

# A Brief History of Post-Soviet Era Cinema in Azerbaijan

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This article reviews Azerbaijan's post-Soviet cinema in the context of its priorities and creative freedom. That is, what issues were preferred in our national cinema during the post-Soviet era? And in the process of filming these issues – during the screenwriting and production – did the filmmakers' ideas face any obstacles? Or were the filmmakers able to freely express their position about the story? From this point of view, the article focuses on the themes of movies produced from the era reflecting the roots of post-Soviet cinema to our modern times, and their interpretation by filmmakers. At the same time, the article also looks at whether state-funded movies were censored due to the filmmakers' interpretations or their point of views.

The article examines examples of new – independent, war, and commercial – movies that have appeared on the eve of the collapse of the USSR and the post-Soviet era within the framework of whether the positions of filmmakers were adequate to reality, whether they reflected the problems of society. Did the filmmakers manage to display their positions and creative attitudes towards themes in their films? Or did they face censorship and restrictions?

It is important to examine these issues because the ultimate goals of cinema (and generally art) are to explore humans and their reactions within the context of different situations and problems, to ask questions, to show the invisible aspects of actual problems, to challenge dogmas in public opinion, to influence viewers by causing psychological discomfort, and at the same time, offering alternative ideas and discussions. In

other words, the main purpose of cinema (art) is to reflect the community in a mirror or, as the Austrian filmmaker Ulrich Seidl states, “art exists to enable people to look at something in a way that gives them an opportunity to think about their lives and society.”<sup>[i]</sup> Cinema is in close contact with societal problems because it does not live in isolation from society. For example, *Sevil* (1929, directed by Jafar Jabbarli and Hamo Beknazarian) influenced the public consciousness of women. “Izzet Orujzadeh, the leading actor, wrote in her memoirs: ‘I had taken my mother to the club on the day *Sevil* was presented. Our relatives also came. Tickets of the most viewers were bought for them by Jafar Jabbarli. On that day, first my mother, and then many other viewers threw away their charshafs.”<sup>[ii]</sup> <sup>[iii]</sup>

The main issues reflected in post-Soviet cinema and the creative freedom of filmmakers have yet to be studied as a separate topic in Azerbaijani film criticism. Their importance is only rarely noted in separate writings such as cinema critic Aygun Aslanli’s articles *Azərbaycan kinosu-120! – eyforiya sonrası oxu üçün*<sup>[iv]</sup> [*Azerbaijani cinema-120! – for reading after the euphoria*] and *Tənqidə yararsız filmlərimiz*<sup>[v]</sup> [*Our movies that are useless for criticism*]. Many topics (such as descriptions of contemporary documentary film, women’s discourse in national cinema, social reality in cinema, and trends in cinema) which need to be studied in Azerbaijani film criticism have not been widely studied yet. In fact, national film criticism has been taken on by only a few critics. Most importantly, *Fokus*, which was the only journal publishing this kind of research, stopped publishing in 2013 due to financial problems. Moreover, there is no support that stimulates fundamental research in cinema criticism.

The relevance of movie subjects and attitudes, as well as innovative styles of filmmakers towards them and the shooting methods used, were taken into consideration in the selection

of movies in this article. The first part of the article covers criminal, detective, and psychological drama movies that criticized the government's shortcomings in 1987, when the first features of the post-Soviet cinema emerged. In the next section, which covers the period between 1988 and 1996, the article focuses on comedy movies which harshly criticized the government, and drama movies which described the problems of the Stalin era. From the 2000s to the present day, there have been several low-budget commercial movies with good cinematic quality, funded by the Ministry of Culture, which focused on the current issues and independently dealt with the human aspects of war.

### **The first manifestation of post-Soviet cinema**

The manifestations of the main topics as well as the renewal of genres and approaches to them in post-Soviet Azerbaijani films emerged in the second half of the 1980s as a result of the demands of that time. For the USSR was in a total crisis until the mid-1980s and the wrong policies that had been made during the years of its existence made changes inevitable. On January 27, 1987, at the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev announced the launch of a new era called Glasnost ("openness").<sup>[vi]</sup> Naturally, the new policy of Perestroika (restructuring) also applied to the sphere of culture. Starting from this period, censorship of-banned critical movies was lifted and they were widely circulated: for example, Aleksei German's *Trial on the Road* (1971) and Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance* (1984). The main theme of movies in the Glasnost era was related to the problems of that time. New movies reflected issues such as prostitution, drug addiction, and youth problems that were previously taboo: *Little Vera* (1988), *The Needle* (1988), *Tragedy Rock 'n' Roll Style* (1990), *My Name Is Arlekino* (1988).

Thus, Perestroika and Glasnost brought not only new topics, but also new styles and aesthetics to our national cinema. Specifically, I want to discuss three movies all shot in the

wave of openness in 1987. Two of these critical movies – Ogtay Mirgasimov's *Under Satan's Gaze* (*Şeytan göz qabağında*) and Farhad Yusifov's *In Unclear Circumstances* (*Aşkarsızlıq şəraitində*) – reflected the corrupt activities of high-ranking Soviet officials and discussed the then heated issue of free speech. Both movies were filmed in criminal and detective genres. A hero of *Under Satan's Gaze*, Teymur Alimov, an employee of the newspaper *Respublika* ("The Republic") who is known for his critical articles, investigates illegal fish hunting in one of the Azerbaijani districts. This illegal act is under the patronage of high-ranking officials – the first secretary of the district and the chief of police. Even though they try to kill Teymur, he survives and his investigation is published in the newspaper. Mirgasimov used to interesting devices that are not characteristic of our cinema. Teymur's persecution scene was shot as a background voice rather than visual demonstration. Although Teymur is in the center of the shot, various male voices in the background are talking about how to get rid of him. Such a tactic is fully aligned with the genre of the movie by increasing the feeling that the situation is terribly dangerous. Or, in another scene, one party official's dissatisfaction with *Perestroika* is demonstrated in a non-verbal, but meaningful way: the first secretary, who is angry at Teymur's investigation, sarcastically looks at the portrait of Gorbachev hanging over his head.

