



NEW RELEASES

What Do We See When We Look at the Sky?

About 20 minutes into Alexandre Koberidze's enchanting, meandering and unclassifiable second feature, a caption appears on screen, imploring the audience to close our eyes at the sound of a signal (and reopen them on a second beep). A countdown follows: 3. 2. 1...

This is a pivotal moment in the tale. The heroine, Lisa, has agreed to meet Georgi – a man she'd happened to bump into twice that day – at a nearby café, but no sooner has the date been fixed than she is warned that the Evil Eye will transform her looks overnight, rendering her unrecognisable. Now the next morning is here, the moment of awakening and perhaps transformation, but Koberidze would have us... shut our eyes?

I would not spoil this moment for the world, even if I'd kept my eyes wide open. But the conceit gives you a flavour of this playful, magical yet realist film, in which the whimsical fairytale narrative is framed by an occasional, wry, gently absurdist, sometimes palpably sincere narration (voiced by the filmmaker) in the tradition of Nikolai Gogol, which is to say, crossing inscrutably between put-on and candour. Moreover, Koberidze's *mise en scène* often pursues completely different lines of inquiry to the narration, minimising the ostensible plot to focus on the environs: the beautiful, ancient Georgian city of Kutaisi, its citizens, its dogs, and its children.

There is what we are told, and what we see, and while these things are not incompatible, they are not synonymous, either. Another case in point: Lisa, transformed as promised, pays a visit to a woman who is said to have the ability to overturn the curse, and who happens to work at a music school for children. This could be a dramatic turning point. What does Koberidze show us? Leisurely locked-off shots of the school's sun-dappled staircase and corridors. Lisa's arrival and attempt to locate the right teacher. Students coming and going. The cacophony of music being hammered out behind closed doors. Eventually, Lisa's contact's classroom and desk, her tea-set, and... that's it. The scene is, in effect, all set-up and no pay-off. By implication – given Lisa does not revert to her former looks – the woman's powers have been overestimated. But what's relevant here is not so much the filmmaker's disdain for narrative convention, but his investment in conveying atmosphere, a specific place and mood. That is: Kutaisi, circa 2014. The progress of Argentina to the FIFA World Cup Final sets the film in that year, although, true to form, Koberidze undercuts this by changing the result of the final; he also picks out a stray dog, supposedly a fan of the England team, that goes by the name of Vardy, which points us rather to the 2018 tournament. Either way, the year doesn't really matter, though Messi clearly does.

One could argue that the film's obfuscation on this point, its fairytale 'innocence', is a form of political evasion, or arthouse escapism. It's true that Kutaisi's medieval aspect feeds into a somewhat nostalgic romanticism that might even be covert nationalism, though the narration is so droll and subversive it's hard to say for sure. And we have to balance the director's

predilection for allowing shots to play out in leisurely 'real time' with the artfully constructed timelessness of the film as a whole.

But if the story is fanciful, the images are straightforward: real people on real streets, and shots selected with a fastidious simplicity, à la Bresson. (Another reference point: Eugène Green's contemporary fairytales, in which the baroque is placed in counterpoint to the mundane.)

We could in fact trace this aesthetic back further, all the way to silent film. Watching *What Do We See...?*, which is for long swathes a film without dialogue and which was partly shot on 16mm, we can always sense the tripod, and almost a hand-crank too. Koberidze favours a slow fade, a dissolve, sometimes even an iris. He's very taken with town squares, school yards, the middle distance, the river, street dogs, streets in sunshine, streets at night, strangers' faces on the streets. In this the film is a cousin to the city symphony, *People on Sunday* (1930) and *In the City of Sylvia* (2007). It is a photographer's film, a record of the inherent beauty of what is there before the lens. Digressions and diversions include a euphoric children's football game (in rapturous slow motion); an idyllic sequence at a farmhouse bakery; and a montage of men sitting at a bar watching the World Cup, with shots of shoulders, elbows and legs.

These apparently arbitrary sequences – often coloured by the 'magical' music (harp, violins) composed by Giorgi Koberidze, the filmmaker's brother – are as fundamental to the experience of the film as any of the narrative scenes, and just as captivating. What they suggest is a special attention to community, and fleeting moments of transcendence shared – much like watching a movie together, come to think of it. There's an affinity here with experimental film, particularly the sensuality and lustre of Nathaniel Dorsky or Stan Brakhage, but with just enough story threaded through to keep us hooked, like the dollar bill a couple of jokers attach to a fishing line to bait passers-by in the movie.

Let's take the liberty of reframing the film's open question of a title to examine the narrative: What do we see when we look at our lover? And does our lover, looking back, see us? In a subplot that comes through in the second half, a filming team (two of them played by Koberidze's own parents) seek out portraits of six romantic couples. But can photography really capture the invisible bond between lovers?

For all the film's teasing ambiguities and elisions, Koberidze actually offers an answer to this direct question, and it's unfashionably affirmative. By chance, Lisa and Giorgi are asked to participate in the film-within-the-film even though they have not recognised each other and are not at this point romantically involved. The film researcher is exhausted, and needs one last couple to sign up before she can call it quits.

At the movie's conclusion, the filmmakers and their subjects gather for a private screening at the local cinema. The lights go down, the projector fires up, and there we see it – the rare and precious movie magic that is recognition. A happy ending, then, like a true fairytale.

Tom Charity, *Sight and Sound*, December 2022

WHAT DO WE SEE WHEN WE LOOK AT THE SKY?

Director: Alexandre Koberidze

©: DFFB, Sakdoc Film, New Matter Films, RBB - Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg, Alexandre Koberidze

Production Company: Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin

In co-production with: Sakdoc Film, Alexandre Koberidze, New Matter Films, RBB - Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg

Funded by: Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg,

Georgian National Film Center

Produced with the initiative: LEUCHTSTOFF

World Sales: Cercamon

Producer: Mariam Shatberashvili

1st Assistant Director: Tamat Shubitidze

Written by: Alexandre Koberidze

Director of Photography: Faraz Fesharaki

Edited by: Alexandre Koberidze

Art Director: Maka Jebirashvili

Costume Designer: Nino Zautashvili

Make-up: Lana Amoeva

Music: Giorgi Koberidze

Sound Design: Giorgi Koberidze

Sound Mixer: Alexandre Leser

Cast

Giorgi Bochorishvili (*Giorgi*)

Ani Karseladze (*Lisa*)

Oliko Barbakadze (*Lisa*)

Giorgi Ambroladze (*Giorgi*)

Vakhtang Panchulidze (*café owner*)

Sophio Tchanishvili (*Maia*)

Irina Chelidze (*Nino*)

David Koberidze (*Irakli*)

Sopho Sharashidze (*Ana*)

Germany-Georgia 2021

150 mins

A New Wave release

NEW RELEASES

The Greenaway Alphabet

From Fri 11 Nov

No Bears

From Fri 11 Nov

Aftersun

From Fri 18 Nov

What Do We See When We Look at the Sky?

(*Ras vkhedavt, rodesac cas vukurebt?*)

From Fri 25 Nov

Lynch/Oz

From Fri 2 Dec

Corsage

From Tue 27 Dec

RE-RELEASES

Nil by Mouth

From Fri 4 Nov (Preview on Thu 20 Oct 20:20; extended intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large on Fri 4 Nov 17:50; intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI Archive on Mon 7 Nov 18:00)

The Draughtsman's Contract

From Fri 11 Nov (+ intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI National Archive on Fri 11 Nov 17:50)

Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander)

From Fri 2 Dec

The Queen of Spades

From Fri 23 Dec

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