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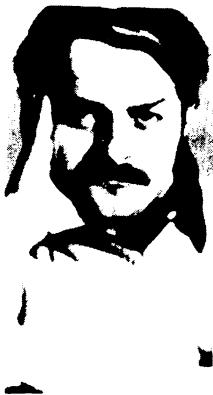
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Alienation and the Everyday:

The Films of Aleksandr Mindadze and Vadim Abdrashitov



Aleksandr Anatol'evich Mindadze (b. 28 April 1949). Scriptwriter. In 1971 graduated from VGIK (the All-Union State Institute for Cinematography, located in Moscow), where he studied in Katerina Vinogradskaya's workshop. Author of more than ten film scripts.

(Photo reproduced from Iskusstvo kino, 5, 1986)



Vadim Iusupovich Abdrashitov (b. 19 January 1945). Director. In 1974 graduated from VGIK, where he studied in Mikhail Romm's and Lev Kulidzhanov's workshops. First attracted attention with his diploma-film Ostanovite Potapova!/Stop Potapov! In 1979 awarded the All-Union Film Festival Prize and the Lenin Komsomol Prize for his first feature film, Slovo dlia zashchity/Speech for the Defense (1977); in 1984 received the R.S.F.S.R. State Prize for Ostanovilsia poezd/The Train Stopped (1982). Works at the Mosfilm studios.

(Photo reproduced from Iunost', 8, 1986)

In the fall of 1986, Plumbum ili opasnaia igra/Plumbum or a Dangerous Game - the first word of the title is the code name adopted

Vladimir Padunov, a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, together with Nancy Condee, also a Fellow of the Institute and Assistant Professor of Russian at Wheaton College, spent two years examining the politics of culture in the Soviet Union.

by a teenage underworld "investigator" working for the militia and druzhiniki (the voluntary people's patrol, members of which are identified by their red armbands) - was given its preliminary screenings in Moscow. (1) This is the sixth film to come from the pen-and-lens team of Aleksandr Mindadze (scriptwriter) and Vadim Abdrashitov (director). They have worked together now for a decade, releasing their first film, Speech for the Defense, in 1977. This was followed by Povorot/The Turning Point (1979), Okhota na lis/Fox Hunting (1980), The Train Stopped (1982), and Parad planet/Parade of Planets (1984). (2)

Although the films of this working collective have attracted increasing attention over the years among movie-goers and the urban intelligentsia in the Soviet Union, they are virtually unknown in the United States. (3) Western Europe has begun to accord some recognition to Mindadze-Abdrashitov's films: TS has been shown many times in London, Paris, and other capitals; PP was screened at the 1985 Venice Film Festival and was given a premiere at the 1985 London Film Festival. The American companies that arrange for the

(1) For an excellent review of this film, see E. Surkov's "Byl li mal'chik"/"Was There A Boy" in Literaturnaia gazeta/Literary Gazette 7 January 1987, p. 8.

In the Soviet Union, preliminary screenings mark the penultimate stage of state censorship, public criticism, and directorial self-criticism prior to the release of a film for general viewing. The final stage (if it is deemed to be necessary) is quite draconian: a film is shelved and not released.

These preliminary screenings take place in various official centers (House of Cinema, House of Arts, House of Cultural Workers, etc.) and are not open to the public-at-large.

(2) To make references to these films less cumbersome, the titles will be abbreviated in the text in the following way: Speech for the Defense - SD; The Turning Point - TP; Fox Hunting - FH; The Train Stopped - TS; Parade of Planets - PP; Plumbum or a Dangerous Game - PDG.

(3) Their first two films are available on video-cassettes from Ark's Intervideo in San Francisco. The cassettes, however, are poor in quality and have no sub-titles.

Major articles on Mindadze-Abdrashitov's films began to appear in the Soviet Union after the release of TS. For TS, see M. Vlasov's "Vysokaia tsena istiny"/"The High Cost of Truth" in Iskusstvo kino/Cinema Art, 1, 1983, pp. 22-35; for PP, see Konstantin Shcherbakov's "Na pereklichke"/"At the Roll-Call" in Iskusstvo kino/Cinema Art, 12, 1984, pp. 37-44.

The only English-language article on their films (FH, TS, and PP) is "Recent Soviet Cinema and Public Responses: Abdrashitov and German" by Nancy P. Condee and Vladimir Padunov in Framework, 29 (1985), pp. 42-56.

importation and distribution of Soviet films in this country, on the other hand, seem to feel that these films do not warrant the investment of \$40,000 (that is, the average cost of importation rights and a first-run screening, according to the International Film Exchange in New York).

