



Dušan Radunović

## Nativism, the Avant-garde, and the Aesthetics of Decolonisation in Nikoloz Shengelaia's *Eliso*

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**Abstract:** The paper evaluates the reappraisal of nineteenth-century imperial discourses about Georgia and the Caucasus at large in the early Soviet context. The dual figuration of the national idea in the nineteenth century is laid out in view of the colonial status of Georgia and in the context of the gradual modernisation of Georgian society in the late imperial years. The key aspects of the rhetoric of national identity at the time are introduced in their complex figuration – the initial appropriation of the image of the Caucasus and Georgia shaped by colonial imagination, and the emancipation from that rhetoric with the second wave of national intelligentsia. The central part of the paper is dedicated to Nikoloz Shengelaia's 1928 film , in which the Georgian poet-turned-filmmaker, in association with the screenwriter Sergei Tret'jakov, transformed the representational language of 1920s Georgian cinema, facilitated its emancipation from ethnographic tropes and transitioned towards an original vernacular aesthetics. To expand on the intellectual roots of this intervention, this discussion highlights the importance of Tret'jakov's concepts of "fact", "production" [proizvodstvo], and "purpose" [naznachenie], which enabled Shengelaia to immerse his characters into their concrete socio-historical circumstances and avoid the pitfalls of 'popular' ethnographic representation. The article argues that the political emancipation of the colonial self was inseparable from the emancipation of the strategies of representation. The discussion concludes, if conditionally and with caveats necessitated by the status of Georgia in the Soviet project following the country's violent annexation by the Soviet army in 1921, that a developed form of an emancipated representational language can be found in .

**Keywords:** Nikoloz Shengelaia, Georgia, decolonisation, ethnographic representation, film, vernacular, fact, purpose.



## Reclaiming the Caucasus: Imperial Imaginary, the Colonial Self and Early Soviet Policy on Nationalities

For Mark Bassin, the importance of the East in the Russian imperial imaginary is inseparable from Russia's attempt to reconsider the "original Russia-Europe juxtaposition, so unfavourable to the former" (Bassin 1991a: 201). Adding the East to the imperial self-perception, Bassin argues, extends the playing field and revises the identity paradigm by endowing the once "uncivilised" Russia with a mission to "protect, civilize, and educate" (Mamedov 2014: 150) its newly acquired non-European peripheries.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that an important, perhaps central place in the new colonial imaginary belongs to the Caucasus. The five hundred mile long mountain range physically circumscribed the empire at the moment of its expansion in the early 1800s, thus emerging as its natural frontier. In addition to the geographical circumscription it provided to the Russian Empire, the extraordinary ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of the Caucasus reinforced its status of the empire's "external horizon" in a political, cultural, and epistemological sense – a symbolic space whose powerful, if shifting and unstable, semantic potential established itself on both sides of the colonial divide.<sup>2</sup> For the imperial mind, the subjugation of the seemingly unattainable natural formation allegorised the colonial project itself. The dualism created by this boundary (symbolic and real at once) reconfigured the Empire into its inward and outward parts,<sup>3</sup> with the two

parts "overwriting [überschreiben] one another" (Andronikashvili 2011: 73). For the colonial subject, on the other hand, the shifting configuration of the Caucasus encapsulated the changes of identificatory paradigms and, by extension, the evolution of national ideologies from the early days of imperial conquest to its long aftermath, in the early years of Soviet rule.<sup>4</sup>

In Georgia, the country that will be the focus of this discussion, the first cultural manifestations of national ideology under colonial rule occurred in the form of appropriation of the Russian romantic configuration of the region, whereby the symbolic image of the Caucasus played the central role (Andronikashvili et al. 2018: 80).<sup>5</sup> It was against one such background, through a contentious dialogue with the imperial imagination, that the first autochthonous figurations of the colonised space began to take shape.<sup>6</sup> The most significant departure from the initial romantic interpretation was undertaken by the second generation of Georgian intellectuals of the 1860s, the so-called 'terg-daleulebi' – the word literally means those who drank the water from the Terek, the river that flows from the North East range of the mountain into Russia, thus representing the frontier between the imperial metropolis and its peripheries.

With Ilia Ch'avch'avadze, the most notable cultural figure of the time, the symbolism of the

Aleksandr Pypin, who draws attention to the foreignness of the Caucasus to the imperial imaginary, to which it was lying outside of the "native feature" category in contrast to other imperial peripheries, such as the Volga, or the Baltik (Miller 2008: 162).

4 Although the distinction between the terms "national" and "nationalist" is tentative, I am using the former term as the term "nationalism" manifests itself most notably through the aspiration for statehood. On "nation-shaping" aspiration as the quality of "nationalism", see Brubaker 1996: 79.

5 For a nuanced and insightful interpretation of the romantic visions of Georgia in the poets of the first generation as a way of circumventing the colonial present, see Ram and Shatirishvili 2004, passim.

6 According to Zaal Andronikashvili, the revision of the idea of "autochthony" lies at the heart of the imperial reconfiguration of the Caucasus in the works of Russian romantic poets – from Pushkin to Bestuzhev-Marlinskii and Lermontov. Through a range of strategies, the Caucasus in the works of these poets emerges as a semantically deterritorialised space divorced from its real historical time (Andronikashvili 2011: passim).

1 Bruce Grant wrote of the ways in which Russia's early self-perception of its right to rule was configured as a "gift" (Grant 2009: xv). For Russia's self-positioning between Europe in the context of its rise as imperial power see, among others, Bassin 1991b: 1-17.

2 I am borrowing the concept of "external horizon" ["Außenhorizont"] from Section 8 of Edmund Husserl's late work *Experience and Judgment [Erfahrung und Urteil]*, in which it is explained as a surrounding, secondary context outside our experience in which our judgement of "objects cogiven" is informed by our experience in the primary context (Husserl 1973 [1939]: 33).

