb the perspectival centeredness of a spectator, historically it developed in a way that reinforces the stability of perspectival vision.³⁹ This reinforcement, he maintains, is achieved

³⁹ This is a more nuanced proposition, compared to Friedberg's automatic connection of cinematic movement and montage to post-perspectival symbolic form. Friedberg argues that due to montage and the mobility of the camera, cinema changes our perception of perspectival space on screen. Unlike photography

through a narrative-driven construction of space; he mainly has Classical Hollywood cinema in mind.

To demonstrate how the perspectival system of Euclidean space turns into the perspectival system of narrative space, Heath describes the ways the narrative cinema utilizes three possible kinds of movement: movement within the frame, movement of the camera (reframing), and transitions between shots (editing). He argues that the frame in a narrative film is composed, centered, and narrated to maintain “the itinerary of a fixity” for the spectator. The flat screen, as a space with no “behind,” establishes “a pure expanse that can be invested with depth” (38) of a narrative space. The characters within the film also serve for the narrative organization of space. He writes, “[T]he character, figure of the look, is a kind of perspective within the perspective system, regulating the world, orientating space, providing directions — and for the spectator” (44).

To show how reframing and editing contribute to the fixity of the centered position of the spectator, he compares spectatorial perception in early *tableau* cinema and later narrative-driven cinema of the Classical Hollywood era. He points out that the fixed frontal view in early *tableau* films creates the difficulty of effectively maintaining a centered perception because of the “continual wealth of movements [within the frame] and details potentially offered by the photographic image” (39). To overcome this potential threat to centered perception and to achieve spatial clarity and continuity that can bind the subject-spectator in the center of the visual pyramid, narrative cinema underwent fragmentation and subsequent recomposition in accordance with continuity-editing rules. In other words, according to Heath, in narrative cinema the ideology of the perspectival system—the construction of an ideal, centered position for a fixed subject-

“moving” pictures, she argues, signal a shift to yet another symbolic form, which she calls post-perspectival (44-45).

spectator—was preserved in the process of the shift from Euclidean space to narrative space. Along similar lines, David Bordwell argues that in narrative cinema linear perspective is “more a mental system than an optical one” (7). Among scholars who argue for the longstanding complicity between Renaissance perspective and narrative, Laura Mulvey particularly emphasizes the link between perspectival depth and narrative drive (associated with male protagonists), which she compares to the non-perspectival flatness of a spectacle that suspends narrative drive (usually performed by female characters). So far, the general consensus seems to be that cinema inherits and perhaps reinforces linear perspective’s technical conditions (through the camera mechanism),⁴⁰ as well as the conceptual implications (through narrative construction),⁴¹ and therefore binds the disembodied subject-spectator in front of the illusionistic space.

2.2 *TABLEAU* CINEMA AND NONLINEAR PERSPECTIVE

Soviet *tableau* cinema, however, goes against the dominant tradition of the seemingly inevitable inheritance of linear perspective’s technical and conceptual underpinnings. The world that the *tableau* filmmakers create in their films is foreign to the illusion of three-dimensional reality, which is so familiar to a modern viewer. *Tableau* cinema, of course, is not the only trend that defies the linear-perspectival system in cinema. There are numerous examples of postwar experimental and art cinemas that deliberately avoid linear perspectival construction of both space

⁴⁰ Hurbert Damisch, for example, writes: “Without any doubt, our period is much more massively informed by the perspective paradigm, thanks to photography, film and now video, than was the fifteenth century, which could boast of very few correct perspective constructions” (28).

⁴¹ Besides the scholars already mentioned, Domietta Torlasco in cinema, Rosalind Krauss and Wilhelm de Kooning in painting connect narrative to linear perspective.

and narrative.⁴² While in a broader context *tableau* cinema is a part of this tendency, the way *tableau* filmmakers defy the perspectival system and the aspirations that drives their aesthetic experimentations need also to be interpreted in the particular context of Late Socialist culture.

I argue that the visual construction of space in *tableau* films has affinity with the construction of space according to the non-perspectival painterly traditions. Whereas Orthodox icons and the Persian miniatures are the dominant non-perspectival painterly traditions invoked in *tableau* cinema, the stylistic choices of *tableau* filmmakers are not limited to these two traditions. Children's drawings, ornamental art, and early twenty-century modernist art, such as collage or abstract painting, also underlie the stylistic construction of *tableau* films. All of these modes of representation, consciously or not, avoid linear perspective's technical and conceptual implications. I will refer to all of these modes as "non-perspectival" or "non-linear," not so much because the terminology is accurate but rather because it captures the shared qualities that interest me here.⁴³ What are the technical and conceptual implications of non-perspectival painterly traditions? And how is non-perspectival quality related to spectatorship in *tableau* cinema?

The absence or rejection of linear perspective is a complex issue that spans centuries of visual arts history. Here I want to limit my discussion of non-linear perspective to the context that relates to *tableau* filmmakers' aesthetic choices. According to the rules of non-linear perspective, for example in Orthodox icons, the concrete object is rendered not from one person's individual point of view, as in the case of linear perspective, but rather is represented from within the spatial microcosm of the icon, which is similar as a whole to the real world. In his account of non-linear

⁴² See, for example, films of Stanley Brakhage, Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni.

⁴³ "Inverted" or "reverse" perspectives are the terms commonly used with regard to Orthodox icons; I prefer here the more inclusive term non-linear perspective.

perspective in pre-modern (medieval and ancient) art, Florensky writes that, “[the non-perspectival art work’s] purpose is to convey a kind of spatial wholeness, a specific, self-contained world that is not mechanical, but is contained within the confines of the frame by internal forces (226).⁴⁴ Florensky connects these implications of non-perspectival painting to the religious underpinnings of the pre-modern world. In such non-perspectival paintings the world is rendered from multiple and synthetic points of view, in accordance with changes undergone by the painter, the depicted object, and the beholder.

This rendering of the microcosm from within is characteristic of the Persian miniature as well. In his theological interpretation of the Persian miniature, Seyyed Hossein Nasr opposes the common view of miniatures as a profane courtly art: “in a traditional civilization, especially one like Islam where religion dominates over all spheres of life, no aspect of human activity is left outside the authority of the spiritual principles and least of all that which deals with what would correspond to temporal authority in Western parlance” (131). He states that the Persian miniature strictly conforms to the heterogeneous and qualitative conception of space in the Muslim world, where non-perspectively rendered space corresponds to the “intermediary world which stands above the physical and which is the gateway to all higher states of being” (132). Thus, here, too, the non-perspectival technique of the Persian miniature corresponds to the pre-modern conception of the world, where the world is not brought before man as a picture in the Heideggerian sense, but rather man is enclosed within the world, understood theologically. Hence, the position of the

⁴⁴ “Ведь задача его—дать некоторую пространственную цельность, особый, в себе замкнутый мир, не механический, но внутренними силами сдерживаемый в пределах рамы” (226).

medieval painter is not fixed outside the world that he depicts, but rather is enclosed within that world.⁴⁵

The connection between Soviet *tableau* films and these medieval painterly traditions first of all can be supported by the direct citation of icons and miniatures. Both the font style and images in the title sequence of *A Necklace for My Beloved* overtly allude to Persian miniatures from manuscripts. [Figure 1] The division of the film into book-like chapters pushes the resemblance of the film to the illuminated manuscripts even further. In *Ashik Kerib* close-up sequences of actual Persian miniatures from the Qajar era are inserted between the episodes. [Figure 2] Instances of the insertion of Orthodox icons are more abundant and can be found in almost all *tableau* films. Beginning with *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, icons are inserted at crucial moments in other Parajanov's works, as well as in Illienko's films. [Figure 3 and 4] In Abuladze's films and in Shiffirs's *Pervorossiiane* the insertion of icons is less blatant but still is an important reference. [Figure 5]



Figure 1

⁴⁵ The stylistic overlap between Byzantine iconography and Persian miniatures seems to be historically grounded. Not only are recipes for pigments in Persian miniatures closely resemble Byzantine formulae (Barry 31), but according to Michael Barry "Extant thirteenth-century Iraqi adaptations of Byzantine models show a masterful command of Greek illusionistic realism." (56.2 also see 57)



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

The allusion to medieval painterly traditions becomes even more compelling when one looks at *tableau* films from the point of view of the technique of non-linear perspective used in Orthodox icons and Persian miniatures. One of the key features of the technique of non-linear perspective is a multiplicity of visual positions, which results in the peculiar flatness of images as opposed to the volume and depth conditioned by the fixedness of a single position in linear perspective. In film, depth is hardly avoidable due to the linear perspectival property of the camera lens. To overcome the linear perspectival property of the camera and to convey the flatness of the frame peculiar to non-linear perspective, *tableau* filmmakers implement various techniques such as non-perspectivally constructed mise-en-scène, simple monochromatic backgrounds, close-ups, or camera angles that conceal the vanishing point.

The most commonly used technique to avoid linear perspectival depth and convey the multiplicity of viewing position in *tableau* films is the camera angle peculiar to Persian miniatures. Persian miniatures are normally rendered from a mixed—between frontal and overhead—angle of about 45 degrees, which results in a flat, apparently multiperspectival image. To produce a similar effect *tableau* filmmakers commonly use a similar angle in their shots, which is higher than a straight-on angle but lower than an overhead angle. This angle is particularly visible in *A Necklace for My Beloved* and *Ashik Kerib*. [Figure 6 and 7] Of course, one static camera shot cannot reproduce the mixed angle of multiple viewing positions exactly as in Persian miniatures, but this in-between angle at least allows the viewer to combine frontal and overhead positions and to avoid the linear perspectival illusion of depth. The common close-ups of face in *tableau* films, frequently shown against monochromatic background, is another way to suggest non-perspectival depthless space. [Figure 8]



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

An even more explicit construction of space accorded to non-linear perspective is evident in Parajanov's films where he manipulates objects' positions and their respective sizes. Instead of observing the rule of the diminution of size toward the vanishing point in linear perspective, a mise-en-scène in *Ashik Kerib*, for example, shows the enlargement of objects and the widening of the field of view toward a horizontal line. [Figure 9] Some mise-en-scènes in *The Color of Pomegranate* demonstrate the peculiar position of objects and their respective size. The non-

perspectival quality of these compositions is reiterated through the 45-degree camera angle.

[Figure 10]



Figure 9



Figure 10

In Orthodox icons this kind of “distortion” is explained by the internal position of the painter:

[The] artist’s internal position with respect to the representation is the characteristic feature of inverted perspective whereby objects diminish in size in proportion to their proximity to the frame, i.e., to the viewer of the picture and not in proportion to their distance from the observer, as is the case in the [linear] perspective. This phenomenon may be understood by suggesting that the diminution in the size of the objects in the system of the inverted perspective not from our viewpoint (the viewpoint of the spectator outside the picture), but from the viewpoint of our vis-à-vis, of an abstract internal observer who may be conceived of being located in the depth of the picture. (Uspensky 38)

In Figure 9, the enlargement of architectural settings and the greater size of the two angels in the background compared to the diminished figure of Ashik in the foreground might be interpreted as evidence of the internal viewpoint. In Figure 10, the figures in the background are positioned higher and are standing in their full height, whereas foreground figures are in kneeling or sitting positions. This manipulation of the position and size, in fact, makes the distinction between foreground and background meaningless, since the figures seem to appear on one plane. The central figure, lying on the bed with her head and shoulders slightly raised, further complicates the overall composition and hinges on multiple spectatorial positions. Such a construction of the frame not only has a defamiliarizing effect on the viewer, but also potentially invites the viewer to see the space not from an outside fixed position but to experience it from inside.

The multiplicity of visual positions in non-perspectival works negates a single fixed position and instead implies a dynamic viewing position. Boris Uspensky, following Lev Zhegin's seminal work on Russian icons, writes:

The system of inverted perspective results from the use of a multiplicity of visual positions, which is to say that it is connected with a dynamic visual gaze and a subsequent summation of the visual impression that is received in a multilateral visual embrace. As a result of this summation, the dynamics of the viewing position are carried over to the picture, thus giving rise to the deformations specific to forms in inverted perspective. (31)

Uspensky adds that this explains the characteristic immobility of figures in medieval religious painting. They do not need to move, since the observer's gaze should move instead. The static characteristic of the images in *tableau* films might be interpreted in this context of the observer's dynamic point of view in non-linear perspective. In *tableau* films, frozen poses and

minimal amounts of laterally choreographed motion within each non-perspectivally constructed frame are designed to stimulate the meandering mobility of the spectator's gaze inside the frame. The static and flat quality of *tableau* cinema can be perceived not only within the frame but also through the camerawork. While the camera in *tableau* films is usually static, in the rare instances when the camera moves, it is limited to lateral movement; forward or backward camera movements that suggest depth are almost absent.

The allusion to non-perspectival and peculiarly flat Orthodox icons and Persian miniatures through the cinematic manipulations in *tableau* films is clear. Extremely rare instances of applying linear perspective only support the non-perspectival tendency in *tableau* cinema. The only two instances that are most glaringly constructed by the rules of linear perspective in Parajanov's films curiously serve almost as ominous signs that lead to the deaths of the main characters. Toward the end of *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* in a tavern scene where Ivanko will be killed, space stands out for its hyperbolized implementation of linear perspective; similarly, in *The Color of Pomegranate*, an exaggerated linear perspectival scene appears just before Sayat Nova's death, when he leaves the monastery for a secular world. [Figure 11 and 12]



Figure 11



Figure 12

The linear perspectival world in these films is linked to a secular world, the world of adults, which ominously points toward death. The only instance of similarly hyperbolized linear perspective in Illienko's *A Well For the Thirsty* appears in the last part entitled "Son," after the main character is informed of his son's death. [Figure 13]



Figure 13

Scholars of non-linear perspective in icons pointed out the affinity of Orthodox icons with children's drawings. Florensky writes, "[I]n terms of non-perspectival characteristics, particularly the invertedness of perspective, children's drawing is vividly reminiscent of medieval painting" (207-208)⁴⁶. This similarity leads him to argue that non-linear perspective is not a random or arbitrary invention of a child or of a medieval Byzantine painter, but rather the result of a different

⁴⁶ "Рисунки детей, в отношении неперспективности, и именно обратной перспективы, живо напоминают рисунки средневековые" (*Ikonostas* 207-208)

perception of the world. Concerning non-linear perspective in children's drawings, Boris Uspenskii gives a telling example of how children explain the violation of the rules of linear perspective by the fact that they are located inside the drawing (44). Both Florensky and Uspenskii conclude that non-linear perspective is not a primitive or unsophisticated technique, but rather a different method of depiction, derived from internal position and synthesizing perceptions of the world.

It does not seem to be a coincidence that many *tableau* films insert images of children curiously looking at something or the images of actual children's drawings. For instance, the very first and last shots in Parajanov's *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* are images of children. [Figure 14 and 15] The window, through which children look in the last scene of *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, alludes to the Albertian window metaphor, but the way in which children look through that window is far from the fixed, distanced position of a Renaissance painter.



Figure 14



Figure 15

The Color of Pomegranate also begins with a child's perspective after the insertion of a few still-life-like shots. [Figure 16 and 17] The upside-down position of the child's head in this scene also hints at his unconventional perception of the world. Toward the end of the film, the child's perspective is shown again from an unconventional position that resembles the gaze of an angel from the mural painting on the dome of the monastery.



Figure 16



Figure 17

Abuladze's *A Necklace for My Beloved* and *Tree of Desire* both are bookended by images of children. In Illienko's films, in addition to numerous images of children portrayed as an innocent sacrifice (*Saint John's Eve*) or as possessors of a fresh perception of the world (*White Bird with a Black Mark*), in *A Well for the Thirsty* we see how a little child literally covers an adult's eyesight while being carried piggyback. [Figure 18] The occasional inserts of children's drawings in Parajanov's films are yet another allusion to children's point of view that gives a hint at a different

spectatorial experience. [Figure 19] Children's perspective is a hallmark of post-Stalinist cinema and has several functions.⁴⁷ In the case of *tableau* cinema the depiction of children and their idiosyncratic perception of the world most notably function as a surrogate of artistic vision, which alludes to an unconventional, in particular non-linear, way of perceiving the world.



Figure 18



Figure 19

Another instance of non-perspectival tradition in *tableau* cinema can be found in the frequent appearance of ornamental patterns. The painted and carved ornaments serve not simply a decorative function in the films but constitute an integral part of the aesthetics of *tableau* cinema. [Figure 20, 21, and 22]

⁴⁷ See Woll 112-124, Prokhorov 2007.



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

Carpets in *The Color of Pomegranate* or to a lesser degree in *A Necklace for my Beloved* are yet another ornamental form in *tableau* cinema that undertakes a similar function. As András Kovács points out, ornamental filmmakers of 1960s—Parajanov and Illienko among them—use folkloric motifs not for ethnographic fidelity but as a part of self-conscious stylization (183). Similar to ornamentalism in modern art, which emerged as a revolt against classical rationalist representation (Connelly qtd. Kovács 176), ornamental style in *tableau* cinema can be considered as a search for an alternative mode of representation. Signaling stylistic adherence to a non-perspectival visual mode, which is free from three-dimensional realism, ornamental style in

tableau cinema foregrounds intricate patterns and details as equally if not more significant than the linear narrative of the film. In *Saint John's Eve* and *Ashik Kerib*, for example, live action often merges into the ornamental pattern instead of pushing the narrative forward.⁴⁸ [Figure 23 and 24]



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

⁴⁸ With regard to the intensified ornamental texture in Illienko's film Kovács writes: "Ilyenko transforms the folkloric motives into a highly surrealistic hypersaturated visual texture, where different visual and narrative motives of Ukrainian national folklore overshadow almost completely the linear narrative. The highly fragmented structure (442 shots in 68 minutes) gives this film the look of a series of ornamentally and sometimes surrealistically composed individual sequences. (183)"



Figure 26

Among early twentieth-century non-perspectival traditions *tableau* cinema, particularly the films of Parajanov and Illienko, often rely on the aesthetics of collage. [Figure 25 and 26] Parajanov, who is also known as a collage artist, claimed that, “collage is a compressed film.” As this claim already suggests, the relation between *tableau* cinema and the aesthetics of collage is complex and involves such issues as temporality, montage, as well as the materiality of the image; at this point, however, I limit my discussion of collage to the issues of perspective. In terms of perspective, collage intentionally as well as inevitably forgoes the three-dimensional illusion of depth and brings everything onto one surface. Clement Greenberg in his essay “Collage” states that Picasso and Braque used the technique of collage “to emphasize the surface still further in order to prevent it from fusing with the illusion” (74). Greenberg’s insight is situated within his broader argument about medium specificity in modernist art. My interpretation of the use of collage by *tableau* filmmakers is far from the Greenbergian idea of medium specificity; however, his insight, that the technique of collage ultimately defies the linear perspectival illusion of depth is useful. In the context of *tableau* cinema, the aesthetics of collage can be considered as yet another technique used to foreground non-perspectival flatness, which enables a different mode of spectatorial perception.

The allusion to the early twentieth-century non-perspectival painterly tradition is also evident in *Pervorossiane*. In particular, the film draws on the resemblance of its imagery to the

works of Kazimir Malevich and Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin. It is worth mentioning that the works of both painters stylistically and conceptually are rooted in Orthodox icons and demonstrate the non-perspectival flatness of the surface peculiar to icons. [Figure 27 and 28]



Figure 27



Figure 28

Malevich and Petrov-Vodkin have their own theoretical interpretations of the non-perspectival qualities in their works. In the case of Malevich, and his *Black Square* in particular, the flatness is partly conditioned by the artist's fascination with the concept of the fourth dimension, which had been widely discussed among intellectuals during the turn of the century (Golding 62). Although interpretations of the fourth dimension differed, all its advocates agreed that it reversed the position on what was real and unreal, or logical and illogical, in our perception of the three-dimensional universe. John Golding points out that virtually every painter interested

in the concept of the fourth dimension agreed that it “involved or implied a recognition of infinity, although paradoxically this infinite space is also often equated with flatness; what has to be distrusted is the three-dimensional space in which we believe ourselves to live and which is captured through traditional, illusionistic pictorial means” (63-64). If in Malevich’s works the flatness is grounded on the distrust for the three-dimensionality, flatness in Petrov-Vodkin’s works has to do with “spheroidal perspective” – a concept he developed to explain his own works. Petrov-Vodkin’s spheroidal perspective takes into account the dynamicity of depicted objects. In his half-theoretical, half-fictional work he explains: “When bodies meet and intersect, they change their shapes: they flatten out, become elongated or turn into spheres, and only when transferred on to a pictorial surface with these kinds of modifications they become appropriate for perception”⁴⁹(482). This explanation of spheroidal perspective in principle is very similar to multiple summary points of view in icons that imply the mobility of the painter/viewer’s gaze. This mobility contrasts with the fixed point of view in linear perspective. The frequent allusions to these two painters in *Pervorossiane* may have various interpretations, but it is hard to deny the film’s visual imitation of the non-perspectival qualities of their paintings.

Why do the *tableau* filmmakers so meticulously reproduce the formal characteristics of non-perspectival painterly traditions, while restraining the expressive possibilities conventionally used by cinematic medium? The instances I trace above suggest that *tableau* cinema’s kinship with non-perspectival painterly traditions is deeply connected to two interrelated issues tackled by *tableau* filmmakers. The first one is related to the rejection of (Soviet) modernity and linear historical progression underpinned by linear perspective and reinforced by conventional use of

⁴⁹ “Тела при их встречах и пересечениях меняют свои формы: сплюсчиваются, удлиняются, сферизуются, и, только с этими поправками перенесенные на картинную плоскость, они становятся нормальными для восприятия” (482).

cinema. The second and more important issue is related to alteration of spectatorial experience through the transformation of the aesthetic possibilities of cinematic medium in order to reimagine alternative histories to Soviet modernity.

The alteration of spectatorial experience in *tableau* films, I argue along with Fried's and Cavell's position, have to do with the filmmakers' attempt to restore spectators' conviction in the cinematic world. *Tableau* filmmakers restore spectators' conviction by both undoing our habituation to a linear perspectival world(view) and the acknowledging constructedness of their representation, on the one hand and on the other hand, by creating new aesthetic possibilities that allows spectator's engagement with cinematic world. The following question is in order: if the spectator's conviction has to be restored, in what context was this conviction challenged in the first place?

2.3 "SINCERITY" AND THE SPECTATOR'S CONVICTION

In Fried's and Cavell's terms, the issue of the loss of spectator's conviction in the cinematic world stems from the problem of theatricality. Simply put, Friedian theatricality means, "playing to an audience," and is considered "the worst of all artistic faults" (Fried "Art and Objecthood" 48).⁵⁰ For Fried an essential condition of the work's being an artwork, that is the survival of art as art, depends on defeat of theatricality. This struggle with theatricality becomes increasingly

⁵⁰ In that sense, his critique of theatricality should not be mistaken for a critique of theater altogether. Following Diderot and the French antitheatrical tradition, Fried distinguishes between theater and drama: "Drama, the positive term, absolutely precluded all suggestion that the beholder had been taken into account (no addressing the audience, falsely rhetorical gestures, symmetrical arrangement of personages, elaborate costumes); conversely, the least hint of theater turned drama into melodrama" (Fried "Art and Objecthood" 48).

difficult during modernity and, by the time of Manet and his generation, results in a strategy that openly acknowledges inevitable theatricality (in Manet's works it is achieved through "facingness"), while preserving artwork's absorptive capacity and autonomy. For Fried, this marks the beginning of modernism in arts. Cavell points to the emergence of a similar phenomena in cinema around the 1960s.

Robert Pippin extends the issue of theatricality in modernist art to modern society as a whole. Among other criticisms of theatricality in modern society, Pippin draws attention to Rousseau's critique of modern man, who lives "only in the opinion of others" and "derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgment" (Rousseau qtd. in Pippin "Authenticity in Painting" 581).⁵¹ Pippin's revision of Hegelian aesthetics—in his book *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*—enables him to draw deep connection between the struggle against theatricality by modernist artist and by modern individual, in general. In this broader sense, theatricality means "to perform an activity controlled and directed by an anticipation of what others expect to occur" ("Authenticity in Painting" 578). Pippin argues that in modern society this causes "skepticism about the possibility of genuinely shared meaning, shared among subjects in some sort of mutuality rather than in relations of subject to object... ." (*After the Beautiful* 97). In other words, Pippin connects theatricality to two interrelated problems: (i) the loss of conviction in the other's action and (ii) the possibility of mutual subjectivity.

Very broadly, Soviet *tableau* cinema's struggle to restore the spectator's conviction and defeat theatricality can be understood in this context of modernity and modernism. This

⁵¹ Around the same time similar criticism of theatricality occurs in Russia under the influence of Rousseau and Diderot. This perhaps was reinforced due to the imported nature of this custom on Russian soil (see, Rutten 35-77, Lotman 249-268).

proposition does not therefore mean that *tableau* cinema's problematic is to be interpreted according to the Western European version of modernity and modernism, which underlies Pippin's and Fried's arguments. Rather, I suggest that while the core of the problem of theatricality—the struggle for conviction and mutual subjectivity—may be common to Soviet and Western modernity and modernism, the shape this problem of theatricality takes and the ways in which this problem is tackled in *tableau* cinema are specific to the context of Russo-Soviet culture and history.

