

DIALOGUE

**A CONVERSATION WITH
THE GEORGIAN FILMMAKER ON
THE ORIGINS OF HIS FILMS,
HIS FIRST TEACHERS AND
SOVIET CENSORSHIP**

MARLEN KHUTSIEV

How it all began

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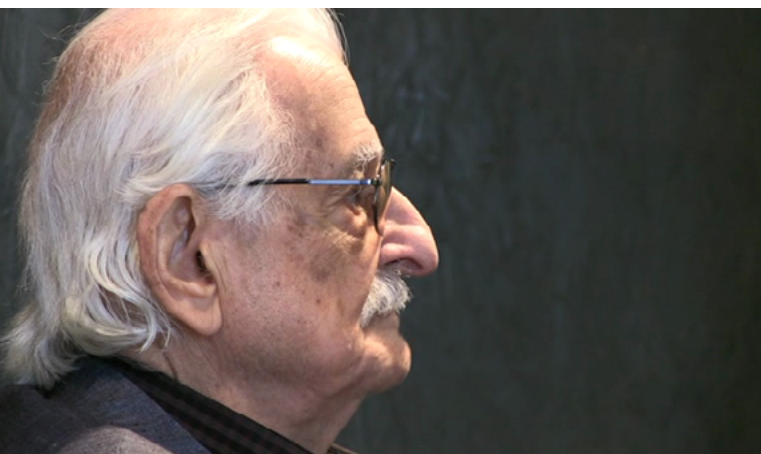
HOW IT ALL BEGAN

CARLOS MUGUIRO

INTRODUCTION

Marlen Khutsiev and Luis Buñuel shared the Special Jury Prize at the 1965 Venice International Film Festival for the films *I am Twenty* (Mne dvadtsat let, 1965) and *Simon of the Desert* (Simón del desierto, 1965), respectively. As would occur again towards the end of the 1980s, for a Soviet film to be awarded a prize in a major international competition at that time was somewhat predictable when certain cultural geopolitical variables, in this case support of the *Soviet thaw*¹, always significant factors in the outcomes of events of this kind, are taken into consideration. *I am Twenty*, however, was far from an exponent of the Soviet regime's newfound open-mindedness with regard cinema. On the contrary², publicly lambasted by none other than Soviet Communist Party First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev himself and subsequently truncated, stripped of its original title (*Ilyich's Gate*) and released, let us say, *anachronistically*, the film was already a cinematographic symbol of the end of Khrushchev's *Ot-tepel*³ well before it reached Venice.

During that week at the end of August, Khutsiev found himself mingling with the likes of Satyajit Ray, Miloš Forman, Luchino Visconti, Arthur Penn and Jean-Luc Godard, some of the most illustrious names in the film world. The mere presence of Buñuel's name alongside his own on the prize winners list was a form of recognition singularly close to the heart of the 40-year-old filmmaker. As slight in build as Buñuel himself and Georgian by birth, Khutsiev had been a member of the first class to graduate from the VGIK after the war and had already made two films considered true emblems of the Thaw period: *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (Vesna na Zarechnoy ulitse, 1956) and *The Two Fedors* (Dva Fyodora, 1959). His talent was of a kind not commonly found in the USSR, capable of capturing the intensity of life and transcending it as just a handful of modern Western filmmakers were able. Indeed, despite so much being consigned to the cutting-room floor, the scenes in *I am Twenty* still managed to retain a vital force which no amount of re-editing could eradicate. Be that as it may, the award lent legitimacy to a



Marlen Khutsiev (photo: Sergio Oksman)

mutilated film which, from then on, would always exist as an incomplete reality referring to another, *Ilyich's Gate*, which became, in turn, a *phantom movie*. Much of the history of Soviet cinema should be interpreted on the basis of this dual parameter of analysis, as defined by Naum Kleiman: the films made and the films never seen, the two being inextricable. The films and their phantoms. The history of *I am Twenty/Ilyich's Gate* conforms to this dualism⁴. All the controversy aside, the award failed to consecrate Khutsiev in the eyes of Western critics and, thanks in part also to his age and the emergence of a new generation of Russian filmmakers, he gradually faded into a somewhat remote, spectral figure.

In 2013, on the occasion of its 70th anniversary, the Venice Film Festival commissioned 70 short commemorative films by different filmmakers identified with the event. Khutsiev's healthy longevity meant not only that he was able to contribute to the celebrations with a short, ironic film about an imaginary encounter between Chekhov and Tolstoy, but also that, rather bewildered, he found himself thrust once again into the international limelight and *re-discovered* by many Western critics. Until then, and following Venice in 1965, Khutsiev's appearances, for example at the Berlinale in 1992 and the La Rochelle Film Festival in 2005, had been sporadic and

somewhat low-key. Not even with the advent of *Perestroika* (which opened the door to the distribution of many Soviet films in Europe, including those of Aleksei Gherman, and also saw a new version of *Ilyich's Gate* being made available) did the figure of Khutsiev kindle the interest of the media or movie buffs. However, in the years following his reappearance in 2013, thanks, in part, to the systematic efforts of certain critics, such as the Russian Boris Nelepo, Khutsiev became the subject of dozens of tributes and retrospectives at festivals (including Locarno, where he also received a Lifetime achievement Leopard, Mar del Plata, Mexico's FICUNAM and GoEast in Wiesbaden), in cinematheques (The Museum of Modern Art —MoMA— in New York, the Filmoteca Española in Madrid, the Cinemateca Portuguesa or the Arsenal in Berlin) and at universities, such as Cambridge and University College London.