3 The idea of two coexisting worlds within the empire can already be found in the writings of the imperial geographer

Caucasus changes from “melancholy enthusiasm” to a more tangible geopolitical space – it develops “into a setting from which the vision of a new Georgia emerges” (Andronikashvili et al. 2018: 141). Significantly, this change is reflected in the discourse of national self-perception, whereby the hitherto prevalent term “homeland” (/samshoblo) is replaced by the less affective, more political concept of “fatherland” (/mamuli). The semantic-cum-rhetorical change in the national imaginary is accompanied by a structural, horizontal change: for the first time during colonial rule, the Georgian national programme is not directed against other nations in the Caucasus, but rather, views those nations as fellow sufferers entangled in the same colonial situation (Andronikashvili et al. 2018: 142, passim). Importantly, the new national ideal, the figure of the “ideal Georgian”, emerges in the writings of Ch'avch'avadze and his followers as the simple man of the Georgian mountains (Gould 2014; Manning 2004). For example, in Ch'avch'avadze's “Letters of a Traveler”,<sup>7</sup> the central text for the understanding of the shift in the Georgian national ideal, the mountain dweller who appears as the pivot of the new national programme does not emerge as a noble savage, but as an articulate and self-aware interlocutor. If there is any observational gaze to be found in the first-person narrator towards his mountain interlocutor, the latter certainly cannot be assumed to be the observed; on the contrary, through his astute comments on the uselessness of the Great Military Road (the material symbol of the conquest) and other contemporary issues, the mountain dweller from Ch'avch'avadze's “Letters” comes across more of an observer than as the observed. This lack of an observational, ethnographic representation of the indigenous subject suggests that the new national discourse of the Georgian intelligentsia revolves around a real historical subject, rather than on the romantic idealisation

of “nativism”. According to Zaal Andronikashvili, Ch'avch'avadze deliberately defines the character of the mountain dweller as neither a peasant nor a nobleman, to avoid the earlier 19<sup>th</sup>-century figurations of Georgianness and to inaugurate a new one – an ordinary man. This move is indicative of the newly shaping political ideology, which for the first time in Georgian history, introduces the concept of the “people” [] as a political category (Andronikashvili et al. 2018: 126-127). What this novel figuration of the national subject as an “average Georgian” also attests to is the gradual emergence of a historically real and autochthonous national self: instead of the melancholy discourses of the first generation of Georgian intelligentsia, which were looking at symbolic expressions of nationhood (paradoxically, mediated through the Russian romantic figurations of the region), the post-1860s generation turns towards the vast masses of the recently emancipated serfs, now poor and barely literate peasants, in order to foster a new national ideology based on the emancipation and politisation of the real historical Georgian populace. In this regard, the question of how to configure a national subject that is historically real, rather than projected, becomes central for the Georgian intelligentsia of the late imperial period, and this new imperative first found its expression in the literary and print culture of the time.<sup>8</sup>

At the dawn of the imperial era, Georgia saw a rapid spread of socialist and social-democratic ideas. Many, if not the whole range of ideas that were either recognised or introduced in the last third of the nineteenth century by Ch'avch'avadze and the terg-taleulebi paved the way for social-democracy and its political programme to take deep roots in the country. Indeed, the ideas, such as colonialism, or multi-ethnicity in the Caucasus, which first received articulation within the second generation of

7 Conceived during the 1860s, Ch'avch'avadze's *Letters* were first published in a serial form in 1871 in journal *Collection / Krebuli* [].

8 Instructive in this context is the way in which the popular newspapers *Times / Droeba* [], published in Tbilisi from the 1860s to the 1880s, was emancipating its readership, the future national subjects. See Manning 2014 90-103; also, Manning 2012: 81-110.

national intelligentsia, continued to shape the Georgian public sphere and its 'body politic' in the turbulent decades to come.<sup>9</sup> The short-lived period of independence (1918-1921), during which Georgia was democratically ruled by the renegade socialist-democratic wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), put the country on the map as one of the world's first social-democratic states. Brought to an end by the military annexation of Georgia by the Soviet state in February 1921, Georgia's national idea would receive a profoundly new articulation.

Motivated by a desire for a radical departure from the oppressive policies of the old regime, but equally, by a pragmatic aspiration to galvanise support from the formerly disenfranchised ethnic groups for its cause, the young Soviet state adopted a comprehensive set of affirmative measures (habitually referred to as "indigenisation" or alternatively "nativisation", from Russian "korenizatsiia"), the most salient features of which were the ethno-territorial (federal) organisation of the USSR and the principle of national self-determination.<sup>10</sup> If the fundamental political achievements of early Soviet indigenisation can be found in the latter two principles, its cultural ramifications, if temporary, were no less seismic, and cannot be adequately summed up by the often-used formula – a promulgation of national cultures in a new, socialist key.<sup>11</sup> Along with

the political and territorial recomposition of the new Soviet land, which entailed a range of genuine nation-building efforts – involving "identifying, classifying, bounding, and in some cases inventing ethnic collectivities" (Blitstein 2006: 275) – the cultural dynamic was in no way auxiliary to the process, but one of its central axes. Indeed, in many of the newly established Soviet republics, questions of language (Soviet Ukraine, perhaps, being the first case in point), or reorganisation of collective memory (the Jewish question or Central Asia), were central to decolonising the formerly disenfranchised imperial subjects.<sup>12</sup> If only for a short period of time, such a diverse range of affirmative policies enabled the Soviet Union to claim "leadership over [...] the inevitable process of decolonization" (Martin 2001: 1), distinguishing the new state not only from the tsarist legacy, but from new European nation-states as well.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the fact that in the initial Soviet decade, the revision of the imperial/colonial past and affirmative policy towards national minorities were central to the legitimacy of the new state,<sup>14</sup> suggests that the emancipatory path from the "prison house of nations" towards the "affirmative

Stalin's aphorism put forward in mid 1930s "national in content, socialist in form" formalises national particularities and reduces them to ethnographic, ornamental features at the expense of more fundamental entitlements, such as rights to education or use of native languages, for example.

12 For a thorough historical coverage of the policy of indigenisation, see Introduction and Chapter 1 in Simon 1991. For a succinct summary of the range of ideas underpinned the policy (from native tongues to the right to self-determination), see Blitstein 2006: 273-293. For an in-depth consideration of the idea of "ethnographic knowledge" and the way in which it precipitated indigenisation, see Hirsch's landmark *Empire of Nations* (2005). For a recent account of the politics of indigenisation with focus on the Caucasus, see Goff 2021.

13 For a comparative discussion of the Soviet achievements in national emancipation during the interwar years, see Kotkin 2001. For a systematic account of the ways in which the new Soviet model positively differed from the hegemonic models of new nation states emerging in the wake of the collapse of old empires, see Brubaker 1996: passim (especially 51) and Slezkine 1994: passim.