The plot of *In Unclear Circumstances* is about corrupt activities of the officials at a construction combine and the murder of a specialist who opposed them. Farhad Yusifov, the director, had an interesting approach to the story. The film begins with documentary shots in the style of criminal reporting (impression of shootings at the scene and the observation of a criminal interrogation). One of the gang members, who murdered someone during the robbery, is interrogated by the investigator at a scene in Yevlakh. The camera sometimes focuses on the investigator Mammadov in the

background. The director declares the intentions of the story in the preface – the movie will be about the murder committed in unclear circumstances. In law, “a murder committed in unclear circumstances” means a murder without any witness. The director’s rhythmic pacing is dominant in his narrative technique: the scene in which crime investigators Mammadov and Alakbarov investigate various people is accompanied by fragmentary montage aesthetics (the kind of montage in which the chronology of actions is disturbed) and each detail plays an important role in the drama of the narrative.

Both movies are similar not only in terms of their theme, but also their shared narrative technique, which is a generally accepted method in contemporary world of cinema. In particular, the shooting technique and visual means of expression used in *In Unclear Circumstances* were new in Azerbaijani cinema: sudden, fractured, and sharp montage transitions from a hand-held camera (in which the camera shakes), imitating documentary films, were filmed with sharp camera panoramas (these methods increase the internal dynamics of a story, give a sense of tension to audience, and create an effect as if things on the screen are happening *here and now*). The camera was both a secret observer and an investigator. It was a secret observer because the camera appeared randomly as if it were secretly watching the incident. It was an investigator because it used appropriate close-ups and angles in order to reveal the essence of the situation and life experience within the characters. The majority of the movie consists of talking heads; the places are mostly closed and limited. Nevertheless, from beginning to end, a dynamic documentary shooting style and genuine drama save the movie from monotony and being a regular broadcast. Tactics that are inherent to the detective genre (such as deliberately distorting the audience’s attention and focusing on another person) are used. Although both in Mirgasimov’s and Yusifov’s movies justice is served, in general, the problem remains unresolved. In one of the final scenes of *In Unclear*

*Circumstances*, a pessimistic opinion such as “the criminals were captured, but their new ones will replace them” is expressed. The final scene ends with a shot from the next crime scene.

Another film I would like to discuss is Rasim Ojagov's *Someone Else's Life* (*Özgə ömür*, 1987), a psychological drama based on a screenplay by Rustam Ibrahimbeyov. The movie is distinguished with its in-depth look into the tragedy of a prestigious rector of one of the universities, who is experiencing cognitive dissonance. The director covers the old man's whole life in a day, emphasizing his personal crisis as a chain of different episodes (household, work, love, family). The roots of the inevitable dual life of the main character and the process of his alienation are not sought in his existential problem, but in the poor structure of the Soviet society.

### **Azerbaijani national cinematography in 1988-1996**

Since 1988, the country had become ungoverned as a result of the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the national liberation movement, softening censorship, revealing the Stalin era repressions, expanding economic and political crises, as well as rising anti-communist opinion. And Azerbaijan restored its independence in October, 1991. These changes, the expansion of freedom of speech and expression, had laid the foundations for new and interesting cinema trends in the national cinema.

I call this trend a screen equivalent of the *Molla Nasraddin* magazine traditions. First, in this period, comedy was renewed as a genre with the help of sociopolitical irony, sarcasm, black humor and grotesque, which were the characteristic features of *Molla Nasraddin* rather than our national cinema; the visual illustrations in cinema became more colorful. The point is that in the well-known local comedies, which became cult classics in the Soviet era, the main themes were mostly

about love, and those movies (*The Cloth Peddler* [*Arşın mal alan*], *If Not That One, Then This One* [*O olmasın bu olsun*], *Date* [*Görüş*]) rarely discussed social problems. In addition, they touched all issues within the narrow framework of comedy genre. That is, the scope of these movies, which were mainstream comedies that could easily be understood by general audience, was limited, and they were deprived of a deep social-philosophical and critical context.

Starting from 1988, new movies were shot, which were purified from the “popcorn movie” genre and featured their own unique style, such as Vagif Mustafayev’s *The Scoundrel* (*Yaramaz*, 1988), Nizami Musayev’s *The Joke* (*Lətifə*, 1989), and Jahangir Mehdiyev’s *Don’t Get Involved, It’ll Kill You* (*Girişmə, öldürər*, 1991). These movies narrated the uncertain mood of the society during the transition from socialism to capitalism, psychological portrait of civil servants, their reaction to Perestroika and democratic changes in the language of comedy. One of the shared aspects of these movies is their mixed genre. The eclectic genre was dictated by the mixed situation of that time period. These movies were both tragic and dramatic, but also the effects of comedy and its varieties (black humor, the absurd, the grotesque, etc.) could be noticed in the general tonality of the stories.

