



## Analyzing History and Themes of Ethnic Groups in Soviet Films

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ABOUT US: As two visual enthusiast fans of Russian culture, we wanted to view and examine certain films from the late Soviet Union. In particular, we looked to investigate the interactions amongst different ethnic groups that are present in Soviet film. In addition to our initial findings, we compared and contrasted our thoughts with scholarly research. The films that we analyzed were *White Sun of the Desert* directed by Vladimir Motyl, *Mimino* directed by Georgiy Daneliya, and *The Color of Pomegranates* directed by Sergei Parajanov.

### WHITE SUN OF THE DESERT

**INITIAL THOUGHTS - The Russian Hero:** Before we watched the film, we were intrigued by the fact that this film was viewed by Russian astronauts. They would watch this film before they headed off to space as a ritual for good luck.

We were also surprised that the leading character of the film exhibited outstanding strength and skill throughout his debut. We were not able to identify any flaws with his



Still from *White Sun of the Desert*. In this scene we see the red soldier protagonist, Sukhov, in action as he is saving the harem women from Abdullah.

character. He is like a superhero that came straight out of a comic book. In the middle of the movie, we instantly thought of Sukhov as a Russian archetype from a Western genre. However, what makes Sukhov special is that he manifests the characteristics of those Western tropes but adds a unique twist to it. He nails the traits of being an action hero by demonstrating toughness, autonomy, aptitude, and collaboration.

Furthermore, other elements such as cruel criminals,

vast landscapes, vengeance, and anarchy appear in this film. These aspects remind us of cowboy film characters such as Ringo Kid and Man with No Name.

When watching the film initially, we perceived him as the cliché hero. He is destined to save those in need and defeat those that get in his way. In our eyes, we view him as a normal individual roaming around the Central Asian country Turkmenistan. Along the way, he saves and befriends the Central Asian person Said. He quickly becomes Sukhov's sidekick

throughout the entirety of the film. He can be best described as an empathetic and generous being. The relationship between Sukhov and Said is unique because it is sincere and warm. Sukhov does not hesitate to help the supporting character. He brings him back to health and provides him the confidence to keep pursuing in his life. This illustrates Sukhov as a Russian hero for the people. He puts his life on the line for the sake of others. When looking into the relationship between Sukhov and Said, we interpreted it as Russia liberating Turkmenistan from a feudal society. Russia is trying to rebuild its power by saving these people.

Similarly to Said, Sukhov is presented as a saviour for the harem women. We were fascinated by how Sukhov treated the women under his care. He displayed tremendous respect



This is a still from *White Sun of the Desert* where the Muslim harem women are shown being led by Sukhov to a safe village

for them. Despite their affections for him, Sukhov does not bear the same feelings. He makes it clear to the women, especially Gülchatai that he has sworn his love and loyalty to his wife. We hardly see this type of charming characteristic of men in Western culture film. Furthermore, the Turkmen women take on the role of damsels in distress. They feel hopeless without a leader to follow. Once again, Russia is trying to take control of Turkmenistan. Sukhov asserts to the women that they remove their burqa. He pushes them to live free

without any restrictions. He wants the women to abandon their Muslim religion.

As for Abdullah, his interactions with Sukhov is different compared to the other characters present in the film. He does not have a friendly relationship with Sukhov. There is tension between them. He is depicted as the greedy villain that taunts the protagonist without any remorse or hesitation. He is the villain that goes to extreme measures to murders people. Abdullah is portrayed as the Basmachi leader that is rebelling against the overwhelming force of Russia.

All in all, Sukhov has met unique people in his journey. Despite not being Russian, Sukhov managed to form warm bonds with these people with the exception of Abdullah. This is evident toward the end of the film as he communicates his experiences to his wife. In general, we



In this still from *White Sun of the Desert*, Sukhov can be seen saving Said and digging him out of the sand.

recognize Sukhov as the Russian hero that dismantles the rebelling Basmachi forces and tries to gain Turkmenistan.

