



## Exploring Youth in Kabardino-Balkaria: Cinema

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### Sokurov Teaching Cinema at the Kabardino-Balkarian State University

During the 67th Locarno International Film Festival, the famous Russian director Alexander Sokurov presented 10 of his students' short films from the Kabardino-Balkarian State University, where he has been teaching since 2010. An interesting experience, considering that Sokurov "challenges that cinema conceived as a method either to capture or narrate reality"<sup>1</sup>. The set of 10 student films represents not only the ethnic culture within the socio-political context of a country (Kabardino-Balkaria) foreign to the western viewer, but also permits the films' study as an ethnographic terrain of a traditional environment, unfolded within contemporary reality. These films thus contain unique insight into Kabardino-Balkaria. What distinguishes this specific region and creates the conditions giving rise to such films ?

#### Context: Russia and the Northern Caucasus

The Northern Caucasus – a region gradually distancing from Russia on spiritual and ideological grounds – remains nonetheless in close political and social ties with Moscow. The rising threat of the Caucasus' loss to the Kremlin, which comes with increased independence and sovereignty in the region, pushes Russian policy to retreat to older approaches – governing the Caucasus as a regional subject. Historically, the relations between Russia and the Northern Caucasus can be likened to those between a difficult child and their preoccupied parent. According to writer and blogger Limonov, the region's instability stems out of ideological, rather than economic factors, and is caused by problems related to past or present suppression of at least certain types of Islam by the federal government.

#### The Islamic Factor

Today, the Islamic factor clearly pervades all spheres of life in the area, the increased prevalence of which can be attributed to socio-economic problems there. It is however equally important to recognize the recent revival of Islam globally as an alternative socio-political model. This contemporary social mobilization of Caucasian Muslims, their opposition to local authority, and to that of the Russian State, accumulates a powerful social energy. Thus, both authorities and civilians are faced with the difficult task of preventing the growing radicalization of Muslim youth. This growing radicalization is undoubtedly influenced by a number of political, historic, and ethnic factors, the phenomenon of which is in part brought about by the destruction of traditional Caucasian Muslim society as a result of social modernization. A significant portion of young people in the area today is passively inclined towards radical ideas. However, Russia's new politically centralized policies provide Muslims with relative social freedom, as seen for instance in Chechnya. Instead of a forceful extraction of Islam from the socio-political sphere, the Chechen governing body strengthens the legitimacy of a Muslim presence in the Russian political field. A similar political model is clearly of interest to the neighboring Kabardino-Balkaria. Consequently, the State University's west-leaning educational approach within the field of filmmaking and visual arts is not particularly welcomed, creating obstacles for the now emerging generation of filmmakers who are to attempt working there.

#### Filmmaking as Linked to Personal Experience

With this in mind, Alexander Sokurov's group of 14 students provides an interesting subject for cultural anthropology. These students film in the

<sup>1</sup> In: *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, edited by Birgit Beumers and Nancy Condee, I.B.Tauris, London-New York, 2011, p. 1



distinct conditions of Kabardino-Balkaria, where the interrelations of power and religion have not yet been resolved, and the flux of which influences the young filmmakers' cinematic language. In their documentary and dramatic works we see urban suburbs, desolate villages – a Spartan post-Soviet way of life. In striving to capture real life, humanity, and combine facts with personal perception and experience, the students adhere to the basic principles of their Master's methods. Sokurov insists that good directing can only be rooted in a deep personal experience. Therefore, the first thematic projects given to the students dealt with the subject of family, for example «Letter to the Mother» [see film stills below] or «Brother», and were expanded upon as socio-cultural issues, oftentimes featuring the influence of Islam on youth (a film by Malika Musaeva shows a girl who runs away to fight and another film, by Kantemir Balagov, portrays a boy who converts to Islam) or being manifested by the metaphorical representation of social contradictions between Russia and the Caucasus region as a Mother (Father) - Son (Daughter) conflict.

### Characterizing the Students' Work

Sokurov very clearly opposes the representation of violence onscreen. On this point, he (unintentionally) converges with Muslim censorship, which prohibits the filming and showcasing of

violence. In this respect, Sokurov's students appear unique against the common direction of post-Soviet cinema adhering to a mainstream western model. Thus, with such a unified direction, what distinguishes the students' work? Although it may be too early to discuss their individual creative styles, a remarkable richness of the ethnographic material is present (for example, Gadzhimurad Efendiev intensely investigates the model of the folk genre in the movie «Melkhet» [see film stills below]). Due to the use of mostly untrained, Kabardian or Chechen speaking actors, and the natural environment sets, these student films can be considered as both contemporary neo-realism, and an ethnographic source. With the term «ethnographic», I do not imply the films' exotic nature, but the serious attempt to create a National Kabardino-Balkarian cinema. The examination of universal themes through local source-material reveals interesting results: for example in works of Vladimir Bitokov [see film stills page 42 of this Bulletin], Tina Mastafova and Kira Kovalenko, capturing a representation of contemporary Kabardian society. Therefore, these students represent a unique example for the creation of a personal cinematic style, and their work – a necessary ethnographic documentation, investigating contemporary socio-political issues of the Caucasus region.



Pismo materi/Lettre à la Mère (2010, court) de : Malika Musaeva



Melkhet/Melkhet (2010, court) de : Gadzhimurad Efendiev