Vagif Mustafayev’s *The Scoundrel* is about a naive and sincere man who was morally corrupted under the influence of a negative environment. The values of Hatem, the hero of the movie, were defeated by the morally corrupt society. Hatem, while becoming a bureaucrat, found himself accepting immorality as a norm. The director caricatured tragic and dramatic moments while emphasizing contradictions in Hatem’s loss of boundaries between reality and illusion.

Nizami Musayev’s *The Joke* is multipersonal and is based on several parallel plots. Events take place in the building where the party committee is located, mostly in the reception room of the first secretary. The admission office where the

prosecutor, the head of the Komsomol, and the chief of the construction department are gathered; their interpersonal conflicts and ambiguous dialogues as well as their manipulative behavior towards demonstrators, demanding a solution to the sewage problem, in front of the building were filmed in sarcastic style. The director visualizes the dreams of the characters. He has several episodes in surreal, black humor style (cynicism of civil servants, visualization of subconscious desires, and fraudulent sadness towards ordinary people with tragedy). Both *The Scoundrel* and *The Joke* can be considered the first comedies in noir genre<sup>[vii]</sup> of our cinema history.

Jahangir Mehdiyev's *Don't Get Involved, It'll Kill You* (1991) is about a group of armed men who kidnapped a dictator of an unnamed country from prison and seized a ship called *Azərbaycan*. These armed men, who aim to cross an unnamed gulf, seize the ship by putting the crew to sleep with a special substance. Events and space are hypothetical in this comedy in which some elements of combat and adventure genres are included. An armed group speaking in an unknown language, their seizure of the ship, the dictator's attempts to restore his power, "Long live democratic republic" and "Stop the regime of this bloody dictatorship" slogans in a demonstration of a foreign city, psychic women's sessions for passengers on board (such sessions were famous at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s in the USSR) are a kind of allegorical approach to what is happening in the country. Stalin's repressions were covered in several movies in 1989. One of them was Rasim Ojagov's *If I Die...Forgive Me* (*Ölsəm...bağışla*), and the other was Shahmar Alakbarov's *Endless Night* (*Sahilsiz gecə*) dramas. After his return from World War II, the hero of *If I Die...Forgive Me* learns about his father's innocence and starts to investigate this issue.

The release of *Endless Night* caused controversy in the society because it depicted the life of Zibeyda who was forced into



prostitution after her father was persecuted and she was raped. I would like to note that the notion of women's cinema almost does not exist in our cinema history. Women's issues were a priority mainly in the 1920s and 1930s (*Sevil*, *Almaz*, *İsmət*) due to the Soviet propaganda to emphasize women's position in society and promote their rights. In general, Azerbaijani cinema, in its essence, is androcentric. In the following years, women's issues were handled in Gulbaniz Azimzade's *The Last Night of the Last Year* (*Keçən ilin son gecəsi*, 1983) and, to some extent, in Huseyn Mehdiyev's *Another's Times* (*Özgə vaxt*, 1996).

*Sahilsiz gecə* is the first Azerbaijani movie that describes the fate of women whose body was exploited by men. This movie, which is about the life of a prostitute woman and has explicit scenes, caused a controversy. Rəfig Aliyev, the cinematographer of *Endless Night*, says:

"After we shot the movie, Tofiq Tagizade said that he was offered this screenplay but he was afraid of accepting it. Then Abdul Mahmədov also rejected this screenplay. The premiere took place during demonstrations [in Azerbaijan]. At that time, movies were first shown on state television. Ramiz Fətəliyev, the director of cinema studio, called Moscow and said not to show the movie, it was not an appropriate time [during demonstrations]. People might not to accept the movie. Nevertheless, state television listed the movie in its program. At that time everyone was at demonstrations. A group of people attacked Shahmar [the director] in the cinema studio. In the movie, Nuriya Ahmədova played an ethnic Armenian who was seducing girls into prostitution. The attackers said that we promote the Armenian [character]. However, the main motive in the movie was to show Stalin's victims. The parents of the hero were persecuted, she herself was raped but nobody cares about her. Here, we wanted to highlight the woman's loneliness, isolation, and her rejection by the society. She is alone everywhere, even among the crowd in bazaar scenes (...) These were the issues that should be

discussed.”[\[viii\]](#)

The genre of Huseyn Mehdiyev's *The Girl Witness* (*Şahid qız*, 1990) is political mystery. Although political changes in the country were reflected in many movies at that time, *The Girl Witness* directly criticizes the government and in this regard, this movie is a kind of political pamphlet. The main theme is about the activities of the government to manipulate mass demonstrations in favor of itself.

Hafiz Fatullayev's *The Red Train* (*Qırmızı qatar*, 1993) is about a free country, democratic struggle, human rights, and the will to power. In a part of the train where the events took place, worker-peasant class and the psychiatric patients stay in poor conditions while comfortable places were allocated to the upper class and prostitutes. The struggle of the worker-peasant class with hammer and sickle to get rid of the rats and its characterization as a sacred war, a lumpen proletarian character collecting a lavatory pan collection, the rape of an old man by prostitutes, a utopian country, and other similar episodes are the director's satires about the Soviet era. Tofiq Tagizade's last movie *The Hound* (*Köpək*, 1994) is based on the same theme. But the director is more specific in his target, namely, that he is investigating an important subject, such as the danger of losing one's humanity in slavery. In the movie, where there are no specific spaces and names, the author has worked on the symbolic storyline.