14 On the dual ethical/ideological and pragmatic underpinnings of indigenisation, see Simon 1990: 20-61. For a somewhat different but relevant intervention into the debates over Soviet multinationalism and the experience of the former Empire, see Khalid 2007: 123-151.

9 According to Stephen Jones, by the end of the nineteenth century, Georgia, which was at the cusp of modernity, was defined by four key concepts – colonialism, multi-ethnicity, regionalism, and social divisions, all of which were identified by the *terg-daleulebi* (Jones 2005: 29).

10 Sketched out in the "Soviet Resolution on the National Question", the two core principles were passed at the All-Russian Congress of Soviets held in June 1917 in Petrograd, and reasserted in Lenin's polemics with Bukharin at the 8th Congress in March 1919 before being finally adopted at the 10th Party Congress in 1921. That said, the roots of Soviet federalism, if not of indigenisation more generally, are to be found in long debates across the spectrum of the revolutionary movement in Russia, which gained momentum following the revolutionary turmoil of 1905 (Jones 2005: 227-235). For more on indigenisation, see Slezkine 1994: 420-421 and especially Hirsch 2005: 64-65: passim.

11 The formula above fits far better the set of restrictive and assimilatory measures, which began to be applied in the 1930s to diminish the alleged achievements of indigenisation. Indeed,

action empire,” as Martin calls it, was part and parcel of the early Soviet social contract.<sup>15</sup>

## Political Recolonisation and Early-Soviet Georgian Cultural Vernacular

If the short period of independence turned the capital city of Tbilisi into a cosmopolitan “contact zone”<sup>16</sup> in which modernist artists from across the vanishing empire gathered to find refuge from post-Revolutionary and Civil War turmoil (Ram 2007: 63-89), the years following the annexation of Georgia signalled a new stage in the country’s perennial negotiation of its cultural identity. Sovietisation put an end to the development of Georgian modernism’s dialogue with predominantly European cultures, and it brought about the realignment of the national culture with the cultural logic of the early Soviet period.<sup>17</sup> However, Sovietisation did not mark, at least not instantly, the eradication of modernist tendencies in art and culture. On the contrary, in the years following the annexation, Tbilisi became the site of systematic appropriation of avant-garde ideas and practices across artistic media. In a recent evaluation of the variegated manifestations of modernism in Georgia vis-à-vis the national idea, Zaal Andronikashvili has

15 I would certainly limit this claim to the period preceding the start of the first five-year plan, the moment in which the Soviet authorities’ “ethnophilia” (Slezkine 1994: 415) began to cede and give way to the growing centralisation in a variety of forms: political (party centralisation and extreme cult of personality), socio-economic (industrialisation and collectivisation), cultural (folkloric, rather than substantial markers of people’s identities).

16 The term “contact zone”, which was introduced by the American critic Mary Louise Pratt to denote a social space “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (Pratt 1991: 34) and reappropriated by Harsha Ram to describe the cross-cultural emergence of modernist poetry in Georgia, may offer an adequate framework for understanding the relationship between the incipient Georgian avant-garde culture and the overwhelming influx of its Russian forerunners.

17 On the shaping of Georgian modernist poetry in dialogue with Russian and European influences, see Ram 2014 and Chikhradze 2014.

asserted that this final and most prolific iteration of Georgian modernism associated with Futurist and Constructivist avant-garde movements was “critical of national heritage” and “tolerant towards the Soviet project” (2022: 85).<sup>18</sup> This argument holds true to the extent that one takes for granted the principal “governmentality”<sup>19</sup> of Soviet cultural production *tout court*, which is especially valid in context of the earlier discussion of the reclamation of the national discourse from its dual articulation characteristic of the colonial context. Indeed, rooted in the strategy of indigenisation, the cultural logic of the early Soviet years did not create preconditions for the notion of autochthonous national discourse to take shape. However, the claim is nevertheless generalising as it leaves out of consideration a powerful, if rare, stream of decolonial discourses to which the rest of the paper will be dedicated.

It is in this multifaceted historical context, marked by the rise of avant-garde culture on Georgian soil, in the wake of the country’s recent annexation, with the vivid memory of imperial subjugation and the unfulfilled dream of a nation-state, that the name of Nikoloz Shengelaia, the protagonist of the subsequent, central part of this paper, achieves cultural prominence for the first time. His 1924 manifesto “The Georgian Circus” ( 1924: 43-44) called for the reinvention of theatrical language through para-theatrical forms; a move that could hardly be seen as original by anyone at the time. Indeed, although restating and blending contemporary

18 According to Andronikashvili, the three historical stages in Georgian modernism are: 1) “national modernism” of the 1910s, represented by Symbolist and Expressionist art and poetry; 2) the international Tbilisi avant-garde of the Democratic Republic years, which included various avant-garde movements and the work of the Zdanevich brothers, and 3) Soviet Georgian modernism, which manifested itself in a range of revolutionary avant-garde movements and art-forms, such as Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism in literature, visual art, and cinema (Andronikashvili 2022: 78).

19 The term “governmentality”, which emerges as a combination of the concepts of “government” and “rationality”, is used here with reference to Michel Foucault’s discussion of society’s actions aimed towards “educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs”. See Foucault 1991: 103-104; Murray Li 2007: 275.

discussions on modern theatre,<sup>20</sup> Shengelaia's programme pleads for folk creativity and, in so doing, links the avant-garde concept of mass/collective authorship with traditional practices. In contrast with the metropolitan (constructivist) avant-garde, which looked up to industrial production as a model to append artistic creativity, Shengelaia calls upon traditional cultural forms (sazandari ensembles,<sup>21</sup> acrobatic horse riding, and so on) – a gesture that circumvents the hegemony of metropolitan (which means markedly Russian and Soviet) avant-garde discourses and foreshadows, if not outlines, a different, vernacular mode of cultural production.<sup>22</sup> The subsequent part of the discussion will move to the moving image and point at the ways in which some of the central concepts of (metropolitan) avant-garde, such as material, object, or fact, were engaged by early Soviet Georgian cinema to create a cultural vernacular reflective of the Georgian national condition.

