

## CULTURE AND SOCIETY

UZBEK CINEMA:  
A SLOW REVIVAL

Vladimir MESAMED

*Researcher, Harry Truman Institute  
at the Jewish University in Jerusalem  
(Israel)*

The Soviet Union's collapse not only had an impact on the sociopolitical situation in the former Soviet republics, but also on the state of affairs in science and art, including cinematography. Marked by many common or similar traits, Soviet cinema, as the unity and synthesis of its national components, disintegrated into purely national parts, finally breaking free from Moscow's ideological grasp. This also led to the cinema art (and its parts) of the newly independent states breaking its decades-long ties with the cinematography of other former union republics, primarily Russia. The difficulties experienced by all these countries during the transition to a market economy also took their toll on the national film industry, including in Uzbekistan, the only post-Soviet republic in which local cinematography has centralized financial support. (When a film production and rental market is just forming, it is difficult to overestimate the state's participation in encouraging and supporting this intricate process.)

Specialists and connoisseurs of this type of art have highly praised Uzbek cinema for its professionalism, national uniqueness, and originality. It is indicative that films began being produced here almost as soon as cinematography was invented. For example, a pioneer of Uzbek cinema, Khudoibergan Devanov, made the first documentary film in Khorezm as early as the spring of 1900. As for feature films, the first ones were made in Uzbekistan during the second half of the 1920s almost immediately after the formation of the Uzbek S.S.R., with the help of Russian masters. During the next decade, local teams of directors, cameramen, scriptwriters, and other creative specialists appeared and began their professional activity. The quality of films gradually improved and their number increased. Whereas at the beginning of the 1950s, three feature films were made every year at the Uzbekfilm studio, by the mid-1980s, during the heyday of local cinematography, this number had leaped to twelve. Whereby nearly every year, one of them received a prize at prestigious international film festivals. The documentary film industry was also highly praised in those years, in which well-known director Malik Kaiumov, who won prizes at many festivals, worked. In the mid-1980s, a documentary film by Tashkent documentary film director S. Papazian was awarded the Silver Dove prize at the International Film Festival in Leipzig. Vibrant masters of Uzbek Soviet cinema, such as Sh. Abbasov, A. Khamraev, E. Ishmukhamedov, and M. Abzalov, are well known in the

world of cinematography. A prestigious school for cameramen was also created in the republic, represented by such names as D. Fatkhullin, Kh. Faiziev, A. Pann, M. Krasnianskiy, L. Travitskiy, and M. Penson.

During the ten post-Soviet years from 1991 to 2001, more than 50 feature films were made in the country.<sup>1</sup> A decree by President Islam Karimov of 9 March, 1992 became the organizational base for developing the local film industry, and on 29 April, 1996, the Uzbekkino State Joint-Stock Company was created and a program for reforming national cinematography drawn up. But, as the local press noted at the end of 2002, ten years after the president's decree, no significant changes have occurred, despite the fact that in recent years the state has subsidized all stages of film production. Incidentally, the experience of neighboring Kyrgyzstan shows that it is also possible to get by without government subsidies in this sphere. After producing noteworthy films, Kyrgyz cinematographers attracted the attention of foreign investors, who provided the money to form creative funds for assisting the development of cinematography in Bishkek. Articles in the Uzbek press inform us that the republic's film industry will continue to be financed exclusively by domestic sources in the near future.<sup>2</sup>

Every year in Uzbekistan, money is allotted from the state budget for making 50 films: six to eight feature films, about 40 documentary, and four children's movies, including cartoons. But in 1997, only one film was made, in 1998, ten, and in 1999 and 2000, four each.<sup>3</sup> What is more, the budget envisaged funds for dubbing foreign films in the Uzbek language. A separate program has been drawn up for developing video film production, which is also financially supported by the state. But the underdeveloped production base and shortage of qualified personnel make it impossible to utilize even those funds allotted. For example, in 2002, 120 million sums (approximately \$120,000) were not utilized. This is because it is very difficult to put a new film into production; in particular, the fully bureaucratized system for making a film—from submitting a script application to putting it into production—falls entirely in line with the bad memories of the Soviet experience in the state film industry. Putting scripts into production drags out for long months, and what is more, the green light has to be given from above. And the ridiculously low wages earned by creative specialists makes it impossible to attract high-class professionals for writing high-quality scripts. According to D. Bulgakov, former editor-in-chief at Uzbekfilm, the scriptwriter of a feature-length fiction film receives at best 300 dollars in royalties.<sup>4</sup> The monthly salary of the director of a feature film is no more than 20-25 dollars.