To approach the problem of theatricality and spectator's conviction in *tableau* cinema, I take a closer look at the concept of “sincerity” in the Soviet context. Sincerity, which can be considered theatricality's conceptual counterpart, becomes of essential importance in the post-Stalinist period.⁵² The hallmark text that epitomizes the role and significance of sincerity in post-Stalinist culture is Vladimir Pomerantsev's “On Sincerity in Literature” (“Ob iskrennosti v literature,” 1953). The concept of sincerity that lies at the heart of this text as well as of the Thaw culture at large traditionally has been interpreted as a critique of Stalinist hypocrisy and a call for genuine personal expression, which often takes lyrical and emotional form. Alexander Prokhorov, for example, summarizes Pomerantsev's essay as follows: “(1) the writer should express his own sincere feelings instead of just echoing official decrees; (2) the immediacy of emotions is the ultimate measure of literary value; (3) the positive hero of Stalinist literature is the epitome of insincerity” (95-96). Prokhorov concludes, that through this essay “[s]incerity becomes the code word for refurbishing Soviet literature in accordance with the new cultural values: anti-monumentalism, the cult of emotions, and the individual” (96).⁵³ Ellen Rutten, in her study of the

⁵² The concept also gains renewed significance in the West after World War Two. See Rutten 67-

⁵³ Joshua First express a similar interpretation in his book (26).

new sincerity in Russia, adds that Thaw era sincerity not only had emotional and private connotations, but was also linked to social and political meaning. She characterizes post-Stalinist Soviet culture as a “regime of obligatory sincerity” (76-77).

While not denying private and public implications of the concept, I want to add that in post-Stalinist culture the emphasis on sincerity signals yet another important concern of the period: the renewed interest in the audience’s conviction. In Stalinist art, the audience’s conviction was undermined: their position was either reduced to credulous indulgence in utopia (as in *kolkhoz* musicals) or subject to unilateral propaganda (as in *The Fall of Berlin*), or often both. In short, the audience was objectified.⁵⁴ By contrast, in post-Stalinist art the audience emerges as an equal member of aesthetic experience. In other words, the search for genuine self-expression in artwork is not a sufficient condition for Thaw sincerity; the artwork also should be compelling to the reader or the viewer. The existing scholarship on Thaw era sincerity often overlooks the latter condition. However, to account for the aesthetic transformations in post-Stalinist cinema, and particularly in cinema of republican studios, it is crucial to highlight the concern with the audience’s conviction implied in sincerity. By the concern with audience’s conviction I, of course, do not mean the demand for rigorous realism or accessibility to the audience. Rather what I mean is a struggle against the artwork’s theatricality and for the possibility of mutual subjectivity.

How exactly does this concern with the audience’s conviction look like in the discourse of post-Stalinist sincerity? I will start by focusing on two key texts of the period: Pomerantsev’s “On Sincerity in Literature” and Nekrasov’s “Great Words and Simple Words.”

⁵⁴ Evgenii Dobrenko in *The Making of the State Reader* makes a similar claim with regard to Stalin period readership: “The Soviet reader, spectator, or listener is not simply a recipient (or in the Western sense a ‘consumer of books’): in accordance with the doctrine of ‘reshaping society’ that lies at the heart of Socialist Realism, he is the object of reshaping, ‘molding’. (2)”

In Pomerantsev's essay, the main cases of insincerity are clichés and the “varnishing of reality” in Stalinist literature. The problem with clichés and “varnished reality” in Pomerantsev's account is not so much in their untruthfulness to reality but in the fact that they do not compel readers. He writes, “Although clichés do not cause direct disbelief in literary word, they deprive things of their validity and leave us indifferent. The direct disbelief in the literary word is caused by another type of insincerity, which we are used to call ‘varnishing of reality’” (219). It is logical to attribute this concern about the readers' indifference or disbelief to the critique of insincerity in Stalinist culture, but it is only a part of Pomerantsev's larger claim.

Pomerantsev's approach to sincerity in literature is of diachronic nature and is deeply related to readership; it is not simply a critique of Stalinism. The diachronic nature of his approach to sincerity and his concern with the reader's conviction in the sincerity of the work is put upfront in the introductory part of his essay. There he gives a rough account of sincerity in the course of the novel's literary evolution. After describing readers' disinterest in the didacticism of the rhetorical novel [риторический роман], he explains the reasons for the popularity and decline of the epistolary and other types of novel:

The epistolary novel became popular because a private letter felt the sincerest. When the readers sensed that the letters are composed for them, and not for the addressee, when it became a ubiquitous technique, the epistolary novel lost its popularity and disappeared. “Novel of manners” [роман положений] became attractive not so much because of its garishness but rather due to the characters' behavior in diverse situations. Theater interests us thanks to the vivid everyday life of people, who do not suspect that I observe them. This is why they behave independently. When an author clumsily lets me know that men and women who

live on stage know about my presence and speak for me and not for other men and women on stage, then I lose interest in observing them, whereas for them, their life is constrained. (219)⁵⁵

For our purposes, I want to underscore the following points in this quotation: (i) techniques that express sincerity change over time and (ii) this change is directly related to audience's conviction.⁵⁶ As long as the novel and its characters preserve their independence and do not "perform for" the reader—in other words, as long as they defeat theatricality, as Fried would say—the reader believes in the artwork's sincerity.

The emphasis on the audience's conviction is even more explicit in Nekrasov's "Grand Words and Simple Words." As I have discussed in the previous chapter, this article compares Solntseva/Dovzhenko's lofty style to Khutsiev's simple style and gives preference to the latter. What I want to emphasize here is that the criteria for Nekrasov's judgment are primarily based on spectators' conviction. He states "It is important that you believe in whatever is happening in the book, on stage, or on screen. Even if it is a fairy tale or the adventures of Baron Munchausen..."

⁵⁵ "Эпистолярный роман имел всеобщий успех оттого, что частное письмо казалось всего откровеннее. Когда читатель почувствовал, что письма составляются для него, а не для адресатов, когда это выродилось в распространённый приём, - эпистолярный роман потерял спрос и исчез. Роман положений привлекал не столько их пестротой, сколько поведением героев во всех ситуациях. Театр прельщает наглядностью быта людей, не подозревающих, что я их наблюдаю. Поэтому они держатся сами собой. Когда автор неуклюже даёт мне понять, что живущие на сцене мужчины и женщины знают о моём пребывании в зале и говорят для меня, а не для других живущих на сцене людей, то мне уже неинтересно их наблюдать, а им - уже несвободно живётся" (219).

⁵⁶ The diachronic approach also becomes clear when he emphasizes the role of a critic in identifying the newness of a literary work. He writes, "The role of a critic is not only in revealing the patriotism of a writer or topicality of the theme. The critic must assess the role of the book in literature, must tell us what new contribution it makes compared to previous works. [Задача критика не только в том, чтобы раскрыть патриотизм писателя и актуальность освещенной им темы. Критик должен оценить роль книги в литературе, сказать, что нового вносит она сравнительно с прежними]" (234).

(56).⁵⁷ He subsequently explains what he means by one's belief in theater or cinema: "'To believe' means: I look at the actor Babochkin and believe that he is Chapaev; I look at the actor Cherkasov and believe that he is Professor Polezhaev. But we have different cases as well. We look at the actor Boris Andreev in *The Fall of Berlin* and see that Andreev is playing the role of a Soviet soldier. And we don't believe him" (56).⁵⁸ To support his claim, Nekrasov recounts an example from one of Konstantin Stanislavskii's famous situations in "I don't believe! [He верю!]"'. Here again, the emphasis on audience's conviction is aiming not at realism but at anti-theatricality that would be compelling to the viewer.

Another point that Nekrasov makes explicit regarding the audience's conviction is that of mutual trust between the artist and the audience. He writes, "I am always grateful to the author when he gives me a chance to 'feel with' his characters, when I am given a space to think out for myself. In the *Poem about the Sea*, the author does not trust me. He always talks, clarifies, and proves—either directly or through his characters. In *Two Fedors*, characters talk very little. But when they are silent, I know what they are thinking about" (59).⁵⁹ On the most obvious level, Nekrasov criticizes verbosity and didacticism of Stalinist art here, but his claim also implies the necessity of mutual trust and the possibility of shareable meaning between the artist's work and

⁵⁷ "Но есть одно, что необходимо каждому из них, без чего, как бы правильна и ясна ни была мысль, заложенная в том или ином произведении, она никогда не дойдет до того, кому адресована. Важно, чтобы ты поверил в то, что происходит в книге, на сцене, на экране. Даже если это сказка или приключения Мюнхгаузена" (56).

⁵⁸ "А что такое вера — в театр, в кино? Вера — это значит: я смотрю на Бабочкина и верю, что это Чапаев, смотрю на Черкасова и верю, что это профессор Полежаев. Но бывает и другое. Смотрели мы в свое время на Б. Андреева в «Падении Берлина» и видели Андреева, изображающего советского солдата. И не поверили ему" (56).

⁵⁹ "Я всегда благодарен автору, когда он дает возможность «сопереживать» с его героями, когда мне оставляют додумать что-то самому. В «Поэме о море» автор не доверяет мне. Он все время говорит, поясняет, доказывает — или сам, или устами своих героев. В «Двух Федорах» герои говорят мало. Но зато, когда они молчат, я знаю, о чем они думают" (59).

the audience. This point indicates that Thaw sincerity is not simply about the artist's unilateral sincere self-expression but is also about mutuality.

My analysis of these two emblematic texts from the Thaw era foregrounds the following aspects about the concept of sincerity in post-Stalinist cultural expressions: (i) the audience's conviction becomes essential to understanding sincerity in post-Stalinist art; (ii) techniques that express sincerity and, by implication, compel the audience, change over time; (iii) sincerity and the audience's conviction open the possibility for sharable meaning and mutual subjectivity.

With these aspects of sincerity in mind, I now want to narrow my focus to the discourse on sincerity in cinema of the post-Stalinist period. In Thaw cinema, Prokhorov distinguishes two main features of sincerity. First, he claims, "the focus on *kinoiazyk*, *kinematografichnost'* [film language, cinematography] signified the sincerity of both the film medium and criticism about it" (30). Second, Thaw filmmakers and critics "favored the revolutionary film avant-garde of the 1920s as an example of authentic and sincere filmmaking and downplayed the role of Stalinist genre cinema of the 1930s-50s" (30). In short, Prokhorov characterizes Thaw "cine-sincerity" by formal innovations of cinema language that go against the Stalinist style of filmmaking. Although unstated in Prokhorov's account of "cine-sincerity," I want to emphasize that the concern with the spectator's conviction underlies the propensity to formal innovations in post-Stalinist cinema. Furthermore, I argue that the decisive difference between Stalinist and Thaw cinema is in this altered relationship to the spectator. Prokhorov's ultimate argument is that, despite stylistic innovation, Thaw cinema remains within the boundaries of Socialist Realism. He claims that "while Thaw cultural producers believed that they had abandoned Stalinist cultural practices, their works continued to generate major tropes of Stalinist culture..." (102). I suggest that, even if on the thematic level Stalinist tropes may be retained, the different attitude toward the spectatorship

is indicative of an entirely different aesthetic paradigm. Unlike in Stalinist culture, in the Thaw the spectator's conviction is no longer negligible or taken for granted. The features traditionally associated with the shift from Stalinist hypocrisy to Thaw sincerity—the attention to cinema language, anti-monumentalism, stylistic simplicity, and the artist's lyrical self-expression—are only manifestations of this underlying shift in the relation to the spectator. The spectator now is imagined to be an equal subject of aesthetic experience. And this becomes an essential condition for sincerity in post-Stalinist cinema.

Many scholars—and Prokhorov among them—argue that by the late Thaw the quest for sincerity as well as the Thaw enthusiasm in general are exhausted.⁶⁰ Prokhorov writes:

The writers and filmmakers of the 1960s gradually distanced themselves from the practices of Thaw culture. Their reevaluation of the Thaw project, and, above all, the bankruptcy of sincerity, signaled the end of Soviet utopianism. As a reaction to the uniform individualism of the Thaw, with its All-Union quest for sincere and authentic self-expression, the culture of the 1970s questioned the possibility of authentic self-expression and privileged otherness as a set of potentials for artistic production, none of which promised any comprehensive narrative or explanation of existence. (359)

The claims in this paragraph comes down to the following: (i) The “bankruptcy of sincerity” indicates the break between the Thaw and late Socialism. In Prokhorov's analysis, irony becomes the dominant mode that substitutes for the sincerity of Thaw culture (see Chapter Five of his dissertation); (ii) questioning the possibility of sincerity marks not simply the end of the Thaw; it also signals the end of the Soviet grand narrative. This interpretation leads Prokhorov to locate

⁶⁰ See, for example, Lipovetskii 1999, Groys 1993.

late socialist culture within the postmodernist paradigm. In the vein of the postmodernist problematic, he argues that “with the demise of the sincerity project in the late 1960s, [Soviet culture] had lost the possibility of establishing transcendental meaning” (360). Following Mark Lipovetskii’s argument, Prokhorov contends that “during the late 1960s, Soviet cultural metanarratives entered stage of decomposition parallel to the delegitimation of the narrative of Progress and Rationality in Western culture” (359).

This link between the “bankruptcy of sincerity,” late socialism, and postmodernism is widely accepted, and I have no intention of debunking it entirely. What I argue, however, is that in republican studios of that period or at the very least in *tableau* cinema, the crisis of the sincerity project does not necessarily mean abandoning the quest for sincerity all together and shifting to postmodernist irony. If we keep in mind that (i) an essential part of sincerity in art lies in the audience’s conviction and that (ii) the ways in which it may be achieved vary over time—we can call into question the overgeneralized statement about the “demise of the sincerity project in the late 1960s” and the subsequent advent of postmodernist skepticism.

Returning to our initial question—if the spectator’s conviction has to be restored, in what context was this conviction challenged in the first place?—we can now suggest the following response. Broadly speaking, the loss of the spectator’s conviction is the problem at the heart of modernity and modernism (Pippin and Fried). In the context of Soviet cinema, first, the spectator’s conviction and the possibility of mutual subjectivity were undermined by the theatricality of Stalinist cinema. A pervasive quest for sincerity in Thaw cinema and culture was a response to this problem. Later the problems of conviction and mutuality were further challenged by the skepticism of late Socialism, which questioned the very possibility of sincerity and conviction in both art and Soviet culture at large. This led many scholars to agree on the overlap between postmodernist

aesthetics and late socialist skepticism in Soviet culture and cinema. This may be largely true with regard to central studio production, which by the late Thaw was either dominated by irony or censored and shelved.

However, the emergence of formally complex cinema produced mainly in the republican studios during late socialism suggests that the struggle for sincerity and the audience's conviction continued at the peripheries of the Soviet film industry.⁶¹ By the continued struggle for sincerity and audience's conviction I do not mean to suggest that republican studios strived to maintain the belief in Soviet master narrative through their cinema. Quite the opposite, my hypothesis is that cinema on the peripheries tried to reimagine alternative past to evidently failing project of Soviet modernity by turning to medieval art, local folklore, vernacular histories, and legends invoking pre-Modern ("primitive") sensibilities and expressing them in radically experimental forms.⁶² The unprecedented experimentation with cinematic form so prominent in *tableau* cinema is one example of such struggle to confront late socialist skepticism and restore the spectator's conviction in their cinematic world.⁶³

⁶¹ These was partly conditioned by a set of factors in the republican studios during that period. Among those factors were the loosened control by the center, increase in funding, and a spurt in film production (First 38), which began during the Thaw and lasted until the early 1970s in Ukraine and much longer in the Georgian studio. In case of the Georgian studio, the prolonged Thaw was possible due to Eduard Shevarnadze's personal protection. See Golovskoi 171, Medvedev n.p.

⁶² First provide similar explanation with regard to Ukrainian cinema's turn to Ukrainian culture: "The appeal to national culture was tied into a broader malaise with contemporary life in the USSR..." (8).

⁶³ Parajanov, for example, in his article "Perpetual Motion" writes: "We have to recognize something in those spots and shines. This is the main thing. Of course, the easiest way would be to draw (or even copy) a saber, but would believe in it? Who would believe in a drawn sabers and generals? [Мы должны что-то узнать и в этих пятнах, и в этом блеске. Это главное. Конечно, проще было бы нарисовать (а лучше сказать, скопировать) саблю, но кто же поверит в нее? В нарисованную саблю или в нарисованных генералов?]" (47). Osyka's following statement also emphasize the importance of believe in the film world: "Romantic spirit does not exclude, but rather presuppose extremely deep and full authenticity. The sense of measure and moral truth are necessary – otherwise there is now conviction in the film. [Романтическая одухотворенность не исключает, а предполагает предельно глубокую, полную

Contemporary critics accused the highly experimental *tableau* films either of being elitist and inaccessible to common people (Ivanova), or of betraying “true” cinematic nature and being aesthetically retrograde (Bleiman). The former critique may be interpreted in the broader context of the growing sociological research of film audiences as potential consumers and the turn of the late Socialist film industry to entertainment cinema.⁶⁴ The latter critique, articulated in Mikhail Bleiman’s controversial article “Archaists or Innovators?” [Arkhaisty ili novatory? 1970], was a double-edged hallmark event that, on the one hand, proclaimed *tableau* films as a school, but, on the other hand, legitimized the official persecution of the identified school. Bleiman claims that painting-like elaborate frames end up being static illustrations that neglect the main cinematic specificity to capture “the duration, the flow of the movement” (69). This shortcoming, in his view, is closely related to the major problem of the trend: the turn to parables and allegories (68), which he considers artistically inferior and inappropriate for cinema (72).

These two lines of critique—the inaccessibility and “non-cinematicness”—may be read not as flaws of *tableau* cinema, but on the contrary, as the strategies to restore the spectator’s conviction and confront the ever-growing pressure of late Socialist skepticism, a consumerist approach to cinema, and the ideological control over film production. There is little doubt that *tableau* films are not accessible to the spectator in the conventional sense, particularly due to their radical disruption of linear perspectival construction, disregard for the established cinematic conventions, and explicit acknowledgment of the constructedness of their cinematic world. At the

достоверность. Необходимо чувство меры и чувство нравственной правды – иначе нет веры в сам фильм] (103).”

⁶⁴ First in his book writes “The spectator was no longer exclusively the ‘object of reshaping’..., but an active consumer of an increasingly diversified amount of media. Artists had to consider who would be interested in their work on self-consciously national subject matter” (11). Also, see his “From Spectator to ‘Differentiated’ Consumer: Film Audience Research in the Era of Developed Socialism (1965-80)”.

same time, I argue, *tableau* cinema opens new aesthetic possibilities that allow the spectator's absorption. This leads us to the following questions: what are the aesthetic possibilities that *tableau* films open and how these possibilities enable cinematic reimagining of alternative past to Soviet modernity? To explore how each *tableau* film articulates these issues is the task of the subsequent chapter.

3.0 *TABLEAU* CINEMA'S ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES

Whereas the previous chapter maps out *tableau* cinema's common stylistic aspect (non-perspectival spatial construction) and its shared concern with spectators' conviction in their respective cinematic worlds in the context of the late Socialism, this chapter attends to individual *tableau* films and analyses the inner workings of each cinematic world. On a generic level, the non-perspectival space in *tableau* films, I suggested, is related to the rejection of (Soviet) modernity and linear historical progression as well as to their invention of the alternative histories to Soviet modernity. How does each *tableau* film articulate these alternative histories to Soviet modernity and how are these alternatives related to experimentations with the aesthetic possibilities of the cinematic medium are the central questions of this chapter. I analyze five *tableau* films by five filmmakers in a rough chronological order of their production. All of them—except for one, which was produced at Lenfilm Studio—are produced in the peripheries: the first two at the Dovzhenko Film Studio and the last two at the Georgia Film Studio.

3.1 AN UNDECLARED *TABLEAU* MANIFESTO: IURI ILLIENKO'S *A WELL FOR THE THIRSTY*

“Хочешь случайности – купи фотоаппарат, хочешь истины – рисуй”

(Illienko *Paradykhma kino*, 256)

A Well for the Thirsty [Krynytsia dlia sprahlykh, 1966] was Iurii Illienko's directorial debut at the Dovzhenko Film Studio. Prior to this film, he was known as a talented young

cinematographer best known for his camera work in *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1964). The commission of *A Well for the Thirsty* was tied to the “thematic plan” of the commemoration of World War II.⁶⁵ The literary script by Ivan Drach, at that time a young but already prominent Ukrainian writer, was written as his graduation project for the Advanced Course for Script Writers and Film Directors [Высшие курсы сценаристов и режиссеров]. The script was well received and published in the literary journal *Dnipro* in 1964. Drach’s literary script described rural life in a Ukrainian village with pithy humor and close attention to the details of rural everyday life. While the script centers around the memories of the old rural dweller Levko, it is enriched by the comedic elements that emerge out of the clash between the older and younger generations and between the rural and urban ways of life in contemporary Soviet Ukraine.⁶⁶ Illienko’s film also centers around the old man’s memories and roughly follows the structure of the script—five episodes and an epilogue—but it is devoid of the literary script’s sense of humor and texture of everyday life. The tone of the film is serious, and the style is radically experimental. The film was so unusual in its form that it was banned from release and all the copies were supposed to be destroyed. Only one copy miraculously survived because it was inside the copying machine at the time of the film’s confiscation.⁶⁷ The film was eventually released in 1987, as a part of the famous “unshelving” campaign of banned films during Perestroika.

In terms of the boldness of its stylistic experimentation, *A Well for the Thirsty* is a peer to Tengiz Abuladze’s *The Plea* (1967), Sergei Parajanov’s *Kiev Frescoes* (1965, unfinished) or *The*

⁶⁵ For more information on the director’s background and on the production history of the film, see *First Ukrainian Cinema...* 128-143.

⁶⁶ See Ivan Drach “Krynitsa dlia spraglikh” 7-42.

⁶⁷ For the account of the film’s censorship process, see Margolit “Rodnik dlia zhazhdushchikh” 68-86.

Color of Pomegranate (1969), as well as to Shiffers's *Pervorossiiane* (1967). While all of these films explicitly engage in the innovation of the cinematic language of the time, Illienko's *A Well for the Thirsty* is perhaps the boldest and certainly the most self-reflexive among them. Considering the manner in which the film reinvents every single component of the cinematic medium, one could call it *tableau* cinema's celluloid manifesto, albeit officially an undeclared one.

In the existing literature on the film and on the Ukrainian Poetic School more broadly, *A Well for the Thirsty* is interpreted either along the lines of the primordialist claims about Ukrainian "national identity" and "soil" (Bryukhovetska *Poetichne kino*, *Kinosvit Iuriia Illienka*) or as the elitist experimentation of a self-indulgent auteur (First *Ukrainian cinema*...). In my reading of Illienko's film, I find it insufficient to reduce the film's formal complexity either to a primordialist narrative or to the whims of an auteur. Through my analysis of the film, I hope to demonstrate that such radical experimentation was done as an active attempt to rescue the cinematic medium from the accumulated clichés and to re-establish spectators' conviction in the film world, which offers an alternative past to Soviet modernity.

The story of the film hinges on a dark and preposterous situation: an old lonely widower Levko Serdiuk prepares for his own funeral. Throughout the film, old Levko is roaming over the desolate sandy landscape of his village as well as over his memories. He recollects his late wife, his children (who either died in the war or live in the city) and his past village life. Lonely and hopeless, he decides to build his own coffin and lie there until death comes. He summons his children with their families to his own funeral. The children arrive and to their surprise they find

him alive. At the end of the film, Levko seems to overcome his despair, destroys his coffin and uses the wood from the coffin to rebuild a well.

Through this personal story of the main protagonist, *A Well for the Thirsty* retells the history of a Soviet Ukrainian village and does it through the reinvention of the possibilities of the cinematic medium, which conventionally, or at least within the method of Socialist Realism, was in charge of showing “history in its revolutionary development.” The subtitle “A Cinematographic Parable [Kinopritcha]” already hints at the film’s unconventional way of dealing with historical narrative. While the film unpacks the history of the Ukrainian village through the story of Levko, each episode at the same time tackles a different aspect of the cinematic clichés (starting from the photographic image and ending with sound) and offers new ways to think about history and Soviet modernity through cinema.

The first episode, which could be considered a prologue to the film (it is the only untitled episode), introduces the main protagonist and his relationships with his wife, children and neighbors through a series of flashbacks. While introducing the main characters and motifs of the film, this episode at the same time reconfigures fundamental cinematic components: still photography and movement, as well as cinematic space and time.

While the opening credits are rolling, we hear a rich sound collage of a woman giving birth, children crying and laughing, a bell ringing and a funereal folk song. This lively soundscape in the opening credits contrasts to the lonely squeaking sound of the well’s windlass in the opening shot, which shows old Levko turning the handle of the windlass amid the desolate sandy landscape. The well here serves as a source of both water and memory. Following the scene of Levko repeatedly hauling the bucket up and down the well, in the next shot the camera mimics this up and down vertical movement while gliding along the family photographs hanging on the wall of Levko’s

house. Here the introduction of Levko's memories of his family through photographs coincides with the film's introduction of one of the medium's fundamental components—still photography.

The repetition of the frontal framing of Levko against the background of the white wall decorated with multiple frames—family photographs, a mirror, and two window frames—reinforce the centrality of still photography and framing in the episode. [Figure 29]



Figure 29

In the very beginning of this frontal scene, Levko does a curious thing: he turns these frames to face the wall. Narratively, this could be explained by his disappointment with the family members captured in these pictures, since they abandoned him. But this scene also could be read as a gesture toward the cinematic medium: when Levko turns both the photographs and the mirror to face the wall, we are invited to assume that what we are about to see is neither photography's indexical trace nor a mirror's reflection.⁶⁸ The only frame that remains unturned is the window. But this window frame is not an ordinary one. Through the frame we see not a real landscape of the village, but an imaginary landscape where dreams and memories come to life.⁶⁹ In other words,

⁶⁸ Gurga interprets the turning of the mirror in this scene along the ethnographic lines, as a sign of preparation for death (265).

⁶⁹ A window frame as an entry point to imaginary world is also used in Illienko's and Parajanov's previous film *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*. It will play a similar role in Illienko's later films as well.

the film explicitly turns away from the photographic realism of the medium to face the medium that has more to do with memory, time, and imaginary space.

