

PARABOLIC LANGUAGE AS A CINEMATOGRAPHIC DEVICE IN THE WORKS OF FILM DIRECTOR ELDAR SHENGELAIA

Sopio Tavadze

*PhD in Theory and History of Art
Associate Professor at Batumi Art State University*

E-mail: sofotavadze@hotmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9876-4479>

Abstract. Eldar Shengelaia is one of the most prominent representatives of the generation of Georgian filmmakers known as the "Sixtiers" - a generation that brought about a major turning point in national cinematography and defined the artistic direction of that decade. The "Sixtiers" laid the foundation for a new stage in Georgian cinema with their unique message, individual style, clearly defined civic position, and new artistic forms.

Since censorship remained in force in the 1960s, as it had in the preceding period, a solution was found in a new approach to traditional forms of thinking. The reality implied in the films of the "Sixtiers" was created with signs of the symbol, metaphor, and allegory. This fostered the establishment of parabolic forms, which served both as a means of defense against censorship and, at the same time, presented the artists' message on screen in a more interesting and original way. The parable proved to be the most appropriate form for Georgian cinematography during this period. Through it, under conditions of strict censorship, Georgian filmmakers managed to convey their attitude toward the existing regime and life using dramatic or light-hearted intonations. The action in such films takes place in a historically undetermined, conditional world, where reality is abstracted and the setting lacks precise dimension. There is almost no use of everyday elements, no direct reflection of anything with a specific sign, or direct statement of the message.

Eldar Shengelaia, with his distinctive, refined, and original cinematographic language, narrates parabolic wisdom. This work examines the film "The Eccentrics" (*Sherekilebi*), which is a film-parable disguised with comic elements about human beings' longing for freedom. The article analyzes the structure of the parable, the significance of its symbolic language, and the artistic forms through which the authors allegorically point to the ideological pressure of the Soviet era in the context of the individual versus the system.

Key words: Eldar Shengelaia; "Sixtiers"; parabolic form; film "The Eccentrics".

Introduction. The 1960s, considered the golden age of Georgian cinema, still serve as the main reference material for film theory and practice. This period is distinguished by multifaceted novelties: processes of creative search and renewal are underway, and new thematic, genre, and stylistic tendencies are taking root. Despite Georgian cinematography being part of the Soviet film art, it managed to give rise to the concept of the "Georgian Cinema Phenomenon," which consisted of Georgian cinema possessing its own distinct face with clearly defined signs of national identity - in form, methods of artistic representation, spirit, etc.

As is known, due to conjunctural reasons within the Soviet Union, the Soviet system and ideology restricted the freedom of the artist. Certain topics were subject to prohibition. Consequently, the artist had to work under conditions of strict censorship. They were forced either to submit to the dominant ideology or to find ways to escape ideological influence - that is, to express their message through a new way of thinking and new artistic forms, and thus preserve national consciousness and traditions.

The history of Georgian cinema is also a history of the struggle to save its nationality, originality, and naturalness, a struggle that did not pass without "sacrifices." The price of this was films that were altered, and thus mutilated, unrealized, or even destroyed as a result of official directives, which followed the artists' attempt to tell the truth in some form amid totalitarian falsehood and preserve their own self and dignity.

This kind of difficult and contradictory path was faced by the representatives of the new generation who entered Georgian cinematography in the early 1960s - the so-called "Sixtiers," including: Eldar and Giorgi Shengelaia, Otar Iosseliani, Merab Kokochashvili, Lana Gogoberidze, Mikheil Kobakhidze, and others. Each of them stood out with an individual style. These young filmmakers brought new themes to Georgian cinema, showcased a different world, and established new artistic forms. They significantly enriched Georgian cinematographic thinking and created their own distinctive, artistically valuable individual cinematographic world.

Methods. To study the issue presented in this work, a historical-comparative, content-based understanding, and research method based on the cross-referencing and analysis of scientific literature was used.

Discussion. In the creation of an artistic work, time is the important factor that determines the artist's position, in which the author's personality is shaped, clearly revealing their creed, the mentality of the epoch, and the national character in their work - which is a primary condition for studying modern art processes.

It is noteworthy that in the difficult process of forming new tendencies in art, one of the decisive roles is played by the influx of new creative forces, since every new generation enters art not only with a new worldview, new ideas, and a new vision of reality, but also with greater boldness in terms of formal searches and experimentation in the sphere of film language.

