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Film Awards as Cultural Institutions Towards a Diverse Landscape of Film in Georgia

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Abstract

This article aims to give a short overview of the history of the Georgian film industry, with a focus on recent developments, new artistic formats and experimental approaches. In addition, it is also in part an experience report of the ADAMI Media Prize for Cultural Diversity in Eastern Europe, which was founded in 2015 with the aim to support new formats in film, audio-visual media and video art focused on ethnic, religious and cultural diversity.

From Soviet Cinema to Independent Film and Experimental Film Art

Georgia has a long and dazzling history of film. In the last few years, the small South Caucasian republic has

again gained international recognition as a producer of quality films, and international film festivals are keen to see what Georgian directors have to offer. In the following, the question of Georgia as a contemporary

“country of film” is examined on an institutional level: What does the state offer filmmakers? How can films be developed, produced and distributed? Does there exist an “economy of prestige”? What are the mechanisms of valuation (prizes, awards) inside the country? To what extent should the “national cinema” serve as a representation of national identity, and how does this influence the state funding system? What functions do international and non-governmental institutions serve, and how can they contribute to a more diverse system of funding, education and networking?

In Soviet times, Georgia was famous for its film production studio Kartuli Pilmi (also known by its Russian name, Gruzia-Film), which was founded in 1921 as one of the first film studios not only in the Soviet Union, but worldwide. The genesis of the film industry in Georgia came out of the pragmatic idea of film being a powerful tool to establish a new national self-perception inside the newly founded multi-national Soviet empire. For this reason, Georgian film in the beginning had a strong ethnographic dimension, and mostly served the centralist dictate of a national identity inside the Soviet Empire, and therefore inside the federal/imperialist discourse.² Founded as a means of Sovietization at first, the Georgian film studio quickly became one of the biggest film production companies in the USSR. At certain times, such as after the Second World War (the years of *malokartin'e*), Georgia even produced more films than any other Soviet republic,³ always under the organizational and ideological control of Goskino, the USSR's State Committee for Cinematography.

In the 1960s, a new generation of Georgian directors including Tengis Abuladze, Otar Iosseliani, the Tbilisi-based Armenian Sergei Parajanov and others emancipated themselves more and more from Russian cinema and went their own way, often with a more avant-gardist and critical approach. Nevertheless, Georgian cinema has always negotiated and mirrored national identity, be it in the beginning of the Soviet Union as folkloristic representation of the Georgian nation inside the multi-national socialist federation, or later with a more critical and conflictual examination of identity and social reality.

What came then with the independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union was at first not a blossoming and fruitful time for Georgian cinema, on the contrary: In 1994, the historic Georgian film studio was turned into a stock company and stopped receiving funding from the state. The society was tormented by civil war and conflicts, and due to this total economic

breakdown, many directors went abroad. National identity was negotiated from this exile perspective, and at the same time, Georgians entered the European film industry and had the chance to establish contacts and collaborations. Slowly, as a result of Georgia's economic upturn and an opening towards Central and Western Europe, the global interest in Georgia and Georgian film became stronger. The August War with Russia in 2008 led to a total break with the Russian film industry, with which Georgian film had to that point still been closely connected, further intensifying the shift in orientation towards the European (and international) film scene.

Funding, Education, Networking: What Are the Possibilities for Georgian Filmmakers Today?

The founding of the Georgian National Film Center (GNFC) in 2001 was a major step towards a new independent but state-supported film industry. The GNFC, which was established under the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, is the main institution for coordinating state budget funding for cinema productions at all project stages, educational programs, international cooperations, and the development of Georgian cinematography. The Film Center strives to support the development of Georgian Cinema at all levels—project development, production, distribution and promotion. In 2003, in the course of the Rose Revolution, Gaga Chkheidze became its director, and the budget was increased to 900,000 GEL⁴ (at that time equivalent to about 360,000 Euros). Today, the budget operated by the Film Center is about ten times higher, with approximately 70% of it going into film production and 30% in educational programs, film heritage (restoration of vintage films, etc.), festivals and publications. Since 2010, Georgia has become a member of European funding programs, including Eurimages and MEDIA, and integration into the European co-production landscape has accelerated. Georgia joined the Creative Europe program in 2015, the first Eastern Partnership country to do so.

In addition, the Georgian Government launched the Film in Georgia incentive program through Enterprise Georgia to attract shooting and production of foreign films in Georgia. A cash rebate program for film production in Georgia was introduced, offering up to 20% rebate of expenses and an additional 2–5% for including Georgian elements like landscapes or cultural specifics in the production. The program also offers location scouting, assistance with permits and coordination

1 See English 2008.

2 See Radunović 2016: 8.

3 See Grashchenkova, Fomin 2016: 269.

4 See Interview of the author with Gaga Chkheidze, 2020.

with local institutions and businesses.⁵ In 2019, Universal Studios' *Fast and Furious 9* shot scenes on the streets of Tbilisi, being the first Hollywood production to shoot in Georgia, spending 31 million USD in the country. This success provides hope for those who have over the past decades worked to establish film as a major contributor to the Georgian economy.