This situation is all the more deplorable since Mindadze received an Italian award for "best foreign scriptwriter of 1985" (4), while Abdrashitov was elected to the Secretariat of the Union of Cinematographers after the upheavals at the Union's Fifth Congress in May 1986. (5) American newspapers, especially The New York Times and The Washington Post, have made much of the revolutionary changes taking place in the film-making industry in the Soviet Union under the new First Secretary of the Cinematographers' Union, Elem Klimov, who replaced Lev Kulidzhanov. (6) Foremost among these changes is the removal from Goskino's shelves and the release of films that have been banned for political reasons for more than a decade. (7) Unless similar, radical changes occur in the foreign-film distribution industry in the United States, Mindadze-Abdrashitov's films will continue to be overlooked by specialists in Soviet cinema and by the movie-going public as a whole. Paradoxically, the struggle against political censorship on one side of the curtain must be matched by a struggle against economic censorship on the other. If not, the screen will continue to be blank.

It is ironic to begin a discussion of Mindadze-Abdrashitov's films with such global, polemical force. Their films are always quiet and understated; they focus on the local, daily grind (byt) of small people; they avoid both analysis and tendentiousness in resolving the social and ethical issues that lie at the center of

(4) Sovetskii ekran/Soviet Screen, 10, 1986, p. 20. Two of his screenplays have been published in Russian: PP in Iskusstvo kino/Cinema Art, 7, 1983, pp. 179-205; PDG in Iskusstvo kino/Cinema Art, 5, 1986, pp. 139-174.

(5) For a full list of all new officials in the Union of Cinematographers, see Iskusstvo kino/Cinema Art, 8, 1986, pp. 6-8.

(6) Lev Aleksandrovich Kulidzhanov was First Secretary of the Union of Cinematographers from 1965-1986. He is very conservative politically and an arch-traditionalist as a film director. He is best known in the West for his 1957 film Dom, v kotorm ia zhivu/The House I Live In. He was one of Abdrashitov's teachers when the latter studied film directing at the State Institute for Cinematography.

(7) Goskino: The State Committee for Motion Pictures. From 1972-1986 its chairman was Filip Ermash, a cultural conservative of the first magnitude (see VP-1). On 29 December 1986 Ermash was retired and Aleksandr Kamshalov was appointed to succeed him.

each film. At their loudest, these films are dialogues (not surprisingly, Dialogi has been the working title of several of their films): between characters (the reporter and the railroad investigator in TS, the short-timers and greenhorns in PP, Chatko and everyone else in PDG), within a single character (the defending attorney in SD, the perpetrator-victim in TP, the "hunter" in FH). On a more significant level, the films mark a dialogue between the scriptwriter (the hand, or the agent that commits a deed) and the director (the eye, or the one that records it). And finally, on a symbolic level, their films are a dialogue between the two of them as a working collective engaged in producing a cultural object and the audience as a working collective engaged in consuming that product.

As Mikhail Bakhtin has argued convincingly in his book on Dostoevsky, the essence of all dialogue is unresolvable in structure and ethical in nature. (8) Just as telephones eventually stop ringing, Mindadze-Abdrashitov's films have an ending (the client is acquitted - SD, the driver is exonerated - TP, the mugger is rehabilitated - FH, the investigator arrives at conclusions - TS, the reservists return home - PP, Sonia dies - PDG). But these endings are as arbitrary and unexpected as the silence punctuated by the telephone ceasing to ring. These endings are mere formal devices, formal acknowledgements by the makers of the films that works of art require a kind of "poetic closure." (9) There is invariably a sense of something missing, something left unsaid; the endings of all of Mindadze-Abdrashitov's films are ruled by this absence. In "Obshchii iazyk"/"A Common Language," an article written jointly for the journal Iskusstvo kino/Cinema Art, Mindadze-Abdrashitov put it this way:

The absence of an absolutely clear finale ... fully corresponds with the complexities of life as such. From the point of view of the storyline ... the film /TP/ left nothing unresolved for the spectator; the result of the judicial investigation was made clear. However, we consciously tried to leave the spectator with feelings of concern and anxiety, which were not assuaged by the formal, logical conclusion. The pathos ... or some kind of catharsis consisted of its absence, its unattainability /emphasis in the original/. (10)

(8) see Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, "Theory and History of Literature 8" (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

(9) see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

(10) 10, 1982. All translations from Russian are my own.

Genuine dialogues can be interrupted, but they cannot be closed in any poetic or natural way. That leaves only the "unnatural" - death and silence. Tombstones may preach to the living, but they do not engage them in dialogues.