Due to this and for several other reasons, many well-known directors have left the republic. Such maestros of Uzbek cinema as A. Khamraev and E. Ishmukhamedov, who filmed the serial *Heiress* in Russia, now live and work in Moscow. Torn from their native soil, they are making films which do not have the national flavor inherent in their earlier works that earned Uzbek cinematography its high reputation. The fact that the former strong professional and organizational ties with the film specialist training centers in the U.S.S.R. were destroyed after the republic gained its independence is also very detrimental. At the beginning of the 1990s, the leadership of the Uzbek film industry fell under the influence of the campaign that swept the country of indiscriminate denial of Soviet experience and announced that it was distancing itself from the Russian film specialist training centers, considering them fallacious and falling short of world standards.<sup>5</sup> Plans for training professionals not only in the West, but also in countries without strong film traditions, for example, Malaysia, were proposed and drawn up.<sup>6</sup> But these plans have not been carried out yet either. All the current prominent figures in the Uzbek film industry studied at one time in Moscow, in the world-renowned All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). Since the beginning of the 1990s, this institute (now the All-Russian) has been inviting a certain number of students from the new post-Soviet states to study at it on a gratuitous basis, which unfortunately Uzbekistan is not taking advantage of: in the past ten years, Tashkent has not sent a single student to study at VGIK. The youngest Uzbek actors, who had serious professional training in Moscow, are now forty years old. Now cinema-

<sup>1</sup> See: *Uzbekiston san'ati* (1991-2001) (Toshkent), 2001, p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> See: *Pravda Vostoka*, 26 December, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See: *San'at*, No. 1, 2000, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Recording of a conversation with D. Bulgakov, Tashkent, 28 January, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> See: *Pravda Vostoka*, 14 August, 2001.

tographers are trained at the Tashkent Institute of the Arts, which does not have a solid material and technical base or experienced professional teachers in the field of cinema art.

The technicians of the local film industry have also been affected by mass migration of the Russian-speaking population, who comprised a significant number of these specialists. The exodus of highly qualified employees from this not very prosperous industry was also caused by a deterioration in the financial status of most of the republic's residents, essentially by a "return to 20-30, and sometimes even 40 years ago."<sup>7</sup> The production and technical base of cinematography is experiencing a severe crisis. This largely explains why Uzbek films today are being made at an extremely low professional level, and "technically do not withstand any criticism."<sup>8</sup> It stands to reason that this is preventing domestic films from being promoted in countries with a developed film industry. According to D. Bulgakov, there is only one specialist with the necessary professional training left in the sound department at the Uzbekfilm studio, and there is only one professional film designer, all the rest have moved elsewhere or left the profession. The situation is similar among other specialists: cameramen, film cutters, editors, and so on. As a well-known film critic in the country noted, "professionalism is no longer the main criterion in film production."<sup>9</sup> What is more, people are joining the film industry leadership who often have nothing to do with this form of art, while those who brought it fame continue to leave. This happened at the only documentary film studio in Uzbekistan, where highly-qualified personnel began to be victimized when the management changed, as a result of which art director Sh. Makhmudov, the most well-known director-cameraman in the country, who made a series of documentary films for national cinematography and won prizes at prestigious international festivals, was fired.

Despite the abundance of names related to the present development stage of the film industry, not many genuine professionals can be mentioned who are still devoted to the art and demonstrate a high level of mastery. The most prominent of them is Iusuf Razykov, a former scriptwriter (and VGIK graduate) who later became a director, as well as Zulfikar Musakov, who also took higher courses in film directing in Moscow. Alas, it is difficult for them to perfect their skills, since, as we have already noted, their older and more experienced colleagues are gradually leaving the industry. Director Shukhrat Abbasov, renowned master (of worldwide fame) who celebrated his 70th birthday in 2003, has essentially stopped filming altogether. He is currently heading the cinema department at the Tashkent Institute of the Arts. "I am a man of the past," he said several years ago after the premiere of his film *Otandan kolgan dalalar* (Our Fathers' Estates).<sup>10</sup>