Every artist who emerged in the 1960s brought with them a new outlook and characters, a different sphere of interest, and a unique style. Their works demonstrate the changes that their thinking expressed, through artistic symbols and implications. The reality reflected in the films of the "Sixtiers" often had another meaning. The idea embedded in every word, phrase, or form, which implied reality, was created with the signs of the symbol, metaphor, or allegory. This new vision gave rise to the so-called "Parabolic Cinema." This, on the one hand, was a means of defense against censorship, and on the other hand, it was intended for the directors to express their message in a more interesting and original way.

"It was precisely by confining itself within the 'frames' of the parable/myth/legend that Soviet Georgian cinema of the 1960s and 1970s managed to 'speak' not only about themes and problems unacceptable to the existing ideology, censorship, and artistic method of socialist realism, but also to intensify searches in the expressive, formal direction; to create the unique face of new Georgian cinematography as a category of art, which is called the 'Georgian Cinema Phenomenon'" (Ochiauri, 2018, pp. 113-114).

What constitutes a parable and what are its main characteristics? As a literary genre, the main elements of a parable are: the conditional nature of the situation, the symbolism of the characters, a hidden philosophical discourse, the polyvalence of situations, and the sharpness of moral and philosophical conclusions. The parable is a moralistic, instructive, philosophical genre whose function is to transmit knowledge and establish dialectical connections (i.e., similarity-difference) between two phenomena. However, cinematography, for its part, introduced additional correctives. The characteristics of a film-parable are: didacticism, a striving for generalization, paradoxicality, laconism, and the parabolic nature of plot development. It is clear from the cinematic practice that the parable reveals its nature in completely different genres of film: drama, every-day or lyrical comedies, and tragicomedies. Therefore, it is more accurate to call it a generic form.

"The form of the parable, on the basis of which Georgian cinema was recognized as a 'phenomenon', was not, in my opinion, a device 'invented' merely for concealing the message, but it was a logical arrangement of objects, the expression of thought, and events, which in the context of time took on precisely this

kind of artistic form. It was a way of thinking that certain historical and temporal conditions helped to establish" (Ochiauri, 2004, p. 154).

We find clear examples of parabolic cinema in the works of Eldar Shengelaia, which is characterized by sharply individual features, themes, artistic images, and cinematographic devices characteristic of the author.

Creativity is, first and foremost, an eternal search and a desire to discover the new. Every artist perceives reality individually, and their mission is to reflect the existing in such a way that reality -directly or indirectly - becomes the artist's message. The goal of every creator is to establish their own style and handwriting in art, but this is realized only when the artist possesses an individual worldview.

"Whether they want it or not, whether they try to or not, an artist is either an ideologue or a propagandist. An ideologue, if they bring new themes, new problems, a new point of view, and stylistics. They are a propagandist if they tread the beaten, old, tiresome path, repeating what is outdated and worn out" (Bakradze, 1989, p. 251). In the context of this opinion expressed by critic Akaki Bakradze, Eldar Shengelaia can be considered an ideologue, as his work is distinguished by topical themes, critical vision, and the search for expressive devices.

The film-director noted: "In the 1960s and 1970s, there were two realities in the Soviet Union: the false, propagandistic one that was reflected in cinema, literature, and the press, and the real one. Our generation had to bring something else to get closer to the truth, the truth of life, of the problem. We knew that only individual, creative, and civic responsibility would lead us to our goal" (Shengelaia, 2013, p. 116). This "something else" became the path of parabolic cinema, which allowed for freedom of expression in message and form.

As already noted, the parabolic form is found in various genres of films in Georgian cinematography of the 1960s and 1970s. The combination of the parable with the comedy genre proved particularly significant. Thanks to the comic elements, the directors disguised their critical pathos, which led to the allegorical and parabolic nature of the films of this period. The rethinking of the generic nature of film comedy in Georgian cinematography is associated with the name of Eldar Shengelaia, which was presented in the director's work through the transformation of traditional elements and their synthesis with other genres.

The appearance of film dramatist Revaz Gabriadze became a kind of event in Georgian cinematography of the 1960s and 1970s, and new characteristics in the development of the comedy genre are associated with his name. The dramatist completely reinterpreted and presented the national character. He paved the way in Georgian cinema for the image of the "simple" person, in whom the essential features of the national character are collected: outstanding artistry, a sense of humor and self-irony, and the ability to overcome hardship with laughter.

In 1973, the creative co-authorship of Eldar Shengelaia and Revaz Gabriadze resulted in a fairy-tale-parabolic choice and the creation of the film "The Eccentrics". The film emerged on the border between the real and the imaginary. Despite its external simplicity, its expressive side is very eloquent. Based on the specificity of the parable, the unity of time and place is rejected in *The Eccentrics*. The film is devoid of didacticism, although the moral is clearly established in it: with great faith, dedication to an idea, and tireless work, even the impossible will become possible.