Despite the fact that the avant-garde circles in 1920s Tbilisi shared the modernist fascination with the propensity of the moving image to capture the fleeting and kaleidoscopic nature of human experience, the path to vernacularisation of avant-garde concepts by the emerging Soviet Georgian cinema was not instantaneous.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in aesthetic terms,

20 In addition to the dominant narratives at the time, Meyerhold's biomechanics and Foregger's theatrical-physical training [tefiz trenazh], Shengelaia's ideas directly draw on the thematic block "Theatre and Circus" published in the first double issue of the international journal *Veshch. Gegenstand. Objet* with contributions by Valentin Parnakh, Fernand Divoire and Céline Arnaud (Lissitzky and Ehrenburg 1922: 23-25)

21 Sazandari [] ensembles usually consisted of two string instruments and a drum and were a characteristic feature of bohemian life in the Caucasus, Georgia in particular.

22 Originally a language-related concept denoting the adaptation and modification of literary language in practical everyday use, the term "vernacular" is here used to indicate the appropriation of metropolitan cultural discourses by culturally distinctive non-metropolitan groups. For Rebecca Gould, the term vernacular refers to a representation that is "grounded in local context". (Gould 2014: 363 n. 5)

23 The contributions to the futurist journal H2SO4, from Shengelaia's already mentioned "The Georgian Circus", to the poetry and critical writings by Pavlo Nozadze, Niogol Chachava, Simon Chikovani and others, are replete with references to the film medium (H2SO4: passim). Also see Tsipuria 2011: passim.

the incipient cinema of the Soviet Georgian republic offered little more than reappropriation of the styles of pre-revolutionary Russian cinema, and, more often than not, the Georgian films of the 1920s revolved around simplified historical adaptations and they relied on abundance on ethnographic clichés. In the words of Aleksandre Duduchava, a member of the Georgian branch of RAPP, the films of the Studio's foremost directors, Vladimir Barskii, Ivan Perestiani, or Amo Bek Nazarov, represented nothing but a "georgianised Khanzhonkovism" [ogruzinivshaia khanzhonkovshchina] (Duduchava 1933: 2). In one of his first published pieces, the young critic and, in the decades to come, leading Soviet cinematographer and director Mikhail Kalatozov, accused the Georgian directors and screenwriters of producing historical narratives that were not ideologically sound [shatkii] and bemoaned their lack of a "materialistic" view of history and "dialectical" organisation of the narrative (Kalatozov 1925: 1). So, the shedding of oriental excess, a dialectical organisation of the narrative and a different, more active treatment of history will remain a priority task for the new generation of Georgian filmmakers, all of whom belonged to the Tbilisi avant-garde milieu and who were waiting for the opportunity to enter the industry.

While Nikoloz Shengelaia made his cinematic debut in 1926 by writing a screenplay for Kote Marjanishvili and Zakaria Berishvili's production *Samanishvili's Stepmother* / (Soviet Union), another event took place in the same year that would change the course of Georgian Soviet cinema. In 1926 the Tbilisi studio became host to the leading members of the Sovkino ensemble – Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Tret'iakov, and Viktor Shklovskii among them, who were assigned a production *Locomotive B-1000* / *Parovoz B-1000*.<sup>24</sup> The production abruptly came to an end, but a series of lectures delivered by Kuleshov and

24 Tret'iakov's screenplay has not been preserved, but Kuleshov's shooting script has (Kuleshov 1988: 356-370). The production was stopped for unknown reasons after which Kuleshov and Kalatozov were arrested by the local OGPU. Upon their release, apparently at Maiakovskiy's intervention, Kuleshov

Tret'iakov on a range of subjects, from screenwriting to montage and other aspects of production, and the creative community established between them and their younger Georgian peers had a lasting impact on the film culture in the Georgian capital (Kuleshov 1989: 132; Tsereteli 1968: 24).<sup>25</sup> Later that year Shengelaia and Kalatozov would be brought together in a production titled *Giuli* (1927, Soviet Union) – Shengelaia as a co-director (with Lev Push) and Kalatozov as the cinematographer. Based on an 1899 story by Shio Aragvispireli,<sup>26</sup> *Giuli* centres upon a young Muslim woman who falls in love with a poor Christian (Mitro) to be ostracised and punished by her community. Set in the multi-ethnic region of Borchaly in the late imperial period, the film ostensibly highlights the inability of the feudal society to rise above traditional customs and confessional divides. In actuality, the film juxtaposes the backwardness of tribal ethics and feminine desire, while failing in its task to render individual affects as indices of progressive and/or regressive social forces. Equally, the film does away with ethnic particularities and social/class differentiation, both of which are implied in the film's narrative. *Giuli*'s lover Mitro is a poor Georgian craftsman, *Giuli*'s father, who is forced to marry his daughter to a wealthy old widower, is a poor peasant, and Mitro's friend Ovanes is an Armenian merchant. The film uses these features practically as empty signifiers, without assigning to them any social significance. However, in terms of its visual rhetoric, the film represents a step forward insofar as it deploys a broad gamut of shot sizes. Most significantly, the cinematography in *Giuli* reveals in close-up shots, which are used prolifically and, reportedly, are the first close-ups in Georgian cin-

was reluctant to continue and decided to leave the set. For more details on the event, see Kuleshov 1989: 132.

<sup>25</sup> As is well known, Tret'iakov produced four screenplays for Goskinprom Gruzii (*The Blind Girl* / [*usinatlo*], *Eliso* / , *Khabarda* / , *Salt for Svanetia* / [*dzhim shvante*]). Shklovskii produced one – *The American Woman* / [*amerikanka*], directed by Leo Esakiia in 1930.

<sup>26</sup> Georgia born and educated in Congress Poland, Shio Aragvispireli [ (1867 – 1926)] made his name in the 1890s with socially and nationally conscious writings, initially short prose fiction and later dramatic works.



Fig. 1: Loosely integrated close-up in *Giuli*.

ema (Amiredzhibi 1978: 44). Nevertheless, these details strike the viewer as a mannerism without purpose – the type of approach to cinematography that would soon be subject to criticism by Kalatozov himself.<sup>27</sup> A case in point may be found in the effective, but subsequently irrelevant visual introduction of an auxiliary character Ovanes with a series of close-ups showing his shiny boots and pocket-watch (Fig. 1), which are only parenthetically relevant for the character building (indicating flamboyance or laziness). Likewise, in a close-up that will later be mirrored in *Eliso*, two open hands next to each other supposedly foreshadow, but effectively sensationalise and obscure, the scene of an attempted rape of *Giuli* by her elderly husband (Fig. 2).