It is obvious that the main goal of the Uzbek film maker today is to interpret, reveal, and relate in cinema art images the events that have been going on in the country since it gained its independence. There have been many changes, and the main one is that the people have been given a historical opportunity to create their own national state. But the path to acquiring genuine independence is incredibly arduous, only by analyzing and correcting past mistakes is it possible to step confidently forward, which unfortunately is a rare sight in the Uzbek film industry today. For example, Zulfikar Musakov made a few comedies in the best traditions of this genre, combining both fantasy and light mysticism. They are full of kind-heartedness, but have little in common with everyday life. They were all warmly received by the audience. But the encores for each of his new films are explained by the fact that the audience goes to watch "these conformist fairytales"<sup>11</sup> for the very reason that they yearn for the life shown on the screen. Similar thoughts are evoked by films such as *Abdullajan*, *The Bomb*, *Mummy Dear*, *The Little Doctor*, and *Divine Boys*, which were made based on contemporary topics and at quite a high professional level. But most of this director's films are situation comedies which have little in common with real life. The audience enjoys because they provide a distraction from harsh reality.

<sup>7</sup> L.A. Freedman, *Ocherki ekonomicheskogo i sotsial'nogo razvitiia stran Tsentral'noi Azii posle raspada SSSR*, Moscow, 2001, p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> Recording of conversation with D. Bulgakov.

<sup>9</sup> Kh. Abul-Kasymova, "Kino i izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo," *San'at*, No. 1, 1999, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> "Kino va zamon turt soatga singgan asr," *Turkiston*, 26 September, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Recording of conversation with D. Bulgakov.

For example, the picture, *Divine Boys*, had quite a good run, in which Zulfikar Musakov attempted to show the growing gap between the rich and the poor. The film is built on episodes from the life of four Tashkent schoolchildren who belong to different social classes. But instead of serious study of this deep topic, the film is full of sentimentality, and the most important task of creating a “kind-hearted film” did not allow its author to be objective enough.

The Orator, *Angel in Fire*, *A Woman’s World*, *Comrade Boikendjaev*, and *Male Dance* are films which made another popular contemporary director, Iusuf Razykov, famous. But hardly any of them relate to the modern-day world, some of them try to make sense of the recent Soviet past, whereby primarily from nihilistic standpoints, while the others can be said to reflect life beyond time and space. It is worth noting that in a review of one of Iusuf Razykov’s best films, *A Woman’s World*, well-known film expert Khamidulla Akbarov limited himself to the following statements: “...this canvas ... provides rich food for thought about the interrelations between belles-lettres and screen art,” “...not against a background of historical events, but in everyday life, with respect to love, women, and creativity.”<sup>12</sup> An article by film critic Kh. Abul-Kasymova also gives an incoherent description of the film’s contents.<sup>13</sup>

The contemporary theme has a hard time making it onto the screen. In 2002, D. Bulgakov and N. Tulakhojaev wrote a film script reflecting the reality of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. It was based on a true story and told of a surgeon who worked at the clinic of well-known Moscow oncologist, N. Blokhin, defended his doctor’s thesis there, and in the mid-1990s returned to Tashkent. And under conditions that had little in common with those in Moscow, this specialist continued his work, bringing back to life people who just recently were diagnosed as terminally ill, in so doing meeting clear opposition from his colleagues. But the script “got held up” in the departments, where people were guided by political, rather than professional motives, and accused the authors of the fact that the theme of their brainchild was not national enough. But the real reason was that the script spoke openly for the first time about the shortcomings in the country, showed the extremely difficult situation that has developed in the public health system, and opened up real problems which most film-makers avoid. The republic’s mass media, which are inclined to turn a blind eye to any shortcomings of the post-Soviet period and only sing the praises of the new victories, had to nevertheless admit recently that “...the Uzbek film industry has become alienated from the people.”<sup>14</sup>

Under present conditions, the appeal of domestic film makers to the nation’s spiritual heritage, to the key aspects of its distant and near history is extremely natural. This is reflected to a certain extent in the films, *Great Emir Timur* (Buiuk Amir Temur), *Imam al-Bukhari*, *Our Fathers’ Estates*, *The Stone Idol* (*Tosh sanam*), *Sogdiana* (*Sugdiena*), and *Alpamysh* (*Olpamish*). Religious films have become a new phenomenon. For example, the TV serial *Lafz* (*Word*) made by director B. Akhmedov at the Uzbektelefilm studio in 2000. It was based on the hadiths of famous medieval theologian, imam al-Bukhari, who lived and wrote on the territory of modern-day Uzbekistan. The film introduced the synthesis of religious dogmas and everyday life into the practice of national cinema for the first time. As the republic’s press noted, “the screen brings us the thought about the inevitability of atonement not through the language of didactics, but through quite entertaining and moving narration using convincing means of artistic imagery, comprehensibly and subtly.”<sup>15</sup>