In those years, filmmakers did not only focus on political and social processes. For instance, Davud Imanov's *Basement* (*Zirzəmi*, 1990) and Rasim Ojagov's *For Business and Pleasure* (*Həm ziyarət, həm ticarət*, 1995) explore the identity problem of intellectuals who had to make either art or money in the process of changing society. Anvar Abluc's *Window* (*Pəncərə*, 1991) is about ruthless attitude of teachers towards boarding-school pupils, Shamil Aliyev's *Confession* (*Etiraf*, 1992) describes the drama of an unsuccessful person who was betrayed by his wife and friend. Ayaz Salayev's *Bat* (*Yarasa*, 1995) is

arthouse reflecting his opinions on cinema art. This is the first Azerbaijani fiction movie featured in Forum section of the Berlin Film Festival. The French *Le Monde* newspaper named it a “fairy tale with delicate designs and tasteful images.”<sup>[ix]</sup>

The abovementioned Huseyn Mehdiyev’s psychological drama *Another’s Times* (1996), which received the *Golden Sevilla* award at the International Madrid Film Festival for the *Best Director*, is in noir genre. *Another’s Times* describes the process of alienation of a young woman, who dedicated her life to her care needed father. The director explores an important moral-ethical issue in our mentality such as “a child’s obligation to a parent” and asks questions: Is the choice of this woman, who experiences an identity crisis as a result of her preference to pay her debt to her parent, right? Is sacrificing oneself, which violates the harmony of human nature, a moral act? Is not this another form of suicide? The questions remain open and answers are left to viewers.

### **Movies in the Oil Boom Period**

Despite the economic and social difficulties of 1988-1996, the destruction of the film distribution system, and the fact that cinemas only operated in the capital, our national cinema was experiencing a boom in intensive production of movies, genre diversity, and interesting interpretation of events. While some of the reasons for this boom were the existence of broad opportunities for freedom of expression, the considerable weakening, and at some point disappearance of, censorship, the other reason was that business invested in film production. But towards the end of the 1990s, the political situation stabilized, which limited free economic relations and severely damaged independent entrepreneurship, thus reduced funding for cinema from alternative sources. Moreover, the tax on cinema, the high customs fees for cinema technology brought into the country also had a negative impact on independent cinema.

For these reasons, the oil boom which began in 2005 did

nothing for the development of cinema. For comparison, in 1992 and 1994 four feature films were produced, and in 1993 and 1995 six were made. If you add to this list the short films produced, both fiction and documentaries, you see a rich palate. But from the early 2000s, only two or three full-length feature films were produced each year. By the mid-2000s, centers of independent production were in a non-functional state. If at first centers of independent production could dispose of the funds they received based on their applications to the Culture Ministry and oversee production themselves, after 2008 all production shifted to the state-controlled *Azərbaycanfilm*, while centers of independent production ceased to operate for the most part.

At this time the themes began to change as well: themes such as corruption, bureaucratic arbitrariness, personal freedom, personal choice, protest, and social degradation were replaced by a moral crisis in the face of social problems, historical films promoting the idea of a unified Azerbaijan, and light mysteries. In this period the films produced were few and of low quality: *Əlvida cənub şəhəri*, *Cavid ömrü*, *Hökmdarın taleyi*, *Cavad xan*, *Əlavə təsir*, *Niyyət*, *Vəkil hanı?*, *Sübhün səfiri*, *Dərvişin qeydləri*, *Mən evə qayıdıram*, *Qatil*, *Xeyirlə Şərin rəqsi*, etc. The main features of these films are substandard screenplays and drama, the lack of a deep understanding of their themes, pathos, artificial acting, slapdash musical choices, broad strokes instead of deep examination, and a stereotypical directorial approach.

In the past 20 years, several films which took part in first class festivals have been made with financial support from the ministry. The creators of these films are a new young generation of filmmakers. Chingiz Rasulzadeh's film *Dolls* (*Kuklalar*, 2010), which premiered at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, is a look at the 1980s and early 1990s on the eve of the fall of the Soviet Union. Under the management of Jora, an ethnic Armenian, six teenagers work in cartoonish costumes at a seaside park and pose for pictures

with tourists. They are beginning anew to live independently. The changes in the country force the teenagers to make a choice, and ultimately one of them leaves the country while the others go to war in Karabakh. The events of the film come alive many years later in the memory of the youth who lives abroad.

To a certain extent, *Dolls* is an autobiographical film. The director, who was 17 at the time of the events described, translated his personal experiences and observations into cinematic language. One of the director's primary goals is to describe the atmosphere of heartfelt friendship between peoples in Baku at the time: take, for example, the scene in which the teenagers help Jora the photographer to leave the country safely. The finale, however, was subjected to censorship by the Culture Ministry, although that part is the film's best and most antimilitarist episode in terms of artistic power. In that scene, when his comrades enter into battle, one of the teenagers remains in the trenches, buries his face in his hands, and cries in fear and horror. The director showed that any war turns people's lives and dreams upside down. Corpses on the battlefield dressed in silly costumes is an effective metaphor for broken destinies.