We know that this frame is a “window to the past” because Levko’s late wife appears on the other side of it as young and we hear children’s voices. This window punctuates the first episode to trigger three sets of memories. [Figure 30]



Figure 30

First, it brings Levko’s children to the well and reveals an unusual space. His grown-up children walk toward the well from different directions as the camera glides over them in a dazzling circular movement, creating a disorienting space in which figures appear and disappear as the camera makes 360° pan. In the second set of memories, “the window to the past” invokes Levko’s wife, who appears in the apple orchid first as young, but she turns old in three consecutive shots, while washing her face. [Figure 31, 32, and 33] These two sets of memories not only introduce to us Levko’s family, they also expose to us the creation of cinematic space and time, which runs counter the conventional spatiotemporal construction in cinema.



Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33

Right after we see Levko turning the last frame with a newspaper clipping that has the picture of his son who heroically died during World War II (we can read this in the clipping), the image of “the window to the past” appears for the third time and triggers a series of images that point to Levko’s decision to die (in the next episode, we see him making his own coffin). Visually, this series of images consists of an alternation between live-action shots and freeze-frames (still photographs). This alternation is synched to the ax’s rhythmical chopping sound, which is also reminiscent of the clicking sound of a photographic camera. While the freeze-frames capture Levko cutting down a tree, the live-action shots present faces of random peasants, presumably from his village, captured in Dovzhenko-style static frontal framing.

The ominous sound of the ax and the falling of a tree, the recurring figure of a little boy (perhaps a childhood image of the son who passed away in the war) and the faces of the old peasants (as though visiting from Dovzhenko’s collectivization narratives), and finally, Levko

captured in freeze-frames, which Illienko calls a “portrait of death” in his theoretical writings⁷⁰ – all these images allude to Levko’s contemplation of death.

The theme of death condensed in the freeze-frame image of Levko is paired with the film’s exploration of movement in cinema. If the first two sets of memories were exposing the creation of cinematic space and time, the third sequence focuses on the creation of movement out of still photographs. What is interesting about this sequence is that it not simply juxtaposes still photographs with live-action shots, but it also challenges our notion that still photography is static and live-action is dynamic. The freeze-frames of Levko capture the most dynamic moment of his act and appear blurry. In contrast, the live-action shots of peasants appear as static photographs: the minimal movements seem to be added just to indicate that they are live-action shots and not still photographs. [Figure 34 and 35]



Figure 34



Figure 35

⁷⁰ Illienko *Pardykha kino* 246.

The rhythmical sound of the ax, which resembles the clicking sound of a photo camera adds yet another layer of ambiguity to our perception of movement in this sequence. When matched with the still images of the chopping Levko, we hear the sound of the ax and imagine his movement, but when the same sound is synched with a series of the static and frontal shots of peasants, we are tempted to interpret the sound as that of a photo camera and perceive the live-action shots as still photographs. In his theoretical writings on cinema, Illienko articulates this paradox as follows: “Movement has no relationship with photographic image. It is in some other place, in some other space, it hides between the photographs. Maybe it is a figment of our imagination” (*Paradykhma kino* 241).⁷¹ In other words, the alternation of freeze-frames and live-action has a dual function: on the one hand, it foregrounds the theme of death by depriving the screen of movement, and on the other hand, it suggests that whatever movement we perceive here, happens in our mind rather than on screen. Overall, the first episode at the same time lays out main themes of the film (memory and death) and redefines some fundamental elements of the cinematic medium: still photography and movement, cinematic space and time.

The following episode, “The Coffin is Needed,” continues the themes of memory and death by cinematic means as Levko wanders around the village in search of the lumber for his coffin. This episode can be divided in two parts: the first part is built around the unveiling of the World War II monument in the village; the second part is framed as Levko’s flashback of the war. Both parts are about the memory of the war but the way in which the war is remembered contrasts drastically.

⁷¹ “Движение не имеет отношения к самим фотографиям. Оно где-то в ином месте, в ином пространстве, оно скрывается между ними, за ними, вне их, а может быть и вообще его нет нигде. Может, это плод нашего воображения” (Illienko *Paradykhma kino* 241).

The unveiling ceremony of the monument to commemorate the war dead is shot in documentary style and perceived by the villagers with alienated curiosity and caution.⁷² The enormous size and unwieldiness of the statue seem to embody the impersonal and detached nature of the official commemoration. A series of close ups of women's mourning faces looking up at the monument in complete silence only underscores the incommensurability of the public commemoration with their personal loss.⁷³

This ritual of public commemoration triggers Levko's personal memory of his war loss. Once again, the well is likened to the cinematic apparatus and serves as a source of both memory and water. As Levko cranks the handle of the well, we see the unrolling footage of the soldiers drinking water from this well and walking away with their backs to the camera. These shots are composed and edited in a way that suggests reading Levko's action as that of a cameraman: both crank a handle; however, what is unfolding in front of him is not reality but memory. In that way, the film shifts the emphasis from a camera as a recording device to a camera as a remembering device.

While turning the handle of the well, Levko asks the passing soldiers if they have met his sons, but he hears no answer as the soldiers walk away with their backs to him. Instead of hearing the answer, towards the end of the episode, we see a soldier being shot while complaining that there is nothing left in the bucket but slime.⁷⁴ Right after his words, we hear a machine gun firing

⁷² According to Illienko, to produce a realistic effect the unveiling of the monument was announced through the village radio as an official event (Briukhovets'ka *Kinosvit*... 67).

⁷³ A similar sensibility is expressed through the similar means in Osyka's *Love Awaits Those Who Return*.

⁷⁴ In Ukrainian-language version of the film this phrase is said in Russian. This is one of the only two lines pronounced in Russian. In the script, by contrast all the phrases appear in Ukrainian.

and see black liquid, blood or slime, pouring out of the holes of the bucket. The same shot of a little boy from the previous episode is inserted perhaps to draw the connection between this dying anonymous soldier and Levko's son. The extreme subjectivity ascribed to the camerawork in this flashback allows remembering the deceased son in way that starkly contrasts with the detached documentary style that captured the public commemoration of soldiers in the first half of the episode. As in the previous episode, Illienko is commenting on both the story being told and the cinematic medium that renders it.

The third episode, "The Longest of July Nights," captures the realm of Levko's dream and pushes the subjective logic of the cinema apparatus even further. As the title of the episode suggests, it is set at night and is organized by a dream logic. The episode strings together seemingly unrelated scenes of the collective building of a house, Levko's pottery making, the delivery of the pottery to empty houses seen through the multiple window frames, the coffin turning into a boat, sand appearing as water, etc. Narratively, we can interpret these scenes as fragments of Levko's dream world—his memories of collective life with neighbors, ruminations about life, or anxieties in the face of death—and therefore we may ignore the absence of spatiotemporal continuity between the scenes. But to see this episode simply as a disjointed pile of random fragments of a dream world is to miss the point. The underlying continuity between the shots, which supposedly follows a dream logic, is there and is created by ostensibly cinematic means: editing based primarily on graphic matches.

The graphic match is the dominant technique of this episode. The circular shape of plates links to that of buckets, then to women walking in a circle, then to Levko's pottery wheel, then to the shape of the pottery itself, then to a bicycle wheel and so on. A series of window frames are cut together based on their graphic affinity more than anything else, a coffin is graphically matched

with a boat, and even such shapeless matter as water is matched with the shapelessness of sand. But central in this episode is perhaps the graphic match between the tightly framed pan shots of seven women treading the mud with an ox.

Illienko cuts together eight pan shots—seven of them are shots of women of different ages, starting with a little girl and ending with an old woman, and one shot is of an ox. This scene is highly reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa's famous graphic match of six running samurai in *Seven Samurai* (1954), but unlike the samurai, who are running forward, the women, it turns out, are walking in circles. Thus, a linear progression of time suggested by the progression of their age in each shot is, in a way, canceled out by their circular movement. But we do not realize their circular movement until we see a bird's-eye view establishing shot that shows them treading in circles and mixing the mud. This revelation of a circle has a dual function: on the one hand, it turns the linearity of the aging process into a Dovzhenko-style circle of life; on the other hand, this circle lays bare the device that enabled this episode's underlying dream logic based on graphically matched editing. The circle of the treading women refers among other things to a film "plate" of the editing table. The association with the editing table's "plate" is reinforced by the following shot, another graphic match, which shows a potter's wheel rotating in the same direction as the treading women in the previous shot. [Figure 36, 37, and 38, which is the editing table from *Man with a Movie Camera*] This episode is as much about Levko's inner world of dreams as it is about the means by which this dream world is created. As in the previous episodes, the cinematic apparatus here is redefined as a medium capable of capturing the interior world of memory, dream and our relation to death.



Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 38

The fourth episode, “The Judgement Day Has Come,” opens with a frontal close-up of a sunflower swaying in the wind against the background of a window frame in the middle of a white wall. A woman’s face is looking out of this window frame. This composition immediately brings to mind the close-up of a sunflower and a women’s face in the beginning of Dovzhenko’s best known and his last silent film, *Earth*. [Figure 39 and 40] But the difference between the two shots is as significant as is the similarity.

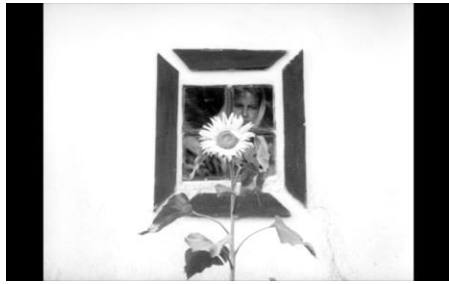


Figure 39



Figure 40

In *Earth*, Daniil Demutskii's camera frames the flower and the face directly against the background of the sky, and thus assimilates the woman's face into the landscape of nature. In Illienko's film, the camera frames the flower and the face, which appear to be already in the frame of the window. This window frame not only separates the woman's face from the swaying sunflower, suggesting the division between human and nature, but it also foregrounds the flat surface and the act of framing itself. Another significant difference is that, unlike in silent *Earth*, in Illienko's film the scene is accompanied by a guitar tune, which turns out to be a diegetic sound of the guitar played by one of Levko's sons. This opening scene foreshadows the main motifs that will unfold in this episode: the canvas-like background of the white wall (against which most of the action in this episode will occur), the relation between the Soviet "modern" and the Soviet "primitive," and the *defamiliarization* of sound technique.

In the beginning of this episode, Levko's children, who now live away from their home village, gather around his coffin after being informed of his alleged death. Despite the bitter irony of their disappointment at the deceit, the family seems to be eventually reunited, however temporarily. This reunion is underscored in the virtuosic moonlight scene towards the end of the episode. In this scene, Illienko seamlessly connects into one seemingly long take the alternating shots of the close-up pans of Levko and the moving shots that glide over the sleeping family members.

Before this cinematic reunion takes place, the larger part of the episode revolves around the tension between Levko and his children. Within this generational discord between the father and the children is embedded a juxtaposition of the Soviet "primitive" and Soviet "modern." While Levko, bound to his well and artisan pottery-making, embodies the Soviet "primitive," his children represent different strata of the modernized Soviet society—a humble looking working-class couple, a "bourgeoise" looking couple obsessed with their children, white-collar son who seem like a party member, a typical *sixtier*[шестидесятник] playing a guitar, a test-pilot who sends his pregnant wife with a voice-recorded letter to his father, and so on. The juxtaposition of the Soviet "primitive" and Soviet "modern" goes a long way back to early Soviet culture.⁷⁵ In the context of Ukrainian cinema, Dovzhenko's films are among the first ones to represent this contrast. However, unlike in Dovzhenko's films, in *A Well for the Thirsty* the Soviet modern seems to be no longer an appealing alternative or a necessary complement to the Soviet "primitive." Rather, it appears as pointless and insensitive as the metal wreath that Levko's children brought to commemorate their yet-alive father. This ironical and moribund view of the Soviet "modern,"

⁷⁵ In case of the Soviet cinema, this tension harks back to the establishment of the national cinemas in the Soviet republics. See Widdis *Socialist Senses*, especially chapters 5 and 8.

powerfully epitomized in the image of the metal wreath, does not necessarily mean that the film romanticizes the Soviet “primitive.” Levko’s memories and dreams seem similarly melancholic and powerless, but at least, his wooden coffin (unlike the metal wreath) can be repurposed to fix the well and water horses, as we witness towards the end of the film.

In the middle of this episode, Levko’s daughter-in-law, Solomiia, plays to Levko his son’s voice-recorded message. After they listen to the message, she asks Levko to say something into the microphone of the tape-recorder in return. Amused and perplexed by this disembodied presence of his son, Levko is unable to say a word into the microphone and only coughs instead. Levko’s uneasy encounter with the sound-recording technology, on the one hand, can be read along the lines of the contrast between the “primitive” and the “modern.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, this scene sets yet another self-referential moment that exposes, in this case, the workings of the sound in cinema.

This self-referentiality is particularly evident in the way this scene is composed. While we hear the voice of the son, we see Solomiia and Levko sitting in front of the white wall of the house, captured in a frontal, static shot, as if figures on canvas. This shot foregrounds the mismatch between the image and the sound, although this mismatch is narratively justified since both characters are listening to the sound from the tape recorder. By contrast, in the following close-up of Solomiia we see her lips moving, but we cannot hear her voice. This shot looks like one from a silent film, although narratively this “silence” could also be explained by the loud sound of a plane flying by at the moment. At the end of this scene, we are finally presented with the sound synchronized with the image, but it is important to point out that this sound is not speech. This synchronized sound is Solomiia’s laughter and Levko’s cough. In this way, this scene not only

⁷⁶ In the script this juxtaposition appears as the main theme.

deconstructs the workings of sound technology in cinema, but it also underplays the role of spoken word in “talking” pictures. In terms of sound, the film as a whole is virtually “mute”[немой], while using eloquently rich ambient sound.⁷⁷ The de- and re-construction of sound in the center of this episode goes along with the film’s overall effort to redefine the language of cinema, be it photography, movement, or editing. This calling into question the conventions of cinematic language and redefining them throughout the film goes hand in hand with its attempt to rewrite the conventional narrative of Soviet modernity and its history on the periphery.

The last episode, “Son,” begins with a death. But this death is not the carefully prepared for and long-awaited death of Levko. Instead, it is the death of one of Levko’s sons, the test-pilot whose voice message we have heard in the previous episode. The manner in which this death is announced suggests that it merges with the deaths of many others who, to quote the voice that announces it, “heroically died during discharge of duty.” The episode opens with a series of frontal close-ups of elderly village women, while a detached but polite male voice reads, in Russian, an official death notification addressed to Levko. The unsettling proximity of the faces of the village women, wrinkled and worn out by enduring hardships, stands in counterpoint to the detached distance of the faceless voice of authority. Because the body that emits this voice is never revealed, it functions as what Michel Chion calls an acousmatic sound. Released from an unseen source, acousmatic sound, according to Chion, is located neither inside nor outside of the film world and often possesses powers similar to those we ascribe to the deity in various religions: ubiquity,

⁷⁷ In his writings, Illienko states that “Sometimes cinema can take a vow of silence. [Время от времени кино вновь принимает обет молчания.]” and adds that “in those cases the true language of cinema is resurrected. [Тогда возрождается истинный киноязык.]” (*Paradykhma kino* 331-332). Among such examples he mentions Kaneto Shindo’s *The Naked Island* (1960) as well as his own film, *A Well for the Thirsty*. *The Naked Island* will serve as inspiration for another *tableau* film, *The Stone Cross*.

panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.⁷⁸ In this episode, the disembodied voice of authority holds similar power and betrays the metaphysical dimension of the official Soviet narratives.

This quasi-religious enunciation of sacrificial death is followed by a series of cinematic stunts that calls into question and undoes the metaphysics of Soviet modernity literally from all directions. First, we see Levko sitting at the head of the long empty table with empty chairs along it. This composition strikes the viewers with its exaggerated linear perspective: the parallel lines of the table converge towards the vanishing point where Levko is sitting. All vanishing lines end at the clearly visible horizon line between the sky and the field. This linear perspectival construction is particularly noticeable here since almost all the shots in this film are ostensibly flat and frontal. As I argued in the previous chapter, the flat and frontal construction of shots is one of the main characteristics of *tableau* cinema, which alludes to non-perspectival painterly traditions. The non-perspectival quality of *tableau* films on the one hand aims at the rejection of linear historical progression, and on the other hand attempts to transform spectatorial experience. The hyperbolized linear perspective in this episode is an exception that only underscores the significance of non-perspectival construction in the film.⁷⁹ The image of the devastated Levko at the vanishing point of the converging lines of the empty table epitomizes the perils of Soviet metaphysics, which has linear (historical) progression at its center. But the camera does not linger over this linear perspectival image for long. In a rapid upward movement of the camera, this perspectival shot turns into a bird's-eye view shot that instantly flattens the illusionistic depth seen before. [Figure 41 and 42] This sudden flattening is reinforced by the following cut to the wooden

⁷⁸ For definition and interpretation of acousmatic sound, see Chion 17-29.

⁷⁹ Similarly exaggerated linear perspectival constructions can be seen in the final episodes of both *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and *The Color of Pomegranates*, see Chapter 2.2.

surface of a windmill wall. Through this cinematic gesture, Illienko undoes the linear perspectival depth and its implications while offering the viewer an opportunity to perceive the texture of the wooden surface and to contemplate the circular movement of the windmill, of which the wooden surface turns out to be a part. [Figure 43 and 44]



Figure 41



Figure 42



Figure 43



Figure 44

Another visual and conceptual undoing of the Soviet metaphysics in this episode occurs around the image of the well and the airplane. Right after the shot of the spinning windmill, we see Levko carrying a bucket of water along a tunnel. Only later we realize that this tunnel is the vertical shaft of the well, turned horizontally. If, in this uncanny movement along the well, an under-the-ground vertical axis becomes a horizontal one, in the following scene, we see an above-the-ground vertical movement become horizontal, as the airplane slowly lands and rolls along the surface of the ground. [Figure 45 and 46]



Figure 45



Figure 46

The shot of the landed plane not only refers to the deceased son, who was a test-pilot, but also alludes to the many other shots of air planes that inundated the screens of Soviet, and especially Stalinist, cinema. More specifically, this airplane shot appears to be in dialogue with the famous shot of the off-screen airplane in the penultimate sequence of *Earth*. In *Earth* too, the airplane is connected to the death of the son, Basil, who sacrificed his life for the cause of collectivization. During the passionate speech of his eulogist, the intertitle reads, “Basil’s fame

will fly around the entire world, like our Bolshevik airplane above.” In the next shot we see the eulogist pointing upward, then the film cuts, but not to the flying airplane shot, as might be expected. Instead, the next cut is to the high angle shot of a crowd in awe looking upward. [Figure 47]



Figure 47

This unseen presence of the “Bolshevik airplane” somewhere in the sky epitomizes the metaphysical foundation of Soviet modernity. The airplane shots in *A Well for the Thirsty* undo this metaphysics by bringing the airplane down to earth and showing it roll on the ground. In the course of this undoing of Soviet metaphysics, Levko overcomes his melancholic contemplation of death and re-establishes his relationship to the “primitive” life. In the last shots of this episode, he destroys the coffin and reuses it to fix the well and to make a water trough for horses.

The epilogue of the film completes this turn from a horizontal axis to a vertical one, again with the reference to Dovzhenko’s *Earth*. In the middle of the desolate sandy landscape, Levko carries on his shoulders an uprooted apple tree (again a vertical axis is turned horizontally) and the ripe apples fall from it. The pregnant Solomia follows Levko and picks the apples. It is left ambiguous whether Levko has just uprooted the tree or is going to plant it again. What is less ambiguous is the very last shot of the film: Solomia is about to give birth. While *A Well for the Thirsty* clearly undoes the vertical axis of Dovzhenko’s film and the metaphysics of Soviet

modernity, more broadly, at the same time it re-inscribes its narrative within a broader cycle of life and death à la Dovzhenko and does it through the reinvention of cinema as a medium.

3.2 A GRAVESTONE TO THE PRE-MODERN WORLD: LEONID OSYKA'S *THE STONE CROSS*

Leonid Osyka graduated from VGIK and started to work at the Dovzhenko Film Studio since 1965, a few years after Illienko. His graduation film “She Who Enters the Sea” (Ta, shcho vkhodyt' v more, 1965) was criticized for formalism by the diploma committee. But Osyka was able to defend his diploma by taking over and completing the film that was initially assigned to another young Ukrainian director Vasyl' Illiashchenko. Illiashchenko's film was halted after studio viewed the filmed material and the film was passed to Osyka. The story behind this decision is complicated and is outside of the scope of this chapter.⁸⁰ What is evident though, is that Illiashchenko's film was significantly redone by Osyka and eventually was released under the title *Love Awaits Those Who Return* (Khto povernut'sia – doliubyt', 1966). Although these two early films already demonstrate *tableau* style, it is Osyka's next film *The Stone Cross* (*Kaminnii khrest*, 1968) that comes closest to other *tableau* films in terms of both style and subject matter.

The Stone Cross is set in the rural Ukraine of the late nineteenth century, during the first wave of emigration from Ukraine. The film is based on two novellas— “The Stone Cross” and “Thief”—by Ukrainian modernist writer Vasyl Stefanyk. To write a screen adaptation of Stefanyk's stories, Osyka asked Ivan Drach, who by that time had already written the script of A

⁸⁰ For production history of this film, see Gurga 277-283 and *First Ukrainian Cinema...* 143-153.

Well for the Thirsty. Very broadly, as Vitaly Chernetsky rightly points out, both Stefanyk's literature and Osyka's film are about the impact of modernity on peasant life in rural Ukraine. In this regard, *The Stone Cross* belongs to a vast group of Soviet films about rural life and the modernization of the peripheries. In the case of Soviet Ukraine, the best-known examples range from Aleksandr Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930) to Ivan Pyrev's *Cossacks of the Kuban* (1949). But Osyka's film significantly deviates from the established narratives about the periphery and largely shares its style and theme with Illienko's *A Well For the Thirsty*.

This deviation, of course, is situated within the post-Stalinist context of radical transformation in Soviet culture at large and in the national film studios in particular. Joshua First, in his account of this historical context in the case of Dovzhenko Film Studio, writes: "Ukrainian film-makers during the 1960s, in particular, assumed key roles in re-imagining a core Soviet concept—multinationality—shifting its emphasis from incorporation, assimilation and modernization to difference, authenticity and tradition" (1). First interprets this shift in Ukrainian cinema of the 1960s as the attempt of the artists and intellectuals "to explore what it meant to possess a particular nationality" (9). While on the level of the policy and rhetoric the cultural producers of Ukrainian cinema of that period may well have been concerned with the questions of "national character," to interpret the complexity of Osyka's and Illienko's films as the search for or the re-construction of the "national character" seems overly reductive.

I propose to consider the shift from multinational "incorporation, assimilation, and modernization" to the national "difference, authenticity, and tradition" in Osyka's and Illienko's films not simply as a renewed search for "national character," but more importantly as a renewed way of exploring the problems of history and (Soviet) modernity by cinematic means. By proposing this, I do not mean to negate the significance of the "national" element in Osyka's and

Illienko's films. Rather, I suggest that the "national elements" in their films are entwined in a more complex nexus of issues that, on the one hand, call into question the conventions of cinema and its complicity in the narratives of historical progression and, on the other hand, open new aesthetic possibilities for cinema to restore spectators' conviction and to offer alternative ways of engaging with history.

The "national elements" in this nexus take up the potential that was ascribed by the early Soviet avant-garde filmmakers to the pre-capitalist "primitive" cultures on the peripheries. Emma Widdis argues that for Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, the Soviet "primitive" had an ambiguous status. On the one hand, it was supposed to be set on path to modernization, on the other hand, it was "a model of precapitalist life that was a source of considerable fascination and allure for those seeking a specifically communist reformulation of mind-body experience, and a renewed relationship with the material world" (168). In the late Soviet culture, *tableau* filmmakers, in a sense, revive this fascination with the "primitive" and its relationship with the material world, but at the same time they discredit the path of modernization. In what follows, I analyze the way in which *The Stone Cross* articulates this complex nexus of issues, while drawing parallels with *A Well for the Thirsty*.

Like *A Well for the Thirsty*, *The Stone Cross* also pivots around the death ritual prior to death itself. In both films, the pre-death funeral rite alludes to the crisis in peasant life in the face of modernity, and at the same time signals the unconventional structure of the diegesis. *The Stone Cross* tells a story of an old peasant, Ivan Didukh, who is about to emigrate with his family from a Ukrainian village to Canada. Before leaving his native village, Ivan erects a stone cross on the hill he cultivated all his life. Similar to Levko, who builds his own coffin, Ivan erects his own gravestone. This preposterous, in a literal sense, situation is central to the unusual diegesis of both

films and among other things alludes to the inversion of linear temporality and to the disruption of conventional causality in their cinematic worlds. If in *A Well for the Thirsty* the outside world can be seen as a projection of the protagonist's inner world of dreams and memories, in *The Stone Cross* we observe almost the opposite: the outside world possesses its own soul and the protagonist is shown as a part of this animistic world. Despite this contrast, the two films are similar in their undermining of the relationship established in cinema between the subject and the surrounding world. As in the 1920s, when Soviet avant-garde filmmakers pursued a model of "mutual interdependence between the human self and the material world" (Widdis 15), here too we witness an attempt to disrupt unilateral subject-object relationships and to imagine a reciprocity of sorts.