Of relevance for the subsequent discussion, rather than connecting synecdochically parts and wholes, close-ups are viewed in *Giuli* as isolated elements, presenting the characters as mere surfaces and their natural, organic features as an excess. This disembodiment of ethnic, social, or individual features prevented the aesthetics of *Giuli* from achieving a narrative unity of the individual and the social, the affective and the political. Lastly, and somewhat paradoxically, this disembodied aesthetics associates *Giuli*, the first creative unity of Georgian avant-garde filmmakers, with the colonial

<sup>27</sup> In his short programmatic article "Methods of Screening" ["- "] published in the 1928 issue of the journal *Memartskheneoba*, Kalatozov insists that the camera position must not only adorn, but "fit the structure of the theme" (Kalatozov 1928: 36).

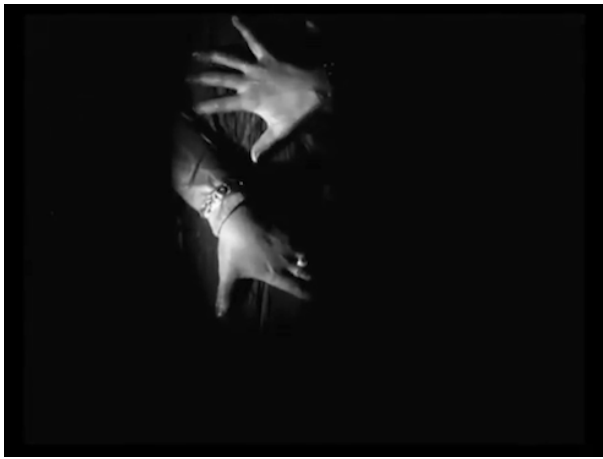


Fig. 2: Close-up without narrative function in *Giuli*.

imagination of the Caucasus – where the imagined world of the colonial conquest emerges as an unmotivated, disengaged cluster of affects and ideas. Shengelaia's partnership with Sergei Tret'iakov in his proper directorial debut *Eliso* will change this practice fundamentally.

### *Eliso* and the Rhetoric of Decolonisation

Filmed in the early months of 1928 and officially premiering on 23 October 1928 in Tbilisi,<sup>28</sup> *Eliso* was based on the 1882 novella written by the Georgian writer Aleksandre Qazbegi. The very choice of the literary source speaks of the film's intended aims. Qazbegi's work, which centres upon an unlikely romance between the Chechen woman Eliso and her Georgian lover Vazhia, is set in the North Caucasus in the 1860s, at the time of the deportation of the Chechens to the Ottoman Empire, a move that marked the brutal ending of the Russian Caucasus campaign. Just like Iliia Ch'avch'avadze and the tergdaleulebi generation, Qazbegi had no illusions about the emancipatory potential of the Russian Empire and knew that the true barrier to Georgian freedom was the imperial policy that pitted Georgians against other non-Christian peoples of the Caucasus, hoping

28 *Eliso* was shown for the very first time in Moscow on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September 1928 to a closed audience of the Society of the Friends of Soviet Cinema, an ARK-supported voluntary film society.

to bind Georgians together with Russia by relying solely on the two nations' unitary faith.

In the novella Qazbegi introduces Eliso as the daughter of Anzor, Imam Shamil's famous naib/associate (a line that is occluded in the film), which betrays early on the protagonist's and her father's ideological proclivities.<sup>29</sup> Eliso continues her father's battle against oppressors, but she displays a politically more emancipated and inter-confessional form of rebellion. Undoubtedly, Qazbegi's staging of the anti-imperial alliance canvases his national political programme: the alliance between mountain peoples irrespective of their ethnicity and religion against their common oppressor, Russian imperialism. The narrative is also relevant insofar as it foregrounds the paradigmatic agents of the new national programme: simple mountain dwellers who emerge as the epitome of courage and morality<sup>30</sup> while symbolising the non-sectarian nature of anti-imperial alliance of Caucasus peoples.

Tret'iakov's and Shengelaia's screenplay retains the main political theme of the novella, but it significantly departs from various other aspects of the literary original. For example, the film adaptation dispenses with the (neo-)romantic tenor of the novella and strengthens the historical background of the plot, the aspect that is reinforced by the use of original historical documents. In Shengelaia's own words, the discoveries made while researching the regional military archive in Vladikavkaz made him and Tret'iakov reconsider their initial ideas about the film and strengthened their resolve to move the dramatic conflict from the realm of the sensuous to the realm of ideology (Shengelaia 1928: 57). The reader of Tret'iakov's writings on revolutionary art and cinema will no doubt recognise in this instance the *Lef* critic's call for the cinematic art to be based

29 Imam Shamil's rebellion represents an important backdrop against which the central narrative of both the novella and the film unfold – the forced exile of the Chechens in the 1860s – and it also plays an important role in the interconfessional world of Qazbegi's national ideology.

30 On the impact of the cultural and historical context on the shaping of Qazbegi's cultural ideology, see Gould 2014.



on “facts” [fakty] and endowed with “purpose” [naznachenie] (Tretʹiakov 1928b: 26). Along with the opening credits of the film, the viewer is shown the transcript of an original historical document, General Loris-Melikov’s request to the Grand Duke Mikhail Romanov<sup>31</sup> to banish one entire Chechen village in the North Caucasus. By framing their film narrative with a historical document, Tretʹiakov and Shengelaia ameliorate fiction with facts to raise the film’s claim to historical objectivity, thereby reminding the viewer that although the film is taking its cue from Qazbegi’s narrative, it refers to specific moments of the imperial history of the Caucasus.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the conflict between religious traditionalism and sentimental romance, which was central to *Giuli*, becomes secondary in *Eliso*, as a result of which the imperial oppression against the Chechen people becomes the central narrative axis of the film.