**SCHOLARLY RESEARCH - Analyzing Orientalism Under the Scope :** Upon watching *White Sun of the Desert*, one aspect that we were curious to learn further about is the harem women that Sukhov protects.

We wanted to know why the Turkmen women were depicted as being dependent on their leader. We wanted to understand further the role that they tried to represent in

history. In a journal piece, authors Prusin and Zeman mention in their writing that one of the main points of this film was the Orientalist difference between the Turkmen's cruel view of women and the Russian's civilized view of women. They state the following about the Russian's Orientalist view of the Turkmen women, "The women need to be raised from their backward condition and 'liberated'. Thus, the film plays on the duality of backward vs progressive, traditional vs revolutionary characteristic of the genre" (Prusin and Zeman 2003, 266). This piece of research is very compelling because it is very noticeable to see the lifestyle of the women under the care of two distinct male figures. When they were abandoned by Abdullah, they appeared very quiet and conservative. Most notably, they hid themselves from the audience with their burqas. They hardly had any interactions with other characters. In our interpretation, we thought that neither culture was backward. However, for the new Soviet state the Turkmen culture did not fit with Soviet ideals. It was a bit of a challenge to read their character at first. As the film progressed, the women started to come out of their comfort zone and broke free from their shackles. Under Sukhov's care, they revealed their faces to the audience. They became carefree.

When it comes to the portrayal of Central Asian Muslims, we wanted to know if there was an intended purpose behind it. We wanted to find the reasoning behind the dynamic tension between Sukhov and Abdullah in the film. There has to be a history between Russia and Turkmenistan. In an article written by Michaels, she writes that that film goes above just representing Central Asian Muslims as indolent, naive, or immoral. Michaels describes the following, "But *White Sun of the Desert* goes beyond simple stereotypes to suggest ambivalence in the relationships between colonizer and colonized" (Michaels 2004, 60). This is fascinating because there are other characters that do express the traits that Michaels mentions in her research such as Said. It is intriguing to see the different personas of the same ethnic group interacting with the main character Sukhov.

In addition to these characters in the film, we took great notice to the Turkmen that Sukhov meets in the middle of the film. They appear in the film as old and stiff. They look like lifeless beings. They are definitely different compared to Said and the harem women. We thought these men were in the film for comedic relief. We were keen about one of the men who used a casing of dynamite explosives as a pillow. Not only that, but they were oblivious to all



In this still from *White Sun of the Desert*, Sukhov explains to his wife his feelings toward the people he has met.

that was happening between Sukhov and Abdullah. Yakushenkov describes these people as, “These turbaned locals are just a tribute to the imaginary landscape, since it would be more appropriate for Uzbekistan than for Turkmenistan.” (Yakushenkov 2020, 184). When watching this scene, we did not interpret the men present in this film to be a type of tribute. Based on this, the Turkmen could be represented as outside characters that are merged with the setting, which could explain their cold and idle interactivity.

Upon surveying Yakushenkov's essay, we were able to further understand Sukhov's character on a deeper level. As stated earlier, this film was watched by Russian astronauts before going to space as a sign of goodluck. According to Yakushenkov's writing, it was more than just goodluck. What these astronauts were striving for was to be a hero like Sukhov. Yakushenkov explains, “After all, each of them to some extent imagined himself to be like a comrade Sukhov facing the unknown” (Yakushenkov 2020, 189). This piece of information is able to emphasize how much attention and love that Sukhov receives from the audience. Even for us, we were fond of his character.

## MIMINO

**INITIAL THOUGHTS - The Unexpected Friendship:** We were interested in analyzing *Mimino* because we knew it was directed by Georgiy Daneliya, who was Georgian and a well known director of Soviet films. *Mimino* also caught our attention because the main characters in the film are Georgian and Armenian. We were curious to see how these two ethnic groups are portrayed in the film and how they interact with one another.

In this film, we are first introduced to the Georgian ethnic group through the main character Mimino. As we learn about him and his life in Georgia, we see the beautiful Georgian landscape and get a glimpse of how life is like in Mimino's small village. These scenes were drastically different from the fast-paced Moscow scenes, where most of the movie takes place. One Georgian character that caught our attention in particular was Ivanych, who is Mimino's boss. We noticed how every time Ivanych comes up in the film he is very loud and outspoken and he seems to get annoyed easily. We were wondering if this is a stereotype of Georgian men or if this character was made for comic relief.