Of the censored episode Chingiz Rasulzadeh said, "The final episode was discussed in the Ministry's Artistic Council. They told me that if you stop after these episodes which could make people angry, then we'll allow it. But then they cut it. They told me that an Azerbaijani soldier can't cry. Why do they make a tragedy out of it and say that an Azerbaijani soldier can't cry? In four episodes of *Saving Private Ryan* an American soldier cries. How could it be that he can't cry? This episode of mine seemed unpatriotic to the bureaucrats."

Ilgar Najaf's *Pomegranate Orchard* (*Nar bağı*, 2017), which had its world premiere at the Karlovy Vary Festival in the East of the West competition, is the most successful film financed by the ministry. *Pomegranate Orchard* stands out from other films

thanks to its cinematic language and acting. Although the characters are seen on screen, they are not in the center, but at the periphery of the screen, as if existing not physically, but rather as shadows. They are usually seen in medium and long shots and at slanted angles. This method is entirely appropriate for the spiritual state of the characters, living semi-closed lives in alienation from each other. The shooting methods and means of visual expression (overall composition, pacing, editing, lighting, shots and angles) used, as a rule, in our national cinema, could not properly express the character of the story. Ilgar Najaf was able to achieve precisely this harmony.

As for the plot, Shamil lives in a provincial town and has a large pomegranate orchard, when his son, with whom he once had a conflict, returns home after a long time in Russia. Gaining his father's confidence, he sells the orchard, abandons once again his young son and wife, takes the money, and runs off to a married woman in Russia. In the background are social and domestic problems in the director's interpretation, while the complexities of human interactions, the breaking points of relationships, and a spiritual crisis are brought to the foreground. The director takes events which are usually seen as news in the media and documents them in an artistic space and invites the viewer to take another look at raw reality with a kino-eye. The details of the story – topical issues such as non-functional infrastructure, the ease with which well-off people can take the private property of simple people, social justice, the limited opportunities for women to pursue self-realization – complicate the plotline. The film stands out for its cold-bloodedness, minimal music and dialogue, and the bottled-up acting style, pushing the characters' emotions into the background. *Pomegranate Orchard's* ending was subjected to censorship by the Culture Ministry. The film was shown with an optimistic ending in Azerbaijan (the boy's weak eyesight improves and he sees the true color of the pomegranates), but with a pessimistic ending

at foreign film festivals (the boy with deteriorating eyesight sees the pomegranates as black).

## War Movies

The Karabakh conflict has played a much bigger role in feature and documentary films than in literature. Our cinema also compares favorably to literature in terms of quality. The films which deal with this topic take two different approaches. The first approach is characterized by patriotic didacticism, reassuring but lifeless descriptions, and rhetorical dialogues, the personal views of the filmmakers are not expressed, and the films never stray from a formal "love for the homeland." Anvar Abluj's *The Boy With the White Horse* (*Ağ atlı oğlan*, 1995), Eldar Guliyev's *The Hostage* (*Girov*, 2005), Rufat Asadov's *Future Left Behind* (*Arxada qalmış gələcək*, 2004), and Ramiz Azizbayli's *The Lie* (*Yalan*, 2006) are examples of this approach. The Russian film critic Yelena Stishova says of this type of war film, "In my view as an outsider, war-themed films (*The Lie*, *Future Left Behind*, *The Hostage*) about the Karabakh conflict, the meaning that it carries for Azerbaijani society, and the feelings it evokes apart from patriotism, present a mythologized picture far from reality. The filmmaker's own experience, their pain is not felt. The existential problem presented by war is not touched upon. Instead there is ethics and moralizing. In all the films I have watched there has been moralizing."<sup>[x]</sup>

In the other approach (Jeyhun Mirzayev's *The Scream* [*Fəryad*], Yavar Rzayev's *Sarı gəlin*, Elchin Musaoghlu's *Nabat*, Elkhan Jafarov's *Missed Memories* [*Yarımçıq xatirələr*]) there is no exaggerated patriotism, sloganeering, or oversimplified images of the enemy. On the contrary, Azerbaijanis as proponents of a just struggle and peace, as well as the human element are brought into the foreground. The creator of *The Scream* (1993) doesn't allow exaggerations of the Armenians' merciless treatment of Ismayıl, a prisoner of war, or their ideal of Great Armenia, but rather operates in an ironic tone. This is

primarily a manifestation of the screenwriter Vagif Mustafayev's style, expressing the tragedy through self-contained comic devices. In the film there is a humane portrayal of a teenage Armenian girl, who is depicted as a victim of the Armenians' territorial claims.

Yavar Rzayev's *Sarı gəlin* (1998), which won a prize for best screenplay at the international film festival *Kinoshock* in Russia's Anapa, and the *Freedom* award at the Karlovy Vary festival, is perhaps the first of our best war films. In this film the human element is stressed rather than "the nation," and rather than heroes there are people who have experienced the reality of war. The filmmaker places the folk song *Sarı gəlin* in the context of national, religious, and ethnic differences and presents it as a symbol of peace and a product of the common culture of the region, turning it into a crucial element of the plot. The film is an apt response to Armenian propaganda which creates a barbaric image of Azerbaijanis. Mild-mannered village painter Gadir goes to war as a volunteer. Armenian prisoners of war are brought to the military unit in which he serves. On the orders of the unit's commander, Rasim, who lost his family in the war, Gadir is supposed to kill the Armenian prisoner Artavas. It is difficult for Gadir to carry out this order. Although he came to fight a war, he could not kill, and he and Artavas flee together. In the view of the director Isa Jabbarov, the true representative of the Azerbaijani mentality is not a "hero officer," but actor Haji Ismayilov's Gadir.