Importantly, the sharp focus on decolonialising ideology in *Eliso* did not involve the jettisoning of the real lives of the mountain peoples. On the contrary, the Chechens and the Khevsur highlanders are represented as real historical subjects, whose strivings (from securing pasture for their sheep to plotting secret love encounters) are dictated and reshaped by this central paradigm of the film – imperial oppression. As mentioned earlier, the embeddedness of the “simple Georgian” in historical reality characterises the new national ideal of the second generation of Georgian intelligentsia, of which Qazbegi was also a member. But, the same urge to integrate real history into the narrative was the issue of utmost priority for Tretʹiakov and Shengelaia as well. The new Soviet spectator, Tretʹiakov writes in “Our Cinema”, an article written around the same time as *Eliso*, “does not accept the previous era’s understanding of the historical film as a *costume piece*” (Tretʹiakov 2006:

31; original emphasis); what this “activist” spectator demands instead are concrete historical features of an era and new points of view.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to tempering the film’s neo-romantic overtones with historical documents, Shengelaia and Tretʹiakov’s continue to erode some of the most enduring imperial tropes – the representation of the Caucasus and nature at large in the film, a move best exemplified by the authors’ pragmatic figuration of the mountainous landscapes. As put by Shengelaia himself, it was imperative for the authors to avoid “aestheticisation of nature” (Shengelaia 1928: 57-58);<sup>34</sup> as a result, nature in *Eliso* no longer appears as an autonomous and symbolically pregnant visual sign as it does in Romantic figurations,<sup>35</sup> but it becomes part of a larger semantic field. This gesture, in which nature (and indeed everything else in the film) is configured as part of an ideologically inspired narrative economy is emblematic of Tretʹiakov’s functionalist intervention into early-Soviet debates on content, material, and form. Indeed, around the same time when working on *Eliso* Tretʹiakov became embroiled in a conceptual polemic with his collaborators inside the Lef movement, which led him to formulate a new demand for the reevaluation of artistic sign. In an article “Obrazoborchestvo” / “Iconoclasm” published in 1928 in the last issue of *Novyi Lef*, he rejects what he calls “imuginism” [khudozhestvennaia imazhinistika], the type of expression in art that aims at recipients’ affects and emotions, but pleads for the type of poetic image that would

31 General Mikhail Loris-Melikov was the chief administrator of the Ter Region from 1863-1875. Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich Romanov was the Imperial Viceroy of the Caucasus in 1862-1882.

32 A detailed contemporary account of the events of the 1860s and forced exile of the mountain dwellers of the North Caucasus can be found in Drozdov 1877: passim.

33 According to Tretʹiakov there are two types of spectators in cinema: the “the new Soviet activist” spectator and the “old [...] average spectator”. (Tretʹiakov 2006: 31).

34 The absence of symbolic features in *Eliso* was rightly noted in the film’s first US review (paradoxically, *Eliso* was shown in the United States under the more romantic and supposedly commercial title *Caucasian Love*), which was penned by Mordaunt Hall for New York Times and published in December 1929. *Eliso* is commended for its realism and compared to Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s 1925 documentary *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life*, a film set in post WWI Persia.

35 See for example, the snow-capped peaks of El’brus in Pushkin’s “Kavkazskii plennik” / “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” (1822), or Stepan Nechaev’s anthropomorphisation of the mountain in his 1825 “Vospominaniia” / “Memories”: “Tvoi groznyi tsar’, El’brus velikolepnyi...”

above all else have a cognitive purpose [“v tseliakh poznaniia”]. Instead, the artist’s task “is to affect the intellectual side of the reader” (Tret’iakov 1928: 43). Echoing the avant-garde abolishing of the sensuous aspects of representation in art and foreshadowing what art-criticism would later term the “end-of-art thesis”, this critique of imagology and the assertion that artistic sign becomes a piece of evidence (and that, in turn, a fact/evidence can have artistic value) marks a new stage in the development of avant-garde aesthetics.<sup>36</sup> Significantly for the present discussion, the conceptual shift proposed by Tret’iakov affords a fundamental reframing of the colonial narrative insofar as it facilitates its deterritorialisation from the affective realm to the realm of discourse and ideology.

To illustrate the visual manifestations of this pragmatic, decolonised figuration of the natural landscape, let us take a look at the scene in which the film’s protagonist Vazhia has a brief moment of respite as he narrowly escapes the Cossacks, the executioners of the governor’s banishment decree. As Vazhia is sitting by the mountain creek, the cinematographer Kereselidze, while retaining depth of field, foregrounds the protagonist in a medium shot (Fig. 3) thereby reducing the semantic autonomy of the waterfall to a background fragment and effectively eroding the “mountain sublime” along with its underlying intellectual/ideological correlatives of distance, remoteness from civilisation and passive reflection.<sup>37</sup>

The restriction of the field of vision to Vazhia alone enables the viewer to refocus on the pragmatic and rational aspects of the plot – the mes-



Fig. 3: Functional representation of landscape in *Eliso*.



Fig. 4: Landscape as a site of colonial violence in *Eliso*: forced exile of the Chechen villagers.

sage he passes on to Eliso and her father, the village elder, about the cunning plot of the imperial administration to resettle the tribesmen. Interestingly, Shengelaia points out that the use of nature in *Eliso* was “constructive” [], rather than constructivist [] (Shengelaia 1928: 58), by which he effectively means pragmatic and integrated in the narrative. With this gesture, the aesthetic programme of *Eliso* not only departs from the formalism of Soviet avant-garde, but renders obsolete the concept of disinterestedness in art. Importantly, along with this utilisation of nature, the authors also put forward a call for a radical re-actualisation and reappropriation of history. As a rule, the landscape in *Eliso* is hardly ever autonomous; rather, it is fully integrated in the narrative fabric of the film, like in the figure below, in which the viewer does not even register the geographical reality of the image depicting the mountain canyon (*Eliso* was filmed on several locations in the Akhty region of Southern Dagestan), but his/her eye centres upon the action that constitutes one of the culmination points of the film – the forced banishment of the Chechen village.

36 According to the German art theorist Wilhelm Worringer, in modern (abstract) art, art-works lose their sensuous immediacy, a space is created for reflection, cognitive labour created by the critic, which he calls “thought-images” [Denkbildern] (Maskarinec 145). On Tret’iakov’s position in the trajectory of Soviet avant-garde aesthetics with respect to this statement see Khofman and Shtretling, *passim*, especially 25.

37 First introduced by Edmund Burke in his 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the sublime was defined as a quality that incites a sense of astonishment, usually caused by the quality of greatness.



