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# Invisible Culture

An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

## Saving the Other/Rescuing the Self: Promethean Aspirations in Mikhail Kalatozov's *Sol Svanetii*

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They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. [1](#) Karl Marx

Anthropology, in its traversing of cultural realities, is always on the verge of the surreal... The lesson of surrealism, however, is that the experience of paradox is in itself significant and must be grasped to generate new perceptions. Thus, if these films have special value, anthropologically or more broadly, it is that they enable us somehow to confront the intersecting of the worlds they describe. [2](#) David MacDougall

Recently rediscovered and released on home video in the United States [3](#), the Soviet film *Sol Svanetii* [*Salt for Svanetia*] (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1930) offers important insights into contemporary debates around the cinematic representation of “the other” in colonialist and ultimately post-colonialist discourse. Beyond the unavoidable concerns the film raises about primitivism and Orientalism in ethnography, this film obliges us also to consider the unexplored issues surrounding the early Soviet Union’s usage of the aesthetic of “the sublime.” Additionally, *Sol Svanetii* points toward the USSR’s understanding (or *misunderstanding*) and appropriation of Nietzsche, an appropriation that in this example ultimately develops a surprisingly queer valence. Finally the film allows us to address a crucial issue the visual anthropologist David MacDougall has raised. *Svanetii* clearly functions, according to MacDougall’s terms, as a (highly subjective, to be sure) record of the *surreal intersection* between two radically different

cultures. This filmed encounter can then be said to “frame the framer,” to use Trinh T. Minh-ha’s [4](#) critical term, which I explain below, as much, if not more so, than it does the ostensible subject matter at hand, the Ushkul tribespeople of the upper Caucasus Mountains.

Like a number of other remarkable works in the Soviet Film canon, *Sol Svanetii* has been more or less ignored in both Western European and American film history. Compared to other films from the USSR, such as those by the celebrated directors Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov and Aleksandr Dovzhenko, this singularly riveting and exceedingly problematic short film remains a comparable non-entity. In 1972 Peter Morris wrote that “*Salt for Svanetia* is almost unknown outside the Soviet Union and has received only limited screenings”. [5](#) Despite the release of the film on videotape in 1997, this statement must be considered to be as true today as it was thirty years ago. Furthermore, the brief notations the film has received in Western texts have often been misleading or simplistic, suggesting that part of its abject status has been caused by an inability to properly contextualize it. Those who have tried tended to do so more than a little imprecisely.

Georges Sadoul, for instance, chose to compare *Svanetii* to Luis Buñuel’s *Las Hurdes* [*Land without Bread*] (1932) in his widely consulted *Dictionary of Films*:

The people of Svanetia, an isolated valley, 6,000 feet up in the Caucasus, were [. . .] as backward as the people of Las Hurdes in Buñuel’s film [. . .] Many of the images are Buñuelian; a woman, close to childbirth, driven from her house; a horse galloping until its heart bursts; the pagan offering of a slaughtered horse; a cow thirstily drinking human urine for its salt; a newborn torn apart by a dog; a widow dripping her milk into the grave; money counted on a crucifix. [6](#)

A close viewing of the film reveals Sadoul to be wrong on at least two points. First, it is an ox that is slaughtered in the pagan offering, rather than a horse, and second, the newborn dies of shock while being vigorously *licked* by the insatiable canine, rather than physically torn apart. More importantly, Sadoul’s entry seems to suggest that Kalatozov is following in a “Buñuelian tradition” when, in fact, *Sol Svanetii* was produced before all but one of the Spanish surrealist’s films had been released, and at least two years before *Las Hurdes* was made. And even beyond this issue of chronology, there is a fundamental difference between the two works. Buñuel’s film is, at first glance, a seemingly cruel look at a wretched and miserable rural community and it should be understood in just this sense. Buñuel’s genius is to have suggested not that the people photographed in his ethnographic project are savage, but rather that the kind of filmmaking practice that presents appalling misery for the voyeuristic consumption of a travelogue-loving urban audience is,

finally, a callous and deeply hypocritical project. Indeed, Buñuel's work, in this instance, ultimately suggests that it is the audience members watching the film who are the true savages. Along with *Salò* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) and *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (Dennis O'Rourke, 1991), *Las Hurdes* remains one of the cinema's most profound and painful auto-critiques.