The Stone Cross consists of roughly three parts: first, we see Ivan and his horse working on the hill. This scene of Ivan's daily toil is followed by the episode with a thief, whom Ivan caught one night and interrogated together with his two neighbors. Finally, the film ends with a crowd scene of the villagers gathered to bid their farewells to the departing family. One of the most striking stylistic features throughout the film is the bold flatness of its cinematic space. No matter whether it is a wide landscape shot, claustrophobic interior or a crowd of people [Figure 48, 49, 50], each shot is constructed in a way that any depth cue is eliminated. This effect is achieved through both the camera work (angles, frontal close-ups, lateral camera movement, etc.) and shot compositions that obstruct the vanishing point and foreground surface. Through this flatness and many other unconventional cinematic tricks, Osyka seems to set up a world which could be considered pre-modern or "primitive."



Figure 48



Figure 49



Figure 50



Figure 51

The opening shot prefigures this peculiar world to a viewer. [Figure 51] From a high angle the camera frames the flat surface of the black soil divided by a long and deep crack. In the middle of this monotonous landscape we see Ivan with his horse walking along this crack. Because the camera tightly frames Ivan's walk within the unchanging flat landscape with no horizon line, the shot appears as static, as if there is no progression in Ivan's movement. This at once mobile and

static shot of the flat surface displays the main features of Ivan's world. Instead of the forward movement and linear perspectival depth, we see a movement without progress and face a flat and grainy surface of the soil. The deep crack that splits into halves the surface of both the soil and the screen visualizes the fragility of Ivan's world, which appears to be no longer a solid whole.

Variations of this type of quasi-mobile shot we have seen in the opening scene comprise the first part of the film in general. In this part, which depicts Ivan's toil, the camera either tightly frames Ivan's movement or captures his slow movement in a frontal, static shot, so that he seems to be walking in place. The constant shift between front, back and side views also contributes to the weakening of the sense of progress and directionality. This oxymoronic combination of static mobility culminates in the farewell sequence, when a village woman talks to Ivan while walking as if on a treadmill. It looks like a variation of the "moon walk" shot frontally. [Figure 52] The blatant disconnect between the walk and progress in this static shot appears almost supernatural and once again reminds us by cinematic means that different laws govern the world of the villagers.



Figure 52

Yet another peculiar aspect of this world can be seen in Ivan's relation to his surroundings. This relation is especially noticeable in the first part of the film. There he engages in conversation with his sack, the splinter in his foot, his horse, the birds in the sky and, in a similar way, Ivan speaks directly to God. He treats the things that surround him as equal interlocutors, and not as

objects or tools he utilizes. His relation to the land is similar. He appears not as an owner of the land, but rather a part of it. It is not a coincidence that toward the end of the first part, Ivan is portrayed as an indistinguishable part of the soil he cultivates. His rugged body merges with the rugged surface of the soil as the film gradually cuts to a vast landscape shot from a bird's-eye view. [Figure 53, 54, and 55]



Figure 53



Figure 54



Figure 55

The following episode with the thief reveals a darker side of that world, both literally and figuratively. It takes place at night and is lit poorly throughout. The episode mainly consists of the naturalistic scenes of violence and consumption of food and alcohol. The claustrophobic space, dim lighting, and especially the lack of depth cues brings the viewers to greater intimacy with

images on screen. The episode starts with a brutal scene of Ivan spearing the leg of the crawling thief with his pitchfork. The close-up of the speared leg lingers long enough to make the viewers uncomfortable and to convey the sense of harshness experienced by inhabitants of the screen. This interaction is complemented by the visit of the two neighbors who come to Ivan to lynch the thief, following, perhaps, the local custom, since the modern state's punitive apparatus seems not to have been introduced here yet. The two neighbors are reminiscent of the simpletons from the woodcut prints, *lubok*, but are rendered in darker tones. The proverbial nature of their remarks, their naturalistic consumption of food and alcohol, and more importantly the way in which they are framed—frontally and symmetrically, like in *lubok*—all seem to characterize the peculiarity of their “primitive” world.

The figure of the thief is interesting in this context. He appears as an intruder to this world and stands in contrast to Ivan and the villagers. Ivan's world is portrayed as grounded on a direct relation to the soil and the surroundings, whereas the departure to Canada threatens this unmediated relationship. Unlike Ivan, the thief wishes to emigrate to Canada and, if we trust his confession, this is the reason he attempted the theft. The visual composition, which shows a wall clock right above the thief's head for quite a long period of the screen time [Figure 56] further links him to the abstract world of secular temporality, money, and Canada.



Figure 56

When one neighbor asks whether he is from near or far, the thief reluctantly responds: “I am from the world” (“Я зі світа” ‘Ia zi svita’). It is noteworthy that he does not give a particular name of a neighboring village, but instead refers to an unspecified place of his origin the “world/svit”, which also implies the secular world (as in many other languages, in Ukrainian the word ‘world/svit’ and ‘worldly/svit'skii’ share the same root). If we push this interpretation further, we could conclude that the world into which the thief breaks-in is different from the secular world. Later on, in Ivan’s farewell speech he refers to the place he is going to (Canada) as ‘svit.’ He says, “If I could, I would have taken it [his hill] in my bosom into the world/та й взяв з собою у світ). Once again reiterating the contrast between the outside secular world (svit) and his native village.

This dark episode ends with a scene central to the film, in which Ivan places the stone cross on the top of the hill. In lieu of the omitted scene of the killing of the thief, we see Ivan dragging a heavy cross up the hill. At first, it is not clear whether he is dragging a body or a cross. Here several motifs intersect. Visually it looks like the thief’s body becomes Ivan’s cross. Narratively (as Ivan explicitly states later) the cross expresses Ivan’s wish to remain in his village albeit in a symbolic afterlife and thus serves as a material memory of his time spent on the hill. Finally, the scene with the cross can be read as an act of redemption, since Ivan’s act resemble the figure of Christ who dragged his own cross up the hill of Golgotha.

If the first part introduced Ivan’s interaction with his physical surroundings, the last part extends his interaction to the people of the village as they gather to bid farewell. This last farewell section proceeds gradually from a joyful feast to a mournful parting and ends with a pseudo-funeral procession. The shifts from one mood to another are punctuated by distinct aural and visual cues. At the beginning of the farewell, Ivan and the villagers are shot in a single long take as the camera makes dizzying circles around Ivan and the crowd. The camera’s circular and uninterrupted

movement creates a sense of unity among the people.⁸¹ The sharing of vodka and bread by the villagers adds more glue for the cinematically achieved cohesion. The unity suggested in this long take is not only among the people, but also between the people and their environment, as the camera's circular movement also captures the skyline in such a way that the sky and the earth seem to enclose the villagers.

But this sense of unity and joy will change with the following cut to the blind musicians. The arrival of the blind musicians signals a certain rupture in the villagers' world and at the same time brings several leitmotifs of the film to the fore. On the most apparent level, the inclusion of the blind musicians can be read as a gesture towards the ethnographic authenticity of the Ukrainian rural landscape. Chernetsky, in emphasizing the documentary quality of Osyka's film, for example, writes: "Even the use of the blind musicians, ... had a similar [documentary] justification: these were, in fact, an actual wandering group of musicians who performed at local village weddings and celebrations, the film-maker's lucky find" (277-8). The Ukrainian tradition of wandering blind minstrels—*kobzars* and *lirnyks*—was forcibly discontinued in the 1930s because of its strong association with national expression and their appearance in the film, intentionally or not, revives this forgotten history of repression. But the image of the blind musicians holds significance beyond ethnographic documentation and it is not surprising that Osyka vigorously defended this footage despite the censors' critique of "excessive fascination with the aesthetics of the ugly" (Chernetsky 278).

⁸¹ This long take farewell shot stands in contrast with another famous farewell long take from *The Cranes are Flying* (Letiat zhuravli, 1957). While Sergei Urusevsky's camera moves laterally emphasizing individual drama of each subject, Valerii Kvas's camera in *The Stone Cross* moves in circles creating the sense of community's cohesion.

The way in which the arrival of the blind musicians is shot invokes the works of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and in particular his *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind* (1568). The allusion to Bruegel's works will be reiterated throughout the farewell part through the flattened arrangement of the peasant groups, the portrayal of a hunchback and other cripples, and the composition of winter landscapes captured as if from a watchtower. [Figure 57 and 58] This affinity of *The Stone Cross* to Bruegel's paintings goes beyond the visual similarity of the subjects and the composition.



Figure 57



Figure 58

As many art historians have pointed out, Bruegel's works stand in contrast to the works of contemporary Flemish painters of the late Renaissance.⁸² Bruegel is known for his masterful depiction of peasant life and the revival of medieval subjects and is often compared to his late-medieval predecessor, Hieronymus Bosch. Otto Benesch, an art historian of the Vienna School,

⁸² See, for example, Otto Benesch, Joseph Leo Koerner, Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen.

writes that “with Bruegel begins a historical revival of the Middle Ages which increased towards the dawn of the Baroque” (105). He explains this revival as Bruegel’s attempt to grasp “the totality of life, of nature and the cosmos” and, in this respect, compares him to Rabelais and Shakespeare in literature (113). In this light, it seems possible to suggest that the image of the peasants’ world in Osyka’s film shares with Bruegel’s paintings the sense of rustic totality ascribed to medieval world.

In his book on the history of madness, Michael Foucault similarly points out the late Medieval worldview preserved in Bruegel’s depiction of the fools and the mad. He writes: “Whereas Bosch, Brueghel, and Dürer were terribly earth-bound spectators, implicated in that madness they saw surging around them, Erasmus observes it from far enough away to be out of danger” (Foucault *Madness and Civilization* 28). Foucault contrasts the enclosed view captured in Bosch’s, Bruegel’s, and Dürer’s works to the newly emerging distanced view characteristic of the classical age and of modernity. In this juxtaposition, Foucault situates Bruegel’s (as well as Bosch’s and Dürer’s) works at the watershed moment when *The Ship of Fools* will give way to a hospital. *The Stone Cross* seems to allude to a similar watershed moment, which occurred in the twentieth century. The appearance of the Bruegelian blind musicians, the hunchback, and the cripple intermingled with the peasants in the rural landscape of *The Stone Cross* creates an historical parallel between the two watershed moments, which similarly conjure up the vanishing totality of late Middle Ages.⁸³

In addition to the invocation of these historical and art historical references, the arrival of the blind musicians signals the change within the space of the film itself. Although from the very

⁸³ Osyka is not the first Soviet filmmaker to reference Bruegel. The best-known reference to Bruegel appears in Tarkovsky’s films, *Solaris* (1972) and *Mirror* (1975). The reference is also clear in Parajanov’s *The Legend of Suram Fortress*, see Chapter 3.5.

beginning the space in this film is ostensibly flat, it is noteworthy that right after the cut to the blind musicians the flat construction of the shots become even more pronounced. The skyline we have seen in the previous long take virtually disappears as the camera emphasizes flatness of the surface. In the Chapter 2, I argued that in *tableau* films flatness is related to non-linear perspective. In *The Stone Cross*, the avoidance of linear-perspectival depth and the emphasis on surface can be interpreted on at least two levels. Thematically, the avoidance of linear perspective can be read as a rejection of modern way of life and an attempt to ward off modernity's impact on rural life of the peasants, which is captured through non-perspectival images reminiscent of *lubok* or Bruegel's medieval motifs. The closing sequence of the film is particularly telling in this regard: while the family is departing, the hill that Ivan cultivated in the beginning of the film occupies most of the screen space, thus obstructing the vision of their future. In this metaphorical sense, the non-perspectival space in the film serves simultaneously as a critique of modernity's linear progression and an attempt to recollect an alternative to perspectival vision.

The thematic interpretation of this style takes a more nuanced shape when we take into consideration the relation of this style to spectatorship. On the one hand, the non-perspectival space alienates the viewer by exposing the constructedness of its flat cinematic space. Similar alienating effect have the Dovzhenko-style frontal close-ups of the villagers throughout the film. On the other hand, I suggest following Laura Marks that non-perspectival space invites us to shift from optical visibility to haptic one. In distinguishing haptic from optic visibility, Marks rearticulates Aloïs Riegl's famous distinction as follows,

Haptic visibility is distinguished from optical visibility, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visibility depends on a

separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. (162)

In other words, it is implied that whereas optical visibility, as a distanced perception of forms within a deep space, has at its basis linear perspective; haptic visibility, as a perception of surface and texture, is largely rooted in non-linear perspective. If we accept this link between non-linear perspective and haptic visibility, then it could be argued that *The Stone Cross*, with its non-perspectival quality, potentially invites the viewer to perceive its images haptically. In this regard, the motif of blindness could also be interpreted as an indication of the shift from optic to haptic visibility.⁸⁴

The privilege of the sense of touch over the vision is not a random motif in Osyka's films and occurs consistently. For example, in his first short film "She Who Enters the Sea," this motif is emphasized when a child's hand covers a woman's eyes with two shells, while the woman's two palms are wide opened.⁸⁵ The hands are opened for perception while the eyes are closed. This shot is also remarkable for its lack of perspectival depth. [Figure 59]



Figure 59

⁸⁴ The motive of blindness appears in other *tableau* films: in Abuladze's *The Plea*, in Parajanov's *The Legend of Suram Fortress* and *Ashik Kerib*.

⁸⁵ Similarly, a child's hands obstruct an adult's vision in the *A Well for the Thirsty*, see chapter 2.2.

If we accept that the visual style of Osyka's film is meant to invoke haptic visuality, then the question is what are the implications of this shift? The two aspects that Marks's points out in her theorizing of haptic visuality may be illuminating in our understanding of *The Stone Cross*. First, it is argued that haptic representation privileges materiality, which is contrasted with abstraction of optical representation (165). Second, haptic visuality transforms the relation between the viewer and image. Marks writes, with the awareness of a rather crude dichotomy, that "The ideal relationship between viewer and image in haptic visuality is one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose herself in the image, to lose her sense of proportion." Whereas "The ideal relationship between viewer and image in optical visuality tends to be one of mastery, in which the viewer isolates and comprehends the objects of vision" (184).

In *The Stone Cross* these two features—materiality and mutuality—play significant role in delineating peasants' world. The importance of the materiality is conveyed both visually (through flat non-perspectival construction of space that emphasizes surface and texture of the soil, the ornate costumes, and the up-close faces) and verbally (through Ivan's monologue in the farewell part when he regrets bitterly that "now nobody wants the land, but everybody wants banks and bills of credit"). Here the abstract quality of money is contrasted to physical quality of the soil. The episode with a splinter in Ivan's bare foot makes the materiality of the surrounding world felt literally. Ivan's departure to Canada is coded as a separation from this physical world of which he was part. The material concreteness of Ivan's world is threatened by the abstractions of the modern world. The ominous advent of the abstract world is punctuated by the change of Ivan's and his family's dress from ornate traditional costumes to black modern suits. The sense of materiality invoked in this film by haptic visuality, brings the viewer to intimate proximity with Ivan's world. Even in the rare instances of extreme long shots taken from high angles the sense of an objectifying

distance is denied to the viewers since the horizon line and the vanishing point are always outside the frame.

The stone cross, which Ivan erects before his departure and which appears in the very last shot of the film, is the last material object of that old world (or rather a gravestone to that world). When at the end, the camera pulls back to assume the position of the cross, we are offered to share its point of view. Significantly, the avoidance of perspectival depth is reiterated in this last shot: while the camera pulls back and the family moves away, the hill covered with snow occupies almost all of the screen space. [Figure 60] This composition denies the viewer of both geometrical and metaphorical perspective and instead offers to experience the world (albeit through the viewpoint of a gravestone) that knows no distance between subject and object, no linear historical progression that leads to unattainable vanishing point.



Figure 60

3.3 THE REVOLUTIONARY “GOSPEL”: EVGENII SHIFFERS’S *PERVOROSSIANE*

On the face of it, *Pervorossiiane* is an unlikely candidate for *tableau* cinema. It was produced at Lenfilm Studio, not exactly the periphery. It was commissioned to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution and was directed by the old generation filmmaker

Aleksander Ivanov, who was born in the same year as Eisenstein and is known for making a number of typical Socialist Realist films. *Pervorossiiane* is considered Ivanov's last film before his retirement. The script is based on Ol'ga Berggol'ts's poem, "Pervorossiisk" (1950), which she adapted as a literary script [литературный сценарий]. The film adaptation was initially assigned to Grigorii Kozintsev,⁸⁶ but eventually was given to Ivanov. Ivanov had been struggling to come up with the shooting script [режиссерский сценарий] when, late in 1965, the studio administration hired a young assistant director, Evgenii Shiffers, presumably to assist, but in fact to direct the film instead of Ivanov. Such practice, according to contemporary accounts, was not uncommon in the film studios of the late Soviet period. In return for this "work," young directors would be promised a chance to direct their own film (Butovskii 185, Panich 203). This, however, was not the case for Shiffers, and his astonishing *Pervorossiiane* turned out to be his first and last film.

Before joining the film crew, Shiffers was a theater director, who had staged six plays and was known in both artistic and official circles of Leningrad as a talented but defiant young director (Panich 201-2). Shiffers brought to the film crew an art director, Mikhail Shcheglov, with whom he staged his previous theatrical works, and also invited an avant-garde composer, Nikolai Karetnikov. All three significantly contributed to the film's unconventional shape. Especially close was the collaboration between Shiffers and Shcheglov. Their mutual friend and the actor, who played one of the main characters in *Pervorossiiane*, recalls their collaboration as follows: "Evgenii Shiffers and Mikhail Shcheglov are sitting on the floor, 'constructing' the shooting script of the future film. They do not simply breakdown the literary script into separate shots, using glue

⁸⁶ See Mlodik 119-121.

and scissors, neither do they simply make technical notes on how to shoot this or that scene. Instead, they utilize colored marker pens, gouache, chalk.... Each line of the text was tightly linked to Shcheglov's sketches, the pile of which grew taller every day. Those sketches were turning into painting-shots. Later these painting-shots will 'come to life' on screen: the match between sketches and shots was perfect" (Panich 204-205).⁸⁷ According to Shcheglov's biographer, there were 602 sketches and exactly the same number of shots were made (Longina-Sokolova 232). Throughout the process, Ivanov remained a supportive observer of their creative work, but never a participant (Panich 208, Longina-Sokolova 232). The result was astounding.

The reaction to the film was ambivalent. Some praised the innovative film style, others were skeptical. The bold, unconventional style of the film was worrisome to the vigilant eye of the cinema administrators, but at the same time the revolutionary topic and the name of Ol'ga Berggol'ts as an author of the scenario made an outright ban inconvenient. The overall assessment of the film by the artistic council of the studio was favorable, and the film was approved for release provided the filmmakers changed the ending (Bagrov 251). Shiffers refused to make any changes, Ivanov was hospitalized after a heart attack, and that left the cinematographer, Evgenii Shapiro, to change the ending. While the film was not officially banned from release, very few people were able to see it in the theaters. As film historian Vladimir Dmitriev convincingly explains, this was due to several reasons. Not only was a very small number (32) of copies made, but also very few

⁸⁷ "Евгений Шифферс и Михаил Щеглов, сидя на полу, «конструируют» режиссерский сценарий будущей ленты. Это не разбивка текста литературного манускрипта на отдельные кадры, когда главными инструментами служат клей и ножницы, это не только технические заметки, как снимать тот или иной план. Здесь в работу шли фломастеры, гуашь, мел... Каждая строчка текста неотрывно была связана с щегловскими эскизами, черновыми набросками, пачка которых росла с каждым днем. Эскизы превращались в картины-кадры. Потом картины «оживут» на экране: один к одному" (Panich 204-205).

theaters were able to screen it, because the film was shot on 70 mm print.⁸⁸ Ironically, the wide format that was supposed to attract a larger audience, in case of *Pervorossiiane* played the opposite role. First, it limited the number of theaters where it could be shown, and second, it partly motivated the innovative aesthetics of the film, which proved unpopular with authorities and audience alike.

Throughout the filmmaking process, Shiffers had reportedly emphasized the significance of the wide format for every aspect of their film:

We are shooting on the 70 mm, and not on the 35mm. The audience will be watching the film on the gigantic screens projected by the 70-mm equipment. This kind of enlargement makes everything monumental. We are not allowed to capture a real life, as it were—it should be constructed in accordance with the frame. We should consider the parameters of the wide screen in the choice of acting style, of editing, and of camera movement (Panich 205).⁸⁹

The director of photography, Evgenii Shapiro, in his interview also emphasized this fact. “From my viewpoint,” he says, “if the composition and the color scheme are chosen correctly, the large scale of the screen has a magnificent potential. The wide screen possesses new aesthetic qualities and can produce a colossal psychological and emotional impact on the perception of the

⁸⁸ For detailed information about the release process, see Dmitiriev 182-183.

⁸⁹ “Мы снимем на 70-ти миллиметрах, а не на 35-ти. Зрители будут смотреть фильм на гигантских экранах в кинотеатрах, где будет стоять 70-ти миллиметровая аппаратура. При таком увеличении все становится монументальным. Нельзя фиксировать как бы реальную жизнь—ее надо конструировать «под кадр». Надо приспособливать игру актеров, наш монтаж и движение камеры к параметрам будущего широкого экрана” (Panich 205).

images” (Butovskii 190).⁹⁰ Of course, the wide format was not the sole motivator for innovative style, but it undoubtedly affected the filmmakers’ unconventional take on both the cinematic form and history of the revolution they portrayed.

A contemporary critic, Lev Anninskii, who managed to watch the film in wide format in the theater, writes the following impression from the screening: “It feels as if a deliberate ‘anti-cinema’ is in front of you: the denial of movement, the denial of editing, the denial of any illusion of reality. *Pervorossiane* is a collection of compositions and portraits. Indeed, it is not cinema, but a sketch-book with colored illustrations to Olga Berggol'ts’s poem, which accidentally is shown through a cinema projector” (Anninskii 145).⁹¹ In this text, Anninskii contrasts the film with Parajanov’s *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and criticizes *Pervorossiane* for unjustified experimentation with form. “Why is it bad? Because all of these “strikes of color”, extreme close-ups, and overpowering details are the goal in itself.”⁹²(Anninskii 145.) Interestingly, he offers the same critique of Illienko’s second feature film, *Saint John’s Eve* (*Vechir Na Ivana Kupala*, 1968), which he had watched the same day with *Pervorossiane*, as a double feature. The two films were released around the same time and both were shot in wide format. Anninsky criticizes Illienko and Ivanov (since Ivanov’s name appears in the credits) for simply replicating the aesthetic aspect of

⁹⁰ “Большие размеры экрана при точно найденных композиционных и цветовых решениях кадра открывают, с моей точки зрения, грандиозные возможности; обладая новым эстетическим качеством, они производят колоссальный психологический и эмоциональный эффект восприятия изображения” (Shapiro qtd. in Butovskii 190).

⁹¹ “Ощущение такое, что перед нами какое-то нарочитое ‘антикино’: отрицание движения, отрицание киномонтажа, отрицание всякой иллюзии реальности. *Первороссияне* — коллекция композиций и портретов. Это и впрямь не ‘кино’, это скорее — альбом цветных фотоиллюстраций к поэме Ольги Берггольц, почему-то показанных через кинопроектор” (Anninskii 145).

⁹² “Почему это плохо? Потому что все эти «удары цвета», сверхкрупные планы и давящие детали – самоцель” (Anninskii 145).

Parajanov's film, without having an ethical theme (Anninskii 145). By contrast, he praises *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* for using an unconventional form to demonstrate the tragedy of an individual. My interest here is not to contest Anninskii's aesthetic judgement and defend Illienko's and Ivanov/Shiffers's films, but rather to draw attention to Anninskii's insight about the formal similarity of the three films and to further suggest that the similarity is not simply formal. I propose that the underlying similarity the films share has to do with the filmmakers' attempt to rethink history by cinematic means.

It is evident that neither on the level of Shiffers's biography nor on the level of *Pervorossiiane*'s theme can we find any commonality with other *tableau* filmmakers and their films. Shiffers's theatrical background, his work at Lenfilm, and the historic-revolutionary topic of *Pervorossiiane* do not allow us to make direct connection to Parajanov, Illienko, Osyka or Abuladze, who worked at the republican studios and primarily made films about rural life on the periphery that usually dates back to the pre-Soviet past. Although in practice Shiffers may seem to be a unique case, his film shares with other *tableau* films a similar concern with the cinematic medium and history. Furthermore, *Pervorossiiane* and other *tableau* films also have common points of reference in Dovzhenko and Orthodox iconography, at the very least.

According to Butovskii, Shiffers admired Dovzhenko's silent films and reportedly said that *Earth* was the greatest film he had ever seen, adding that it has some genius naïveté (Butovskii 187)⁹³. Another important cinematic reference for Shiffers may have been Carl Theodor Dreyer and especially his *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Danilina 197)⁹⁴. But above all, the film is replete

⁹³ “Самый великий фильм, который я видел—*Земля*. В ней есть какой-то гениальный наив...” (Butovskii 187).

⁹⁴ “- Про него говорили: ‘Ну, он театральный режиссер’. Но что значит ‘театральный режиссер’? Его любимый режиссер—Дрейер. *Страсти Жанны д’Арк*—не театральный фильм?

with religious references, be they biblical tales or Orthodox iconography. Shiffers, for example, explicitly stated that in their film “they are not telling a parable, but are writing a Gospel” (Panich 208).⁹⁵ To this remark the art director Shcheglov added that they are writing it not by means of photography but by means of paint: “We are writing with pure paint, it is not photography, but icon, like in Andrei Rublev—golden mountains and black forests, golden rye, inverted perspective...Black horses of the killers and black soil of the graves... Not the faces of mortals but the faces of saints, like on the icons” (Panich 208).⁹⁶ Although story-wise the film could easily belong to the historic-revolutionary genre, as a whole the film remakes revolutionary history into a religious creation myth.