The conversation reproduced here was held in May 2014 in Madrid, when Khutsiev was invited to the Imaginaindia festival. The great barrage of retrospectives and tributes, of which the 2015 Locarno festival can be taken as the high point, was yet to come, but even so the filmmaker was already bemused by all the sudden interest in his work. "I've just come from England and am flabbergasted; I'm astounded there is so much interest in my films. I have never been in Spain before... I have practically not travelled at all. They didn't send me to any festivals, you understand. I went to Venice once. A secretary of the Communist Party insisted, so I went. And I went to present *Infinitas* in Berlin. And that's it. I've never been anywhere else. I've not left Russia. But now, on this trip ... I really don't know. Until now I've just got on peacefully with my life, even though I've found it very difficult to work for some time now." The conversation got under way with *I am Twenty/Ilyich's Gate* and led on to other subjects, such as his memories of his teachers or his attachment to painting.

I would like to start with *I am Twenty/Ilyich's Gate*. Much has been written about the controversy it stirred among the highest political echelons, Nikita Khrushchev's speech and the re-edit of the film, but I would like to hear your side of things. To begin at the beginning, can you explain the origin of the film?

All my films have come into being to solve or address a question which took shape in the previous one. This was no exception: *Ilyich's Gate* or *I am Twenty* grew out of *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*. When I was shooting that movie, I felt a very deep sense of nostalgia for Moscow. That's where it came from: nostalgia. I like Moscow or, rather, I liked the Moscow of that period. I had always lived in an old neighbourhood and I used to love wandering around aimlessly. But when I went to work at the Odessa film studio, where I made my first two films, I started to miss the city quite intensely. It may seem strange, but the film was born of that emotional state. That is why, apart from the stories of the characters, the film is Moscow itself. You can recognise me in the rambling walks the protagonist goes on, first thing in the morning or at night.

What you are saying reminds me of Brinton Tench Coxe's words. He wrote that one of the most disconcerting aspects of the film in political terms was none other than your portrayal of the city as a transmuting, cinematic space, reflecting Walter Benjamin's description in his essay *Moscow*, "a kind of animate, protean, transformative presence that can alter its appearance at will" (COXE, 2008: 217). An image of Moscow at odds with the vision of the city as the eternal, sacred centre of the USSR, as Stalinism saw it. On top of this sense of nostalgia, did the film initially have a literary basis?

No. Someone who noticed a certain similarity in the dialogues said that the film was based on Erich Maria Remarque's *Three comrades* (*Trois camarades*), but that is not so. The plot and the pro-

tagonists were mine. The three characters are different portraits of myself. Sergei gives voice to my reflections from the period in which the Thaw took place in our country. He does nothing but think about what has happened and how it has come about, very pensively, from a generational perspective as well, as I did. The second protagonist, Slava, who has a young son, is also me, because I had a small child at that time as well and I used to go out to get milk for him. And



I am Twenty (Mne dvadtsat let, Marlen Khutsiev, 1965)

the third protagonist, Kolia, the most seductive, is ultimately everything I have always lacked. I have always regarded that kind of ease when dealing with women with great envy. I envisaged the film as two long movements, each like a feature film in itself, making sure that there was no ethical conflict in the first one, that is to say, without prejudging anything, showing how people of my age lived, how we fell ill, how spring cheered us up, how delighted we were to meet up and share those years. I needed to immerse the audience in that flow of everyday life and for the internal conflicts to emerge from there. I didn't want to make a sociological or moralis-



I am Twenty (Mne dvadtsat let, Marlen Khutsiev, 1965)

tic film as such formulas were understood at the time, with external dilemmas repeated a hundred times.

All the same, despite not formulating any express ethical or political criticism, the film fell victim of one of the most dramatic cases of censorship of the day. Certainly the case which had the greatest public impact. Khrushchev put the film down at an event held in the Kremlin convened expressly for that purpose and attended by six hundred artists and writers. His words appeared in *Pravda* on the 10th of March, 1963. Khrushchev wrote: "These are not the sort of people society can rely upon. They are not fighters or remakers of the world. They are morally sick. [...] And the filmmakers think that young people ought to decide how to live for themselves, without asking their elders for counsel or help." The film raised questions or concerns about the present which found voice, above all, when the protagonist meets the ghost of his father, who had died in the Great Patriotic War (Second World War). How did you interpret his words?

Indeed, the characters have doubts. In order to clarify this matter for you properly, I have to go back to my childhood, a long time ago. I have to tell you how it all began. Do you mind?

Of course not, go ahead.