*Sol Svanetii* is, for many reasons, a far more difficult work to come to terms with. Upon casual viewing, it presents itself as a straightforward and mostly sympathetic work about the plight of a "backward" mountain people shown to be in dire need of the benefits of Stalin's modernizing and industrializing program for the USSR--the then ongoing First Five Year Plan. (The desire to create support for the Five Year Plan across the Soviet Union was surely instrumental in the film receiving its commission.) As portrayed by Kalatozov, the Ushkul tribespeople are shown to be virtually stranded, for all but a few weeks of the year, due to the generally snow packed mountain pass that is their only link to the outside world. Living in a pocket of existence that severely lacks basic sustenance items—salt in particular—these tribespeople's constant Sisyphean struggle to trade with the outside world is truly a matter of life and death.

Despite the commonsensical questions the situation raises (i.e. how have the Ushkul been able to survive throughout the centuries at the very brink of extinction?) the stark predicament the Ushkul face creates a resonance that temporarily supports the account's veracity. And these "primitives" clearly exert a strong fascination to their more worldly Soviet chroniclers, who include, in addition to Kalatozov, the celebrated Soviet writer and editor Sergei Tret'iakov who wrote the journal articles that initially inspired this documentary project. This sense of fascination is entirely typical in ethnographic documents created by outsiders. (And although Kalatozov was Transcaucasian himself, he was born in Georgia's urban center of T'bilisi and not in the Republic's rural areas; thus, when he traveled high into the Caucasus Mountains, he did so as a relative foreigner, not unlike an urban American visiting the "hillbilly" back country of the United States.)

Tret'iakov, whose wide ranging documents of other cultures are routinely celebrated in Soviet Studies, presents a compelling example of the potential successes and pitfalls of ethnographic work. His *A Chinese Testament* (1934) is subtitled as *The Autobiography of Tan Shin-hua*, an account that is simply said to be "told to S. Tretiakov" (sic, emphasis added). And yet, not surprisingly, Tret'iakov admits in the "Preface" to the Russian edition that his constitutive work on the project was far more than a mere matter of transcription. Tan Shin-hua, he writes, "generously placed the depths of his wonderful recollections at my disposal. I dug into them like a miner. I was, at various times, his examining judge, father confessor, interviewer, companion, and psycho-analyst." [7](#) This metaphor of digging into an individual cultural "other" is a common trope in ethnographic

discourse and one that recurs in Tret'iakov's writing, and it is one all-too-easily suggestive of a masculine sexual drive. Speaking of Svanetia, Tret'iakov again uses a metaphor that can easily be seen as sexual. Svanetia, he writes, "signifies a half-inaccessible land. Its very name scares travelers and shoots down mountain climbers in the attempt of penetration." [8](#) As Trinh (1989), Marianna Torgovnick (1991) and Edward W. Said (1979) [9](#) among others have pointed out, this kind of sexual iconography and energy, which will manifest itself complexly in *Svanetii*, as I explain below, has always been crucial to the project of ethnographic primitivism.

Following its opening credits, *Sol Svanetii* provides a brief quotation by Lenin that reads: "The Soviet Union is a country so big and diverse that every kind of social and economic way of life is to be found within it." While this epigraph alone makes clear that the film's spectator is about to watch a text from a Soviet (and a very nationalistic) perspective, the shots that follow are even more telling. The spectator see two images, one dissolving into the next, of two different regional maps—the first one is general and the second more specific—of the Transcaucasus region in which the upcoming film will take place. [\[Fig. 1\]](#) Such a beginning, common in ethnographic documentaries from *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922) onward, immediately indicates not only where the film takes place, but also that what we are about to watch is, in some sense, perfectly positioned for students in any number of geography or sociology classes.