All the same, despite the noted and other problems, in recent years, Uzbek films have been actively participating in international film reviews and have even been awarded high prizes. For example, *The Orator*, a film by director Iusuf Razykov, received first prize at the Kinoshock Moscow Film Festival of CIS and Baltic Countries in 1999. It was also shown successfully at the International Film Festival in Berlin in 2000 and at a special review organized in Brussels by the Cinema-NOVA film association. This film takes the viewer back to the first years of the Soviet period, takes another look (admittedly, frequently very straightforwardly) at the heritage of the totalitarian regime, its tragic errors, and through the life

<sup>12</sup> *Pravda Vostoka*, 29 February, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> See: *San’at*, No. 1, 2000, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Pravda Vostoka*, 24 May, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 August, 2000.

of a simple peasant shows the futility of accepting other people's ideals. On the other hand, it also leads the viewer to understand that the Soviet era is part of history and deserves to be "...thought of kindly."<sup>16</sup> A film by the same director, *A Woman's World*, created on the basis of a novel of the same name by writer O. Mukhtar, participated in the contest review of the 22nd Moscow International Film Festival in 2000. At that time Uzbekistan was the only CIS state, apart from Russia, allowed to take part in the contest program of this film review. *Fellini*, a film by director N. Abbasov, participated in several festivals, in Warsaw, Calcutta, and Innsbruck (Austria). Whereby in Innsbruck this film won the Grand Prix, and then it was shown on the screens of more than 15 countries of the world.<sup>17</sup>

At the International Teleforum of 2000 in Moscow, a documentary film by director V. Iskhakov, based on a book by the republic's president, Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan at the Turn of the 21st Century: Threats to Security, Conditions and Guarantees of Progress*, was awarded two prizes at once. But there is hardly any point in anticipating cinematographic innovations in a film in which "...not only the country's wise leader is shown, but also the current Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, who assumes full responsibility upon himself and understands their role in ensuring the nation's peaceful and dignified future." Here are the words of the film's author: "I tried to take a look at how the power, a specific leader, behaves in emergencies, and if I was unable to hide my admiration of the Uzbekistan President, that was only because it was genuine."<sup>18</sup>

In recent years, people in the republic are talking more about the need for further reforming national cinema and are identifying the difficulties it faces today. One of the significant problems is the extremely small number of cinemas for showing films: more than 80% of the cinema houses have been turned into restaurants, cafeterias, discotheques, billiard halls, and other places of entertainment. Projects are being put forward which affect different aspects of the industry's operation. For example, well-known film expert and film critic, Professor Djura Teshabaev, suggested dividing the film industry into technical and creative components. In so doing, film studios will continue to act as technical enterprises, carrying out the entire production cycle, beginning with putting out the script, while the creative aspect of making films will be served by a specially created film academy, which will allow both branches of the film industry room for maneuver.<sup>19</sup> Another suggestion was aimed at searching for new sources of financing: leasing pavilions, film sets, costumes, and other property to foreign film companies for making their films. What is more, there are proposals to sell foreigners some of the shares of the national film company.<sup>20</sup>

A new phenomenon is attempts by Uzbek film makers to establish cooperation with colleagues from neighboring Central Asian states. A big event was the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Film Bridge conference organized in December 2002. Some of its participants accused Uzbek cinema of "spinelessness, insipidity, and unnecessary sentimentality and romanticism," and of "...making no headway." Whereas Kyrgyz films, which are being made in a country where there is now a different political and ideological climate and more "advanced" democracy, were said to be distinguished "...by artistic taste and mature cinematographic vision. ...Our Kyrgyz colleagues find topics and themes which touch the hearts of today's audience. ...Their works are full of the grim truth."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Kh. Abul-Kasymova, "S nadezhdoi na budushchee," *San'at*, No. 1, 2000, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Toshkent Okshomi*, 9 September, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> *Narodnoe slovo*, 5 October, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> See: *Pravda Vostoka*, 24 May, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Recording of conversation with film director M. Zakirov, Tashkent, 27 January, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> *Pravda Vostoka*, 26 December, 2002.