Berggol'ts's literary scenario based on her poem “Pervorossiisk” is about young revolutionary workers from Petrograd who sacrificed their lives to build a commune in Altai in 1918. While the film retains the key elements of the original story, it tells us a different history. One important difference between Berggol'ts's story and the film is the contemporary framing. While in Berggol'ts's poem and scenario the story of the revolutionary years begins and ends with contemporary perspective, in the film this framing is absent (especially if we dismiss the alternative ending, which was ordered to be added later). From the very beginning the film emphasizes that it tells a story outside of linear history and has no distinct past, present and future. The epigraph, rephrasing lines from the poem, states that “This poetic legend is about the

Вопрос. А Шифферс говорил: “Это самый замечательный фильм из всего, что я видел” (Danilina 197).

⁹⁵ “Мы рассказываем не притчу—мы пишем Евангелие” (Panich 208).

⁹⁶ “Пишем чистыми красками, это все не фотография, а икона, как у Андрея Рублева—золотые горы и черные леса, золотая рожь, обратная перспектива... Черные кони убийц и черная земля могил... Черные обугленные дома и черные кони, и костюмы поджигателей. Цветные главы—это работа со зрительским подсознанием... Не лица—лики. Как на иконах” (Panich 208).

immortal feat of first Russian communards. It is about that, which will never become past.”⁹⁷ In other contexts, these lines might sound like a Socialist Realist cliché, but in a film that turns a historical past into a creation myth, the “immortality” and “timelessness” gain a different meaning.

The film consists of eight chapters, which draw a bold parallel between the revolutionary and religious narratives and convey it in what contemporary critics perceived as “anti-cinematic” style. The first chapter, “Oath”, portrays the funeral ceremony for the victims of the October Revolution on the Field of Mars in Petrograd. In terms of sound, the funeral is accompanied by a solemn funeral march and an oath to continue the cause of the victims. The chapter ends with an image of Lenin giving his “blessing” to build a commune. What is striking in this typical historic-revolutionary plot is its execution. The chapter opens with a series of close ups of the main protagonists, one after another. These close ups serve as a visual refrain that will be repeated in different colors throughout the film. Their faces take up half of the screen space, the rest is a blurry background of the snow-covered landscape of Petrograd. The gust of snow blowing on their faces and the Petrograd landscape are reminiscent of the opening lines in Aleksandr Blok’s “The Twelve,” a controversial poem about the revolution: “Black night./ White snow. / The wind, the wind!/ Impossible to stay on your feet./ The wind, the wind!/ Blowing across God’s world!”⁹⁸

The similarity, of course, is not simply in the imagery and the weather conditions, but more importantly in the religious leitmotif, which runs through both works. The light cast on the protagonists’ pale, motionless, and solemn faces makes them seem like martyrs and saints on icons. The sign-of-the-cross gesture of the first protagonist adds a final touch to this iconography. Their

⁹⁷ “Это поэтическая легенда/ О бессмертном подвиге/ Первых российских коммунаров/ О том, что никогда/ Не станет прошлым...”

⁹⁸ “Черный вечер./ Белый снег./ Ветер, ветер!/ На ногах не стоит человек./ Ветер, ветер — /На всем Божьем свете!” (Maria Carlson’s translation).

frontal position and passionless facial expression with a nonetheless compassionate gaze invoke the style of Orthodox iconography.

At the same time, their alabaster-like static faces partly resemble the statues of the deities and rulers inserted in this chapter. Not unlike in the famous gods sequence in Eisenstein's *October* (Oktiabr', 1928), in this chapter we see inserts of solemn busts of Petrograd's old idols—the Sphinx, Nicholas I, deities of the rivers Dnepr and Neva, Alexander I and III, and Peter the Great. To underline their divine status, all statues are shot from a low angle against the ash-blue background of the sky. If in *October* the old gods and rulers are toppled, in *Pervorossiiane*, it is suggested, the old gods are substituted with a new pantheon. Indeed, the protagonists introduced in this chapter do not look like mortal humans: they look more like new deities or, to be more precise, the martyr-evangelists of a new gospel. The new belief system comes with a new iconography. The banner-like image of Lenin's head against the red background at the end of this chapter, serves as a sacred image in this iconography and the proto-image for future banners.

[Figure 61]



Figure 61

The revelation of the red banner will become a central event in the following chapter, “Piano,” which portrays the communards’ departure from the Petrograd train station. The dominant color throughout the whole chapter is ash blue: the train, the cobblestones, the costumes,

the banners, and even the air is tinged with this color. It becomes particularly clear in this chapter that color in this film is an autonomous expressive category that spills beyond the contours of particular objects on screen. Compared to somber color and sound tones in the previous chapter, the ash blue color and the lighter tunes of this chapter convey a dreamlike atmosphere of a cold foggy morning and innocent hope for a new start. It is noteworthy that children, youth, and women are predominantly dressed in costumes of this color, whereas elderly men and soldiers are dressed in black. [Figure 62]



Figure 62

The ash blue banners hanging on the train appear onscreen several times and read “The red star is raising above the world.”⁹⁹ The slogan on these blue banners, which conveys a sense of hope for the world revolution and new era to come, also has a clear religious undertone. Just as the “morning star” is considered to signal the Nativity, so does the rising “red star” mentioned on the banner anticipates the birth of a new era. In this regard, the revolution here is portrayed not as a progressive event in the course of the historical development, but as the rebirth and repetition of a miracle.

The revelation of the red banner towards the end of the chapter serves as a ritual of reenactment of a miracle. [Figure 63] As the blue metal gates slowly open, we see a warm orange

⁹⁹ “Красная звезда восходит над миром.”

light and steam spilling out of the opening gates, and in the middle of this empty warehouse a boy holding a red banner is walking toward us. The warm tones of the red banner in this scene stand out particularly because the whole chapter is saturated with ash blue hues and cold air. The piano accompaniment played in the middle of the train station adds a magical element to this ritual. This piano is a present from the artel of tuners, the gift of the magi of sorts. Both the banner and the piano have little practical value for the departing communards but carry spiritual significance as symbols of faith and hope.



Figure 63

The chapter ends with the departure of the train to Altai, the region where the communards are determined to build a commune. But unlike the Soviet cinema's numerous trains, the so-called locomotives of the revolution, this blue train boasts neither speed nor clear forward movement. On a dreamlike ash blue screen, we see the train moving slowly and turning to a foggy corner. The perspectival view, both literal and metaphorical, is doubly avoided by the curve of the railroad and the fog. [Figure 64]



Figure 64

“The Promised Land” is the title of the third chapter. While the title of the chapter is explicitly Biblical, its content has a broader spiritual scope, ranging from animism to communism. Compared to the foggy ash blue of wintertime Petrograd in the chapter two, the springtime Altai shown in the third chapter strikes the viewers with a whole range of natural colors and a vivid sound of running water.

At the center of this chapter is a conflict between the newly arrived communards and the local Cossack leader. But the chapter begins with the juxtaposition of the images of nature captured as extremely vivid and almost tangible. It opens with a close-up of gray stones and gradually tilts up to show a vast landscape with trees and mountains. Then follows a pan of stony mountains, then a cut to slender tree trunks shot from a static high angle, then a cut to a wooden gate with a pagan mask carved on it. Then the episode cuts to a group of communards—with scattered small campfires behind them—then another cut to a stony cliff, then the Cossack on horse comes out of the wooden gate to confront the communards and so on. The confrontation between the newcomers and old settlers—Cossacks and old believers, who appear later—is repeatedly paralleled with the contrast among the four elements: stone, wood, fire and water. The confrontation introduced in this chapter, therefore, is not simply a power struggle between the newcomers and the old settlers, or a class struggle, but is the confrontation of the two belief systems, of opposite elements, as it were. The opening nature sequence in this chapter can be interpreted in the context of such a confrontation.

While the Cossack, Shurakov, is captured against the background of the forest or in the middle of the river, the communards are visually linked to stone and fire. The opposition of wood and stone partly resonates with the old standing opposition between the spiritual old capital,

wooden Moscow, and the secular stony new capital, Petersburg.¹⁰⁰ The association of the revolutionary communards with fire also recalls the lines from Blok's abovementioned poem: "Around them fires, and fires, and fires . . . /Rifle straps on shoulders hang . . ."¹⁰¹ or even more explicit line: "To the grief of all bourgeois/ We'll fan a worldwide conflagration,/ A conflagration drenched in blood – /Give us Your blessing, O Lord! "¹⁰² It is noteworthy that Blok's poem also interprets the revolution as an elemental force. To reiterate this elemental confrontation, the last two shots in this chapter are again the wooden mask and stony surface of the mountains. [Figure 65 and 66]



Figure 65



Figure 66

¹⁰⁰ On the opposition between wooden Moscow and stony Saint Petersburg, see, for example, Olga Gritsai and Herman van der Wusten.

¹⁰¹ "Кругом — огни, огни, огни.../Оплечь — ружейные ремни..."

¹⁰² "Мы на горе всем буржуям/ Мировой пожар раздуем, / Мировой пожар в крови —/ Господи, благослови!"

Towards the end of the confrontational dialogue between the Cossack leader and the communards, we hear the voice of one of the communards saying: “But Soviet authority does not exist here, Uncle Vasilii.”¹⁰³ While hearing this remark, on the screen we see first the close up of Liuba and then of her husband Vasilii, the leader of the communards, both with a fire in the background. Vasilii’s solemn response to this remark—“If it does not exist (now), then it will exist soon” [Net—tak budet]—implies its miraculous creation from nothing. It is significant that the phrase “tak budet” in Russian rhymes with a Biblical creation mantra “da budet” (let there be). What follows, then, should be the creation of Soviet authority [Sovetskaia vlast’]. And indeed, the next chapter “Husband and Wife,” can be interpreted in this light. Liuba and Vasilii are not simply a communard wife and husband, they are also the progenitors or the creators of Soviet authority. The alabaster-like make-up on their faces underlines their divine status. Their love scene, therefore, is at the same time a creation scene. It is accompanied by the rumbling sound of thunder and the images of stone and fire, the two elements associated with the communards.

The creation of Soviet authority is followed by the establishment of its law, which is the subject of the chapter five, titled “The Charter of the Commune.” This chapter pushes the boldness of this film’s style to the extreme. It simply shows a text on the screen. [Figure 67]

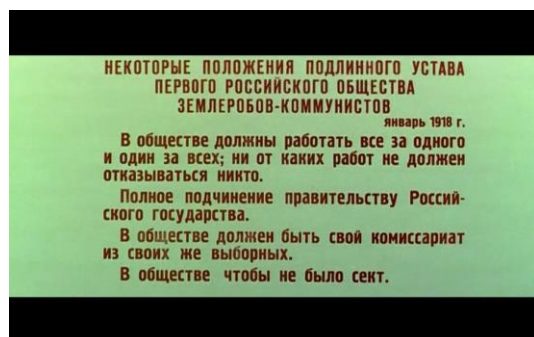


Figure 67

¹⁰³ “Дядь Вась, да ведь здесь Советской власти то и нет.”

After the immersion into the rich sonic and visual texture of the film in the previous chapters, it is shocking and puzzling to experience a complete absence of sound or images on screen, except for red letters on a light blue background. This stark contrast adds austerity and authority to the displayed rules, which are written in an unusual imperative style. The tone of the text as well as the content of some of the paragraphs are highly reminiscent of the biblical ten commandments. For example, paragraph two “Full submission to the government of Russian state”¹⁰⁴ and paragraph four “There should be no sects in the society”¹⁰⁵ are reminiscent of “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Paragraph eight—“For theft and fraud members are to be expelled from the society and to be transferred to the government court, while all the property should remain in the society’s disposal”¹⁰⁶—reads as an expanded version of “Thou shalt not steal.” The fact that their charter consists of exactly ten paragraphs further underscores the parallel with the ten commandments.¹⁰⁷

The following chapter, “Resurrection,”¹⁰⁸ continues the narrative of the Ten Commandments and opens with the image of a calf’s head lit in a golden light. The reference to the golden calf worshiped by Israelites upon Moses’s return with the ten commandments is evident. In the next shot, carefree children are enjoying a sunny day at the riverside and swimming with

¹⁰⁴ “Полное подчинение правительству Российского государства.”

¹⁰⁵ “В обществе чтобы не было сект.”

¹⁰⁶ “За кражу и мошенничество исключается из общества и отдается правительственному суду, а имущество остается полностью в пользу общества.”

¹⁰⁷ If we do not count the last caveat paragraph declaring that “At the discretion of the society the charter may be altered at any time. [По усмотрению общества устав может быть изменен во всякое время],” the charter consists of exactly ten paragraphs.

¹⁰⁸ In Berggol'ts's text the word is spelled as Sunday – voskresen'e.

two calves. Stylistically, this golden calf episode stands apart from this chapter and from the film as a whole. The style and the subject matter of this episode are much closer to the Socialist Realism of the Stalin period. In particular, the swimming children are reminiscent of Aleksandr Deineka's paintings of the 1930s and 1940s. [Figure 68] The motif of children obliviously playing around a golden calf, as well as the fact that it follows the quasi-ten commandments, prompt us to read this episode as an allegory for a false faith, but it remains ambiguous which belief system should be read as a false faith: is it the impending worship of Stalin through Socialist Realism, or is it the faith of old believers that is false, or, indeed, is it the faith of the communards themselves?



Figure 68

The conflict and the conversion between the old believers and the communards are at the center of this chapter. On a sunny Sunday, a day of “Resurrection,”¹⁰⁹ of worship and rest, the local people come to observe the communards plowing the field. While the locals, and old believers among them, are captured as static and idle, the communards are shown as constantly moving in the process of their hard toil. The conflict between them is particularly concentrated on the figures of conversion: more explicitly (mainly verbally) on the figures of a former priest and a local peasant Kekha, and implicitly (mainly visually) on the figure of Efimia, the daughter of the old believer. Not only does her red costume stand out among other old believers dressed in black,

¹⁰⁹ In Russian two words Sunday and resurrection are identical except for one letter, so the title of this chapter retains this ambiguity.

but the gradual change in the position of her head throughout the three close-ups in this chapter visually suggests her conversion. [Figure 69, 70, and 71]



Figure 69



Figure 70



Figure 71

In terms of visual composition and the color scheme, this chapter is closest to Orthodox iconography. As in icons, in this chapter the more important figures are captured in the center and are bigger, while the less important figures are significantly smaller and located on the margins. The dominant colors are golden, red, black, and brown. And finally, the figures are arranged on a hill and framed in a way that avoids a linear perspectival view and foregrounds the flatness characteristic to icons. Importantly, all of these variations are captured in a looped choreography

of the camera movement that suggests the icon-like unity within the frame. The physicality of their sweating bodies portrayed in this scene can be described as at once haptic in Marks's sense (due to the absence of linear perspectival distance and proximity to the camera) and also reminiscent of the images of martyrs in Orthodox icons (due to the warm yellow light cast on their bodies).

The composition and the color scheme of the next chapter, "The Bonfires," seem strikingly different from the iconographic style of the previous chapter. Nonetheless, the two chapters share a number of underlying iconographic ideas and techniques. The style of this chapter is particularly close to the quasi-iconography of Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin and Kazimir Malevich. Both painters aimed at iconographic transcendentalism through non-linear perspectival vision, as discussed in Chapter 2.2. If "Resurrection" is rendered in the style of Orthodox iconography, "The Bonfires" is rendered in the style of revolutionary iconography.

In "The Bonfires," the houses, the streets, the clothing of the people in the newly organized Commune are tinged entirely with red. This red commune will be violently destroyed by local Cossacks, all dressed in black. Although we are never shown the direct confrontation between the Cossacks and the communards, the clash of the diagonal lines that occur during the cross-cuts between the two groups vividly expresses the intensity of the conflict. [Figure 72 and 73]



Figure 72



Figure 73

The color scheme and the composition of the frames here invoke and combine diverse references ranging from avant-garde posters “Okna ROSTA” (Окна РОСТА) to Eisensteinian diagonals and scythes, and from Petrov-Vodkin’s colored horsemen to Malevich’s reapers and squares. [Figure 74, 75, and 76]



Figure 74



Figure 75



Figure 76

The rhythmical repetitions and shifts of colors, sounds and images in this chapter not only represents the obvious conflict of creeds, but also participates in a broader dialectical process where abstract forms, colors, and elemental forces clash in a rhythmical interchange. The visual “fireworks” displayed here represent the culmination of the revolutionary iconography for the new era. This chapter also serves as a coda to the film as whole. The visual and sound motifs from all previous chapters come together here and eventually turn into a cinematic Black Square. Towards the end of this chapter, after one of the communards crashes the piano with a stone, the film cuts to a huge black square of a burnt-out field. [Figure 77] Although it may require little ingenuity to replicate Malevich’s famous painting, the visual similarity achieved in this chapter is nonetheless significant. The reference to Malevich’s *Black Square*, which was considered a substitute for a religious icon for avant-garde artists,¹¹⁰ adds both spiritual and revolutionary dimension to the ongoing conflict and suggests a mystical transcendence of the opposites through the absolute negation.



Figure 77

¹¹⁰ Aleksandr Benuea wrote in 1916: “Undoubtedly, this is that icon which gentlemen Futurists offer instead of Madonnas and shameless Venuses” (qtd in Andreeva 2010).

The two squares—the square of the field of Mars in the beginning of the film and the black square of a burnt-out wheat field in the end of this penultimate chapter—visually bookends the film and renounce any idea of linear historical progression through this repetition. This denial of linear history is bolstered by another bookending device that accompanies the images of these two squares. Two poems—one in the opening chapter and another at the end of this penultimate chapter—bookend the film verbally. In the opening poem, a female voice-over declares that the story told here is passing directly from heart to heart: “From heart to heart/ Only this way/ I chose for you/ It is direct and dreadful.”¹¹¹ The last lines in the closing poem, repeat the motif of a communication through the heart and declares that the lyrical subject becomes an epoch, and the epoch is speaking through her heart: “And I am becoming you, the epoch/ And you talk through my heart.”¹¹² In other words, the epoch is expressed here not through the conventional landmarks of history—“Neither through monuments, nor through obelisks”¹¹³, to quote the poem—but directly through the heart, which implies that the epoch (history) is alive and always present. This resonates with the epigraph to the film, which says that it is “a story that will never become a past.” The linear temporality of the “epoch” in these poems transforms into an incarnated and spatialized form. Notably, the two bookending poems are not from the original poema “Pervorossiisk,” although both are written by Berggol'ts. The filmmakers’ choice of these two poems can be read

¹¹¹ “От сердца к сердцу/ Только этот путь/ Я выбрала тебе/ Он прям и страшен.”

¹¹² “И я тобой становлюсь эпоха/ И ты через сердце мое говоришь.”

¹¹³ (“Не в монументах и не в обелисках”)

along the lines of their attempt to show an eternal creation myth as an alternative to linear historical progression.

The last chapter, “Red and White,” serves as an epilogue that shows the continuation of the conflict during the Civil War. But given the persistent tension between the historical and the mythical in the film, the conflict between the reds and the whites here goes beyond the concrete historical circumstances and suggests a mythological universality.

The account of the film’s original ending seems to corroborate this tension between history and the creation myth.¹¹⁴ Longina-Sokolova, who partly relies on the director’s shooting script, describes the original ending as follows: “After a long freeze frame, suddenly a red horse dashes across the white snow desert and disappears in the snow storm, leaving a white spot. The scene is accompanied by the sound of the ringing bells” (Longina-Sokolova 225).¹¹⁵ The imagery in this ending is highly reminiscent of the ending of Blok’s “The Twelve,” where in the middle of the blizzard the invisible Christ marches with a blood-red flag.¹¹⁶ Just as in the ending of Blok’s poem, in this film the historical and religious motifs merge in a metaphorical relation where it remains

¹¹⁴ The original ending of the film was not preserved. There exist two accounts of this lost ending: one is based shooting script and another one based on the memories of a viewer who have seen the original ending at the artistic council.

¹¹⁵ “Стоп-кадр длился и длился, и вдруг взрывался: по белой снежной пустыне под колокольный звон в бешеном галопе неся красный дикий конь и исчезал в брызгах снега, оставив нам белое пятно” (Longina-Sokolova 225).

¹¹⁶

Впереди — с кровавым флагом,
И за вьюгой невидим,
И от пули невредим,
Нежной поступью надвьюжной,
Снежной россыпью жемчужной,
В белом венчике из роз —
Впереди — Иисус Христос.

Ahead of them – with bloody banner,
Unseen within the blizzard’s swirl,
Safe from any bullet’s harm,
With gentle step, above the storm,
In the scattered, pearl-like snow,
Crowned with a wreath of roses white,
Ahead of them – goes Jesus Christ.

ambiguous which part of the metaphor is the “vehicle,” and which one is the “tenor”. The Blokian reference here adds productive ambiguity to the tension between the historical and the mythological threads that runs through the film.

There is, however, a less Blokian but no less ambiguous version of the supposed original ending. Butovskii, who was present at the artistic council’s screening of the film with the original ending, describes it as follows: “black Lenin against the red background with sad and scrutinizing gaze is looking directly at the audience” (Butovskii 189)¹¹⁷. This image may have corresponded to the banner-like image of Lenin in the beginning of the film and been meant to question the contemporary viewer’s state of faith. My goal here is not to determine the original ending, but rather to underscore the ambiguity of the strong religious implications in both possible endings, which, unfortunately dissipates in the celebratory monumentalism of the current ending.

The film as a whole uses radical cinematic means to create a strong analogy between the history of the revolutionary years and religious creation. In this process, the film questions linear historical progression and reveals the metaphysical nature of the Soviet regime. If Illienko’s *A Well for the Thirsty* undoes Soviet metaphysics by cinematic means, Shiffers pushes Soviet metaphysics to its extreme and by doing so exposes the crisis of this belief system.

The unconventional cinematic form and the film’s affinity to the medieval and modern iconographic traditions at once alienate and immerse the viewer in a world that offers alternative genealogy to the revolutionary history. Unlike the *tableau* films made in national studios, which revive the potential of the pre-modern sensibilities through the hapticity and materiality of their images, *Pervorossiiane* reveals how the tangibility of the physical world, particularly pronounced

¹¹⁷ “Черный Ленин (Честноков) на красном фоне печально-вопросительно смотрит в глаза зрителям” (Butovskii 189).

in the chapters three (“Promised Land”) and six (“Resurrection”), turns into Suprematist abstraction epitomized in the black square at the end of the film.

3.4 ARTISANS AS ARTISTS: TENGIZ ABULADZE’S *THE NECKLACE FOR MY BELOVED*

Tengiz Abuladze first received theatrical education in the Tbilisi Theatrical Institute where he studied under Georgii Tovstonogov.¹¹⁸ After the Theatrical Institute, he studied filmmaking at All-Union Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Sergei Iutkevich’s workshop and graduated in 1953. Throughout his career Abuladze made seven feature length films. The first film, *Magdana’s Donkey* [Лурджа Магданы, 1956], was co-directed with Rezo Chkheidze, his friend from the Theatrical Institute as well as from film school. Their debut film was rendered in a neorealist style and was received with great acclaim by Soviet and foreign critics alike.¹¹⁹ Abuladze’s next two films—*Other People’s Children* [Чужие дети, 1958] and *Me, Grandma, Iliko, and Illarion* [Я, бабушка, Иliko и Илларион, 1962]—were made in a similar neorealist style.¹²⁰ Later Abuladze would describe these early films as mere sketches: “I take full responsibility for those films [*Other People’s Children* and *Me, Grandma, Iliko, and Illarion*] and am not going to deny that they are my films. But believe me, I am not showing off when I perceive them as mere stepping stones to

¹¹⁸ Tovstonogov then was yet to become a famous theater director in Leningrad and, coincidentally, the teacher of Evgenii Shiffers, the director of *Pervorossiiane*.

¹¹⁹ The film won special prize in short film competition at Cannes and Edinburg International Film Festival in 1956.

¹²⁰ Andrei Plakhov, for example, calls early Abuladze a “Georgian neorealist.”

or sketches for big cinema” (Kvasnetskaia 56).¹²¹ These early films by and large convey the atmosphere of early Thaw cinema: lyrical rendition of everyday subject, attention to individuals, moderately innovative style and black-and-white film stock.

A radical shift in both the subject matter and style of his films occurs with his fourth feature film, *The Plea* (Vedreba, 1967). This film is considered the first part of Abuladze’s trilogy. The other two films of the trilogy are *Tree of Desire* (*Natvris khe*, 1977) and *Repentance* (*Monanieba*, 1984). All three films no longer focus on everyday contemporary subjects but rather deal with the past and are rendered in highly stylized form, for which they were labeled by contemporary critics as “difficult” films.¹²² In this respect, the trilogy has much in common with the *tableau* trend. Perhaps, *The Plea* has the strongest connection to other *tableau* films in terms of style and theme, as well as with regard to the crew members.¹²³ Nonetheless this chapter primarily focuses on Abuladze’s next film *The Necklace for My Beloved* [*Ozherel’e dlia moei liubimoi*, 1971], which lies outside of his trilogy. This film was made between *The Plea* and *Tree of Desire*. While stylistically *The Necklace for My Beloved* is close to his “difficult” films (*The Plea*, *Tree of Desire*, and *Repentance*), in terms of genre and subject matter it seems to belong to a large group of films produced by the Georgia Film Studio of that time—comedy about rural life in the Caucasus. In

¹²¹ “Я целиком несу за них [*Чужие дети* и *Я, бабушка, Илико и Илларион*] ответственность и не собираюсь от фильмов этих отказываться. Но поверьте, вовсе не кокетничаю, если воспринимаю их лишь как подступы к большому кино, как эскизы” (Kvasnetskaia 56).

¹²² See, for example, Ivanova “Trudno—eshche trudnee—sovsem trudno.”

¹²³ The cinematographer Aleksandr Antipenko joined *The Plea* crew after working on Parajanov’s *Kiev Frescos*.

other words, *The Necklace for My Beloved* is neither an entirely arthouse film of the *auteur*, nor is it a fully popular film for mass consumption.