More importantly, the images of the maps that follow Lenin's words indicate something that might be taken for granted by a typical film viewer but is nonetheless crucial here; they tell us exactly who the film is *not* intended for. *Sol Svanetii* is not intended, certainly not primarily intended, for the people of the upper Caucasus Mountains themselves. They, more than anyone else, would either already know exactly where they live or, conversely and more to the point, they simply would not care about their location in relation to any larger mapped-out world. These first shots, then, situate the film's location precisely in terms of its importance literally "on the map" for spectators from the outside, those spectators who would want to place the film's location according to then dominant trends in geopolitical understanding. The display of the map can then be read as the initial and most basic signifier of the "colonialist ideology" operating throughout the film, both at the conscious level of Soviet propaganda and the unconscious (or surely unacknowledged) level of discursive production. Both these intentions are cloaked, of course, by the film's operation within its taken-for-granted mode of discourse, one that presents itself over and over again as the carrier of the self-evident "truth."

According to Bill Nichols, there are six basic modes of documentary, ethnographic or otherwise: the poetic, expository, observational, participatory (or interactive), reflexive, and finally the performative. [10](#) Each of these sub-genres can be seen to

have an historical period of dominance in Nichols schema. (I've listed them according to his chronology.) And while the observational form may be considered the purest form—"eschew[ing] commentary and reenactment; observ[ing] things as they happen" [11](#)—and thus the most "documentary-like" of all the documentary forms, it actually represents a small portion of the vast body of documentary productions. Indeed, it is a mode most associated with a particular group of films from a particular era, such as those by Frederick Wiseman (like *High School* [1968]) that first emerged in 1960s.

*Svanetii*, for the most part, utilizes strategies from both of the modes associated with the 1920s, the expository and the poetic. As Nichols defines it:

The expository text addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that advance an argument about the historical world [. . .] This is the mode closest to the classic expository essay or report and it has continued to be the primary means of relaying information and persuasively making a case since at least the 1920s. [12](#)

For a film that follows this essay- or report-like mode, it is somewhat problematic to consider that *Svanetii* also operates in a highly poetic register. This poetic impulse does not invalidate the film's expository categorization, but it certainly casts a shadow on the authoritative status of the expository mode when one sees the two combined here into an explicitly political argument.

As the film proper begins, Kalatozov quickly and efficiently constructs a dream world of primitivism that may, initially, seem far from any issues of colonialist intent. And yet *Svanetii's* combination of documentary exposition and poetic idealization creates a form of surrealism very much in the service of a colonialist cultural project. In this discourse, poetry can paper over the holes in a film's political argument, and conversely the expository form can grant a scientific authority to the psychic operations of the poetic discourse.

There are two further title cards following Lenin's words. They read: "Upper Svanetia, cut off from civilization by mountains and glaciers" and "Here converge two mountain ranges of the Caucasus." Oddly, despite the announcement of an intersection between two ranges, only a single mountain peak—the first real photographic image in the film—is shown. Then, on the next title card, the word "Tvethuld" appears (apparently a mistranslation/misspelling of the mountain "Tetnaldi") with a foreboding singularity. Following this strange merger, a series of more and more discombobulating images manifest. We see a roaring mountain stream filmed from a canted angle and a vertiginous height. [\[Fig. 2\]](#) After a single, more stabilized image of a canyon cut through the mountains (which despite the

connection to the previous shot doesn't seem to match its antecedent shot at all geographically [Fig. 3]), we are presented with the upside-down image of a mountain that is revealed, through a camera tilt, to be a reflection of that first singularly imposing peak. [Fig. 4] Next, when the first image of an actual high-Svanetian city is shown, with its tall towers shrouded in fog and geometrically askew stone walls disappearing into the misty horizon [Fig. 5], the merger of the ethnographic text, one tasked with displaying and implicitly arguing for the understanding of an objective world, and the poetic dream-text is fully realized. For a film that seemed just moments before to promise a "cinematic lecture" in a simple expository mode, this plunge into oneiric disequilibrium is arresting.