At stake in Mindadze-Abdrashitov's dialogues is the ethical stability of the entire social order that has given rise to and formed the characters, and that (ultimately) has been internalized uncritically by each of them. They all have established their places in society (a lawyer - SD, a scientist - TP, a factory worker - FH, an investigator - TS, an astronomer - PP, an undercover "cop" - PDG). They have their habitual routines and responsibilities, their socially "necessary" relationships, and their "received ideas" about the social world, its stability and justice. They are, as I already have pointed out, small people, who unknowingly take comfort and strength from the absence of conflict and contradiction in the everyday flow of their lives. At some time in the pre-histories of the films, the central characters have forgotten the fact that this unproblematic daily flow is an arbitrary construct that they themselves have imposed on the social reality around them. Forgetting carries a double charge in these films: on the positive side, it enables the characters to participate in the reigning social myths of harmony, consonance, and balance; on the negative side, it empowers them to be unaware of the disharmony, dissonance, and imbalance of the social environment, of which they are a part and which they reproduce in everything they do. Mindadze-Abdrashitov's films act as a reminder. For the characters, this means a return to memory and consciousness, a taking stock of the social conspiracy into which they have drifted.

In each film, the fragile equilibrium between consoling social myth and alienating social reality is destroyed by an unexpected encounter with the world that lies outside of their personal daily patterns - a random and, at first, insignificant interruption from "out there": a client - SD, a pedestrian - TP, a mugging - FH, a train accident - TS, a letter - PP, a piece of music - PDG. Each minor disruption, however, presages the onset of a major ethical dilemma, one that cannot be resolved within the meaning-giving framework that has structured their lives.

The central character of each film is simultaneously a quasi-detective and a quasi-judge. As the former, these characters seek to arrive at a truth that initially presents itself as someone else's: the guilt or innocence of the client - SD, the eyesight of the pedestrian - TP, the identity of the muggers - FH, the cause of the train accident - TS, the meaning of life - PP, the injustice committed in the past - PDG. Each of Mindadze-Abdrashitov's heroes undertakes the quest for this alien truth certain that she or he cannot be implicated by it, only to discover that the search for truth forces them to switch places with that someone else: in examining the client's love for her accuser the attorney uncovers the absence of love and passion in her own life, and abandons her groom-to-be on a train platform - SD; in searching for mitigating circumstances in

the death of the pedestrian he has hit, the driver finds that he too is a victim seeking punishment - TP; in establishing the identity of his muggers, the "fox hunter" ends up symbolically mugging the "less protected" and "more guilty" of the two - FH; in pursuing the cause of the train accident, the investigator finds that the truth is irrelevant to the train-working community, even though it is the only relevant fact in his own life - TS; in leading his reserve unit back to their city, back to their everyday lives, the senior lieutenant discovers that he has many roles to play, that he has played them before and will play them again - PP; in his quest to apprehend the criminal from the past, Plumbum ends by betraying one woman and causing the death of another - PDG.

As detectives, Mindadze-Abdrashitov's heroes find that it is impossible to assign guilt, impossible to re-establish ethical stability in the social order by isolating a villain, impossible to return to the comfort and complacency offered by social myths. All, beginning or ending with the detectives, are guilty: it is only the blindfold of justice that keeps the scales seemingly balanced - seemingly, because with the blindfolds on, no one can see.

Detection, however, requires the use of the eyes and necessitates the tearing away of the blindfold. The detectives have seen. This gives them their second function in the films: quasi-judges. Several Soviet film critics have pointed to the sudebnaia tema (the judicial theme) as a hallmark of Mindadze-Abdrashitov's films (11), one critic has more astutely called all of their films sudebnye khroniki (judicial chronicles). (12) Their first film is set almost entirely inside the court system (it is a kind of Soviet "Perry Mason"); their second and third films contain scenes in courtrooms; their fourth film ends with the completion of a preliminary investigation that will lead to a trial; their sixth rarely moves out of the underworld, which provides the daily fodder that justifies the existence of the courts. To say this is merely to emphasize the obvious - the judicial theme - which is, at best, the surface level of the story-line. Much more interesting and accurate is the idea of a "judicial chronicle": each film is a social narrative that uses human figures to characterize that society and as vehicles to offer up a social indictment to the jury - that is, to the viewing audience.

(11) V. Baskakov and M. Kuznetsov, "Podvig sovetskogo naroda na ekrane"/"The Heroic Feat of the Soviet People on the Screen" in Sovetskoe kino: 70-e gody/Soviet Cinema: The 1970s (Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1984), pp. 39-40. Vladimir Baskakov was appointed to be the director of VGIK in 1986.

(12) S. Drobashenko, "Zakliuchenie"/"Conclusion" in the same collection, p. 328.

This is the "symbolic level" of dialogue, to which I referred earlier: between Mindadze-Abdrashitov and the audience. But it is "symbolic" precisely because the dialogue is not between two individual artists, each of whom speaks in his own voice (on the one side), and a faceless mass of individuated viewers, each of whom retains a unique system of ethical values and priorities (on the other). Mindadze-Abdrashitov sacrifice the specific for the universal, the individual for the social. Their voice in the dialogue is their collective voice, just as the audience responds with its collective one. A jury, after all, must overcome its individual opinions to arrive at a shared judgment, which is expressed in the courtroom in a single voice.