Fig. 5: Long shot of the Caucasus anticipating the exile of the Chechen aul in *Eliso*.

If there is any symbolism in the use of natural landscapes in *Eliso*, then these could be only interpreted as a direct reversal of the nineteenth-century rhetoric, in which the mountain acted as a sublime rendition of the imperial conquest.<sup>38</sup> For example, the extreme long shot of the Caucasus (Fig. 5), which shows the mountain landscape as distant and foreboding, is prefaced by the intertitle saying “The aul is leaving” and is immediately succeeded by the resettlement scene, in which the entire population of the village is being forced out.

The new, “decolonised” visuality of *Eliso* reconfigures the Caucasus from the site of “ecopoetical sublime” (Gould 2013) to a site of injustice and human tragedy caused by the historically documented event of Russian colonial conquest. In addition to the factographic approach to the film narrative, the decolonisation effect is vitally facilitated by a comprehensive, ideological as well as aesthetic, shift in the angle of vision, in which both the historical events and the enduring topoi of their representation are being revised by the placing of the colonial subject at the centre of vision. This eradication of the ‘colonial gaze’ thus emerges as the essential feature of the representational ideology of *Eliso*, which releases the Caucasus from the bounds of an inher-

38 Ram and Shatirishvili have argued that the concept of imperial sublime had involved two axes – a vertical axis provided by the real “alpine” landscapes of the Caucasus and a horizontal one, in the appropriation of those landscapes by the lyrical subject and often achieved by “personifying the empire as a kind of human colossus who bestraddled and surveyed his domain much as Gulliver would have seen Lilliput” (Ram and Shatirishvili 2004: 9-10, *passim*).

ited discourse – as a romantic site of excess, which instils both horror and awe, invites mastery and domestication. Instead, the Caucasus of *Eliso* emerges as a historically real site of human suffering and struggle. Unlike in *Giuli*, the colonial subjects in *Eliso* are immersed in a real historical context: although without any social authority, these colonial subjects are endowed with agency by virtue of being the actors of history. It was this decision to show the colonial subject as an agent of history that enabled the authors to avoid the pitfalls of ethnographic representation: the eye of the camera in *Eliso* is not engaged in participant observation of pre-conceived colonial subject defined by their (assumed) ways of life, in isolation from the real course of history. To quote Tret’iakov again, this time from the article “Industry Production Screenplay”, the historical and socio-economical realia should not only accompany the plot, but transform it and “define a new type of human relations” (Tret’iakov 2012 [1928]: 137).

To further explicate the strategy of de-colonialising representation in the film, attention should be drawn to the reconfiguration of another colonial trope in the representation of the Caucasus and its peoples – their music and dance. At a purely iconographic level, the figures below display the most obstinate anthropological topos – the people of the Caucasus engaged in their affective pursuits, such as singing and dancing. However, in the metric and rhythmic<sup>39</sup> montage sequence, which displays a rapid succession of shots, the short cuts of the dancing mountain dwellers are repeatedly intercut and juxtaposed with the images of their fellow villagers building a house for a young widow.<sup>40</sup>

39 Here I am referring to Sergei Eisenstein’s definition of rhythmic montage as a sense of rhythm achieved in a film not only by the correlation of shots of specific physical length (“metric montage”), but by the interaction of shot length and narrative content (Eisenstein 1988 [1929]: 186-188). While Eisenstein will pen down these concepts about a year after *Eliso* was completed, Shengelaia’s and especially Tret’iakov’s personal and professional exposure to Eisenstein’s work is widely known.

40 In this scene, the past (through collective effort of the villagers) resurfaces in the mind of the contemporary viewer through the Soviet practice of collective labour. Tret’iakov embraced with enthusiasm the idea of collective labour and he



Fig. 6: The non-ethnographic representation of national customs in *Eliso*.



Fig. 7: Productivism of everyday life in *Eliso*

To be sure, the dance-house building scene, as well as the film overall, are not stripped of the ethnographic elements. A range of traditional dance patterns performed by the Chechen villagers are all carefully choreographed and utilised in the film with some fluidity<sup>41</sup> to underscore the main political message of the film – proximity of, and solidarity between the oppressed nations of the Caucasus irrespective of their tribal and religious divides. The way in which the film re-actualises Qazbegi's anticolonialism and his call for a pan-Caucasus unity against imperial rule is also indicative of Tret'iaikov's call for historical narratives to re-actualise historical past histories: as indicated earlier, Tret'iaikov's new viewer

even spent some time at early Soviet collective farms in the 1920s. In the first years after the Revolution, the system of collective farms revolved around cooperatives in which private property over land and livestock mainly dominated over joint ownership. Indeed, the structure of the aul Verdi, where the action of *Eliso* is set, could be thought of resembling what used to be called *artel'*.

<sup>41</sup> The examples of ethnographic accuracy are plentiful: for example, Vazhia is dressed in a traditional Khevsureti costume, he is carrying a characteristic round shield ( ). Set designer on the film was the Georgian painter Dimitri Dito Shevardnadze (1882-1937), a key figure in the modernist art movement in Georgia and founder of the Society of Georgian Painters.

wants to see the past as a “springboard of history” (Tret'iaikov 2006: 31). And, indeed, rather than excavating the colonial context of the 1860s, the film reframes Qazbegi's call for inter-ethnic solidarity in the Caucasus in the arguably emancipatory context of the 1920s.<sup>42</sup> The overarching ideas of purposefulness and rootedness of human actions in real social conditions de-ritualise life practices and, as pointed out earlier, re-signify an ethnographic genre scene into a historically significant human activity.<sup>43</sup> Pleading for a revision of the (psychologically and dramaturgically defined) categories of representational art, such as the character (*personazh*), or narrative construction, Tret'iaikov's puts forward the idea that socialist art should be approached above all from the point of view of its purpose/function (Tret'iaikov 2006: 32).