A typical audience, based on the international cinematic conventions of the expository mode, would expect at this point to be introduced, in a relatively straightforward way, to the human subjects of the unfolding documentary. But the spectator's introduction to the Ushkul tribespeople is anything but straightforward. First, there will be a continuing series of breathtaking expository shots of the Svanetian landscape—clouds dashing against glacier-covered mountain peaks [Fig. 6]; sheep grazing before a lonely expanse of high prairie [Fig. 7]; narrow, treacherous foot-paths cut across a steep hill [Fig. 8]; and a snow storm in July [Fig. 9]. These recall the awe-inspiring aesthetic of the sublime, an aesthetic most paradigmatically exemplified in the paintings of the 19th Century German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich. Unlike Friedrich's work, however, the human figures presented by Kalatozov seem much more *a part* of nature, than significantly distinct from it. Friedrich's figures are often fragile individuals confronting a stunning, violent, and finally incomprehensible world. Kalatozov, on the other hand, shows the Ushkul as very much in harmony with their harsh and beautiful universe, at least in the first half of the film.

Then, presenting images from tilted angles as well as shooting from a series of extremely high and low perspectives, Kalatozov constructs an oneiric sense of disequilibrium, not for the film's *characters*, but for its *spectators*. As this sense of unmoored physical positioning continues, the disequilibrium begets a sense of *disembodiedness* for the spectator, since the disequilibrium (implied by the film's images) does not match the spectator's balanced upright actual physical placement (sitting normally facing forward toward the motion picture screen.) Thus, it might be said, if one considers the ideological intent of the film's makers, that *Svanetii* offers an assumedly non-bourgeois – certainly non-grounded – perspective on a previously over-determined and controlled physical world.

As the spectator sees more and more human subjects during the first dozen minutes or so, the film's images refuse to offer a clear expositional perspective of these people's physiognomies. Rather, the images put the photographed subjects

into a particular perspective within the landscape. A young boy's layered haircut [Fig. 10] rhymes with the rock shingles placed on the village huts and towers. [Fig. 11] Other individuals are only shown in medium-long-shot silhouettes, shots that mimic the village's tall towers that, in turn, echo the high mountain peaks behind them. In one of the most remarkable series of shots in the film, we see a man sleeping on a shelf of stone on a sunny cliff-side. In the first shot of this brief sequence, we only see his head, a head that is seemingly disembodied from the rest of his person. [Fig. 12] The head looks so much like a round rock with a face carved in it that an audience could be forgiven for its spontaneous laughter. When the image cuts to a shot from the other direction and the audience is now able to view only the man's lower body [Fig. 13]—a body that also looks like nothing more than a rock formation—it seems as if a very deliberate visual joke has been constructed. Nonetheless, it is a joke with a very particular point to make about the one-ness between these “exotic” people and their harsh-but-beautiful world. At moments like this, hastened by the homogenizing tendencies of monochrome cinematography, a surreal elision is constructed and maintained between flesh and the earth, the animal and the cultural, nature and society. But as David MacDougall reminds us: “The lesson of surrealism, however, is that the experience of paradox is itself significant and must be grasped to generate new perceptions.” <sup>13</sup> One of *Svanetii's* greatest values is that its paradoxes force the spectator to question and problematize the categories that seemingly structure this film.

For fully half the film's fifty-three minutes, the viewer senses that a positive and compassionate relationship must exist at the intersection between these “upper Svanetians” and the filmmakers who have guided them into a reconstruction of their lives for the camera. One might posit a sense of envy between the urban Kalatozov and these pre-industrial people who remain at one with their land and are fully connected to—or unalienated from—their labor as farmers, weavers, and goat herders. This romance of the rural subject was common in the USSR, if hardly the party-line perspective expected of a commissioned film celebrating industrialization through the First Five Year Plan.

Yet *Svanetii's* paradoxical feelings toward these “noble savages”, who must be both celebrated and changed, explodes into a fierce condemnation in the film's second half. In part, this ambivalence is understandable as the result of a projection—in the psychoanalytical sense—onto the Svanetians of the Soviet Union's own sense of national shame. In the 1920s and 30s the various republics of the USSR were considered very much “backwards” compared to the more industrialized nations of the world. In 1929 Stalin himself clearly tried to use this sense of shame as a motivating tool in the completion of the First Five Year Plan, a plan that was very much created to address the Soviet Union's own status of primitivism compared to the rest of the world. Stalin proclaimed:

We are going full steam ahead toward socialism through industrialization, leaving behind the age-long 'Russian' backwardness. We are becoming a land of metals [. . .], automobiles [. . .], tractors, and when we have put the USSR on an automobile and the muzhik on a tractor, let the noble capitalists [. . .] attempt to catch up. We shall see then which countries can be labeled backward and which advanced. [14](#)