Not long ago, someone made me a present of somebody's memoirs in which my mother is referred to as "the beautiful Nina Uteneleva"; that's how they put it. In her youth she must have been an extremely beautiful woman, so I have been told, the greatest beauty in Tbilisi. The "beautiful Nina Uteneleva," note the surname. It was actually Utenelishvili, but they changed it to the Russian style, as occurred after the revolution with other surnames belonging to the *intelligentsia* and aristocrats who adapted to the new circumstances. My grandfather was a teacher in the Cadet Corps, where my uncles also studied. Even when he was retired, he held the rank of General to the Tsar. That's my lineage on my mother's side. But my father was a Communist, even before the revolution. When the Soviets came to power, my mother had to work to make ends meet and that is where she met my father. That's how they got together: my father went to see her parents, pulled out a pistol, put it on the table and said: "If you do not give me your daughter's hand, I'll shoot myself right now, right here in front of you." So they said, "Marry her, marry her right away." And that's how they got married and I was born; I was born of the revolution... My name speaks for itself: Marlen, *Mar* from Marx and *Len* from Lenin. The second episode takes us to when I was 12 years old. The death of my father, though my father didn't simply die. One night in 1937, the NKVD police entered our home and arrested him while I was asleep. I slept in the same room as he did. There was my bed and alongside it there was his, the two right next to each other. But it happened in such a way that I didn't realise. In the morning, I looked over and my father wasn't there. "Where's my father?" I asked. My father lived with another woman then. "He has gone away for work," she replied. True enough, he used to travel around for work, but he had never left like that, in the middle of the night, without saying. At first, I was surprised, but I believed her. Very soon, that sto-

ry started to seem a bit unusual to me, a strange trip, and I started to wonder when he would come back. He never did. I had a fantastic father who disappeared from my bed. I remember him as a surprisingly musical person. He taught himself to play the piano, he played the guitar very well...

That autobiographical dimension is, of course, very important when it comes to understanding the essence of the film.

Yes, but there is a third element you need to know before you can understand it all properly. I've already told you I didn't fight in the Great Patriotic War (Second World War), but I did live through that period and was fully aware of everything that was going on. I was 20 years old when it finished. I lived in Tbilisi throughout the conflict. I went to school there. Not once did I think "What if we lose the war?;" not a single time. Not even when the Germans were on the verge of crossing the mountain pass, when the air-raid sirens went off, did I have the slightest doubt, you know. In December 1943, my mother was on tour with her company. She was an actress and occasionally travelled around Georgia with a theatre group. That's what she was doing at the end of that year. I celebrated that New Year's Eve at home on my own. I bought half a bottle of wine (you could buy it in one of the basements without a ration book), a handful of beans, some onion and that was all. There was no electric light and a little lamp I had made myself was all the light there was. A loose wick threaded through a wire made of hairpins floating in kerosene which provided some light. I placed a mirror in front of me. I served myself wine in a small tumbler, not in a wineglass, toasted my reflection and drank to victory. That's how I spent the night of the 31st of December, 1943. The Germans were defeated in Stalingrad in February.

It's night, an empty bed, the light of an oil lamp, a mirror, your father and you, a time of uncertainty, historically speaking, a farewell that never

took place, the most absolute solitude... And the doubts of a 20-year-old about his place in history. You're recounting the central scene in *I am Twenty*.

Of course, and I'll tell you more. In the *I am Twenty* version, not in *Ilyich's Gate*, when the father leaves, the camera pulls back and pans out to a general scene, and there's a long monologue. He never said those words to me, but could easily have come out with them, just as they sound in the film. He had a good job and his own car. Once, I don't know what happened, but I was running late and my father drove me to school. I asked him to stop at the corner of the street where my school was, so as not to arrive there by car. My father was happy I did that. He was a very unobtrusive, genuine person. Genuine, just how a Communist should be according to the ideals of the time. Do you see what I'm getting at?

I recall the dialogue between Sergei and his father, one of those unforgettable moments in Soviet cinema, not only because of the emotional dimension of Sergei meeting his dead father, but because it possesses the rare ability to condense the historical and generational dilemma of those who did not make, but rather inherited the revolution: the doubts to which you were referring.

- "I want to go on the attack with you, I want to die by your side," says Sergei.
- "That's absurd," replies his father. 'That was our job. Your job is to live, not to die.'
- "Give me some advice then. Tell me what I should do."
- "How old are you?"
- "23."
- "I," says his father, "died twenty-one years ago, so I can give you no advice: I'm younger than you. It is up to you to solve your problems."

My film *Infinity* (Beskonechnost, 1992) came entirely from that scene. It started to take shape while I was working on that movie. All of a sud-



I am Twenty (Mne dvadtsat let, Marlen Khutsiev, 1965)

den one day, the new film came to me as an apparition, all at the same time: the title, the presence of the double, how they meet, the dancefloor scene and even the music that would accompany the sequence, everything except the end. I couldn't work out how to split the older and younger versions of the same character apart again. And much later I came up with that ending in which they're walking along a small brook. At first just one metre separates them, nothing insurmountable, but then it broadens into a great river and the two banks are far apart.

I'd like to return to your childhood a moment. What was your first taste of cinema like?