I will look more closely at Elchin Musaoglu's *Nabat* (2014), a film about Karabakh from the most recent period which participated in the Orizzonti Competition at the 71st Venice Film Festival, our first film to participate in such a prestigious festival. Despite the danger of an enemy attack, village residents, especially the elderly, do not want to abandon their homes. After ceaseless bombardment, everyone leaves the village except an elderly woman named Nabat. *Nabat* is a war drama without any battles or violence. The director



creates the story using modernist narrative techniques. In our modern national cinema such narrative techniques had not been used in a war film. In line with the modernist model of plot, the film focuses on an individual's inner reality. Although Nabat, the sole protagonist, lives alone and isolated in this abandoned village, she never interrupts the daily rhythm of her life. Nabat's antagonist, the reality that she faces is war. Widening the geographical borders of the narrative, the director humanizes our national problem and observes the themes of "the confrontation of war and the individual" and "human behavior in war" without pathos. He shows war in detailed descriptions of everyday life and nature and in plans for the future, for example: abandoned houses, an empty cradle, a half-finished breakfast, spilled milk on the floor, dates dropped on the ground, children's clothing sadly hanging from a clothesline, a single shoe. The primary goal of the drama, which combines neorealism, poetic realism, symbolism, and even magic realism, is to show Nabat's reactions to complicated situations in the conditional reality presented. *Nabat* is a low-key film and reflects a wider trend in festival films: to relate a human drama in a minimalistic story in which every aspect is expressed.

The events of Elkhan Jafarov's film *Half-Finished Diary* (2015) are shown in two different time periods – World War II and the Karabakh conflict. Azar, a veteran who defended Brest Fortress from the nazis and, 50 years later, Karabakh from the Armenian occupiers, is killed by Vanya, a Russian officer. The Russian officer finds the old man's diary, discovers that Azar had fought in WWII with his grandfather, and puts his own life in danger to return the old man's body to the Azerbaijani side. The veteran, who battled to defend his home to the end, was forced to take part in the war. In *Half-Finished Diary*, the pacifist message comes across powerfully. It is no accident that Azar, a teacher by profession, wrote about pacifism in his final diary entries.

## **Independent Movies**

After 2010, there has been a trend for Azerbaijani filmmakers to work independently with small budgets. This trend, created mostly by a new generation, focuses on the youth, their way of life, traditions, social conditions and their real, unvarnished thoughts on these things. This new generation of filmmakers does not work in a studio or on set, they go out on the streets with their camera to begin to film real places and lives. Independently financed by young directors Elvin Adigozel and Rufat Hasanov, *The Chameleon* (*Buqələmun*, 2013) was the first Azerbaijani film to earn a place at the Locarno Film Festival. Youths, living in oppressive conditions in the provinces, battle for life. The youths are forced to change their colors according to their environment like chameleons. To show the stagnation and pain in the characters' lives, the filmmakers use long, static shots; the dialogue is minimal and music is not used. This style, originating from the work of Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, remains one of the main trends in modern world cinema.

The films of director Emil Guliyev are considered to be more for a domestic audience. The film *The Curtain* (*Pərdə*, 2016) focuses on the intimate world of one family and domestic issues. The film's creator translates into the language of cinema violence and family problems, which are sometimes discussed on social media and often seen on the news. Zaur married on the advice of his parents and soon afterwards divorced with a small daughter. His sister, Lala, is engaged to a person she doesn't love. Lala runs away with Emin, a young man from the same neighborhood. To teach her a lesson in tradition morality and honor, Lala's cousin rapes her. At the end, having reconciled themselves to their fate, everyone is in a state of hopelessness and defeat.

In Guliyev's film there is no attempt at rhetoric or moralizing. On the contrary, he goes against established public opinion and tries to bring into view the roots of the problem. The director focuses on the serious problem of the rape of a woman who is under family pressure which becomes the

motive for a family's domestic crime and a human drama. The Curtain is a social drama and, in a sense, a road movie. The events take place over the course of a single day and, to solve their problems, some of the main characters are always on the road. In this film, based on a real event, the handheld camerawork, radical transitions, and location filming (including the music) all give the story a documentary look.

Winner of the special jury prize at the Let'CEE Film Festival in Austria, director/producer Teymur Hajiyeu's short film *Shanghai-Baku* (*Şanxay-Bakı*, 2015) is a combination of documentary and fiction filmmaking techniques. The story was filmed in an actual part of Baku called Shanghai, in real interiors, with the participation of the local residents seen occasionally in the background. The story, describing one aspect of our daily lives, is an ironic look at our mentality and monotonous lives. Teenage Samir accidentally films his sister Roza kissing her boyfriend and starts to blackmail her. Roza's boyfriend Rasim, unable to find work at home, went to Russia and, like most Azerbaijanis who go to work in Russia, he has a girlfriend there, too. Roza, who wants to get married, is a young girl who lives under the supervision of her parents and equates marriage with happiness. The director does not stress the contradictions between poor Baku and rich Baku, but this episode gives an impression seemingly accidentally captured on camera. The contradictions are seen as Rasim drives Roza home in his car and they have an angry argument about male and female equality. When the car, speeding through shiny new skyscrapers, reaches impoverished Shanghai, it is as if Roza's dreams are extinguished, she sees the difference in how she lives and surrenders to her reality. Thus in one effective, detail-rich episode, the director has shown Azerbaijan's harsh social stratification in the background of the young couple's argument, and Baku's other, sordid side.