In one of his interviews, while mentioning *The Plea* and *Tree of Desire* as his favorite films, Abuladze points out that in *The Necklace for My Beloved* he was seeking for a new cinematic language. He says, “In *The Necklace for My Beloved*, I was searching for a new cinematic language, new poetics, new means of expression... I was curious to understand, to experience if it is possible to unite in one film eccentricity, poetry, philosophical parable and folk *skaz*. To unite convention and hard realism. Like in other films, I wanted to access the wisdom of fiction” (Abuladze qtd. in Gerber 108)¹²⁴. Indeed, compared to the stylistic rigor or one could even say rigidity of *The Plea*, the style of *The Necklace for My Beloved* is more eclectic and experimental. More generally, the artistic devices that are implemented in the trilogy, in this film are laid bare in a more explicit manner. *The Necklace for My Beloved* boldly foregrounds the flatness we have already witnessed in *The Plea*, foreshadows the color-symbolism of *Tree of Desire*, and experiments with the absurdist eclecticism that will fully fledge in *Repentance*. It is precisely this in-between position of *The Necklace for My Beloved* that bears a potential for exploration of the stylistic and thematic persistence of the *tableau* trend, while also allowing an investigation of the uniqueness of Abuladze’s oeuvre.

The Necklace for My Beloved is based on the novella *The Necklace for My Serminaz* (1965) by the Dagestani writer Akhmedkhan Abu Bakar, who also participated in writing of the script. Both the film and the novella are structured around the road adventures of the protagonist

¹²⁴ “[В] Ожерелье для моей любимой я искал новый киноязык, новую поэтику, новые средства выражения... Мне было интересно понять, почувствовать, можно ли в одном фильме объединить эксцентрику, поэзию, философскую притчу и народный сказ. Условность и жесткий реализм. Да и в других я хотел прикоснуться к мудрости вымысла” (Abuladze qtd. in Gerber 108).

Bakhadur, who encounters various artisans and crooks in the villages of the Dagestan mountains, while wandering in search of a present for his beloved Serminaz. The biggest difference between the novella and the film lies in their attitude toward contemporary modern life. While in the novella many of the comedic effects emerge at moments of encounter between traditional rural life and modern Soviet values, in the film the contemporary markers are reduced to a minimum. Abubakar's novella humorously reconciles the wisdom of tradition and craftsmanship with the progressive values of modern Soviet life, be it the emancipation of women, the use of technology, or modern education. Abuladze's film, by contrast, situates the protagonist in a surreal fairy-tale-like world and elicits comedic effects by pushing the humor to border on the absurd. How to interpret this elimination of contemporary markers in Abuladze's film and in which ways the film as a whole can be considered as a part of the *tableau* trend? To start answering these questions an in-depth analysis of the film is in order.

Despite the difference in their take on modern Soviet life, one common aspect of the novella and the film is evident in their attitude towards art. Both question the role of art in the contemporary world and link the art of storytelling, verbal and visual, to the artisanship of the village masters, who carry the secret of their craft from pre-modern times. In both, the main body of the text (the road adventures) is framed as a story created by the protagonist. In this way, both build a self-reflexive tension between the work itself and how it is made.

The role of art is most prominently brought to the fore in the film's prologue. This is the only sequence in the film where we see an overt evocation of the contemporary Soviet context. The prologue opens with a frontal medium close-up of Bakhadur wearing a crimson red shirt. In the background is a padlocked door. [Figure 78]



Figure 78

This shot alternates with a shot of the almost caricatural policeman, who interrogates him. The policeman sits in the sidecar of the motorcycle with a dog on his lap and is surrounded by two other policemen and the elderly people of the village. Bakhadur is standing among them. Not only does his red shirt stand out in this group shot of primarily grey tones, but also, and more importantly, the use of the isolated frontal shot of Bakhadur with a padlock in the background emphasizes that at the same time he and his creative work belong to a separate world, not accessible (padlocked) to the world of the policeman. In his interrogation, the policeman tries to establish the identity of the villain from Bakhadur's fiction in order to arrest that personage. When Bakhadur confesses that the villain is a fruit of his imagination, the policeman gives him advice: "In the future, write openly and directly without any fancies and pseudonyms, then you would be able to help justice. Otherwise, what it turns out to be, 'art for art sake'?"¹²⁵ Bakhadur responds with a cunning smile on his face and says that he surely will follow the advice. What follows next is his story, which comprises the main body of the film.

The absurd conflation of reality and fiction by the policeman encompasses the film's engagement with several intertwining problems surrounding the role of art in the Soviet society

¹²⁵ "Впредь пиши открыто и прямо безо всяких вымыслов и псевдонимов тогда ты сможешь оказать помощь правосудию ... А то, что получается, искусство для искусства."

and in the contemporary world more generally. The most apparent issue here, which also runs throughout the film, is the debate over the utility of art and its autonomy (“art for art sake”). While the policeman’s attitude represents an exaggerated version of the Soviet official position on art, Bakhadur’s playfulness and seeming compliance hint at the artistic response to the utilitarian view of art. The way in which Bakhadur is captured in this prologue—frontally with padlock in the background—demonstrates that there is a different and inscrutable dimension to his art world. The prologue suggests that this world is different not only spatially, but also temporally. When the policeman asks his age, Bakhadur responds that he is only thirteen years old. His mature appearance and moustache cause the policeman’s doubts. Bakhadur further explains: “We consider as a birthday not the day when a child was born, but the day when the child sat next to a master at a workbench.”¹²⁶ This unconventional measurement of age reiterates the distinctiveness of the artisans’ and, by extension, artists’ world, to which Bakhadur belongs.

This prologue also intimates the status of art in the more concrete context of the late Soviet society. The interrogation of Bakhadur, who wrote under his pseudonym, looks like an absurdist parody of the famous trial of Andrei Siniavskii and Iulii Daniel, who were tried and imprisoned in 1966, for writing under pseudonyms what was perceived as anti-Soviet fiction. Within the context of Abuladze’s own films, the obsessive control over artistic process and the absurd idea of imprisoning a fictional character suggested in this prologue foreshadow the absurdist motifs that will be fully developed in Abuladze’s depiction of Stalinism in *Repentance*.

The prologue is followed by Bakhadur’s fictional story, which consists of three chapters and comprises the remainder of the film. Despite the policeman’s advice to write openly and

¹²⁶ “У нас днем рождения считается не тот день, когда ребенок появился на свет, а тот, когда он рядом с мастером сел за верстак.”

directly, his story is set in a fairy-tale-like world full of mysterious incidents, surreal characters, and ambiguous parables. The sparse contemporary markers in the film are blended into this surreal world.

What is most striking about these three chapters is their ostensibly flat spatial construction. Similar to other *tableau* films, *The Necklace for My Beloved* avoids the horizon line and any depth cues. The camera angle is consistently positioned high enough to eliminate the skyline. When the camera is positioned frontally, the vanishing point is obstructed by walls, mountains, or other objects. In rare cases where the camera moves, its movement is primarily lateral. Visually the space in the film is closer to painterly than cinematic representation. The title of Bakhadur's fictional story—which is inserted after the prologue of the film and which coincides with the film's title—is drawn in a style akin to a Persian miniature and prompts the viewers to anticipate that the visual mode will resemble medieval illustration.¹²⁷ [Figure 1] As if to reinforce the painterly reference, towards the end of the film Bakhadur brings a pile of sketches as his present to his beloved. These sketches capture some scenes we have encountered throughout the film.

The non-perspectival painterly flatness is not unique to *The Necklace for My Beloved*. Abuladze's previous film, *The Plea* as well as the subsequent film, *Tree of Desire*, adheres to the same stylistic choice. This choice, I suggest, is related not only to the filmmakers' rejection of the conventional ways of capturing reality with the camera, but also to their inclination toward pre-modern artistic practice, which in visual arts often takes non-perspectival form. In *The Necklace for My Beloved*, this inclination toward pre-modern artistic practice is also underscored by

¹²⁷ Abuladze's next film, *Tree of Desire* explicitly refers to a painterly mode through its subtitle, which reads: "Pictures from the life of the pre-revolutionary Georgian village" ["Картины из жизни дореволюционной грузинской деревни"].

Bakhadur's encounters with the local artisans, who demonstrate the crafts of carpet making, pottery, and tightrope walking among others.

Interestingly, the same footage of the artisans whom Bakhadur encounters is used in Abuladze's short documentary film about the local crafts of the Dagestani people, which was released right after *The Necklace for My Beloved*. The documentary is, in a way, an expanded version of the sequences of the local craftsmanship inserted in *The Necklace for My Beloved*. In addition to carpet making, pottery, tightrope waking, and the beauty of the local architecture already shown in the fictional film, the documentary shows the crafts of goldsmithing, jewel encrustation, stone and wood carving, wool making—all in the same flat cinematographic style and shot by the same cameraman.¹²⁸ The voice-over narration in this documentary explicitly states that the most marvelous thing in this region is “an astonishing sense of beauty characteristic to the local people.” On its surface, this line sounds like an official Soviet cliché, but if we take into account the concern with art and beauty in Abuladze's other films, most notably in *The Necklace for My Beloved* and *Tree of Desire*, this line can be interpreted not simply as a cliché. The celebration of the sense of beauty that permeates local crafts is aligned with the filmmakers' attempt to create a space for art outside its utility. In this regard, the title of the documentary—*The Museum in the Open Air*—is revealing. The work of the artisans is equated with art. The role of the cinematic medium here is compared to that of the museum space, rather than that of a documentary recording of reality. How, then, does this documentary footage of artisanship-cum-

¹²⁸ The cinematographer for both *The Necklace for My Beloved* and the documentary was Lomer Akhvlediani, who was assistant cinematographer for *The Plea* and the main cinematographer for *Tree of Desire*.

art work within *The Necklace for My Beloved*? To answer this question a closer look into the plot and characters of the film is needed.

Both the first chapter (“Everything Begins with a Road”) and the last chapter (“A Road Knows No End”), which are set in Bakhadur’s village, bring some narrative structure to the film: in the first chapter we learn that Bakhadur has to find a present to win the heart of his beloved, and in the end, we see him returning with his present, which is an illustrated tale of his journey. The exact repetition of the opening and the closing shots of the film suggests a circular structure of the narrative. By contrast, the central chapter (“If You Are in Love—Wander the Mountains”), which portrays Bakhadur’s journey itself, is less structured and appears as an assemblage of very loosely connected episodes with little narrative or spatiotemporal coherence, but with plenty of puzzling repetitions.

The most puzzling of them is the repetitive encounter with a shapeshifting character that appears in three different disguises. The first time, Bakhadur encounters him in the mountains as an onion-seller. He swindles all Bakhadur’s money from him by pretending to be an unfortunate peasant unable to sell his sack of onions. Halfway through his journey, Bakhadur meets this character again, but this time in the disguise of a builder called Daud, who once again steals Bakhadur’s money. Later, we see Daud being attacked by a distraught house owner, whose house crumbled after Daud’s sloppy construction. It is here that we hear a remote repetition of the debate between the utility and autonomy of art that was foregrounded in the prologue. Through the comical clash between the house owner and Daud, we learn that Daud advocates durability over beauty in his construction. This idea is reiterated through his far-from-subtle song that he is forced to repeat during their absurd quarrel:

Beauty—what is it for?

Durability is better than beauty.

The wall will stand for a century,

You will be satisfied by me.¹²⁹

As though in a counterpoint to this claim, in the middle of this episode, we see the inserts of the shots with the beautiful stone architecture of the mountain villages. [Figure 79] This is the same footage that was used in Abuladze's documentary. The beauty and durability of this centuries-old architecture demonstrates the opposite of Daud's claim.



Figure 79

An even more explicit reference to the debate over the utility and autonomy of art is shown in the last encounter of Bakhadur with the same character at the very end of his journey. While the onion-seller and Daud-the-builder appear in Abu Bakar's novella, albeit in passing, the last encounter is the addition of the filmmakers and highlights the issue of art in the film most explicitly. In this last encounter the character takes shape of an artist and pretends to paint Bakhadur's portrait. On his canvas, however, instead of the portrait, we see twenty-five-ruble bills being copied from the original. When Bakhadur approaches him to look at the portrait, the "artist"

¹²⁹ "Красота — к чему она?/ Прочность лучше красоты./ Будет век стоять стена,/ Будешь мной доволен ты."

covers the painted money with a sloppily made sketch of him. Their conversation is even more straightforward. The “artist” insists that “art should be useful.”¹³⁰ When Bakhadur asks to whom it should be useful, the character slyly responds, “To the artist, of course.”

The whole scene takes place in a field full of red poppies. Somewhere in the background a policeman is peacefully plucking those flowers and making a bouquet. This garish field of red flowers is almost a replica of the opening shot in Mikhail Chiaurelli’s pinnacle of Stalinist kitsch *The Fall of Berlin*. In Chiaurelli’s opening shot a schoolboy is plucking flowers for his teacher in the middle of red poppy field. [Figure 80 and 81 are from *The Fall of Berlin*, 82 and 83 are from *The Necklace*]



Figure 80



Figure 81



Figure 82

¹³⁰ “Искусство должно приносить пользу.”



Figure 83

The only visual difference between these backgrounds is that in Abuladze's film the skyline is left outside the frame and as a result is much flatter. This Stalinist final touch to the scene prompts us to draw a parallel between this money-drawing artist and the state of art under Stalinism. Both demonstrate how the subservience of art to the authority of either Stalin or money turns it into outright kitsch. But the consequences are, of course, more serious than just kitschy art. The terror and tragedy of the utilitarian view of art and beauty will be fully demonstrated in Abuladze's next two films: *Tree of Desire* and *Repentance*.

The motif of a field with red poppy flowers reappears in the opening scene of *Tree of Desire*. A white horse is dying in the middle of a red poppy-flower field. Towards the end of the film we realize that the horse is metaphorically linked to the heroine, who is portrayed as the incarnation of beauty. A garish abundance of red flowers (this time carnations) also appears in the beginning of *Repentance*. Here the coffin with the corpse of the dictator is surrounded with the red flowers. Meanwhile the dictator himself appears throughout the film as a devilish shapeshifter akin to the one featured in *The Necklace for My Beloved*. Of course, each of the three films mentioned here focuses on different themes, but they share the concern over the role of art and commonly use Chiaurelli's garish red flowers as an ominous reference.

In *The Necklace for My Beloved*, the shapeshifting character that demonstrates the subservience of art is contrasted with the caricaturized romantic acrobat Suguri from the village of

acrobats and tightrope walkers. Suguri first enters the frame with a sheep, which he later leaves to Bakhadur. This thinly veiled biblical reference leaves little doubt about Suguri's contrast to devilish shapeshifter¹³¹. Whereas the shapeshifter takes all of Bakhadur's money, Suguri gives his sheep and spare clothing to Bakhadur, who lost his pants and shirt to mischievous goddesses.¹³² Bakhadur encounters Suguri twice. In their first encounter, Suguri tells his unhappy love story, which is shown in a mixed style of silent film and pantomime. This story within a story has its own title credit which shows hand-drawn clowns and colorful letters that read "Circus, Clown Suguri, Acrobats, Eccentrics." In this silent-film-like flashback story, first, we see Suguri's beloved Chada demonstrating her acrobatic tricks. Then we learn that Suguri's fate has gone awry after he staged own suicide to test Chada's love. After being shown this story, as if to reinforce the reference to silent cinema, Bakhadur exclaims: "Unbelievable, like in movies."¹³³ Suguri confirms: "Like in movies."¹³⁴ Thus, this episode not only conveys Suguri's sad love story, but simultaneously reflects on the history of cinema as art by incorporating elements of early silent cinema with its circus-like attractions and melodramatic plots. Both the story of love and of cinema

¹³¹ It is worth mentioning here that the actor Ramaz Chkhivadze, who plays the role of the shapeshifter also played Matsili, the incarnation of the evil in Abuladze's previous film *The Plea*. In the subsequent film, *Tree of Desire* the same actor would play another devilish character—a corrupt priest Okhrokhine.

¹³² In terms of both their appearances and behavior the goddesses in this scene are eerily similar to the mischievous heroines in Vera Chytilova's *Daisies* (1966). Chytilova called her film a "philosophical documentary in the form of a farce" (see Koresky). Although thematically Abuladze's film is quite far from Chytilova's film, it nonetheless shares this carnivalesque genre eclecticism with *Daisies*.

¹³³ "Даже не верится, как в кино."

¹³⁴ "Как в кино."

here fail to be “believable.” In this light, Bakhadur’s words— “Unbelievable, like in movies”— can be read as a verdict to both their love story and to cinema’s status as art.

The second encounter between Bakhadur and Suguri takes place towards the end of the film. While in their first encounter, Suguri was in despair because his attempt to manipulate Chada’s love failed, in their second encounter, Suguri appears optimistic since, as he confesses, he realized that ‘trust[doverie]’ is what can sustain their love.¹³⁵ If we keep in mind that during the first encounter, their love story was paralleled with the story of cinema as art, it is not hard to predict that ‘trust’ should sustain the art of cinema as well. After this confession, Suguri and Bakhadur go to meet Chada and find her demonstrating acrobatic tricks. We are shown the same footage of her performance as in Bakhadur’s first encounter with Suguri, but now these shots are seamlessly intercut, through Kuleshovian “imagined geography,” with the documentary footage of local acrobats and tightrope walkers. If in the episode with Daud-the-builder the documentary footage of local architecture was inserted to undermine Daud’s claims about beauty and durability, in this episode the documentary footage is meant to convey some sense of ‘trust’ or ‘credibility’ to the story and its medium.¹³⁶

The episode with the acrobats is the last instance in this film that demonstrates documentary footage of local artisans blended within the plot. In the previous cases, the

¹³⁵ In the novella, the episode with Suguri and Chada emphasizes the motif of women’s emancipation. It shows how Suguri’s jealousy changes to the acceptance of Chada’s right to continue her career as a dancer.

¹³⁶ With regard to documentary film, Abuladze reportedly stated that “neither fiction film can be without documentary, nor documentary can exist without elements of fiction, otherwise it risks becoming a mediocre chronicle, either bleak or pompous. In a documentary film, it is necessary to perceive nature sensitively, to be able not to intervene, not to alter or ‘rebuild’, but rather to immerse in it. I think that any director, no matter in which genre they work in, an experience in documentary cinema is immensely useful.” [“Как художественное без документального, так и документальное без элементов кино

documentary footage was also used when Bakhadur encounters carpet weavers and pottery makers. In these two cases, he attempts to utilize their art in the form of a present for his beloved and as a result is met with hostility akin to fairy-tale witchery. In contrast, the art of acrobats and tightrope walkers escapes the danger of utilitarianism. It is noteworthy that the episode with Suguri and Chada is the only instance in this chapter when the skyline enters the frame. Partly this could be explained by practical necessity, since it is hardly possible to capture tightrope walkers and avoid skyline. But if we take into account that in *The Plea* and *Tree of Desire* the only instances when a skyline is captured within the frame are the scenes with heroines who appear as allegories of art and beauty, it is possible to suggest that within the narrative of the film, the skyline in the episode with acrobats and tightrope walkers indicates its singular non-utilitarian status among other forms of artisanship.

The sense of credibility and the hierarchy of artisanship suggested by the documentary footage that shows various artisans is not the only reason for its presence in the film. As forms of pre-modern arts, the artisan sequences with their material and tactile qualities underscores the film's inclination toward the "primitive" sensibilities of pre-modern times. This is particularly evident when the camera glides over the intricate patterns of carpets or shows in close-up hands molding pottery. [Figure 84 and 85]

художественного существовать не может, иначе ему грозит превращение в заурядную хронику, тусклую или напыщенную. В документальном кино необходимо чутко слушать натуру, уметь не вмешиваться, не переиначивать, не 'достраивать' природу, а вникать в нее. Думается, любому режиссеру, в каком бы жанре он ни работал, практика документального кино полезна сверх всякой меры" (Abuladze qtd. in Kvasnitskaia 15).



Figure 84



Figure 85

These images punctuate the overall non-perspectival flatness of the cinematic space and help to create a sense of the world at once tangibly proximate and removed from the modern world. We can trace this tendency back to *The Plea* or even slightly earlier to his unrealized project to make a film about Niko Pirosmani, a primitivist artist *par excellence*.¹³⁷ It is a speculation, of course, but it is not unreasonable to imagine that Abuladze's film on Pirosmani might have looked as non-perspectival paintings of Pirosmani himself and in that also resemble Abuladze later works (*The*

¹³⁷ Before making *The Plea* Abuladze submitted a request to make a film about Pirosmani, but the project was declined by the cinema administration. Instead of a traditional biographical film, Abuladze proposed to make a film as a series of episodes, where each episode would portray the legendary figure Pirosmani in a different way. In the interview with Kvasnetskaia, Abuladze suggested: "Let the image of the artist remain as elusive in its unambiguity and multidimensional for perception, like it was in reality. Let's trust people and let them express themselves on the screen, promote their own legend, retell their own dream. [Пусть образ художника остается столь же неуловимым в однозначности и многомерным в восприятии, как на самом деле. Поверим людям, дадим им высказаться на экране, выдвинуть свою легенду, пересказать свой сон]" (59).

Plea, *The Necklace For my Beloved*, *Tree of Desire*) as well as *tableau* films more broadly. It is noteworthy that Parajanov also made a film about Pirosmeni and his paintings.

On its surface, *The Necklace For my Beloved* as a whole appears as slightly absurdist but in general a lighthearted fairy-tale adventure with happy ending. Bakhadur eventually returns to his home village and wins his beloved's heart by presenting her the sketchbook with the drawings of his adventures. But at the same time, the film raises a number of serious questions shared with other *tableau* filmmakers, namely, the crisis of cinema as art and its ability to regain the viewers' "trust", the fascination with the "primitive" and the avoidance of modern contemporary life.

In Abuladze's film, the crisis of arts (and cinema among them) is linked to the avoidance of contemporary markers. In other words, we can read Abuladze's film as a text where the dead-end of Soviet modernity goes hand in hand with the dead-end of conventional forms of art, be it Stalinist Socialist realism or post-Stalinist Socialist romanticism that tried to integrate romanticist historical imagination with "actually existing" socialism.¹³⁸ If Abu-Bakar's novella could serve as a good example of this kind of Socialist romanticism, where pre-modern and modern co-exist in harmony, Abuladze's film abandons the modern life all together. The rare instances of modern life (a truck, machine guns, wedding photographs with the indication of the year, etc.) are turned into surreal elements of the quasi-fairy-tale world. The persistent invocation of the pre-modern arts is offered as an alternative to this crisis.

In its attitude toward the "primitive" and "modern", Abuladze's film is similar to Illienko's *A Well for the Thirsty* and Osyka *The Stone Cross*. All three, each in its own way, seek for

¹³⁸ In the collected volume "Landscapes of Socialism: Romantic Alternatives to Soviet Enlightenment," edited by Serguei Oushakine, the notion of socialist romanticism—Sotzromantizm—is offered as a solution to the descriptive and analytic deadlock of Socialist realism that was capable neither of containing stylistically the diversity of aesthetic and symbolic practices of postwar socialism nor of explaining conceptually the appearance of new trends and styles of the time (Oushakine, 12).

alternative past for Soviet modernity by turning to pre-modern materiality of the local way of life. I use the term ‘local’ here instead of ‘(ethno-)national’ to de-emphasize the importance of the nationalist discourse in *tableau* films. The fact that *The Necklace for My Beloved* is set in Dagestan, and not Georgia, underscores Abuldze’s interest in the local rather than ethno-national Georgian specificity. Parajanov’s “nomadic” way of inventing national films across the Soviet republics—starting in Ukraine, moving to Armenia and then to Georgia—is exemplar in this regard.

3.5 THE LAST OF THE *TABLEAU*: SERGEI PARAJANOV’S *THE LEGEND OF SURAM FORTRESS*

If I were to write a chronological account of what I call the *tableau* trend, I should start with Sergei Parajanov’s *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1964). *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* was a breakthrough film that signaled a radical stylistic shift, which brought about a new wave of filmmaking on the Soviet peripheries. Parajanov’s subsequent film—produced at the Armenia Film Studio and released under the title *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969)—pushes its stylistic experimentations to the extreme.¹³⁹ Then follows fifteen years of silence in Parajanov’s artistic

¹³⁹ The director’s cut of the film was severely censored, reedited and had a limited release under the title *The Color of Pomegranate* (1969). For more information on production and release history of the film, see Steffen *Cinema of Sergei Parajanov* 114-155.

biography, during which he was imprisoned and kept from filmmaking due to political and aesthetic disagreements with state authorities.