This is a still from *Mimino*. It depicts the character Ivanych as he is being loud and is clearly irritated.



In this still from *Mimino*, Kachikyan is giving Mimino advice on asking Larisa out on a date.

The friendship between Mimino and Kachikyan is a big part of the film. It was very enjoyable to watch their friendship develop. We found it silly how whenever Larisa Ivanovna, a flight attendant who Mimino had a crush on, didn't show up for their dates, Mimino and Kachikyan would go together instead. Kachikyan also tried to help Mimino understand the type of family that Larisa comes from and how he should ask to go out with her. Kachikyan even went out of his way to teach Mimino

how to sell a tire to make money and tried his best to find witnesses for Mimino's court appearance. Mimino also showed his care for Kachikyan as we see him buy a green toy alligator, which Kachikyan was desperately looking for. The friendship between these two characters is clearly seen as a genuine friendship, but what makes it interesting is that Kachikyan is Armenian while Mimino is Georgian and we know those ethnic groups have historical background tension. So, it can be said that this type of genuine friendship exhibited in the film would not have been something to expect. Therefore, we believe that showcasing this friendship was intended to encourage Russia's multinational vision.



This still from *Mimino* shows Mimino leaving a store with a green crocodile he bought for Kachikyan.



This still from *Mimino* shows Mimino is at his court hearing denying to previously knowing the man he attacked.

A scene that really stood out to us was the courtroom scene. Mimino was taken to a court hearing after he attacked a man who he was trying to sell a tire to. It seemed that Mimino recognized the man, but at the court hearing Mimino denied knowing the man and denied having a motive for attacking him. It was very clear to the viewer that Mimino recognized the man and did in fact have a reason to attack him, but Mimino was determined to withhold this information. This really surprised us because his lawyer, Svetlana, explained to him that having a reason

would help his case and reduce his punishment. We were really surprised and confused why Mimino would not explain himself. Svetlana ends up finding out how Mimino knows the man and why he attacked him. The man was Mimino's sister's ex boyfriend and he promised to marry her, but after he seduced her he left for Moscow and left Mimino's sister pregnant with their son. Svetlana explained all this during Mimino's court hearing and she did not seem to have a problem with revealing the truth. It lessened Mimino's punishment from years in prison to only a fine. This got us thinking about the possible cultural differences between Georgians and Russians. This could explain why Mimino was reluctant to explain himself, because he would be exposing something personal and maybe that is not seen as appropriate in his Georgian culture.



In this still from *Mimino*, Svetlana, Mimino's lawyer, is explaining what happened when Mimino attacked the man and his reasons for doing so.

**SCHOLARLY RESEARCH - Breaking Stereotypes in Film:** As we dug deeper into researching *Mimino*, we first focused on learning about the Georgian stereotypes and if they were depicted in the film. As mentioned earlier, the character of Ivanych is what inspired us to look this up. What

is interesting is that we did not come across any Georgian stereotypes describing them as loud and easily annoyed, which was the impression we got from Ivanych. Instead, “Georgians are portrayed as hospitable; they love feasting, drinking wine, restaurants, [and] wasting money” and we do in fact see in the film (Miresashvili n.d., 3). Mimino is shown to have all these characteristics. All the dates he planned to have with Larisa were extravagant. He wanted to take her out to dinner with dancing and he also tried to take her to the opera. Mimino did waste money on these dates since she never showed up, but Kachikyan taught him how to make some money from selling a tire and later in the film Mimino tries to sell a watch. It is very interesting how we did not notice these characteristics as stereotypes, but the characteristics we did notice and thought maybe could be stereotypes were not.



This is a still from *Mimino*. It is taken from when Mimino and Kachikyan are dancing together at a restaurant.