Teymur Hajiyeu does not restrict his attention to the love story alone, he lets his camera lense drift away from the main

characters to capture close-ups of Shanghai's narrow, trash-filled alleys, people dressed in faded, threadbare clothes, and destitute shacks. The viewer does not only see the events through the lense of a professional camera. We follow the story, when Rasim and Roza are kissing, through a police camera, Samir's telephone, and a car's security camera. And from each camera's angle the story switches genres: in the first case it is a tragicomedy, in the second it is a comedy, and in the third it is a family drama. This hybrid structure, a synthesis of professionalism and amateur techniques, intensifies the effect of the narrative, and shows the total surveillance of citizens through the police and new technologies.

## **Commercial Movies**

The popularity of commercial comedy movies has been unexpectedly increasing since 2010. As its name implies, commercial movies are produced for the general public for profit. The tradition of commercial cinema, with a relatively large budget, featuring renowned comic actors, began in the early 2000s: for example, *Neighborhood-1* (*Məhəllə-1*, director Ramiz Fataliyev), *Interpapa* (director Namig Aghayev). After a pause, new movies in this genre were produced such as *My Name is Intigam* (2014, director Emil Abdullayev), *Vampire* (*Xoxan*, 2014, director Samir Karimoghlu), *The Groom's House* (*Oğlan evi*, 2015, director İlham Gasimov), *Wedding 2* (*Toy 2*, 2015, director Hasan Aliyev), *100 Bills* (*100 kağız*, 2015, director Şahin Zakizada), *The Final Road* (*Axırındı yol*, 2016, director Emil Abdullayev). Sometimes there are 4-5 premieres a year due to increasing number of comedy production. Priority themes of new era commercial movies are desire of personages to make money as well as their financial fraud. In *My Name is Intigam*, swindlers try to appropriate 2 million manats from a naive village boy, who earned this money from his popular video which made him a social media phenomenon. The main personages are swindlers trying to steal 100 000 manats from a rich woman. In *100 Bills*, banknotes pass from hand to hand and in

the end nobody gets them. The heroes of *The Final Road* hijack an armored car loaded with two million dollars.

The theme is not the only thing that unites these movies. Another general aspect that connects them is the abundance of dirty jokes and toilet humor. Toilet humor is based on the symptoms of human physiological processes: nausea, vomiting, flatulence, emphasis on genitals, rude expressions of sexual relationships in slang, and so on. But toilet humor is not off-color humor because the quality of any kind of humor is determined by its interpretation, context, and author's point of view. In the mentioned comedies, toilet humor is used in a banal way since they are not appropriate for the context of the situations. That is, laughter does not derive from a situation or the nature of an event, instead, it is aimed at making the audience laugh for whatever reason. Without any exception all new movies have some social messages today. However, they are lost among exaggerated and extreme jokes.

Thus, I would like to talk about a few good quality movies. The theme of *The Groom's House* is based on true story: a rich man sells the same house to a few poor people. We can regularly see such stories in the news. By addressing such a relevant topic, the story is conveyed at a sociological level. Generally speaking, the director was cautious and did not exaggerate the jokes. In the end, son of the rich swindler opposes his father, supports the young people who are victims of his father, and says: "Youth is honest, the future depends on this honest youth."

Even though Elmar Bayramov's *Don Marleone* is a parody of criminal movies, it depicts current problems: certain power centers want to seize the private properties of rural people; municipalities, courts, and police officers cooperate with these centers. The rural community starts an armed struggle against these forces. In the finale scene, it becomes clear that the armed struggle of the rural population is just a dream of Xan, one of the characters in the movie. In his

dream, he sees armed struggle the only way of restoring justice. In reality, however, the trial is postponed, and the ending is unclear. Successful color correction, place selection, suits, smooth operation are the superior features of the movie. But the director was not successful in placing a number of side effects on a single line. The comics-style portrayal of the things that happen to each of the characters creates the impression of a collection of unconnected stories.

Saida Hagverdiyeva is the only filmmaker who has brought women's issues into commercial cinema. In her first movie *The Husband Well* (*Ər quyusu*), the majority of the characters are women. This movie, shot in the comedy-drama genre, is based on Hagverdiyeva's family memories. The plot is a description of our values, the lives of women in the provinces of Azerbaijan, their lack of opportunities, and their approach to marriage as the single purpose in life. Despite the fact that the director does not show psychological factors enough, the movie is valuable in terms of its examination of women's problems in the provinces and the description of their real life.

The main reason for the sudden development of commercial movies was probably cinemas operating in the big shopping malls. Managers of those cinemas hold promotional venues and advertise both local and foreign movies to attract viewers. On the one hand, it is safe for producers to invest to comedy movies on certain issues. On the other hand, they have a good chance to profit from this investment. *Xoxan* and *My name is Intigam* were to some extent grossing movies. At the same time, it is more profitable to shot low-budget comedy movies with toilet humor and well-known comic actors without creative tricks. Popular comedies featuring prominent singers and actors are easily consumed by the audience. But this does not mean that the audience is not interested in other genres. And commercial cinema does not only include comedy genre. It includes various genres of which main purpose is profit. Although at some point, a few local melodramas (*Half the World* [*Yarımdünya*, director Osman Albayrak]; *Night Guest-2* [*Gecə*

*qonağı-2*, director Kanan M.M.]) were produced, they failed to attract viewers because people are not interested in traditional Indian-style plots – extremely emotional relationship between a poor boy and a rich girl. However, good quality Turkish melodramas and dramas, which are periodically featured in cinemas, do attract many viewers.