The first memory I have of cinema is *Chapaev* (Chapaev, 1934), the mythical *Chapaev*, directed by the Vasilyev brothers and with the legendary Borís Babochkin in the leading role. I remember seeing that first film vividly. I must have been nine or ten years old at the most. I have never bothered to pin that memory down exactly, but it was a love for life. *Peter the First* (Pyotr Pervyy, Vladimir Petrov, 1937) also made a great impression on me, although by then I was slightly older and the effect was less marked. But I must say that, though I liked the cinema, becoming a film director never crossed my mind back then. I wanted

to be a painter. I wanted to be a painter with all my heart and I constantly dream of going back to painting, even at my age, and I'm always putting it off... Putting off what I have always most wanted to do. That's not all. I didn't even imagine that you could study filmmaking or that there was a *school for making movies*. But that's where I ended up, at the VGIK, as a result of a number of coincidences.

What was joining the VGIK like?

You have to place yourself in 1945, the year the war ended, the year of Victory, which was precisely the year I started in the VGIK. That year the admission process took place later than usual. They normally did the tests at the beginning of summer, but that time they did them in autumn because the VGIK had to come back from Almaty in Central Asia, to which it had been evacuated, and had to set up in Moscow again. During the war, the entire film industry had moved to Almaty, where the so-called Unified Central Studio was. Remember that Eisenstein shot *Ivan the Terrible* (Ivan Groznyy, 1944) there in Kazakhstan, in Almaty, during the war. When I enrolled, I signed up for Igor Savchenko's classes. I had already seen three of his films, *The Song of the Cossack Golota* (Duma pro Kazaka Golotu, 1937), based on the story by Arkady Gaidar, *Riders* (Vsadniki, 1942), and finally his famous *Bogdan Khmelnitsky* (Bogdan Khmelnitskiy, 1941). Of course, I liked his films, but you can't imagine the extent to which that decision proved providential. Savchenko was an incredibly charming person, with a very expressive body, blond with a lot of hair and very thick eyebrows as well. He spoke with a slight stutter which was most endearing. And from day one, his classes were spellbinding. Let me tell you in detail. Savchenko regularly set us word association exercises to get us used to metaphorical thinking. We would give us a word and we had to invent an association, say what we linked that word with. He taught us to get used to metaphorical thinking. From the very outset, Savchenko showed no

interest in our learning the trade or profession. He wanted to teach us to construct associations, to make metaphorical chains, through images, because art without metaphor, without the ability to create associations, is not art.

Were you taught by Alexander Dovzhenko?

No. Dovzhenko was around, particularly in the first few years, and I knew him by sight, of course, but he taught the screenwriters, he taught dramaturgy. But, to be honest, he didn't seem very nice. You would see Dovzhenko walk by with all the solemnity of that all-important, high-and-mighty filmmaker, but with Savchenko, you could say 'Here's an artist'. He inspired a completely different kind of admiration in me.

Savchenko died on the 14th of December, 1950. Were you still at the institute when he died?

He died at the age of 44, quite suddenly. Yes, he didn't even get to see my final degree project, let alone my films. A huge loss. If you remember, the main character in my first film, *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, was called Savchenko, Sasha Savchenko, precisely as a tribute to my mentor. That's not all. I also called my son Igor after him. Savchenko was my guiding light, but because of his passion and example when it came to film-making.

Did you get the chance to meet Boris Barnet at the institute?

Yes, I did my work experience with him and then worked on the film he shot in Moldova, *Lysana* (1955). He was a very peculiar man. Sturdy, quite tall, he looked like Feodor Chaliapin. There were even rumours that he was Chaliapin's illegitimate son. He looked a lot like him and was just as exuberant in life. And a big drinker too. He was friends with Savchenko; they were great friends. He suffered a lot, there's no doubt about it.

His suicide in 1965 also brings to mind the death of Gennady Shpalikov, the screenwriter of *I am Twenty/Ilyich's Gate*, who also took his own life in 1974.

But Barnet and Shpalikov were not a bit alike, not one little bit. My relationship with Shpalikov was complicated. But for many reasons, I would prefer not to go into that subject. One is the myth which credits him with the authorship of the screenplay for the film *Ilyich's Gate* (*Zastava Iliyicha*), but that was not really so. He simply took part at a certain point, when I fell out with my friend, co-author and classmate because of *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* and, as we had rowed (we had different points of view), he asked us to remove his name from the credits. And so Shpalikov remained in the credits, while Felix Mironer, who should have appeared in the credits of *I am Twenty*, isn't there. Let's move on to another question, please.

Now that you mention Felix Mironer, I would like to go back to the VGIK to talk about your classmates. Draw me a picture of that first group of post-war filmmakers.