We also looked at the general relations between ethnic groups and more specifically between Armenians and Georgians. We learned that in many ethnic groups, some sort of “rivalry between ‘our’/ ‘other’ is present.” For example “Ukrainians tell [jokes] about the Polish or the Russians; The Latvians about the Estonians; the Georgians about the Armenians,” and these jokes “have one or several national characteristics that become a subject of mockery or critique” (Miresashvili n.d., 2-3). We see a little glimpse of this throughout the film when Kachikyan tells Mimino multiple times that where he is from they don’t know how to make a particular Armenian dish that is extremely good, but of course it comes out as light hearted. Because it is light hearted, this leads us more to believe that the friendship encouraged the Soviet Union’s multinational vision. That despite the historical tension and the us vs them mentality that may exist between different ethnic groups, it is still possible to form friendships and work together.

Along with that, we wanted to learn more about the cultural differences between Georgians and Russians in order to have a better understanding of the court scene. Our main question was what stopped Mimino from explaining why he attacked the man. After reading the chapter “Hidden Treasures in Mountains and a State that Comes and Goes” in Florian Mühlfried’s *Being a State and States of Being in Highland Georgia*, we learned that the cultural differences between Georgians and Russians made the interaction between the two a bit complicated. Mühlfried explained an incident where Tushetians, who are from the same region in Georgia as Mimino, “did not oppose the expansion of [a] boarding school,” because the expansion would include a highly demanded dormitory for students. However, “they did not agree to expansion at any cost. If it meant violation of well-internalised taboo rules, it needed to be stopped” (Mühlfried 2014, 82). The cultural disconnect can clearly be seen in the situation with the boarding school, but it also occurred when Georgians moved to Moscow as they would continue to approach and handle situations with knowledge from their own culture. We see this with Mimino during the court scene and when he is interacting with Svetlana. After learning this,

we are confident that Mimino's cultural background is what stopped him from explaining himself in court and why he was, as a result, okay with going to prison.

### THE COLOR OF POMEGRANATES

INITIAL THOUGHTS - A Colorful Animated World: We wanted to include *The Color of Pomegranates* in our research because it is one of Armenian director Sergei Parajanov's most well known and impactful films. The film itself has a great history from being banned and then becoming extremely popular in the west. It clearly still holds its influence today as it was used as inspiration for Lady Gaga's song "911." Needless to say, this film caught our interest.

While watching the film, we took notice of the way of life that was portrayed. From the start of the film we get a glimpse of life in the monastery, which most of the film takes place in. We also see the traditional Armenian way of life. As one way being shown through the carpet making process. Where we see material being dyed and then used to create the carpets, which then get washed and put to dry. There are also scenes at a public bath and later in the film a family making lavash, which is an Armenian flatbread, is shown. It was fascinating to see the richness of American culture being expressed in the film.



These stills are from *The Color of Pomegranates*. The still on the left is from the scene where a family is shown making Armenian lavash. The still on the right shows women weaving carpets.

One detail in the film that is pretty hard to miss is the repetition of movement and not only the repetition of it, but the actual movement. It seemed like Parajanov wanted to create 2D imagery using our 3D world. It was not something that we have ever seen before. The juxtaposition between the slow, linear movements of the characters and the fast movements created by the wind were striking. Especially the scene with the wind flipping the pages of the many books that were left in the sun to dry. The way Parajanov used motion reminded us of stop-motion animation style and we also got the impression as if we were looking inside a doll house.



This still is from a scene in *The Color of Pomegranates* where books from the monastery are left in the sun to dry.

Another detail we couldn't help but notice was the recurring symbolism of the conch shell. It confused us at first because we know Armenia does not border any seas and conch shells are typically found in tropical regions. In the film, a conch shell is shown covering one of the breasts. We don't know why that is or what the conch shell may signify, but it is something that we were interested in digging into. In addition to that, we noticed many ritual performances taking place in the film. These caught our attention because they seemed significant and we wonder what connection they may hold with Armenian culture and traditions.