## **Children's Cinema**

Although there is no children's cinema tradition in Azerbaijan, a few children's movies with average quality have been filmed: *The Magical Robe* (*Sehirli xalat*), *One Tower's Secret* (*Bir qalanın sirri*), *The Lion Left Home* (*Şir evdən getdi*), *Shared Bread* (*Şərikli çörək*) and *Asif, Vasif, Aghasif*. During the years of independence, the children's movies were totally forgotten. Even though in several movies the heroes were children, they cannot be considered only children's movies. For movies with a child protagonist and children's movies are different concepts. For example, while *The Magical Robe* is a children's movie, Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*, which describes the story of a twelve-year-old hero, is far from being a children's movie. Or in Rufat Asadov's *Future Left Behind* (2004), a small boy named Samad, living in a refugee camp witnesses the events of the Karabakh war in 1990s. The main focus in this movie is the war rather than the child. Children's movies should be easily understood without including any dramatic events that may traumatized fragile psyche of children. Furthermore, directors must have a clear concept about what they want to film: the children's world, their concerns, their joy, their desires, or their fears? Or do they want to use a child image as a tool to show the conflicts of adults and the contradictions of certain time period?

During the period of independence, only one movie, Rafiq Aliyev and Javid Tevekkul's *The Lesson* (*Dərs*, 2015), has been shot for the child audience by order of the Ministry of Culture. The movie is about school life and difficult

attitudes of pupils towards one another. The main hero Khalid, although being innocent, is boycotted in the classroom. The movie successfully entered into the inner world of children, and the directors managed to approach them as (unique) individuals. It is true that the grandfather role is unnecessary, which bores the audience, and some dialogues do not correspond to the spoken language. Nevertheless, these shortcomings do not cast a shadow over the success of *The Lesson*.

## **Conclusion**

I tried to clarify the questions posed at the beginning of this article that what the main topics in cinema on the eve of and after the collapse of the USSR were and how much creative freedom enjoyed by directors. Thus, in the period of Glasnost, when the first manifestation of post-Soviet cinema emerged, courageous critical movies were shot without the official permission of the Soviet authorities. By reflecting criticism of the Soviet system (bribery and criminal activities of civil servants, or their identity crisis due to the lack of proper system), filmmakers pointed out the need to rebuild the existing system. In the comedies shot on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the development of this issue went further. In their movies, filmmakers no longer needed to get official permission in order to sharply criticize the attitudes of civil servants, who were not ready for the transition from socialism to capitalism, towards democratic changes, and these movies showed the need for a complete collapse of the current system. During the period of 1988-1996, when there was hardly any censorship, consequences of Stalin's repression, government-individual relations, the issue of individual freedom, the life of a person who could not find themselves in the process of total change, and their psychological status were especially emphasized. Cinema of this era was also remembered by the concept of a new hero (Hatam in *The Scoundrel* and Zibeyde in *Endless Night*), which we had not been accustomed to see during the Soviet era.



Along with the didactic movies that advocated banal patriotism on the war, despite being the losing party in the war, our filmmakers have found courage in filming peace-loving movies within the war-individual framework.

In the 2000s, cinema's lack of independent funding and the concentration of funding in the hands of the state affected theme choices and creative freedom of filmmakers. Financial dependence and creative limitations prevented filmmakers from presenting their positions in their works. As a result, significantly poor products were produced. However, with the exception of several previous movies, *The Dolls* (director Chingiz Rasulzadeh), which portrayed the problems of the young generation in the context of social and political events, and *Pomegranate Orchard* (director Ilgar Najaf), which reflected family drama on the background of severe social problems, directors preserved their positions as a result with the struggle with the government officials. In small independent budget movies since 2010, there have been real issues like the real life of Azerbaijan, the life of the real heroes, problems derived from the current system, the mentality as well as social and family violence, and filmmakers have maintained their creative freedom by working with a small amount of money without depending on the state. These movies do not judge because the purpose of art is not to judge. They reveal the invisible truth and details behind the facts; they raise questions, and give opportunity to audience think, feel more deeply about life and look at it from other angles.

Commercial comedies are primarily intended to entertain by emphasizing primitive household problems. Frivolous and entertaining commercial comedies and giving large amounts of money for such movies by companies are politically safe, and in this sense, there is no interference in the creative process. What should be done if directors, who are trying to reflect important issues on the big screen, are unable to realize their creativity? While cinema was considered an expensive art in a certain period, the development of

technology and the existence of alternative (cheap) methods for filmmaking, create conditions for our directors to shoot small or no budget movies without depending on the Ministry of Culture.

Given all these problems, our post-soviet cinema landscape can provide material for various researches. For example, why there are few independent films in the country while there are alternative options for filmmaking? In addition to practical works in this area, we also see a wide range of opportunities for the application of different theoretical approaches and hope that researchers who are interested in these issues will be found.

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[iii] A 'charshaf' is a loose garment, like a robe or a dress, worn by some Muslim women (trans.).

[iv]

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[vii] Noir means black in French; here interior and nature are shot in matte colors, in a bad pessimistic weather in which it

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