Mizana Bregadze (played by Akaki Bakradze) gives up the ghost during a feast and merrymaking. Ertaoz (played by Dato Jgenti), left an orphan, has his entire livelihood taken away by his father's debtors. Ertaoz takes items out of the house and distributes them to the debtors. Finally, when nothing is left of the movable property, he dismantles the house and gives parts of it to the neighbors: one takes a door, another a window, and a third the stairs and posts. Meanwhile, the remaining part of the house collapses... The only things left for Ertaoz to pawn are: a drum, a felt-cloak, a wine skin, and the song "A Little Bird Was Flying By". The

episode of the property's "seizure-ravaging" is interestingly resolved in the film, unfolding against the background of a joyful Georgian folk melody and having a comedic nature (Composers: Giya Kancheli, Jansug Kakhidze).

Left homeless, Ertaoz heads to the city, where he accidentally meets Margalita (played by Ariadna Shengelaia) - the wife of the train engineer Tripon (played by Merab Eliazishvili), who entertains admirers while her husband is away. Among them are Khuta (played by Boris Tsipuria), the head of the prison, and Noshrevan (played by Abrek Pkhaladze), the owner of a psychiatric hospital. Ertaoz falls in love with Margalita at first sight. To save herself, she assigns Ertaoz a risky task, which leads him to prison. This is where Ertaoz's "adventure" begins: in prison, he meets the elderly Kristepore (played by Vasil Chkhaidze), who was arrested a long time ago and is obsessed with the idea of creating a flying machine and finds no rest. His goal is pure and cherished: Kristepore wants to fly over the grave of his beloved (who threw herself into the river waves due to her father's opposition) with the flying machine and thus fulfill her last wish. The dreamer Kristepore also "befriends" Ertaoz, and the two of them work diligently to realize the idea of flying: they calculate formulas and, at the same time, prepare secret holes for escape. The attempt by the two "Eccentrics" to build a flying machine and take off is perceived as a metaphor for the constant striving for freedom and the fulfillment of a cherished dream.

In human consciousness, the word "eccentric" (*sherekili*) does not evoke negative emotions. "Eccentrics" were called genius people who did not submit to the confines of time and space and whose thinking stood above the reality that restricted individual freedom. In this sense, Kristepore and Ertaoz are also "eccentrics" who have the ability not only to dream but also to rise above the surrounding reality.

The film *The Eccentrics* is distinguished by its artistic and ideological concept, expressive side, intellectual depth, humor, multitude of conventions, metaphors and allegories, magnitude of characters, and poetic generalization. The plot, wrapped in a fairy-tale veil, is at the same time a bearer of profound lifelike truth. The film's heroes are characterized not by acquired, artificial comic qualities, but by natural comicality. Hints are clearly legible in them. Ertaoz, Kristepore, Margalita, Khuta, Noshrevan, Tripon - are symbolic heroes who represent very colorful and impressive artistic images.

The sincere, kind, and honest Ertaoz seems to be a character grown out of Georgian folklore, whose naïveté, naturalness, and expressive face lend him an astonishing charm. His expression shows a naive curiosity and the inner instinct of an inexperienced person to be exposed to novelty, to believe and experience it. In love and in his attitude toward life, Ertaoz shows a romantic nature: the will to live is given wings by dream and hope.

Kristepore - with his physique, plasticity, expressive intonation (the character is voiced in the film by actor Erosi Manjgaladze), and astonishing spontaneity - is a typical comic character. There is also a romantic intonation in him: he was punished for seeking the truth and sacrificed for an elevated love. Kristepore is a dreamer and an idealist. The reality that did not spare his beloved is an unacceptable reality for him, which he must escape at any cost, and he fights selflessly for the realization of this dream.

Kristepore and Ertaoz represent the folkloric-fairy-tale embodiment of human romantic, yet comic, ideals. And the qvevri-shaped prison, covered with various inscriptions and formulas, is a micro-model of a world where the human dreaming soul stubbornly fights against the hindering environment. Khuta and his policemen, the psychiatrist Noshrevan, Tripon, and Margalita also appear as barriers hindering the idea of flying, but this creates a more pragmatic model of the naturally existing earthly world than the image of a "mortal enemy." It should be noted that even the negative characters in Eldar Shengelaia's films do not cause irritation, which is explained by the nature of the comic genre and the nature of the caricature.