This rhetoric is not simply a matter of pride. At the time that these words were spoken, there was a palpable and even publicly admitted fear (one that also served a propagandistic function) that the future of the Soviet Union in a hostile capitalist world utterly depended upon the rapid improvement of the industrial infrastructure. In 1931 Stalin would remark: "We are 50 to 100 years behind the advanced countries. We must cover this distance in 10 years. Either we do this or they will crush us." [15](#) (As David MacKenzie and Michael Curran point out in their study, Stalin wasn't at all unjustified in his fears. "Ten years and four months later," they remind us, "Hitler invaded the USSR!" [16](#) )

Regardless of the shame or fear behind this desire to modernize the country, a desire that was fully interconnected with the colonialist impulses of the USSR, *Sol Svanetii's* initial fondness for these simpler people is not easily disavowed. Still, disavowed it is. In its second half, *Sol Svanetii* develops an almost incoherent and surely disturbing series of "meanings," which fully reify these mixed emotions. A pregnant woman goes into labor just before the funeral of a tribesman, thus invoking a "primitive" superstition whereby she must be banished from the group in exactly in her hour of greatest need. [\[Fig. 14\]](#) She is forced to give birth to her baby completely alone, and produces an infant which, due to the absence of any helpful members of the tribe, dies almost immediately, certainly of shock, *contra* Sadoul, brought on by a crazed dog trying to consume the salt in the newborn's coating of embryonic fluid and blood. [\[Fig. 15\]](#) Meanwhile, at the well-attended funeral, the Ushkul people both celebrate the departure of one of their miserable tribesmen—and his hungry, consuming mouth—while also clearly anguishing over a death that reflects their own, always-imminent, mortality. While all this is occurring, the greedy, parasitic church takes the meager financial offerings of the mourners. Thus in this section of the film, which also shows the appalling wastefulness of the ox sacrifice and a horse literally ridden to death across the hills, the once noble Svanetians are presented by Kalatozov as transformed into wretched, deluded theists living wretched lives, succumbed to the self-destructive superstitions of the self-serving but still powerful paganized church. These people are ultimately seen as little more than suffering savages in dire need of the modernizing influence of the Soviet Union's industrializing revolution, a revolution that, in the film's happy ending, will triumphantly rescue them.



This rescue is, as one might expect, a *masculine* rescue. As Nichols writes:

[ethnography's] symbolic representation of power and authority centers on the male. The male as 'man'—symbol of cultural achievement—is the star of ethnography, celebrated in close-ups [. . .] Ethnography represents a masculinist order—symbolic of male structures of experience and knowledge subsequently naturalized as universal [...] The male stands in for culture and power. [17](#)

In *Svanetii*'s last few moments, a male-driven army of steamrollers is shown “coming to liberate” the primitives. The cutting down of a forest of redwood trees, one that presumably stands between the Svanetians and Soviet civilization, is seen as a triumphal moment of human progress. Of course it is a group of strong, shirtless, and clearly sexualized men—Soviet outsiders and Svanetians—who come together, and who are photographed as heroically forging this “road to civilization.” [\[Fig. 16\]](#) Meanwhile the Svanetian women can only stand by, disheveled and grossly pregnant, threatening to bring more hungry and miserable children into the world. [\[Fig. 17\]](#) The triumph of the men's labor will, as the film comes to a close, imply the eradication of the “problem” (through the provision of ready access to food and other provisions that will nourish the children) of the women's pregnancies. Yet one is then left with an unpleasant sense of misogyny, one which is all too often balanced against a strong and muscular, undeniably eroticized homosociality.