In 2018, the Georgian Film Cluster was founded with the support of the European Union's EU4Business initiative and GIZ (German Society for International Cooperation). The membership of the Cluster consists of production companies and professionals in the audio-visual industry, its basic aim being to bring together stakeholders of the Georgian film industry and create partnerships and collaborations, both inside Georgia and internationally.⁶

As can be clearly seen, the film infrastructure has improved in many ways for local and international productions. But while the economic and professional dimensions of the film industry have grown quickly, there still exists no broad variety of cultural institutions such as festivals, film awards or even cinemas—while in Soviet times there were cinemas in almost every village or small town, now there are just a few multiplex cinemas in the big cities, with a growing tendency to integrate them into shopping centers. Nevertheless, there have been initiatives to organize screenings in the regions: the CineDOC festival has its program CineDOC on Tour, and small initiatives like the Moving Cinema organize open air screenings in villages. There is no arthouse cinema in Georgia, and the big cinemas show mostly blockbusters and Hollywood productions. The Tbilisi International Film Festival annually invites private sponsors to fund an award for Georgian productions in the Georgian Panorama section, in addition to the festival's international competition. In 2019, the Georgian Public Broadcaster also allocated two 20,000 GEL (about 6,500 USD) prizes for the best Georgian documentary and short film.

Considering Georgia's long history of foreign rule and the ethnic and territorial conflicts that intensified with the collapse of the USSR and continuing Russian aggression, there is a self-perception of "Georgianness" as something fragile and permanently threatened. In this context, the idea of a culturally diverse society instead of a homogeneous nation-state might still be threatening for many people, and ethnic minorities are often excluded from the self-representing mission of the "national cinema". On the other hand, Georgia is too poor to have the budget to support independent,

self-sufficient film production and is highly dependent on other countries to make co-productions: "Practically all films that the National Film Center supported in the last years were co-productions,"⁷ says its director, Gaga Chkheidze. This means that, although the country is independent from the Russian film industry, there is a lower budget than in Soviet times and Georgia is now dependent on other countries. With this "minority-status" that the Georgian cinema has, it might be even harder to consider Georgia as a multinational country with its own ethnic or religious minorities.

A unique tool in this aspect is the ADAMI Media Prize for Cultural Diversity in Eastern Europe, which was founded in 2015 to create a platform that operates not just nationally but transnationally (in the six countries of the Eastern Partnership of the European Union) to honor films, videos and TV contributions focusing on cultural diversity. The underlying idea is again the power of audio-visual media and its use in the direction of tolerance, integration of minorities, and a self-representation of an open and diverse society through institutionalization and cultural prestige.

New Concepts of Representation and New Artistic Formats

A new generation of Georgian filmmakers, many of them women, has found new artistic ways of expression and gained international recognition, for example Nana Ekvtimishvili with her film *In Bloom*, Rusudan Glurjidge with *House of Others*, and Tinatin Gurchiani with *The Machine that Makes Everything Disappear*. Others, among them Anna Dziapshipa, walk the line between filmmaking and conceptual video art and autobiography, e.g. in her piece *On Being Dziapshipa*. Documentary filmmakers have chosen to look towards the margins of the society, to portray people who live in remote areas, at the borders, or who have been displaced in the course of conflicts. Their thematic approaches and new video art formats often do not fit into the idea of a national cinema, which mostly focuses on big productions, full-length films, and representations with beautiful landscapes—films which attract tourism and are thus the main focus of the new governmental programs like Film in Georgia. Tako Robakidze and Salomé Jashi, both of whom were awarded the ADAMI Media Prize, number among those Georgian artists who have taken a different path.

Robakidze started her creative career as a photographer and experiments with video and multimedia art focusing on social and political content. For her piece

5 See www.filmingeorgia.ge.

6 See www.filmcluster.org.

7 Interview of the author with Gaga Chkheidze, 2020.

A Look Beyond the Headlines (2016), she spent several months in the Pankisi Valley in Georgia, which is known for its ethnic Kist inhabitants and which makes its way into Georgian headlines almost exclusively because of Islamist terrorism. Robakidze portrays the lives of ordinary people, showing their everyday problems and traditions, which are very similar to those of other rural Georgians. The main goal behind her work is to bring attention to the insufficient media coverage of the valley, coverage which stigmatizes the people living there. Her approach is a journalistic one and the format a very unique style of video art. She experiments with stroboscopic loops and moving images, layered with a soundscape of minimalist noise and atmospheric recordings as well as traditional songs. Her second video *Creeping Borders* (2018) portrays people living at the occupation line between Georgia and so-called South Ossetia, where the internationally unrecognized border is frequently moved by Russian soldiers and people are “falling asleep in their homeland and waking up in occupied territory,”⁸ as Robakidze puts it.