As you say, my best friend Felix Mironer was part of that group. We shared a room in the hall of residence and did our final degree project together. My first film, *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, was shot from a screenplay of his as well. I also studied with Alov and Naumov, very famous film directors in our country. And a world-renowned figure, Sergei Parajanov, was also in my year. There were more people, of course, but I'm mentioning the ones who became famous. Grigory Chukhrai and other directors studied in different years. I was great friends with Mikhail Schweitzer, who had already finished studying when I started, because his wife was studying with us. He introduced me to another great director, also from Leningrad, Vladimir Vengerov. That was my circle of acquaintances and friends. I don't know if you are familiar with the work of these filmmakers, but some of their films are extraordinary. They are certainly on my list of favourites: Schweitzer's *Vremya, vperyod!*

[Time, Forward!] (1965), Vengerov's *Rabochiy posyolok* [Workers' settlement] (1966), and so on. Extremely beautiful films. If I widen the circle beyond my friends to other fellow students at the VGIK whose films I still like a lot, I would particularly like to stress Yuli Karasik, an extraordinary director. I strongly recommend two of his films: *Dikaya sobaka Dingo* [Wild Dog Dingo] (1962) and *Shestoe iyulya* [The Sixth of July] (1968), on the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party uprising, with a formidable portrayal of Lenin, completely different and totally unconventional.



July Rain (Iyulski dozhd, Marlen Khutsiev, 1967)

It's very moving to hear you speak of your colleagues. Probably no other director in the world has invited so many directors to take part in his films as actors. Vasiliy Shukshin in *The two Fedors*, Alexander Mitta in *July Rain* (Iyulskiy dozhd, 1967), Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky in *I am Twenty*... They all appear in your filmography. Your films are full of filmmakers.

To be fair, I should say that most of them were still not directors when I directed them or chose them as actors. *The two Fedors* was Vasiliy Shukshin's first appearance on screen. Nobody knew him before that. He acted remarkably well in the film and then he went on to become a very well-known actor, and a director as well. Andrei Tarkovsky, meanwhile, was seven years my junior. He did his work experience with me in the VGIK and in one interview he even said that, while he had studied under Mikhail Romm, it was alongside Marlen Khutsiev that he truly learned to make movies. He acknowledged that, although, true enough, he never said it again... Sometimes I am asked why I gave him such an irritable, unfriendly character to play in *I am Twenty*. It had nothing to do with his personality, but rather his temperament, which fitted in with the physical mould I was looking for. In the scene with the great argument, when he asks the protagonist what he takes seriously in life, you also have the cameraman Fedorovsky; Konchalovsky, who you see for barely a minute; Olga Gobzeva, who is now a nun and was an actress in a provincial theatre back then; Pavel Fil, a writer; and Natalya Ryazantseva, another writer. In short, I wanted living people to be in it and so I made use of the people I knew, and it ended up becoming a sort of involuntary portrait of a generation. My assistants tried quite hard to convince me that I should use professional actors and I even did rehearsals to show them they were wrong. The actors acted out each response mimetically, but those who weren't actors lived it as part and parcel of, let's call it, their everyday world. Their lives were like that. It was a kind of, not exactly experiment, but a new method, at least in the USSR, to make acting more veracious. And, in fact, there is always someone who is not an actor acting in my films. Provided they fit the physical requirements, I like to shoot scenes with people who have never been in front of the camera. The same thing occurred with Mitta. I believe he has always said he was interested in this way

of directing actors and that he decided to accept the role of Vladic because he was interested in improvisation. Allow me to digress here a moment; I learned all this from Neorealism. As soon as I discovered it, it became a fetish of mine: De Sica's *Bicycle thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948), Germi's *Path of hope* (*Il cammino della speranza*, 1950) and other neorealist films. If we're looking for influences, I must mention, without a doubt, the work of Rossellini and all those filmmakers. Later on I came across the art of Fellini. When he came to Moscow for a festival, at the same time as all the problems with *I am Twenty/Ilyich's Gate*, he heard about it and wanted to meet me. So we met up in person, I would even say made friends, because after that I went to his house several times and met Giulietta Masina. I even danced a waltz with her!

Tell me, what do you think of *The Return of Vasil Bortnikov* (*Vozvrashsheniye Vasiliya Bortnikova*, 1953), Vsevolod Pudovkin's last film?

It's an absolutely unremarkable film. No way is it as good as the rest of Pudovkin's work.

I ask because some critics and historians, such as your friend Naum Kleiman, place symbolic importance on the film, a first sign of the changes that were to come in the USSR as of 1956 with the so-called Thaw. In any case, I mention it here on account of the idea of return as an important component of estrangement, that bewilderment which confuses a character when he returns to his home sometime after his departure (or death). A place to which he no longer belongs, but is his home. It is a situation which is repeated in a number of your films. An estrangement which even has a political angle, already evident in *I am Twenty*, with the father who returns and finds that his son is older than he is.

Infinity is about that, certainly. And *Epilogue* (*Poslesloviye*, 1983), but return wasn't the main

theme in that case. The film which conforms to what you describe is definitely *Infinity*. And that is probably down to two things. When they grow old, everyone eventually begins to think: "What is all this? How long do I have left?," and they start thinking about the end of human life, about death. I also started thinking about it and eventually overcame the fear of death, and this film is dedicated to that. And then, and this



Epilogue (*Poslesloviye*, Marlen Khutsiev, 1983)

would be the second reason, man doesn't only return to the places where he has been, but also returns mentally to events in which he did not take any personal part, but have interested him all his life. That's why my protagonist, despite never fighting, suddenly finds himself at the start of the First World War, even though he could never have been there. What can I say? Mentally, I have been here and there as well! As for the Patriotic War, I should have joined up in the last year, but for a number of medical reasons, asthma for starters, they didn't let me. Since then I have felt in debt to my peers, young people like me, who did fight. That's the plain truth! I have always really wanted to make a film about that and didn't do it at the time, but afterwards I shot a documentary called *Lyudi 1941 goda* [*People of 1941*] (2001).