Eldar Shengelaia and Revaz Gabriadze masterfully manage to tell about essential social and moral problems with a light, carefree, and ironic tone. The authors expressed the conflict between the dreamers

and the representatives of the authorities in parabolic form. The authors' masked critical pathos is clearly felt in *The Eccentrics*. Even the fact that the utterly innocent heroes were imprisoned by a boorish policeman and a foolish doctor directly aroused association with the political situation of the 1970s of the last century: political prisoners were, as a rule, "placed" in prison or a psychiatric clinic.

However, this motive not only reminds us of the reality of the Soviet period but also directly causes an association with the current political environment. Individual position, dissenting opinion, critical mood, and protest are still perceived by the ruling system as a threat. Arrests, administrative persecution, and in some cases, manipulation with a psychiatric diagnosis are still used as an instrument for suppressing "difference."

The Eccentrics ultimately achieve their goal: they create the flying machine, which is perceived as a symbol of a imaginary dream coming true. Kristepore and Ertaoz break through the doors of this world's prison, soar into the azure sky, enjoying the beauty of nature and magnificent churches. From this height of the dream, the true beauty is clearly visible. This fabulous journey into the boundless world, where there are neither borders nor the possibility of restriction, resembles a vision, a dream, after which the existing reality appears even more terrifying. The film's finale is read as a symbol of eternal freedom and liberation from mundane reality.

The film's authors achieve parabolic generalization by blending elements of the fairy tale, grotesque, buffoonery, and everyday comedy, and create a romantic world of heroes who dream of love, freedom, and flight. Only heroes like Ertaoz and Kristepore could talk about freedom, dreams, love, and the philosophical problems of eternity with carefree lightness and humor in the social and political atmosphere of the 1970s.

The Eccentrics is a film-parable disguised with comic elements about the human longing for freedom... Prisoners confined in an underground dungeon create a flying machine and strive upward. Love liberates them, and hope and great effort give wings to the dream. Even in the direst conditions of life, the ideal is unlimited - this optimistic idea runs through the film, whose symbolic characters are adorned with astonishingly warm humor by the screenwriter and director.

It is noteworthy that Georgian cinema, thanks to the collaboration between director Eldar Shengelaia and film dramatist Revaz Gabriadze, not only acquired pivotal films but also discovered entirely new methods of conditional narration. The themes of their films sharply distinguish and set them apart from the general thematic monotony of Soviet cinematography of that period. National originality, colorful characters, an interesting ensemble of actors, dynamic composition of the frame, mastery of cinematographic lighting, and film metaphor appeared on the screen.

As we noted, *The Eccentrics* relies on the conditional methods of the fairy tale. The fairy-tale style, the parabolic form of narration, romantic motives, and the poetry of allegory required a large-scale artistic vision to create this world, which was originally resolved by the film's artists - Tengiz and Revaz Mirzashvili. The film *The Eccentrics*, with its folksiness, simplicity, and natural comicality, is one of the most prominent examples of national originality.

As for the parabolic form, it disappeared from Georgian cinema after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as there was no longer a need to talk about themes unacceptable to socialist realism using parabolic language. The abolition of censorship led to the loss of the orientation that Georgian filmmakers fought against with their creativity.

Conclusion. The 1960s and 1970s in Georgian cinematography are marked by multifaceted searches. It was during this period that a number of thematic, genre, and stylistic tendencies emerged, and new forms of expression of thought and message were established. In the Georgian film art of this period, it became possible to replace false pathos with the daily ups and downs of life. Since Soviet censorship remained in force, a solution was found in a new approach to traditional forms of thinking. The principle of conditional-

allegorical thematic thinking was established, which found continuation in the cinematography of subsequent decades.

Ideological demands still existed, which created a certain barrier for authors in choosing themes. Therefore, directors tried to find new forms and new expressive devices for dialogue with the audience. The establishment of parabolic forms is associated with this period, which in turn finds development in relation to other artistic devices and means of expression.

Eldar Shengelaia masterfully uses parabolic language as a cinematographic device to convey his message. The film *The Eccentrics* transcends the boundaries of a specific historical period and allegorically reflects the eternal confrontation between power and the individual. The film does not lose its relevance in the contemporary political context - when signs of authoritarianism, institutional crisis, and the restriction of free speech are again part of reality.

References

- Bakradze, A. (1989). *Cinema, Theatre*. Tbilisi: Khelovneba.
- Ochiauri, L. (2004, N1). In Search of the Poetic Origins of Georgian Cinema. *Theatre and Life*.
- Ochiauri, L. (2018). Interpretation of Myth in Art. *Art of the XX Century*.
- Shengelaia, E. (2013). *A Word or Two..!* Tbilisi: Forma.