This troubling form of homoerotics—troubling not because it is homoerotic, but because its a homoeroticism juxtaposed against a what is perceived to be a grotesque heterosexual “problem”(in this case, pregnancy begetting starving children), which results in certain resentment toward women—is as pervasive a subject in ethnography as it is largely unexamined. The reasons for its appearance in *Svanetii* are certainly complex and cannot be said to emerge here in exactly the same way as they do in other examples of ethnographic discourse. They involve, finally, the sense of Soviet shame on the one hand, shame for its own backwardness and, on the other hand, an essential and ultimately triumphant Soviet good-will between men – a good will which clearly did exist between the Soviets and these “primitive” others at the time. (This tension is also found in many of the other ethnographic Soviet films of the period, for example *Three Songs of Lenin* [Dziga Vertov, 1934].) In other words, while the (male) Soviet may want to project his own sense of inferiority (in relation to the industrialized world) onto his country's rural “primitives,” he nonetheless wants, finally, to paternalistically lift those primitives to the level of equality (an act that will also show his moral superiority and his arrival into the top tier of nations). This may be small comfort to

the “primitive” object of the Soviet man’s “burden/desire,” especially the women, but it cannot compare to the sense of injury that other primitives have faced in history.

Maria Torgovnick also addresses the ways in which primitivism is negatively linked to heterosexuality, a relationship which she describes as the attraction of the colonialist male to the primitive female and the consequent lure by the death instinct towards the darkness of oblivion defined by the female subject. [18](#) (Significantly, Torgovnick’s analysis focuses mostly on African blacks.[19](#)) In the Soviet/*Svanetian* context, however, the equation of woman with death is removed from the erotic register and is connected instead to childbirth (i.e. to “nature” itself). Eros, for its part, becomes aligned, with the death-defying project of the industrializing of the Soviet Union, one conceived of as a man-on-man affair.

*Sol Svanetii*’s homoeroticism can also be seen as one born of a specific form of narcissism, a narcissism inherent in conceptions of the *ubermensch*, the “superman” about whom Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in the 19th Century. He predicted that such a being would ultimately emerge both from the realization of the death of God, as well as man’s individual striving for personal greatness and superiority. Although, as Mikhail Agursky reminds us, “the USSR declared the total rejection of Nietzscheanism in 1933, when Hitler came to power” [20](#) throughout the 1920s (and even after, albeit more covertly) the Nietzschean myth of the transcendent final step in human progress was nonetheless a powerful sub-text in Soviet culture, in part because it fit in so well with Marxist ideas of a socialist utopia. Margarita Tupitsyn, in her analysis of photography and photomontage from the 1920s and 30s, finds that the roots of the *ubermensch* philosophy run deep in much of that discipline’s study of the cultural and artistic output related to various Five Year Plans. By the 1930s, according to Tupitsyn, there would be a “shift from the depiction of an anonymous worker as a kind of Nietzschean ‘Higher Man,’ able to overcome any hardship, to the glorification of a specific leader [Stalin].” [21](#) At the time *Svanetii* was released, however, Soviet artists were still constructing the image of the country’s individual workers (representative of the class as a whole) as the super human “New Soviet Man” (and, at least in the work of El Lissitzky, the “New Soviet Woman” was often constructed as well). But the notion of a superman is hardly a hermetic concept, one that has only simple political valences (as the Germans would soon prove), and the infinite number of connected myths and ideological concerns it raises may, in part, contribute to much of *Svanetii*’s complexity and confusion.

The connection between *Sol Svanetii* and the *ubermensch* ideology can be made less generic by the analysis of a 1904 remark made by Anatoly Lunacharsky, later Commissar of the Enlightenment. He declared:

We have to support the growth of trust of the people in its strength, in a better future glowing with happiness [. . .] develop the feeling for tragedy and joy for struggle and victory, for the *Promethean* aspirations, stubborn pride, and unite hearts in a common striving towards a Superman—*this is the artist's task*. [22](#)