Bernard Eisenschitz referred to the encounter between the past and the present that comes up in some of your films, particularly in *Epilogue*, and summarises what you are explaining.

But it isn't anything mystical, please understand, it is simply to do with memory, with the preservation of the memory of others and what to do with the past⁵. It is as though the film suggests that they will always be alive and you can meet them again. I don't like unadulterated spiritualist pomposity at all, just as I don't like making a show of formal effectism. There are directors who are very concerned that the audience should recognise what they know how to do, how well they have brought it off. I never think about that. All my films are born of reflection and feelings, and that is what I keep in mind. It is something that has accompanied me all my life, it's at the root of what I do. What's more, and I came to understand this after some time, nothing ages in art, particularly our art, as much as that which is built on the priority of form, which is subject to changing fashions. The most important thing is the essence, the internal form, the most important thing in art is man. I don't like pure abstraction. It is like a rug, which can decorate a setting, as pure decoration, but offers nothing to the soul or to the spirit...

In that sense, do you think that, in general, your cinema has been misunderstood or not understood properly?

In our country, the critics are very attentive to what's going on in the West. But speaking about that internal form I'm referring to, no critic has so far paid any attention to one feature which appears over and over again in all my films: I am referring to how they begin and how they end, because they almost never start with something tied in with the plot or in a functional manner. They always begin with a kind of opening, with a long introduction, with the creation of an emotional state, with scenes in which there is not even any text. And then the endings. I am going to tell you, and



The filmmaker, during the interview in Madrid, May 23rd, 2014
(Photo: Sergio Oksman)

don't think I'm boasting, but if any of the Western directors or our film experts had seen the end of *In-finitas*, but shot by a Western director, they would have written and spoken wonders of it, because it is—indeed, I see it as such—a very interesting, metaphorical solution, but in our country they pay no attention to such things. No one has realised that each and every one of my movies—except *The two Fedors*, which ends with a gaze and a remark, a final response—has an emotional ending with a metaphorical meaning. There is no storyline between the main characters in any of the last scenes of my films, not even in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*—the scene in which the wind blows all the papers on the desk into the air—, in *Ilyich's Gate*—the fallen soldiers marching and morning breaking in the city—, or in *July Rain*, with the veterans' reunion, which is also the end of the movie. I have repeated it in all my movies. *Epilogue*, which is based on dialogue, ends with an unexpectedly long pause, with photographs being developed, a storm, the protagonist looking and thinking there is an old man on the balcony opposite. *Infinity* concludes with that story of the river we have spoken about. And the next film I'm going to make, about Chekhov and Tolstoy, won't end with a plot development either. It's going to have a metaphorical ending. I guess it's something I like.



Over Eternal Peace (Nad Vechnim Pakoem, Isaac Levitan, 1894)

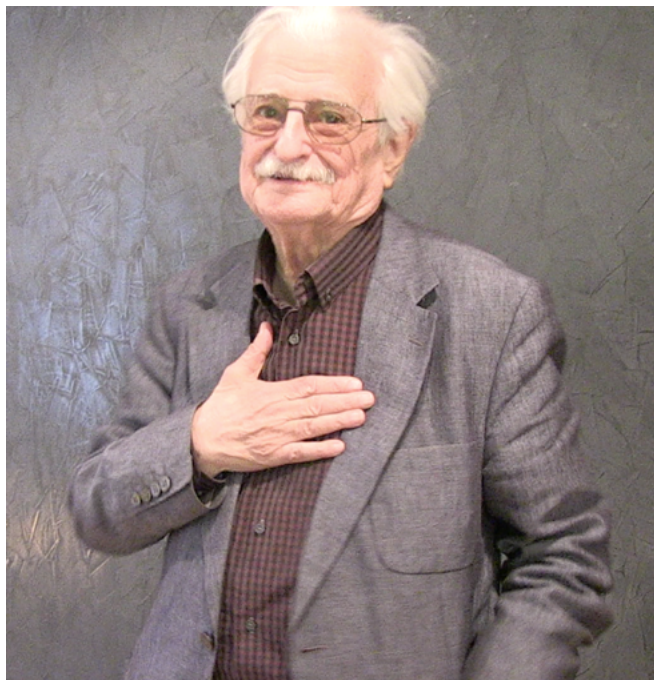
We haven't talked about painting and I think it's important to dwell on the subject, not only because you have always acknowledged that painting was your earliest vocation, but also because of the direct references to pictures and artists that you make in your films. There are quite a few explicit references to the great Russian realist and landscape painting of the 19th century. In *I am Twenty*, for instance, the characters go to an exhibition of the Itinerants, *The rejoicing of the Peredvístzhniki*. In *July Rain*, one of the characters compares a landscape to a picture by Isaac Levitan...