The screen represents the courtroom (and therefore already implicates the audience-jury), the viewing hall is the jury box (implicating in turn the quasi-detectives and quasi-judges). From this point of view, Mindadze-Abdrashitov's heroes occupy a complex position in relation to the audience. Their individual, psychologically unique problems and ethical dilemmas are amply characterized within the artistic framework of each film. But since individuals, psychology, and ethics are all grounded in social reality and cannot be severed from it, no collective (that is, social) resolution is possible within the films. Any attempt at resolution would exclude the audience, which is part of that same social reality. Judgment is never pronounced on the screen because there is no one left to pronounce it: the interrogators (Mindadze-Abdrashitov), the detectives and judges (the characters), and the jury (the audience) are equally guilty. Inn Shul'zhenko makes this point in a somewhat different way:

He /Abdrashitov/ has a mass of questions; questions directed at the heroes of the films ("Well, how do you deal with this kind of situation?") and - automatically - to the viewer ("And how would you react in his place?"). At this juncture, if you have heard the question, it becomes clear that his films contain a disturbing and profound meaning, an insistent call to think, to use those lazy brains. Even more so because each of his heroes is correct in his own way. As a result it appears that everyone is right, everyone can be understood, and there is no one who is absolutely wrong. So, think, so, decide... The material seems to be simple, and because it is familiar we recognize both the petty details and the grand picture. However, the categories invoked by the artist are elevated and eternal.

(13)

(13) "A u menia vopros..." / "But I Have A Question..." in Iunost' / Youth, 8, 1986, pp. 164-165.

Each of the heroes finds herself (SD) or himself (all of the other films) ill-equipped to make sense of the narrative events and ethical paradoxes from within the normative codes of the social myth that has provided their lives with meaning and that have been seen as natural and inevitable. Consequently, though each film resolves the specific psychological problem confronting the individual hero, the attempt to reach a collective (social) resolution is inseparable from dismantling these normative, natural, and inevitable codes. Once dismantled, however, Mindadze-Abdrashitov's heroes find that they are lost in the wilderness: they are cut off from the past (family), the present (workplace), and the future (the husband-to-be in SD, the new wife in TP).

The resulting deracination and alienation are not limited solely to the intelligentsia, as Mindadze-Abdrashitov demonstrate in FH, their most paradigmatic film. The hero-"fox hunter" is an ordinary factory-worker and amateur sportsman; he is stolidly inarticulate and (at least on the surface) unreflective. Yet he too becomes distanced from all of the values and social relations that provided his life with meaning. By the end of the film, his isolation is complete: he gives up the race, runs off into the woods, away from family and friends. Most of Mindadze-Abdrashitov's heroes, however, are part of the professional-scientific intelligentsia. It is almost as if they are presenting a collective portrait of this group to movie audiences in the Soviet Union. This feature is emphasized by the fact that the same actor, Oleg Yankovsky, plays the roles of the abandoned groom in SD and new husband-driver in TP. Yankovsky has described these two roles of the young intellectual of the 1970s as being "spiritually united," as part of "my biography," "the experience of my generation." (14)

All of Mindadze-Abdrashitov's heroes have seen. All have judged. All accept their isolation from the social collective because they can no longer accept that collective's consoling myth. And all are struck dumb. Isolation destroys the very possibility for dialogue; it leads either to silence (a kind of spiritual death) or solecism (a soliloquy without an audience). Five of their six films end with mute scenes: the long, staring scene between the attorney and the groom as her train pulls away - SD; the brief, puzzled look exchanged by the driver-victim and his wife - TP; the "fox hunter" running into the woods - FH; the angry stares of the residents as the investigator passes by - TS; Plumbum looking down from the roof at Sonia's body - PDG.

Interestingly enough, only PP ends with solecism: the reservists

(14) quoted in Irina Grashchenkova, Sovetskaia kinorezhissura: Istoriia i sovremennost'. Problemy i imena/Soviet Film Directors: History and Contemporaneity. Problems and Names (Moskva, Znanie, 1982), p. 103.

call out old passwords to each other as they scatter and disappear forever: "Karabin" (carbine) - "Kustanai" (the name of a city). Though the words can be translated, they convey no meaning. Nor is there anyone left to hear them. I stress the different way that PP ends because it is the one film by Mindadze-Abdrashitov that attempts to break out of the paradigm that I have tried to describe and analyse. But even when the paradigm is broken, it is merely re-inforced: to discover (or remember) the eternal, cosmic community and communion of human souls is to experience (or recognize) the life-long isolation and alienation of the human psyche and social being.

Whether the heroes are reduced to silence or solecism, the overall result is the same: none of them can articulate what she or he has seen. The verdict is reserved for the audience.

Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Wakefield"



Vladimir Padunov

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