The Legend of Suram Fortress (1985) was made at the Georgia Film Studio after this long period of imposed silence. The audacious experimentation with cinematic conventions and ethno-national themes as well as the filmmaker's idiosyncratic and transgressive behavior, which were not tolerated fifteen years earlier, was now generously accepted. This change was possible thanks to both the loosened censorship during the Perestroika period, more generally, and the favorable conditions at the Georgia Film studio, in particular.¹⁴⁰

Although made at the beginning of Perestroika, stylistically and thematically *The Legend of Suram Fortress* is closer to other *tableau* films, which all share not only non-perspectival spatial construction, but also a modernist seriousness uncharacteristic of the films of the Perestroika era. Interestingly, the shooting of *The Legend of Suram Fortress* was going on at the same time (1984) and place (Georgia Film Studio) as the shooting of the signature Perestroika film: Abuladze's *Repentance*. Unlike Abuladze's *Repentance*, Parajanov's *The Legend of Suram Fortress* is devoid of the playful irony and dark absurdity common to Perestroika era films. The point, however, is not to argue that Parajanov made an anachronistic film, but rather to shift focus on stylistic and

¹⁴⁰ The Georgia Film Studio benefited largely from the protection of Eduard Shevarnadze, then the first secretary of the Communist Party of Georgia. To protect a controversial director like Parajanov and the studio, which hired him, from the potential criticism by the center, a prominent Georgian actor David "Dodo" Abashidze was assigned as a co-director of this film. Abashidze, who played Osman Agha and Simon the Piper in *The Legend of Suram Fortress*, again appeared as a co-director and actor in Parajanov's next and the last film *Ashik Kerib* (1987).

thematic persistence of *tableau* films that began with *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and, arguably, ended with *The Legend of Suram Fortress*.¹⁴¹

The Georgian legend about a youth bricked up alive in the wall of Suram Fortress inspired many writers and filmmakers before Parajanov. The best-known version of the legend is Daniel Chonkadze's novella "The Suram Fortress" (1860), on which Ivan Perestiani's 1922 film of the same title is based.¹⁴² Parajanov's film is also roughly based on Chonkadze's version. However, while in Chonkadze's novella and Perestiani's film the narrative is triggered by the plight of serfdom and the motif of vengeance, in Parajanov's film this kind of historical and narrative motivation is reduced to a minimum. Instead, Parajanov's film foregrounds the motifs of fate, faith, and sacrifice, which make the film closer to ancient tragedy and myth. While the film is primarily based on the legend of Suram Fortress, it also makes reference to the medieval epic poem by Shota Rustaveli *The Knight in the Panther Skin* [*Vepkhist'q'aosani*] as well as to other mythical and historical figures from Georgian folklore. Through this eclectic composition, *The Legend of Suram Fortress* offers an idiosyncratic origin myth of Georgia.

In his cinematic rendering of this legend into an eclectic origin myth, Parajanov uses the camera as a paintbrush and organizes space as a symmetrical double stage reminiscent of ancient theater. The prologue of the film introduces the main subject—the construction of Suram Fortress—as well as the means by which this legend will be rendered.

¹⁴¹ While Parajanov's last film, *Ashik Kerib*, retains stylistic features of his previous films, its playfulness set the film apart from *tableau* cinema's modernist seriousness.

¹⁴² Other versions of the story are Niko Lordkipanidze's novella "The Inflexible" and David Suliashvili's story "Zurab's Fortress." Both texts are written during the Soviet period.

The prologue opens with a shot of a flat rock with a horn on top of it, while water is running in-between these two static objects. Opening shots that combine static and flowing substances in a still-life-like composition are characteristic of Parajanov's other films. In the prologue of his previous film, *The Color of Pomegranates*, three pomegranates are bleeding their crimson juice onto white cloth, whereas in the opening shot of his subsequent film *Ashik Kerib*, rice grains and petals are poured onto a ceramic vessel. This combination of immobility and fluidity in the opening shots captures the very core of Parajanov's films: they are petrifying and alienating but at the same time astonishingly unfettering and absorbing.

After this opening shot, the film cuts to a symmetrically composed frame of two circular stages with two ancient statues creating an entrance in the center. A person walks through this entrance and blows the horn, presumably to announce the beginning of the fortress construction as well as of the performance. These two symmetrically positioned round stages prefigure and, in a way, predetermine the film's repetitive structure and ancient theater-like performance that borders on a religious rite.

One of the central images in this prologue is the still life-like shot of six wooden buckets filled with diverse construction materials and arranged as if on a palette. [Figure 86]



Figure 86

These construction materials of diverse colors include the main ingredient for tempera painting—eggs. Egg tempera was particularly widely used in medieval paintings such as Orthodox icons and

Persian miniatures.¹⁴³ The eggs in the prologue allude above all to these medieval painterly traditions, which, in turn, serve as the main visual reference throughout the film. When a character in the subsequent scene mixes these construction materials on a wooden board, he prepares not only for the construction of the fortress but at the same time for the creation of the film by painterly means. As though to reinforce this overlap between the painterly rendition of the film and the construction of the fortress, the crumbling of the fortress shown in the opening credits is expressed as an assault on the camera lens, which captures this fortress in black and white documentary style. Right after the shattering of this black and white shot, a meticulously constructed and richly colored *tableau* opens, a *tableau* that synthesizes in one shot almost all the subsequent visual and aural motifs of the film. [Figure 87]



Figure 87

The plot of the film interweaves two narrative lines: one storyline centers on an ambitious young serf, Durmishkhan, and his lover Gulisvardi (Vardo), whom he abandons for freedom and a richer wife. The abandoned Vardo becomes a fortuneteller and advises Durmishkhan's son Zurab to brick up himself in the fortress wall in order to prevent it from crumbling. The second storyline revolves around Osman-Agha, a Muslim merchant who turns out to be, like Durmishkhan, a former serf and Orthodox Georgian, who used to be called Nodar. Both abandoned their home(land)s in

¹⁴³ Tempera was superseded by oil painting during the Renaissance.

search of a better future. If Durmishkhan, in a way, has to sacrifice his son to atone for the betrayal of Vardo, Nodar, at least on the surface, has to perform a sacrifice to atone for the betrayal of his religion and native land. These two storylines—one unfolding in the present tense and the other presented more as a set of flashbacks—not only intersect (Osman-Agha will become Durmishkhan's benefactor) but more importantly they mirror each other. The fact that most of the events in this film are performed on two circular outdoor stages positioned symmetrically underscores this sense of the mirrored repetition. [Figure 88]



Figure 88

In addition to these two main stories, most of the visual motifs and events, as well as the characters and their actions in the film, are mirrored, doubled, or sometimes tripled. These multiple repetitions permeate the film and create a sense of a world in which figures are reincarnated or nested within each other (like in a matrioshka doll) and time swings as a pendulum instead of progressing forward.

We can see this sense of the world most vividly in the image of Vardo. Within her is nested the figure of the elderly fortuneteller, whose death coincides with the Vardo's awakening as the new fortuneteller. Vardo's character also overlaps with the image of Saint Nino, the enlightener of Georgia, who is introduced in the film as a puppet used in history lessons given to little Zurab. This puppet, wearing blue attire and suspended against an aquamarine blue background (the color blue is symbolically tied to Saint Nino), reappears right before the last shot of Vardo, who similarly

is captured against a blue background. This background is a blanket Vardo made for newly born Zurab. At the end of the film, Vardo brings the blanket to the wall of the fortress to express her sorrow over Zurab's sacrifice. The visual and metonymical affinity that creates the sense of nestedness of the fortuneteller and Saint Nino within Vardo's figure allows us to interpret Vardo's pagan fortunetelling in revenge for Durmishkhan's betrayal—the main motivation for Zurab's immurement given in Chonkadze's novella—as a ritual of religious sacrifice. But the transformation of a pagan act into a Christian one is not unidirectional. For example, the legendary miracle attributed to Saint Nino and her religion—the recovery of the Iberian King Mirian's sight, which eventually led to baptism of the region—is suggested in the film by the fortuneteller Vardo's act of pagan magic. This act is shown in a scene with a blind man visiting Vardo and asking to be cured.

This overlap between the figures of the two fortunetellers and the Orthodox saint is indicative of a larger trait of the film that shows pagan, Christian, and Muslim identities and rituals as nested within each other while leaving their borders fluid. One of the most explicit examples of such nestedness is shown in the episode "Tsar and Folk Play." The episode opens with the image of a queen introducing the Saint Nino puppet. Right after this shot, the Tsar and his subjects decide to ask for a fortuneteller's help in the rebuilding of the crumbling Suram Fortress. The invocation of Christian and pagan powers appears here not as conflicting but complementary. The following celebration of the festival *Berikaoba* reiterates this duality. First, we see the reenactment of the scene from the legend of Saint George rescuing the princess from the dragon. The scene is one of the oldest and most popular subjects in Georgian Orthodox iconography. Then follows a pagan feast with young mummers—*berikas*—dressed in inside-out sheepskin, with their faces smeared with soot, wearing masks and performing a round dance, presumably to celebrate the beginning of

a new agrarian season.¹⁴⁴ By blending Christian and pagan rituals, the film suggests an eclectic but all-encompassing sense of the world. This way of blending the religious and cultural differences on the surface conforms to, but in principle and style deviates from the Soviet cultural politics that promoted the “friendship of people” in the hierarchically organized multinational state. In *The Legend of Suram Fortress* the world of different creeds appears unified and borders among multiple identities are rendered fluid. But this unity is not hierarchical and does not presuppose historical progression.

The figure of Osman-aga is particularly interesting in this regard. Compared to the novella, in the film his role becomes more prominent and, in a way, foreshadows Durmishkhan’s destiny.¹⁴⁵ Osman-aga first appears onscreen as a merchant reciting a Muslim prayer with members of his caravan. But in the course of the film we see him re-convert back to Christianity. This moment of return to his original faith is signaled through the reenactment and idiosyncratic reinterpretation of the scene from *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind* (1568) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

[Figure 89]



Figure 89

¹⁴⁴ See Abakelia 112-115.

¹⁴⁵ In the novella, the figure of Osman-aga mainly serves to underscore Durmishkhan’s greed and heartlessness.

Though nuances in the interpretation of Bruegel's painting vary, it is commonly accepted that the painting depicts the Biblical parable of the blind leading the blind from the Gospel of Matthew.¹⁴⁶ In the Gospel the parable is told as a diatribe against the Philistines and their strict obedience to Jewish law: "They are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (Matt. 15:14). In Bruegel's painting, we see one blind man already fallen into a pit, while five others holding each other's shoulder or sticks are following the fallen man along a diagonal line. In the background is a church, which is literally and metaphorically outside of their sight. In the film, five blind men holding each other's shoulders are walking along a similar diagonal line, but instead of falling into pit, they stumble upon the wall of a church. The scene is accompanied with the sound of a ringing bell. The next scene, which shows Durmishkhan's wedding ceremony inside this church and Osman-aga's miraculous enlightenment, supports this modification of the parable. Through this idiosyncratic alteration of the biblical motif—finding a church instead of a pit—the scene, in a way, defies the exclusionary logic of the parable and suggests that a blind guide may lead to a church as well. If we develop this parallel further, it may be possible to suggest that Osman-aga's Muslim faith led him to the church. This convergence becomes more explicit in the following scene, when the figure that represents the Virgins Mary proclaims altered biblical line "the world is one [мир един]," instead of "God is one."

Through these kinds of alterations, as well as through the aural and visual blending of different cultural markers, the film integrates religious and cultural differences into the broader cycle of the universe suggested by the film. This attitude becomes particularly clear in Osman-aga's last monologue when he faces death. In this dream-like scene, he recites lines from

¹⁴⁶ See Koerner 29-32.

Ecclesiastes while adding own conclusion to it: “The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. Everything disappears and remains in the universe.¹⁴⁷” While the lines about the sun and the water are quoted directly from Ecclesiastes (Ecc. 1:5; 1:7), the improvised last line—Everything disappears and remains in the universe—renders Ecclesiastes’ pessimistic narrative (“Everything is meaningless” Ecc. 1:2) into a wisdom of all-encompassing cycle, which by implication substitutes a historical progression with “eternal return.” The film’s penultimate episode, titled “The Repetition of the Sin,” reiterates this cyclical worldview. Although it is left ambiguous which act is considered to be the sin—Durmishkhan reciting a Muslim prayer as Osman-aga did before him or Vardo advising Zurab to burry himself alive in the wall of the Suram fortress—at this point of the film it becomes clear that the emphasis is on the repetition, rather than on the sin itself.

This nested and repetitive nature of the universe suggested in the film is reinforced by the peculiar construction of its space and time. As in all other *tableau* films, the cinematic space in *The Legend of Suram Fortress* is ostensibly flat. This is primarily achieved through the visual composition, which invokes non-perspectival medieval paintings such as Persian miniatures and Orthodox icons. While nearly all shots in the film demonstrate a use of color characteristic to medieval paintings, as well as ornamental details, frontal position of the characters, their lateral movements, and conspicuously flattened non-perspectival space, I will focus on two key scenes

¹⁴⁷ “Солнце встает и солнце садится. Оно возвращается туда откуда взошло. Реки текут в моря, а моря не переполняются. Вода возвращается к истокам, чтобы течь вечно. Все исчезает и все остается во вселенной.”

that exemplify this tendency most vividly: one is rendered in the style of Persian miniatures, the other in that of Orthodox icons.

The first scene I discuss is set in the marvelous port city Gulansharo. Gulansharo, which means “the City of the Rose” in Persian, is a fictional city-state described in Shota Rustaveli’s medieval epic *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*. The filmmakers send Osman-aga and Durmishkhan to this imaginary place for trade. In this way, the film not only embeds a layer of literary history, which in turn brings in yet another layer of cross-cultural wealth¹⁴⁸, but it also opens an opportunity to invoke Persian visual tradition and to demonstrate Osman-aga’s Muslim past. At the center of the Gulansharo episode is the scene that takes place in a caravanserai. [Figure 90]



Figure 90

The interior of the caravanserai is shot from a high angle commonly seen in Persian miniatures. Each alcove across the three walls of the two-story structure is occupied by different merchants with their goods. In the center is a hexagonal fountain and camels and merchants of a caravan are circling around it. Osman-aga and Durmishkhan are among them. The high angle of the static camera allows us to see the figures within this composition from different perspectives: merchants on the second floor appear in full height and almost frontally, whereas figures on the first floor are

¹⁴⁸ While the prologue and the epilogue of the epic poem are set in the Medieval Georgia, the body of the text features protagonists from Arab, Indian and other cultures of the Medieval world.

captured from the top and therefore are slightly shortened. The use of a telephoto lens widens the rectangular shape of the space and flattens its depth so that the distance between the background alcoves and the foreground alcoves is significantly reduced and they appear almost as if on the same plane. The different lighting used in each alcove of the structure further complicates the visual construction of the space and enriches the color palette of the composition. Overall, the shot deftly conveys the multi-perspectival sense of the space and the color palette characteristic of Persian miniatures.

The second scene to which I attend to is set in the church where Durmishkhan's wedding takes place. [Figure 91]



Figure 91

This is the scene that follows the shot of the blind leading the blind. As in Orthodox icons, the scene is captured frontally by a static camera. The curved lines of the dome and the arcs lit by both outside natural and inside candlelight help to transfigure the regular three-dimensional geometrical shape of the space into a space akin to the non-perspectival microcosm of an icon. The figures in the scene are positioned in three layers. In the foreground, two pairs of women in red costumes are standing frontally by each side of the frame. In the middle ground, we see the wedding couple kneeling in the center, two men (one of them Osman-aga) on each side holding wedding crowns above the heads of the groom and the bride, and a priest standing slightly behind them in the center.

Due to the lateral arrangement of the frontally positioned figures and due to the use of a telephoto lens, the perceived distance between the figures in the foreground and in the middle ground is significantly reduced and the scene appears flat. More importantly, the relative size between the figures in the foreground and in the middle ground runs counter to the rule of diminution of size toward the vanishing point in linear perspective. In this scene the figures in the foreground are smaller than the figures in the middle ground, suggesting an internal position for the viewer (see also Chapter 2.2). The background figures that mainly occupy the upper third of the screen (right beneath the ceiling) represent the Mary with the baby Jesus, both sitting on the throne, and angels in white attire by their sides. Their proximity to the dome makes them look like mural paintings that came to life. This background completes the iconographic composition that defies conventional construction of space in cinema. The predominance of red, golden, and black further underscores the resemblance of the scene to an Orthodox icon.

But the implications of such resemblance to medieval painterly traditions go beyond mere visual similarity. I argue that the construction of the film's cinematic space in accordance with the logic of non-perspectival paintings amplifies the sense of non-linear time and history suggested throughout the film.

Just as the space in the film breaks away from linear perspectival conventions, so does the time in the film manifest itself through unconventional forms. The narrative lines that follow the two protagonists develop both forward (Durmishkhan) and backward (Osman-aga) to eventually suggest their repetition. Similar logic is visible in the character of Vardo. In addition to the repetition of the role of the old fortuneteller and Saint Nino through the character of Vardo, we literally see her embody this alternative temporality. In the episode tellingly entitled "The Run of Time," the maturation of a young Vardo is expressed through her pendulum-like motion, which

allows her younger self to remain visible behind the shoulders of her mature self. The slow swinging motion of a young Vardo first and then of her mature counterpart, while one is seated behind the other, resembles the rhythmical motion of a metronome. [Figure 92 and 93] This metronome-like motion helps to undermine the sense of linear historical progression and instead suggests a temporality marked by rhythmical repetition where past and present are nested within each other.¹⁴⁹



Figure 92



Figure 93

This peculiar temporality is not limited to the characters or their narrative lines. The film also manages to incorporate semi-mythical figures from different historical periods within the narrative of the legend about Suram Fortress. While such historical and mythical allusions are

¹⁴⁹ In *The Color of Pomegranates*, the protagonist, little boy Arutiun, also performs pendulum-like motion to allude to the passage of time. Similar to Vardo's maturation, the maturation from a boy Arutiun to a young poet Sayat Nova is expressed through hiding of the boy behind the back of the youth.

sprinkled throughout the film, they are particularly condensed in the episode called “Droll Piper.” This episode, which is absent in Chonkadze’s novella, shows old piper Simon (played by the same actor who plays Osman-aga) teaching the little Zurab history lessons. From ancient times, the Georgian bagpipe (*gudastviri*) accompanied epic and historical songs performed by wandering musicians. The film alludes to this tradition to tell its own version of history. The centrality of this episode can be inferred from its position in the film. The film consists of a Prologue, nineteen episodes, and an epilogue. This episode is inserted right in the middle: it is preceded by the Prologue and nine episodes and is followed by other nine episodes and the Epilogue.

Because the episode starts with the second lesson, it avoids the burden of starting with the primordial ancestor. Instead, it begins with the figure of Saint Nino, who preached Christianity in Caucasian Iberia in the third and fourth centuries. Next, the piper-historian introduces the medieval Queen Tamar, the ruler associated with the region’s Golden Age, and then jumps to the pre-Christian monarch Parnavaz, who, according to legend, invented the Georgian alphabet. The lesson ends with the story of the Georgian equivalent of ancient Greek Prometheus—Amirani, whose legend stretches back even further to ancient times. All these figures—some of them are historical some are mythical—are represented as puppets suspended from a semi-circular branch in the middle of a rocky landscape in the Caucasian mountains. [Figure 94]



Figure 94

This arrangement visualizes the cyclical conception of time and history presented in the film. Towards the end of the film, when Zurab bricks up himself in the wall of the fortress, we see these puppets hanging above him. Visually the figure of Zurab turns this semi-circle into a circle and metaphorically joins this eclectic pantheon of semi-mythological and semi-historical figures.

This legend as a whole is bookended by the images of the ruler in the panther's skin: in the Prologue he announces the beginning and, in the Epilogue, the end of the construction of the fortress. These images metonymically associate the legend of Suram Fortress to the medieval epic *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* and once again reiterate nested and circular structure of this cinematic rendering of history.

The Legend of Suram Fortress is the latest (if not the last) in the constellation of the *tableau* films considered in this chapter. If Illienko's *A Well for the Thirsty* methodically undoes cinematic clichés and markers of modernity, Parajanov's *The Legend of Suram Fortress* undoes conventional cinematic style at one strike (by smashing the camera lens in the beginning) and avoids modern context all together (as do his all other films after *The Shadows*). Similar to other *tableau* films, *The Legend of Suram Fortress* reinvents both its cinematic genealogy and the history of the region through the invocation of the non-perspectival painterly traditions and pre-modern sensibilities.

If the *tableau* films, I analyzed in this chapter, indeed offer alternative histories to Soviet modernity through radically experimental cinematic form, where then do they belong within the history of ethno-national cinema of Soviet republics and within the late Soviet cinema and culture more broadly? These are the questions that will be addressed in the next chapter.

4.0 CONCLUSION(S): *TABLEAU* CINEMA AND ITS CONTEXTS

The group of films I analyzed in the previous chapter as *tableau* cinema is not an empirically provable coherent set; neither is it an arbitrarily chosen group of films, of course. It would be more accurate to consider these films as a constellation of works that demonstrate a similar style and themes within the shared historical context of late Socialism. The scope of this constellation may be enlarged or reduced, depending on the research questions one poses. This dissertation deals with the five most representative and geographically diverse cases of *tableau* cinema produced during the late Soviet period. The span of the period may be defined either broadly, as the period from Stalin's death to the beginning of Gorabchev's reforms (1953-1985), or narrowly, as the period of Brezhnev's rule (1964-1982). This dissertation operates within the former, broadly defined timeframe.

Thematically, these *tableau* films have largely two common threads: first, they all turn toward the past and deal with history in an unconventional way. Second, they either directly or indirectly question (Soviet) modernity's narrative of progress and instead revive what could be called pre-modern sensibilities. These two common themes are profoundly related to the shared style of *tableau* cinema. Stylistically, *tableau* films consistently reject linear perspectival spatial construction and instead invoke non-linear painterly tradition. By doing so, they unbind the fixed position of a spectator and invite beholders to perceive their cinematic worlds through meandering experience and haptic proximity (as opposed to optical distance).

How are we to interpret the fact that *tableau* cinema turns toward an unconventional recounting of history and rejects any manifestations of modernity's progress? An easy explanation would be that in the context of the Soviet film industry, the category of ethno-national cinema, to

which most of the *tableau* films belong, is often expected to tackle historical subjects rather than contemporary everyday life. Another generic answer may be that such themes are symptomatic of many postwar art cinema (see, for example, the films of Alain Resnais, Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Miklós Jancsó, etc.). Both explanations are roughly correct but have little interpretive potential.

A more productive approach to this question may lie in attending to the ways in which *tableau* films alter traditional ways of thinking about history. In other words, we should also ask what *tableau* style has to do with these themes. The underlying premise to this approach is that the incorporation of stylistic analysis may offer a more fruitful interpretation and lead to a more nuanced understanding of the late Soviet culture and society in both domestic and international contexts.

The discussion of *tableau* style in this dissertation has gravitated toward two poles so far. In Chapter 2, I primarily focused on the relation between non-perspectival visual style and spectatorship. I argued that the implementation of non-linear perspective in *tableau* films has to do with the alteration of spectatorial experience and restoration of the spectator's conviction. In Chapter 3, I analyzed how each *tableau* film articulates alternative histories to Soviet modernity by invoking non-perspectival painterly tradition and reinventing the cinematic medium. One of the goals of this chapter is to examine through *tableau* style the ways in which *tableau* cinema's articulation of alternative histories is interrelated with the issues of spectatorship.

Tableau cinema's turning away from modernity's progress in favor of alternative histories on the one hand and their alteration of spectatorial experience on the other may in fact be two sides of one coin. In this regard, the key stylistic feature of *tableau* films—the rejection of linear perspective and the invocation of the non-perspectival painterly tradition—has a dual function.

Most immediately, as I argued in Chapter 2, this stylistic feature has to do with redefining the spectator's engagement with the cinematic world. But if we agree with Panofsky's interpretation of perspective as "symbolic form," then the perspectival shift in *tableau* films not only potentially alters the spectatorial position, but, by implication, it also challenges both the "modern sense of the world" and the "modern historical system."

In his early essay, "Perspective as Symbolic Form" (1927), Panofsky argues that the invention of linear perspectival construction coincides with our "modern sense of the world," which is characterized by the "objectification of the subjective" (see Chapter 2.1). In the later essay, "Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art" (1933), Panofsky along with co-author Fritz Saxl expands the reading of perspective as epistemological metaphor by drawing a further parallel between a concrete method of linear perspective and a society's understanding of history. In this essay, they argue that unlike the Middle Ages,

the Renaissance had become aware of the "historical distance" separating the Greeks and Romans from the contemporary world. This realization of the intellectual distance between the present and the past is comparable to the realization of the visual distance between the eye and the object, so that a parallel may be drawn between the discovery of the modern "historical system" [...] and the invention of modern perspective, both of which were achieved by the Renaissance. (274)

In other words, according to Panofsky (and Saxl), the emergence of both the modern worldview and modern historical system correlates with the invention of linear perspective. In this light, *tableau* cinema's persistent rejection of linear perspectival space and adoption of a nonlinear

one can be read as an effort to undo the modern worldview and the modern historical system while inventing alternative ways of historical thinking through the creation of non-perspectival space.

It may now be suggested more confidently, albeit more schematically too, that both the spectatorial experience and alternative histories of *tableau* cinema pivot around the same axis, namely, perspective. In *tableau* cinema, this axis undergoes a sort of dialectical process in the course of which the rejection of linear perspective and of its implications generates the re-appropriation of the non-linear perspectival tradition. I propose that the spectatorial experience and alternative histories offered by *tableau* cinema undergo a similar dialectical process to the axis around which they revolve. The ensuing question then is: How to interpret *tableau* cinema's choice of this strategy within the context of the late Soviet period?

4.1 HISTORY AS LABYRINTH: CRISIS OF HISTORICAL TELEOLOGY AND TURN TO SPACE

My hypothesis is that the choice of this perspectival shift can be understood as a response to the crisis of both the spectator's conviction and the historical teleology in late Soviet society. The crisis of the spectator's conviction and *tableau* cinema's response to it was addressed in Chapter 2.3, where I argued that *tableau* filmmakers responded to the crisis by turning to pre-modern sensibilities and expressing them in radically experimental forms. Central among those experimental forms was the shift in perspective. This crisis of spectatorship, I suggest, is embedded within a broader social and cultural context that problematizes linear time and historical progression of (Soviet) modernity. In what follows, I attend to the crisis of historical teleology

(and modern historical system, more broadly) in late Soviet context and examine *tableau* cinema's response to it.