Jashi started her professional life as a journalist and started making films after receiving a scholarship from the Royal Holloway University of London, where she studied documentary film. Her works include *Bakhmaro* (2011), a film about a former Soviet hotel in a small Georgian town, thereby portraying rural society, *The Dazzling Light of Sunset* (2016), a portrayal of a small rural TV station which employs only three people and airs news only once a week, and her newest film *Taming the Garden* (2020) about Georgia’s most powerful oligarch and prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili’s hobby to collect and replant trees.

Like Robakidze, Jashi also deals with the displacement of Georgian families from the Tskhinvali region in South Ossetia in her short video *The Tower* (2018). In this four-minute fragment one can see people standing at a scenic overlook, looking through binoculars at their old land and houses. Jashi does not comment on the political circumstances, she does not show the tragedies and emotions, just people trying to recognize their houses, their favourite trees and gardens from a distance, thereby showing the uprooting of these families

who live in a settlement for displaced people—so close to their land, but unable to cross the demarcation line.

Both Robakidze and Jashi strive for new perspectives and a critical yet intimate exploration of the reality in which their protagonists live. They look for both new formats and means of expression and storytelling, making those parts of the society visible which are neglected, ignored or stigmatized. Their work can be located between film, art and journalism, which makes it on the one hand particularly interesting, but also harder to incorporate into traditional career paths or funding systems. The ADAMI Media Prize attempts to cover

exactly these new formats, making work by such artists visible to international audiences and film networks. Robakidze states:

“ADAMI really tries to promote your work as soon as there is an opportunity for that—show the film at different international festivals, connect with people who might be very helpful in the future, for exam-

ple representatives from ARTE. As a documentary photographer and filmmaker, I always want to see the impact, the result of the story, I want to make changes, so it’s very important to have the opportunity to show your work to people who can ‘change,’ to organisations which are decision-makers and might have impact on particular issues. ADAMI gave me the opportunity to talk about my work at the EU Parliament.”⁹

Georgia as a Country of Film?

Although Georgian film is regaining international recognition and the standards in filmmaking on a technical and professional level have increased, there is still a lack of money for film development and problems with distribution inside the country. Apart from the few film festivals like the Tbilisi International Film Festival or the CineDOC Tbilisi International Documentary Film Festival, there are—unlike in Soviet times—no state-funded prizes for filmmakers. The absence of an arthouse cinema makes it especially hard for Georgian filmmakers to show their work in the country, as Jashi explains:

Tako Robakidze, *Creeping Borders*, documentary film, Georgia 2018, 13’.



© Tako Robakidze

8 Interview of the author with Tako Robakidze, 2020.

9 Ibid.

“The art industry is rather neglected by the state in Georgia. The system of financing in general has been getting better in the last years by setting up a new schema of Creative Georgia, but still, it is not widely accessible and the funding provided is ridiculously low. Traditional art, like traditional singing or dance, that carry an already established form are much more appreciated than contemporary art and creativity. [...] The lack of awards and prizes for cultural activities speaks not only to the fact that the government neglects artists. It does not consider its population either. The general public needs not only actual food to exist. It also needs food for mental and spiritual development and well-being. Right now, the government concentrates on survival of the population or supports initiatives that could have a commercial benefit. Art does not fit in these criteria.”¹⁰

Filmmakers still depend on private funding, like banks or even casinos, as well as on foreign institutions like international organizations, festivals abroad and international funds to get their work funded or recognized. As long as the state does not provide the institutions nec-

essary for a complete film industry, non-governmental organizations and international programs will remain important players in supporting filmmakers on different levels of their projects. The fact that these organizations often have a thematic direction like human rights, women’s or LGBT issues or, like the ADAMI Media Prize, cultural diversity, can serve as a motivator for filmmakers to engage more in these minority topics, thereby creating a more diverse and heterogeneous landscape of film.

On the other hand, it will be the task of the government in the near future to establish a strong and independent cultural sector that can survive without private funding and does not repeat only a folkloristic, traditionalist or nationalist paradigm, but instead questions those representations and strives for new concepts of identities and society. In a multinational state, cultural policies have a responsibility to include all groups. Only with such inclusion can Georgia meet the high expectations which have often been expressed internationally, and keep its reputation of successful development since its independence and—even more—as a country of culture and film.

About the Author

Philomena Grassl studied International Development and Slavistics in Vienna and Berlin. She has lived in Tbilisi since 2015, where she currently works for the ADAMI Media Prize.

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Salomé Jashi, *The Tower*, documentary film, Georgia 2018, 4’.



© Salomé Jashi

¹⁰ Interview of the author with Salome Jashi, 2020.