I am very keen on painting, that's right. Russian painting, certainly. Ilya Repin, for example. Repin is a fabulous painter. His portraits are amazing. And Levitan, as you say, as well. There is a place on the Volga, near Kostroma, called Plyos. I was there once and went in search of the place, the exact location, from which Levitan overlooked the landscape and painted his famous painting *Above the Eternal Peace*. I saw it, I stopped right there. And I noted a strange difference: it's just like that, but also a bit different. That was the spot, but in Levitan's picture you get the feeling that the viewer is even higher up. And I understood why. In the picture, in the distance you have the beyond, the clouds, but Levitan crossed those clouds with another small, light cloud, which is lower down.

That small detail generates the feeling of looking over the cloud, as if you were on it. That decision creates the sensation of seeing the landscape from an enormous height. Of the Spanish painters, there are two I like a great deal: Velazquez and, above all, El Greco. And of the Italian masters, Botticelli. Unfortunately, I've never seen the original of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. I went to see it when I was in Milan and everything was closed; a great shame. I'm sure I could look at it for hours. Returning to the subject of landscape, if you notice, in all my films you can see that rotation of the seasons of the year. It even features in the titles: *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, *It was May* (*Byl mesyats may*, 1970), *July Rain*. I know no other way. We live in the real world, in nature, and the passing of the seasons and changes in nature, the wind and the rain encompass my films too. Well, they are no more than features of my own character. After an interview I gave years ago, the journalist chose the title: "I am a contemplator" (Я созерцатель).

Like in Ivan Kramskoy's picture, *The contemplator*.

Exactly, it is something inherent in me. In life in general. We are talking a lot here, but I don't normally talk so much. I am more the silent type. I listen and watch, and yet I don't do it thinking: "Aha, this may come in useful one day." No, it's my natural state in life. Interest in a person, getting to know them. Now for example, I've met you, I've met Dushitsa, the cameraman who is filming us. I look at him and it's interesting to see how absolutely absorbed he is in his camera. That's what I said a moment ago about one of my qualities, about where all this comes from. I said I am a contemplator. Indeed, I am a contemplator. I like dreaming about things, but without focusing too much, thinking, immersing myself in a situation "What if, what would be if such and such happened to me?" And that's how I came up at the time with *July Rain*. It was raining and I took shelter in a phone box and started imagining... What



The filmmaker, during the interview in Madrid, May 23rd, 2014
(Photo: Sergio Oksman)

if a girl came running up? I would give her my jacket, she would rush off, and then we'd start to phone each other...

People who have been touchstones in your life, such as your father or Savchenko, have marked the course of this conversation. I would like to draw it to a close with another of your teachers, Mikhail Romm, who entrusted Elem Klimov and yourself with the completion of his posthumous film *And Still I Believe...* (I vsyo-taki ya veryu..., 1974).

I met Mikhail Ilyich through Daniil Bravitsky, a writer and later a director, who had worked with Mikhail Romm. Through him and through Vasily Shukshin, who had been a student of his. We developed a very good relationship. When Khrushchev criticised *Ilyich's Gate*, particularly the famous scene between Sergei and his father, Mikhail Romm stood up, turned to Khrushchev, who had broken off his speech for an instant, and said: "Nikita Sergeyevich, I understood that scene differently." And he went on talking. So he contradicted



The Contemplator (Sozertsatel, Ivan Kramskoy, 1876)

him in public when everyone was afraid to do that. So yes, I had a very good relationship with Mikhail Ilyich. I remember once when I was shooting a documentary in Paris, he came to pay me a visit and we arranged to meet up. But there was one other supremely important moment in our relationship: he was one of the very first people to see the complete version of *Ilyich's Gate*, the original version, which still went under that name. We were alone in the screening room. He saw the film, we went outside and he stood in silence next to the screening-room door, smoking long and hard. I was nervous. I thought: "Why is he saying nothing to me and just standing there smoking?" After a while, he came up to me and uttered just one sentence: "Marlen, you've justified your life." ■

NOTES

- * My thanks to: Qazi Abdur Rahim, Sergio Oksman, Olga Korobenko, and the Russian Center for Science and Culture in Madrid.
- 1 In 1958, *The Cranes are Flying* (Letyat zhuravli), directed by Mikhail Kalatozov, won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, post-Stalinist Soviet cinema's first major international award. *Ballad of a soldier* (Ballada o soldate) by Grigoriy Chukhrai was awarded a Bafta in 1961 and was nominated for the Oscar for the Best screenplay written directly for the screen. In 1962, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (Ivanovo detstvo) won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. This was the first and most emblematic international endorsement of the new generation of Soviet filmmakers.
- 2 At first, the Gorky Studio, which specialised in films for children and the youth, welcomed and was even enthusiastic about the *Ilyich's Gate* project. According to the studio's report of the meeting held on 16 December 1960 to discuss the project quoted by Artem Demenok in *Iskusstvo Kino* in 1988, the screenwriter V. Solovyev, member of the First Creative Association, in charge of overseeing the film's production, stated that "this is the only screenplay I know that speaks openly, earnestly about our time, about what's really important, what excites us. [...] This is a wonderfully rare thing, and really needed today." (DEME-NOK, 1988: 97, quoted in COXE, 2008). Those attending the meeting shared Solovyev's opinion. However, there was some concern as to how the Ministry of Culture would see things. "If we have to," V. Ezhov explained, "we'll go to Ekaterina Alekseyevna Furtseva (Minister of Culture), and she'll understand it. We'll tell her it's the first profound, real exploration of the question of contemporary life." (1988: 97). After its publication, the Ministry of Culture warned the director of the Gorky studio, G. I. Britikov, that the main problem with the screenplay was its use of an impassive, contemplative tone, rather than the adoption of a more active, civic attitude. According to Josephine Woll (2000: 142ff.), Ekaterina Furtse-