In Aeschylus's ancient tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, the eponymous hero is chained to a rock at the base of Mount Caucasus and destined to suffer eternal torment, all because of his hubris in attempting to steal fire from the great god Zeus. According to Gerald Fitzgerald, *Prometheus Bound* is celebrated for "such issues as the struggle for the victory of mind and rationality over physical tyranny, the benefits accruing to man from Prometheus's gift of intellect, and the preeminence of the qualities of love and compassion." [23](#) In outline, there are many similarities between Aeschylus's play and *Sol Svanetii*. The people of Svanetia as presented in Kalatozov's film are, like Prometheus, eternally consigned to torture in the remote Caucasus Mountains, held in subjugation partially through the will of the barons of the lower valleys, despots who have continually looted what small accumulations of sustenance the Ushkuls have been able to acquire. This situation is reversed at the film's end, when the fiercely handsome tribesmen and Soviet "brothers"—with their shirts off and backs perspiring [[Fig. 18](#)]—are "unchained" by their Soviet allies and are able contribute to their own freedom via the construction of the new Soviet highway, there is a sense of the superman's self-liberation. But if the Ushkul tribespeople are conceptualized as Promethean figures, chained to a harsh mountain home through an ancient curse, the Soviet filmmakers must at some level have seen themselves as Prometheus-like as well. Like Prometheus, the good Soviet comrade (whether Russian or Georgian) has also stolen the fires of knowledge and production from the long dominating (i.e. capitalist) order and has also gained the wrath of the gods, the gods of the West who still surround their young Union from every direction. Saving the Svanetian highlanders is therefore another type of homo-salvation, another enterprise of projection and reflection, that shows confused good will, longing, and (self-) scrutiny, and it offers another explanation for the film's erotic charge.

More generally, the work of the most recent generation of post-colonialist and ethnographic theorists has rightly found that the castigation their progenitors have again too quickly offered has its own narcissistic component. Indeed, the earlier critiques of ethnography are as vexed by self-regard as the texts they have focused on. Their words have often betrayed a repressive sense of sexual guilt and a fear and disavowal of the death-drive that should more productively be admitted. Finally, one might dare say, their project has shown a self-punishing sense of failure focused on the fact that the various forms of colonialism, whether

capitalist or communist, haven't lived up to the promise to harmoniously unify the globe.

What is still needed in the case of this one film, ultimately, is an historical account that will more fully delineate the self-reported experience of the Svanetians regarding the filmed intersection of two cultures. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the discourse within the former republics has been significantly liberated and the descendants of the tribespeople might have a story to tell about the event of the production that is as remarkable as the text of the film itself, one that even itself, is still too little known. Only then will the film be readable as MacDougall would hope, as a conversation, coerced, manipulated or otherwise, between two distinct but connected groups of different people.

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1. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte" in *Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 300-25, 318 ↑
2. David MacDougall, "Whose Story Is It?" in *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R. 1990-1994*. Ed. Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1994) 27-36, 28. ↑
3. With and titled under: *Turksib*. Kino on Video, 1997. ↑
4. See Trinh t. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). ↑
5. Georges Sadoul, *Dictionary of Films*. Trans., Ed and Updated by Peter Morris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) 346. ↑
6. Sadoul, 346. ↑
7. Sergei Tret'iakov, *A Chinese Testament: The Autobiography of Tan Shin-hua* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1934) v. ↑
8. Sergei Tret'iakov, "Strana Shvan" ("The Land of Svanetia"), *Novyi Ief*. 1927: 12-25. (Unpublished translation by Erika Wolf) ↑
9. See Trinh (1989); Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals*,

- Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Edward W. Said. *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979). ↑
10. Bill Nichols, *An Introduction of Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 99. ↑
  11. Nichols (1991), 138. ↑
  12. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 34. ↑
  13. MacDougall, 28. ↑
  14. Quoted in David MacKenzie and Michael W. Curran, *A History of the Soviet Union* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1977). ↑
  15. Quoted in MacKenzie and Curran, 204. ↑
  16. Mackenzie and Curran, 204. ↑
  17. Nichols (1991), 217-18. ↑
  18. Torgovnick, 154-67. ↑
  19. When homoeroticism surfaces in Torgovnick's study, it is between two white men. Nonetheless, her brilliant analysis of Henry M. Stanley's *How I Found Livingstone* points to the fact that it is against the sublime setting of radical geographical and racial difference that transgressive passion is able to briefly expose itself among these "civilized" subjects. ↑
  20. Mikhail Agursky, "Nietzschean Roots of Stalinist Culture," *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*. Ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 256. ↑
  21. Margarita Tupitsyn, "Superman Imagery in Soviet Photography," *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*. Ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 296. ↑
  22. Quoted in Tupitsyn, 289. Emphasis added. ↑
  23. Gerald Fitzgerald, "Prometheus Bound" in *New Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*. Release 6. CD-ROM (Novato, CA: Grolier, 1993), entry. ↑

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