The concepts of time and historical progress had dominated the Soviet state from its inception. This comes as no surprise since the Soviet Union was the country where historical materialism was first put into practice. Susan Buck-Morss is one among many scholars who argue that "time" was an overriding concern for the Soviet political imaginary. Lenin, for example, referred to the capitalist West and post-Revolutionary Russia not in terms of territorial divide but in terms of stages of history, describing them as "the old world of capitalism that is in a state of confusion . . . and the rising new world, which is still very weak, but which will grow, for it is invincible" (Lenin qtd. in Buck-Morss 36). The privileging of time and historical progress had become even more pronounced since the First Five Year Plan, which was conceived as a process of historical 'acceleration' [*uskorenie*] (Buck-Morss 37). This temporal logic was similarly applied to the rural areas and national republics. Buck-Morss points out how "[t]ranslating the spatial struggle between city and country into the temporal discourse of class struggle justified persecution of the peasants as 'people from the past'" (38). She further adds that "[t]he national question, too, was transposed into a discourse of time, as backward cultures and ethnic groups came under attack as vestiges of an earlier era" (38).

The centrality of the "temporal armature" that sustained the Soviet state is critical for Buck-Morss's attempt to cast a new light on the underlying tension between the artistic avant-garde and the political vanguard in the context of Bolshevik cultural politics. Her premise is that "conceptions of temporality have political implications" (60). Based on this premise, she contrasts the temporalities of the cultural avant-garde and the vanguard party:

The “time” of the cultural avant-garde is not the same as that of the vanguard party. These artists’ practices interrupted the continuity of perceptions and estranged the familiar, severing historical tradition through the force of their fantasy. Progress for the early Russian modernists meant stepping out of the frame of the existing order whether toward the “beautiful East,” back to the “primitive,” or through to the “eternal,” no matter. The effect was to rupture the continuity of time, opening it up to new cognitive and sensory experiences. In contrast, the party submitted to a historical cosmology that provided no such freedom of movement. Bolshevism’s claim to know the course of history in its totality presumed a “science” of the future that encouraged revolutionary politics to dictate to art. (49)

In the course of Bolshevik cultural politics, Buck-Morss argues, “[a]rtists made the fateful decision, in facing forward rather than backward, to move triumphantly into the future alongside political power” (62). As a result,

Artistic practice could no longer attempt to disrupt the continuum of history as defined and led by the party. It could not challenge the temporality of the political revolution which, as the locomotive of history’s progress, invested the party with the sovereign power to force mass compliance in history’s name. Hence the lost opportunity: the temporal interruption of avant-garde practice might have continued to function as a criticism of history’s progression after the Revolution. It became instead the servant of a political vanguard that had a monopoly over time’s meaning... (60).

Two major points can be drawn from this account of the early Soviet period: (i.) the temporal dimension is central to understanding the Soviet cultural and political imaginary; (ii.)

political actors maintained their monopoly over time's meaning, which was equated with historical progress, whereas artists lost their opportunity to challenge this monopoly.

Tableau cinema emerged in the historical context decades removed from this revolutionary time, but the issue of temporality had persisted to the late Soviet period, albeit in an altered form. By the late Soviet period, the urgency and violent character of historical progress had faded, but its legitimacy had never been officially questioned.¹⁵⁰ While this “temporal armature” based on historical teleology was preserved, its fragility and contradictions became increasingly visible, especially so during the Brezhnev period.

It is commonly accepted that the Soviet Union of the period of late Socialism was perceived by contemporaries as an “eternal state.”¹⁵¹ In “The Cultural Logic of Late Socialism,” Lylia Kaganovsky, echoing many other scholars on this period, writes that the period “was marked by a sense of *status quo* so profound that it felt like the life of the nation had come to a halt” (185). She adds,

This sense of stagnation was not merely economic, it was also rhetorical and ideological: the Soviet Constitution of October 1977 asserted that the attainment of “socialism” had been completed – “Socialism was now said to be ‘developed.’”¹⁵² That is to say, the Soviet Union had reached the end point of the road towards the “bright future.” (185)

¹⁵⁰ It is telling that the evening news program that was broadcasted across the Soviet Union from 1968 on, was titled “Time.”

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Yurchak *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* 1-4. While the myth of temporal advance and historical progress was at crisis, this does not necessarily mean that the whole late Soviet ecosystem was stagnant. As Alexei Yurchak convincingly demonstrates in his book *Everything Was Forever Until It was No More*, the space for creativity, unexpected meaning was paradoxically enabled by this stagnant system.

Borrowing Andrei Platonov's formulation of a different period, Kaganovsky proposes that "developed socialism was named in memory of a future that was never going to arrive" (185). This sense of an "eternal" or "developed" state that reached its end point hints at the crisis of the historical teleology that had sustained the cultural and political imaginary of the Soviet state throughout its existence. Although this crisis became particularly visible during the Brezhnev era, one could trace its origins back to immediate post-Stalin era. Similar to Yurchak's argument that after Stalin's death, the paradox of Soviet modernity was exposed, the narrative of historical progress that sustained modernity's project, I argue, was exposed then too.

As forward-moving linear temporality and the narrative of progress were in crisis, the filmmakers of the late Soviet era responded in variety of ways. Some forged a way inward, like Andrei Tarkovsky and other filmmakers of the "poetic cinema" in Turovskaia's sense (Turovskaia characterizes "poetic cinema" of the 1960s as a trend that turns to the complexity of human interiority; see Chapter 1.1). Others forged a path backward, like the *tableau* filmmakers who turned to a reimagining of alternative histories. What is common to these "inward" or "backward" paths is that they approach time in overtly spatial terms. Tarkovsky's famous definition of cinema as "sculpting in time [запечатленное время]" or Illienko's insistence that "cinema is an ideal labyrinth of time [кино, само по себе, -- идеальный лабиринт времени]" (*Paradyhma kino* 313) point at late Soviet (art) cinema's paradigmatic turn away from linear time toward spatialized temporality.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Bandelin 70.

¹⁵³ This turn roughly coincides with Deleuzian shift from movement-image to time-image in postwar cinema.

One way to interpret this turn is to see it as the reclaiming of the opportunity to interrupt the historical continuum and to challenge the monopoly over time's meaning understood as temporal advance and historical progress. This opportunity, which according to Buck-Morss was lost by the early Soviet avant-garde artists, now may be seen as regained. This way of interpreting late Soviet art cinema's turn away from linear temporality can be bolstered by considering this turn along the lines of a broader paradigmatic shift to space in the 1960-1970s.

In her book *The Cinema of the Soviet Thaw: Space, Materiality, Movement*, Lida Oukaderova points out "the primacy of space and above all spatial experience to the cinematic production of the Soviet Thaw" (9). In the works of the Thaw directors under examination, space, she argues, "exceeds the function of a setting; arrests narrative development; slows down time; acts as an embodied participant; persists in its material fragments; and actively attracts, confronts, and disorients viewers" (11). Oukaderova draws a parallel between Henry Lefebvre's spatial critique and Soviet cinema of the Thaw to argue that their turn to space "should be seen as part of the same paradigmatic shift in movements happening a little bit everywhere that began to consider space rather than time as a central category through which to explore social formations" (18).

This spatial turn, according to Edward Soja, has its roots in the works of Lefebvre and Foucault and was linked "to an urgent need to reform Marxist thinking and to deprivilege time and history as the sole meaningful measures of evolutionary dynamics" (Oukaderova 18). Soja writes, "It was at this time [in the nineteenth century] that history and time began to be linked with process, progress, development, change.... Space, in contrast, came increasingly to be seen as something dead, fixed, nondialectical ... always there, but never an active, social entity. Marx called space an unnecessary complication of his theory, and it was that indeed" (Soja qtd. in Oukaderova 18). Along similar lines, Oukaderova points out that "Soviet cinema's profound turn to space during

[the Thaw] period suggests a recognition, if only tangential, that the race against time had in fact been lost” (18). She adds, “Nothing is more consistent in the cinematic works discussed in [her book] than their rejection of linear teleological time” (18). What interests me in Soja’s and Oukaderova’s interpretation of the 1960-70s spatial turn are two things: first, the implied crisis of teleological temporality in both the thought and cinematic practice of that time, and second, the interpretive potential of considering *tableau* cinema’s alternative histories through the prism of space.

Following this detour, which traces the crisis of historical teleology and the spatial turn in late Soviet society, I suggest that *tableau* cinema’s perspectival shift can be understood in this broader context. On the one hand, *tableau* filmmakers amplify the sense of the crisis of historical teleology by negating linear perspective in their films; on the other hand, they create alternatives to linear temporality primarily through non-perspectival spatial construction. These alternatives to linear temporality and by extension to (Soviet) modernity take various shapes in the *tableau* films analyzed in Chapter 3. Despite the differences in their approach to alternative histories, they all share the tendency to create a peculiar non-perspectival space and what could be called a “primitive” or “pre-modern” sensibility.

Among the *tableau* filmmakers considered in this dissertation, Illienko, to the best of my knowledge, is the only one who expressed his views on alternative conceptions of history, not only through the films he made, but also explicitly through his theoretical writings. In distinguishing an ahistorical sense of time from an historical one, Illienko writes: “Circle, ring, wheel, pendulum—all of these are ahistorical [conceptions of] time; in order to become history, the conception of time should have changed. [...] A circle should have become a spiral. [...] Time should have become

space” (*Paradyhma kino* 312-313).¹⁵⁴ He concludes that in this regard the labyrinth “was, is, and will be the most precise model of time.”¹⁵⁵ Following this explanation of his understanding of historical time through space, Illienko makes an interesting claim. He states that “cinema, in and of itself, is an ideal labyrinth of time” (313).¹⁵⁶ In other words, according to Illienko, cinema is the ideal medium to express historical time, which he understands spatially as a labyrinth. His *A Well for the Thirsty* may be considered as such a cinematic labyrinth of history that challenges linear historical progression and forges untaken paths. Illienko lists Parajanov and Osyka among those few directors who were capable of navigating this “labyrinth” using (cinematic) light as their “Ariadne’s thread” (313).¹⁵⁷

If we accept Illienko’s idea of the labyrinth as a metaphor for *tableau* cinema’s alternative histories, we should also remind ourselves that the space of these labyrinths is constructed non-perspectivally. The non-perspectival feature of *tableau* cinema’s labyrinths reinforces the spectator’s meandering experience and encourages haptic perception instead of distanced view, which Panofsky and Saxl associate with the modern historical system. The avoidance of the Renaissance perspective and the foregrounding of the materiality of the surface in the cinematic

¹⁵⁴ “Цикл, круг, колесо, маятник - все это неисторическое время; чтобы стать историей, представление о времени должно было измениться. [...] Круг должен был превратиться в спираль. [...] Время должно было стать пространством” (312-313).

¹⁵⁵ “И все же во все времена самой точной моделью времени был, есть и будет лабиринт” (313).

¹⁵⁶ “Кино, само по себе, - идеальный лабиринт времени” (313).

¹⁵⁷ “Нитью Ариадны - тончайшим солнечным лучом, чтобы смело вступать в этот подземный лабиринт, владели немногие, только те, в кого влюблялась дочь бога солнца Ариадна. Шпаликовым, Параджановым, Тарковским, Иоселиани, Осыкой, Вайдой, Урусевским, Миколайчуком, Шепитько, Гринько, Милютенко, Ступкой” (313).

labyrinths of *tableau* cinema conjure up a “pre-modern” sensibility and the trope of the “primitive.”

4.2 THE GENEALOGY OF THE “PRIMITIVE,” ETHNO-NATIONAL CINEMAS, AND SOCILIST MODERNISM

The fascination with the so-called “primitive” goes a long way back in the history of visual arts and is inextricably linked to imperial histories. Historian and anthropologist James Clifford made a distinction between the Orientalist (in Said’s sense) exoticism of the nineteenth-century, which “departed from a more or less confident cultural order in search of a temporary *frisson*” (542), and a self-critical interest in the primitivism in modernist practice of the early twentieth century. The latter, Clifford argues, “began with a reality deeply in question” and “the ‘primitive’ societies of the planet were increasingly available as aesthetic, cosmological, and scientific resources” (542). Although this distinction is largely relevant to the attitudes toward the “primitive Other” in the cultural discourse of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the differentiation between Self and Other in this territory has been far from unambiguous.¹⁵⁸ This ambiguity, which is partly derived from the region’s geographical positioning between Europe and Asia, and the complexity of the attitude toward the “primitive” become especially prominent at periods of cultural and political crisis. In Russian and Soviet cultural contexts, we witness such a turn to the

¹⁵⁸ For the debate on this topic see, David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*; Etkind, *Internal Colonization*; Khalid, “Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism”; Knight, “On Russian Orientalism.”; Todorova, “Does Russian Orientalism Have a Russian Soul?”; Sharp, *Russian Modernism: Between East and West*.

“primitive” during the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary years as well as during the late Socialism.

Among the pre-revolutionary avant-garde, the works of Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, and Aleksandr Shevchenko are exemplars in their turn to the “primitive.” Shevchenko’s 1913 manifesto “Neo-primitivism: Its Theory, Its Possibilities, Its Achievements” broadly echoes the concerns and aspirations of the artists at the turn of the century.

The manifesto begins with the keen awareness of urbanization and its consequences: “A factory-city is reigning over everything. Perpetual motion, endless hustle, perpetual ghostly nightmares of the city succeed each other. In the light of the darkened by the buildings sun of the day, in the bright light of the electric suns of the night, life appears to us entirely different, it is filled with different and new for us forms” (7).¹⁵⁹ This awareness leads to a search for new artistic forms, which Shevchenko and his colleagues find in the “primitive” (9).¹⁶⁰ It is important to point out that the “primitive” here is invoked not so much as a nostalgia for the idyllic past, but rather as a resource for renewal of artistic expression and a countermeasure to pedantic academism. Shevchenko writes: “We take *lubok*, the primitive, and icon as a point of departure for our Art because we find in it the most acute, the most immediate perception of life, which, on top of that,

¹⁵⁹ “Над всем властвует фабрика-город. Постоянное движение, вечная сутолока, постоянные кошмары-видения города сменяются одно другим. В свете затемненного домами солнца дня, в ярком свете электрических солнц ночи, жизнь представляется нам совсем иной, наполненной иными, новыми для нас формами” (7).

¹⁶⁰ “Мы стремимся к исканию новых путей нашему Искусству, но не отвергаем вполне и старого и из прежних форм его, признаем превыше всех—примитив, волшебную сказку старого Востока” (9).

is of a purely painterly nature” (10).¹⁶¹ In addition to this general inclination toward the style and form of “primitive” art, the manifesto specifically points out their rejection of scientific (linear) perspective:

We destroy scientific perspective, as it is built on a single-eyed view, and therefore is compromising, incorrect and restricting. We substitute it with a new, free, non-scientific, artistic perspective. It allows us to introduce not one, but several vanishing points, so that it is possible to show the same object from different points at once. (22)¹⁶²

This explicit denial of linear perspective in favor of a “new, free, non-scientific, and artistic” perspective serves as both a rejection of the predominantly Western academism and a revalidation of “primitive” techniques. In that sense, Russian neo-primitivists are (often directly) in dialogue with artists like Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and other Western “primitivists.” Indeed, Shevchenko states that on the one hand, the term “neo-primitivism” indicates that the “primitivism” is their point of departure, and on the other hand, the prefix “neo” implies their participation in the contemporary painterly tradition.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ “Мы берем за точку отправления нашего Искусства, лубок, примитив, икону, т.к. находим в них наиболее острое, наиболее непосредственное восприятие жизни, притом, чисто живописное” (10).

¹⁶² “Мы уничтожаем научную перспективу, как построенную на смотреии одним глазом, а потому компромиссную, неверную и стесняющую, и заменяем ее новой, свободной, не научной, художественной перспективой. Она позволяет нам вводить не одну, а несколько точек схода линий, чтобы можно было показать один и тот-же предмет, сразу с нескольких точек зрения” (22).

¹⁶³ “Слово «Нео-примитивизм» свидетельствуя, с одной стороны, о нашей отправной точке, с другой—своей приставкой «Нео» напоминает так-же о причастности к живописным традициям нашей эпохи” (13).

For the neo-primitivists of the pre-revolutionary era, the “primitive” has a dual function: it is a source for renewal of their artistic methods and at the same time it is a means of self-validation of Russian artists vis-à-vis the dominant Western artistic tradition. After stating that in its contemporary sense, the word “primitive” points at its eastern origins,¹⁶⁴ Shevchenko makes a move indicative of the intellectuals of that era and claims that Russia and the East are inextricably linked through their Tatar-Mongol past: “Russia and the East are inextricably linked since the time of the Tatar-Mongol invasion, and the spirit of the Tatars, the spirit of the East are so rooted in our lives that at times it becomes difficult to distinguish where the national character ends and where begins the eastern influence” (17).¹⁶⁵ And in this sense, he argues that “neo-primitivism is [also] a deeply national phenomenon” (17).¹⁶⁶ In a bold leap characteristic of manifestoes, the author further claims that, in fact, “human culture/civilization as a whole originates from Asia” (17).¹⁶⁷ Through this identification with the East and the subsequent claim of its primacy, Russian neo-primitivists distinguish themselves from the similar trends that were co-occurring in Europe.

Along similar lines, in her book on Goncharova and the Moscow avant-garde, Jane Sharp argues that despite the resemblance to many examples of Western European primitivism (Gauguin) and orientalism (Matisse), “Goncharova and her colleagues resisted the European primitivist’s

¹⁶⁴ “Слово примитив прямо указывает на восточное происхождение, т.к. в наше время под ним принято подразумевать целую плеяду Искусств Востока—Японское, Китайское, Корейское, Индо-Персидское и т.д.” (17).

¹⁶⁵ “Россия и Восток нераздельно связаны еще со времен татарских нашествий, и дух татар, дух Востока, так вкоренился в нашу жизнь, что, подчас, трудно отличить, где кончается национальная черта и где начинается восточное влияние” (17).

¹⁶⁶ “Нео-примитивизм явление глубоко национальное” (17).

¹⁶⁷ “Вся человеческая культура вообще пошла из Азии, а не наоборот, как некоторые утверждают” (17).

projection of a Self/Other dichotomy. Goncharova's art expresses her dual status as cultural emissary (mastering various contemporary Western styles) and as colonial subject, whose primary goal is to oppose the cultural hegemony of the West" (4-5). In other words, the fascination with the "primitive" and the self-Orientalizing rhetoric are used by these artists not only as sources of new forms, but also as strategies to both acknowledge and disavow imperialist domination, at least within the realm of art.

Of course, the neo-primitivist strategies of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde should be interpreted within its own historical context of the transformative path of modernization and the ambiguities of the Russian Empire vis-à-vis its own East and the West. Nonetheless, this neo-primitivist genealogy may be relevant and instructive to our understanding of the turn to the "primitive" in early Soviet and late Soviet ethno-national cinemas.

The modernist fascination with the "primitive" continued in the works of the post-revolutionary avant-garde. In particular, Emma Widdis suggests that during the immediate post-revolutionary years, in films made in and about Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Far East, the "primitivist impulse turned its eye upon 'primitive' societies themselves" (165). She further suggests that in this historical context the "primitive" ideal had an ambiguous status because many films produced in this period had to operate on a fault line between three competing imperatives. In addition to "the drive toward enlightenment and the overcoming of 'backwardness'" and "the need to distinguish Soviet attitudes to the East from those associated with the imperial gaze," Widdis underscores "a modernist fascination with primitivism, aligned with a specifically communist/ revolutionary interest in "primitive" ways of life as a possible prototype for a new kind of (revolutionary) subject" (166). In her analysis of the early Soviet cinema of the national republics, Widdis focuses on the "primitivist" inclinations of early Soviet

culture and examines “the idea that revolution could return to human experience an intuitive sensory encounter with the material world that had a parallel in so-called primitive experience” (165).

With regard to the attitude toward the “primitive,” Widdis points out an important difference between the Soviet national cinemas of the 1920s and the 1930s. She argues that in the 1920s, the films of the national republics while invested in the project of modernizing a “backward” East, retain a paradoxical investment in the sensory immediacy of “primitive” life” (266). With the consolidation of Stalinism in the course of the 1930s, however, as the relationship between sensation-feeling and consciousness-emotion shifts towards the latter, the representation of “primitive” life gradually gears toward the need for its modernization and transformation. Her analysis reveals how “the multisensory encounter with difference that marked the ‘Eastern’ (vostochnyi) cinema of the 1920s was increasingly uneasy in the cinema of the 1930s” (20). At the risk of oversimplifying Widdis’s argument, it may be suggested that in the 1920s cinema of the national republics the “primitive” models of sensory experience went in parallel with the modernization drive; by contrast, in the cinema of the 1930s, the path to modernization overpowered the “primitivist” inclination, which was relegated to the “backwardness” that needs to be overcome.

Tableau cinema, in a way, belongs to this genealogy that revives the trope of the “primitive” in Russian and Soviet cultural history. Similar to the pre-revolutionary neo-primitivists, *tableau* filmmakers invoke icons, *lubok* and decorative arts to renew the aesthetic possibilities of the cinematic medium. With regard to the “primitivist” dichotomy between Self and Other, which was disavowed by the pre-revolutionary artists, *tableau* filmmakers demonstrate even more ambiguous attitude, since by the late Soviet period the supranational Soviet identity and

ethno-national one were deeply intertwined, although always differentiated. As a result, it is hard to interpret the “primitive” and “pre-modern” sensibilities of the *tableau* films within the conventional imperial dichotomy between the colonizer and colonized, or the center and periphery. The simultaneous assimilation to Soviet identity and ethno-national differentiation are indicative of Soviet imperial model, which in its late period, according to Ronald Suny and Valerie Kievelson, “was a hybrid formation in constant flux” (337). The “primitivist” inclination of *tableau* cinema can be seen as partaking in this hybridity, which on the one hand preserves imperial structure but on the other hand dismantles it and reshapes its “temporal armature.”

The connection of the *tableau* cinema’s late Soviet “primitivism” to the early Soviet one is deeper and more intricate. As I have argued in Chapter 3, *tableau* filmmakers, in a sense, revive the 1920s’ inclination to the “primitive” and similarly reactivate the sensory experience with the surrounding material world. If the post-revolutionary filmmakers were invoking “primitive senses” in anticipation of the remaking of a new Soviet subject, as Widdis demonstrates, *tableau* filmmakers intended to provoke fresh, embodied awareness of the material world with no such ambitious goal as shaping of a new subject. Unlike future-oriented invocation of the “primitive” in the early Soviet ethno-national cinemas, in *tableau* cinema the invocation of the “primitive” is oriented toward the rethinking of the past and proposing alternative histories. This turn to the past is linked to another significant difference with the early Soviet period, which lies in *tableau* cinema’s pessimistic attitude toward the modernization and modernity, more broadly.

Within the history of Soviet ethno-national cinemas and within the cultural landscape of late Socialism, *tableau* cinema is unique not only because of its unheard-of visual style, but more importantly because of its turn to the alternative histories and total rejection of (Soviet) modernity. While the turn to the past is a common feature of Soviet ethno-national cinemas, the simultaneous

rejection of modernity's progress has been hardly ever represented in the films of national republics. In this sense, *tableau* cinema may be considered a bold harbinger of the crisis of the Soviet modernity and historical teleology, which will be fully expressed in the cinema of Perestroika (see, for example, Abuladze's *Repentance* [*Pokoianie*, 1984] or Abdrashitov's *The Train Stopped* [*Ostanovilsia poezd*, 1982]). But it is important to point out that unlike Perestroika-era cinema's "hopeless" expression of the crisis, *tableau* cinema's articulation of the crisis is accompanied by the "past-oriented" search of alternative paths.

Tableau cinema's unique position is also evident within the context of late Socialist "retrospective orientations" and "reclaiming of history." The "retrospective orientation" of late Soviet culture was recently brought to scholarly attention by the authors of *Landscapes of Socialism: Romantic Alternatives to Soviet Enlightenment*. The editor of the volume, Sergui Oushakine, introduces the notion of *Sotzromantizm* (Socialist Romanticism) as a framework to productively interpret, among other issues, the ways in which "utopian futurity uneasily sat side by side with the retrospectively created past" in the cultural landscape of late Socialism (12). While acknowledging the emergence of "historicizing projects and historicist attitudes" during this period, the contributors of the volume emphasize late-Soviet cultural producers' "strong desire not only to rediscover the globe's *old* faces but also to keep them together with the new ones" (12, emphasis in the original). These tendencies that attempt to integrate the "retrospective orientations" with the "actually existing socialism of the 1950s–1980s" is gathered under the umbrella term *Sotzromantizm*. This new term, Oushakine suggests, offers "a ground from which to challenge the emerging dogma that depicts late Soviet society as a space where pragmatic cynics coexisted with useful idiots of the regime" (14).

To a certain extent, it may seem that *tableau* cinema could also be interpreted under this umbrella term. They share with *Sotzromantizm* the orientation toward the past and similarly challenge the dogma about the late Soviet coexistence of “pragmatic cynics” and “useful idiots of the regime.” The works of *tableau* filmmakers were certainly critical, but not “cynical of” or “complacent with” the regime. Furthermore, the literary scenarios of some *tableau* films are very close to *Sotzromantizm*’s tendency to integrate the past and the “actually existing socialism.” For example, Drach’s literary scenario of “A Well for the Thirsty” or Abu-Bakar’s novella “The Necklace for My Serminaz” may be readily interpreted as instances of *Sotzromantizm* in their attempts to reconcile the Soviet “primitive” and Soviet “modern” (see Chapter 3.1 and 3.4). But the *tableau* films themselves are doing something else. *Tableau* cinema’s “retrospective orientation” is different from *Sotzromantizm*’s relation to the past in that it does not seek to reconcile their alternative histories with the present, but rather invents those histories to sharpen the sense of the crisis of (Soviet) modernity and do it through reinvention of the cinematic medium, which, I have argued, was also in crisis (see Chapter 2.3). It is in this sense, I propose to consider *tableau* cinema as a case of Socialist Modernism.

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