The significance of the dance in the film for the representational ideology of *Eliso* exceeds the above-mentioned deconstruction of ethnographic clichés. Although rarely subject of any debates on *Eliso*, the rhythmic structure of the film and the way in which it facilitates the transmission of realia of everyday life remains a major feature of its novel mode of telling. Here, by cinematic rhythm, I do not just mean the effect achieved by the emphatic and effective use of metric or rhythmic montage, but the effect achieved by a complex unity of time, space, and action in a film. For the French Marxist philoso-

<sup>42</sup> Although it must remain outside the scope of this article, Tret'iaikov's call for an active historical reconstruction brings to mind Walter Benjamin's concept of “Jetztzeit” put forward in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). For Benjamin, “Jetztzeit” is the historical “time filled by the presence of the now”; in other words, a realised moment of the past in which history reaches its moment of fulfilment to reveal itself as a new possibility (Benjamin 1968 [1940]: 261). The theses were written towards the end of Benjamin's life in 1940, years after he became familiar with Tret'iaikov's writing through the intercession of Brecht, which productively resulted with his article “Artist as Producer”.

<sup>43</sup> The assessment of this scene by the astute Soviet critic Miron Chernenko as the only part of the film in which Shengelaia departed from the “ascetic” approach to the narrative to give to the viewer a sense of everyday life in a Caucasus village was only partly accurate at best. The alleged “ethnographic scrupulousness” and “camera curiosity” in this scene were in fact the case studies of productivism in action (Chernenko 1988: 119).

pher Henri Lefebvre, rhythm is the central category through which life is organised, as rhythm appropriates and brings together the axes of time and space as well as the ineffable flow and expenditure of energy (Lefebvre 2004 [1992]: 15). Thus expressed, the rhythmic unity of life-as-it-unfolds captures life not in abstract, but in what Lefebvre calls “lived temporality” (ibid.: 21). The ideas of life unfolding, or that of actuality, presentness, are most coterminous with both the rhetoric and the ideological ethos of *Eliso*, the film that seeks to re-live the historical moment on different, dynamic terms, beyond the deceptive and false transparency of ethnographic representation.<sup>44</sup> The rhythmically achieved totality of the film immerses the subjects of representation in the totality of real-life practices, making them real “living people” (as Tret’iakov would have it – “zhivoi chelovek”)<sup>45</sup> without effacing their identities, but avoiding their essentialisation and ossification in ethnographic representation.

## Conclusion

By revising the melodramatic, lyrical, and proto-realist dimensions of the literary original,<sup>46</sup> *Eliso* marks a major intervention in the visual representation of the Caucasus narrative. The most salient intervention into the representational ideology of the Caucasus can be found in the amendment of the ethnographic mode of telling, the move that was performed by a radical change in the ways of seeing

the colonial subject, whereby the latter is no longer perceived as a captive of their own customs, but is involved in the actual course of history. The mechanisms by which this actualisation of the colonial self was achieved were the introduction of a real historical context in the film and a revised, purposeful, and transferrable treatment of ethnographic material. It is by using these strategies that the key political message of the film was achieved: the constitution of the colonial subject as an indigenous political subject by virtue of his/her participation in actual historical events, rather than on the grounds of ethnographic representation. In other words, the message of the film is that what transforms the colonial subject into a political subject is the role they play in concrete historical circumstances, rather than on the ethnographic imposition of their identity. Importantly, this final achievement, the cinematic production of political subjectivity in the colonial Caucasus, reveals a more complex relationship between the film and Aleksandre Qazbegi's original text. While the film certainly marks a departure from the atmospheric-realist/retro-romantic<sup>47</sup> style of the novella, it corresponds in great deal with Qazbegi's “vernacular nationalism”,<sup>48</sup> the central feature of his national ideology, as well as with the national programme of the post-1860's national intelligentsia in Georgia.

Finally, the decolonisation aesthetics in *Eliso* displays a unique synthesis of avant-garde critical tools and traditional cultural forms. The former is expressed most notably in Sergei Tret’iakov's aesthetics of productivism and factography and in the authentic implementation of cinematic montage. We see the latter in the dynamic reactualisation of

44 In another elucidating moment, Tret’iakov defines exotic representation as “organic opacity /misunderstanding [organicheskaia neponiatnost’]” whose “false significance manifests itself through its external charms [...] hiding its predatory fangs or blind lazy eyes (in “Kak ia rabotal nad ‘Stranoi A-E’”. *Nashi dostizheniia* 4 (1933), 94; quoted in Khofman and Shtretling 2020: 20).

45 For a thorough discussion of the concept of “zhivoi chelovek” in Tret’iakov and within Lef circles, see Wurm 2019: 183–208.

46 Interestingly, classical categories, such as “tragic”, “epic”, and “lyrical” dominate most contemporary reviews of *Eliso* in the Soviet press, which is indicative of the misunderstanding of the film's decolonial intervention in the Caucasus narrative. See for example Ermolinskii 1928 and Os 1928.

47 I am borrowing the term “atmosphering realism” from Erich Auerbach who applied it to Balzac's prose to describe the organic unity between characters and their environment. For Auerbach, this feature of Balzac's narrative style was characteristic of the writer's romantic “intellectual attitude.” (Auerbach 473)

48 By “vernacular nationalism” Gould refers to a specific type of prose fiction developed by Qazbegi, which enabled him to render the everyday lives of his protagonists, Georgian mountain dwellers – “their ways of speaking, thinking, and their everyday tribulations.” (Gould 2014: 371)

the past, that is, in the repeated call for justice and freedom for the oppressed. In view of the complexities in the first decade of Georgian Soviet history, the vernacularisation of Soviet modernity and re-actualisation of nativist cultures in *Eliso* propose a paradoxical and perhaps utopian cultural synthesis in which, to reverse Pratt's definition, disparate cultures meet and grapple with each other without domination or subordination.

Dušan Radunović  
Durham University  
dusan.radunovic@durham.ac.uk

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## Bio

Dušan Radunović is Associate Professor in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham, where he teaches Russian social and cultural history and film studies. Radunović has published in a variety of subjects from intellectual history to critical and film theory (Bakhtin, Formalism, Eisenstein, avant-garde cinema). He is the author of a monographs on the genesis of the concept of form in the twentieth-century Russian humanities (forthcoming) and on Mikhail Bakhtin (in Serbo-Croat, 2012) and is a co-editor of the volume *Language, Ideology, and the Human: New Interventions* (Routledge, 2012). His monograph of the concept of form in twentieth-century Russian humanities is being prepared for publication.

Radunović's other interests include ethnographic cinema, east-European film modernism and the archaeology of the film medium.

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