**SCHOLARLY RESEARCH - Fantastical Imagery Reading:** Throughout the streaming of the film, we were heavily focused and amazed by the aesthetics of this film. From the paint, architecture, to the wonderful soundtrack. One aspect of this film that was being repeated was the ritual performance. We wanted to know exactly what the characters were trying to execute. Levon HM. Abrahamian describes the following in regards to this, "The characters perform rites that are uniquely Parajanovian, and these rites, despite all the director's ruses and provocations, begin to live their own life" (Abrahamian 2001-2002, 78). This perfectly ties in with the message and theme of the film. It fits with the concept of painting Sayat-Nova's poetic dreamland. The rites seem sacred and authentic at first glance. However, after watching the film again, the rites being performed are unique and fantastical. It almost seems as if that is how Sayat-Nova envisions these rites as abstract art.

One piece of detail that we did not pick up from the film was the portrayal of the Armenian flag. At the beginning of the film, we notice that the main character is observing the three men working on dyeing the pieces of clothing. When watching this scene, we noticed that the colors that were present in the dyeing process were red and blue. However, further into reading Abrahamian's chapter, we realize that what we saw is quite different from what Abrahamian wrote and discusses. As Abrahamian describes it, "Three skeins of thread are spread out to form the three colors of the Armenian national flag" (Abrahamian 2001-2002, 72). Just learning about this, it is very enthralling. Looking once more at the film, the color that stands out and is repeated most often is the color red.

Another characteristic of this film was the presence of the conch shell and its connection with the characters. From the beginning of the film, we noticed that the conch shell was placed on one side of the chest of a woman. Fast forward a couple minutes later, we see that a similar



In this still from *The Color of Pomegranates*, the recurring imagery of the conch shell is shown with the poet holding the conch shell up to his chest.

scenario is also being played. The poet is now the one holding the conch shell against his chest. Abrahamian describes this interconnection made by Parajanov, "There is another more remote association also at work here: in his dream the poet is seen pouring milk from a goblet, after which the breast of his lover turns white" (Abrahamian 2001-2002, 80). This is an interesting approach to read this motif in this film. Of course, there is no specific meaning behind the conch shell

with the Armenian culture. It was interesting to see how gender was being played with the concept of the conch shell. With this in mind, we were eager to investigate the motif of gender. After scanning James Steffen's book, we came to the understanding of what it was trying to reflect. According to Steffen, "Sofiko Chiaureli plays both the young poet Sayat-Nova and his beloved, Princess Ana, in *The Color of Pomegranates*; these androgynous lovers who closely resemble each other were in fact inspired by Persian miniatures" (Steffen 2013, 238). This quote took us by surprise. Not only are there references to Armenian culture in this film, but there are also references to Persian culture.

### WRAP-UP

After watching *White Sun of the Desert*, *Mimino*, and *The Color of Pomegranates*, we learned that there is more than what meets the eyes in terms of different ethnic groups and their interactions in Soviet films from the late Soviet period. We also had the opportunity to compare and contrast our reactions with background information, which gave us a better understanding of the films and the cultures they present. From analyzing these films, we looked at Turkmen, Russian, Georgian, and Armenian ethnic groups. In the end, these films defied and challenged certain concepts. From pinning Orientalism in *White Sun of the Desert*, studying stereotypes in *Mimino*, to interpreting fantastical elements in *The Colour of Pomegranates*, we found much food for thought. For *White Sun of the Desert* we dealt with a Russian soldier interacting and liberating Central Asian individuals and we got the chance to explore religious differences among ethnic groups in addition to cultural differences. In our analysis of *Mimino* we were able to dive into the friendship between Mimino, a Georgian character, and Kachikyan, an Armenian character, and see how it developed over the course of time. We were able to see how a Georgian and Armenian friendship can develop despite historical rivalry. We learned about Georgian stereotypes, how ethnic groups generally view each other, and how a disconnect can occur due to cultural differences. Finally, we uncovered parts of the Armenian culture in *The Colour of Pomegranates* from a poetic standpoint, while also learning a lot about Parajanov's style and motif intentions. Overall, these films paved an extraordinary way to perceive them beyond their historical context. Certainly, these films are able to challenge a perception of illustrating authentic culture.

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