va staunchly supported Khutsiev and, following the first screening, came to his defence when he was criticised, among other things, for the volume of the footsteps of the Red Guard marching down the street at night: "At night," the Chairman of the Ideological Commission claimed, "people should be asleep. Footsteps are that loud only in prison." (KHOPLIANKINA, 1990: 46). Furtseva herself, however, fell victim of the power struggles taking place within the political machine and the party (Woll, 2001). Nikita Khrushchev ultimately nipped the release of the film in the bud after the March 1963 screening. At a public event held in the Kremlin, to which some six hundred artists and writers were invited, the First Secretary of the Communist Party and President of the Council of Ministers accused Khutsiev of, for instance, presenting "ideas and norms of public and private life that are entirely unacceptable and alien to Soviet people [...]. The idea is to impress upon the children that their fathers cannot be their teachers in life, and that there is no point in turning to them for advice." (WOLL, 2000: 146-147). Khrushchev's words, which were in line with the new style manifested in his attack on the corruption of Soviet principles in art at the 30th Anniversary of the Moscow Union of Artists, ultimately marked the fate of the film. *Ilyich's Gate* was never released or distributed. Almost two years later, on the 18th of January, 1965, an abridged, reedited version came out under a new title: *I am Twenty*. Soviet society had changed and it received little attention. Suffice it to say that the film was seen by 8.8 million cinemagoers, a very low number compared to the crowds attracted by the major productions of the day, such as *War and Peace* (Voyna i mir, 1965, Andrey Bolkonskiy), which brought 58 million viewers to the box office (ZEMLYANUKHIN and SEGIDA, 1996: 251 and 72).

- 3. The so-called Thaw that followed Stalin's death took its name from a novel by Ilya Erhenburg published in 1954 entitled **Оттепель** (Ottepel/The Thaw).
- 4. Strikingly, as though staging the scores that cinema had to settle with the past, the plot of the film includes a meeting between Sergei and the ghost of his father,

who died at the age of 20 in the Second World War and, now younger than his son, is unable to answer his questions.

5. Regarding this Bakhtinian take on space/time as applied to Moscow in Khutsiev's work, Coxe has pointed out that "during the studio meeting to discuss Khutsiev's and Shpalikov's literary script in December 1960, Khutsiev remarked that these stones of Moscow's streets remember the generations that have walked them, and that he intended to portray the conversation between Sergei and his father 'as completely real' without resorting to the 'recollections' of a cinematic flashback. This is the very sort of transformation (ремонт) of the present (сейчас) that defines the Moscow text. The past and present merge and blend fluidly without resorting to overused cinematic devices." (2008: 218).

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MARLEN KHUTSIEV. HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Abstract

Born in Tbilisi (Georgia) in 1925 and trained at the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, Marlen Khutsiev is a film director, screenwriter, actor and teacher, and was a significant protagonist of the Soviet New Wave of the 1950s and 1960s. His film *Ilyich's Gate* (*Zastava Ilitsa*, 1965) became an unofficial symbol of cinema during the Khrushchev Thaw due to the problems it faced from the Soviet censors, whose reservations meant that it had to be completely re-edited. The new version of the film was released three years later under the new title of *I am Twenty* (*Mne dvadzat let*, 1965). In this previously unpublished interview, which took place in May 2014, Marlen Khutsiev takes us on a journey through his life and work, exploring his childhood, the VGIK years, the origins of his films and his problems with the Soviet censors.

Key words

Russian and Soviet cinema; Khutsiev; Thaw; Censorship.

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MARLÉN JUTSIEV. ASÍ EMPEZÓ TODO

Resumen

Nacido en Tbilisi (Georgia) en 1925 y diplomado en el VGIK de Moscú, Marlén Jutsiev es director de cine, guionista, actor, profesor y protagonista destacado de la Nueva Ola Soviética de los años cincuenta y sesenta. Su película *La puerta de Ílich* (*Zastava Ilitsa*, 1965) se convirtió en un símbolo no oficial de la era Jrushev debido a los problemas con los censores soviéticos, que obligaron a un nuevo remontaje del film. La nueva versión se estrenó tres años después bajo el título *Tengo veinte años* (*Mne dvadzat let*, 1965). En esta entrevista inédita, celebrada en mayo de 2014, Marlén Jutsiev repasa su vida y su obra, explorando su infancia, los años en el VGIK, el origen de sus películas y los problemas con la censura soviética.

Palabras clave

Cine ruso y soviético; Jutsiev; Deshielo; censura.

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