

San Francisco International Film Festival

2010 Part 2: Susa—The type of life that requires illusions

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This is the second in a series of articles on the 2010 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 22-May 6.

Susa, directed by Rusudan Pirveli and written by Giorgi Chalauri, comes from Georgia, the former Soviet Republic. The title character (played by Avtandil Tetradze) is an 11- or 12-year-old boy living in bad conditions, somewhere outside the capital city of Tbilisi.

Susa is employed by the illegal distillery where his mother also works. It's a small, wretched operation, producing cheap vodka for people who can only afford cheap vodka. The boy distributes the product in the city.

His mother worries about him. She does her best, buttoning his coat up in the chilly, damp weather, and telling him not to be late. She takes bottles out of the bag he carries over his shoulder, concerned that the weight is too heavy for him. Meanwhile, she works long hours in the unheated building, and comes in for a tongue-lashing, along with a fellow female employee, from the boss when something goes wrong.

Susa navigates some of the poverty-stricken districts of the city. We see a dive of a bar, where a prostitute plays solitaire in the middle of the day. Someone in an apartment house window lowers a basket for a couple of bottles. A bingo parlor, operating in the near dark, takes four.

The kid is chased by a couple of young thugs, who take a portion of his money every time they get hold of him. The streets are deep in mud and misery. When a policeman grabs hold of Susa, he takes him to a hut, as dismal and dilapidated as anything else around. The chief cop knows him, and probably takes money from the distillery owner too. He just tells Susa: "Tell your boss not to send you here every day."

Susa's friend, a little older, used to work at the distillery. He's left the place. "I don't want to sell that bastard's piss," he tells the younger boy. He knows the ropes a bit. He tells Susa how to protect his product if the cops are chasing him. When Susa can't sell his vodka at his usual haunts, the other youth takes him to an apartment where "punks," young bohemians, hang out. Is this an alternative? It doesn't look like much of one.

The viewer expects something horrible to happen at any moment. But mostly Susa's life simply continues. The other people are not bad to him, in general. A mini-van driver refuses to charge him for a ride to the city: "No fare for you, you're a good kid."

Susa has great hopes that when his father arrives—and he's expected any day—things will change markedly for the better. Mother and son get ready for the big event, cleaning the house and yard, getting in some provisions. The distillery boss gives Susa a lift at one point—he's not a monster either—and warns the boy: "You think he'll take you away, right? Where can he take you? You'll be back here.... Where can he take you, and why?"

The father does come home, after first getting drunk at a local bar, but he's obviously a beaten man. The next morning he tries to engage Susa in

a conversation, but they don't have much to talk about. He goes to the distillery and, as we see from Susa's vantage point, the father shakes hands with the boss—someone's fate is being sealed.

The film is delicately and sensitively made. Tetradze performs well, simply. At times, he has a heart-breaking face, with which, the director admits, she and her camera fell in love. The dialogue, which is concise and to the point, has the ring of truth to it.

Pirveli and Chalauri present the painful facts of Georgian life, but without wallowing in them or allowing their characters to indulge in self-pity or histrionics. Georgian films have had a reputation in the past for their "surrealistic" and "delirious" character. This is something different. The colors of the film are pale, a little washed out, as though the characters lived in permanent twilight.

Susa has hopes, what child doesn't? He makes a kaleidoscope out of shards of tinted glass and looks at the world through it. Everything is colorful and fascinating. He looks out at the passing scene through car and bus windows. The filmmakers explain that one of the characters in the film is "glass and glass bottles," which presumably has something to do with the strong, but brittle quality of the characters' hopes.

The filmmakers also comment that in their work "reality destroys illusions." They wanted, they explain, to shoot "in a documentary style, with the camera following the characters to emphasize the reality of the story." They used mostly non-professionals, in part out of a desire "to avoid theatrical acting and thus to have persons close to reality."

It's healthy to feel the need to refer to "reality" so many times. Certain things bear repeating. The word is discredited in some circles.

At the same time, the criticism of a type of passive naturalism is also legitimate: its tendency to present existing conditions as "inevitable" and unalterable. This is a genuine problem. The critics' response to *Susa* is also passive. While praising the film, no one expresses outrage at the state of life in Georgia, or points out that all the claims about the wonders of the market and the prosperity they would be bringing the population of the former Soviet Union have proved utterly false.

Pirveli and Chalauri, in their comments, refer often to the hopes and illusions of their characters. The bingo parlor operator might be speaking for them when he says, referring to his customers, "They've got such serious faces, they believe they're going to win."

In our conversation (see below), the director referred to this as a specifically Georgian trait, the hope that things will miraculously change for the better. People living in such misery have the right to hope and wish for better. We would differ with the filmmakers' emphasis on criticizing their characters' *illusions* and place the stress instead on criticizing conditions that *require* illusions.

In our interview, the director explained that her next film might be quite different, not so directly "social." As we suggested, artistic evolution is

necessary and inevitable. To go on making “simple” films can be an evasion too. Life and society are complicated, and an artist has the natural desire for a more complex narrative and greater texture. However, we hope the filmmaker will at the same time hold on to the important truth and compassion that lie at the center of *Susa*, and make it stand out.

A conversation with Rusudan Pirveli

We spoke to Rusudan Pirveli in San Francisco.

David Walsh: How did this film come about?

Rusudan Pirveli: The scriptwriter is very young—he’s around 26 now, at the time he was 24. He wanted to comment on the false hopes people have in Georgia. For example, the hope that someone will come, that somehow things will change for the better. He was wondering how to translate this into a story. He discovered this illegal vodka distillery. It came to him to put his story of crushed hopes and illusions into the story of a boy who is working in such a place.

DW: Why did you choose to make this film?

RP: It’s very much something I also share, this concern about a nation with illusions. This is quite a Georgian characteristic, that without making a big effort something will change and we will all have a great future. Father will arrive and everything will be OK.

DW: How did you find the boy?

RP: We went through different schools in a suburb of Tbilisi. Suddenly, we found him, with messy hair, with some bruises. He’s big into wrestling, and he had been beaten the previous day, so he had strange, active eyes. You could feel this quality of being a fighter that he had inside. We didn’t want to have a child who looked really downtrodden, miserable. We needed a boy who simply happened to be in this kind of situation. There was nothing physically special that we wanted, some deformity or something.

Joanne Laurier: This is one of the strengths of the film. Many films made since the collapse of the Soviet Union show entirely demoralized, beaten people, in terrible, impossible conditions.

DW: How is it possible to make a film about inhuman conditions where the people are not inhuman? The conditions are horrible, but the people are not horrible.

RP: You know, it is sometimes, in our opinion, a little bit cheap to associate non-humanity with a miserable situation. If people don’t have good financial conditions, they don’t necessarily lose all their human features. Often in other films they might have the kid sniffing glue, and make him a criminal, and the mother a prostitute...the boss is raping the woman, etc. This is not that story.

DW: This is quite rare.

RP: The films I see tend to go in that direction, which, as I say, I find a little bit cheap. On the other hand, in some films by Fellini, with Giulietta Masina, there is no need to add grotesque details. Some films are packaged like that: difficult conditions, so the people must be rotten.

DW: The mother cares for her son. At the same time, she lets him do something that is dangerous, that is not good for him.

RP: She is a weak personality in some ways. She is like a child in some ways. She knows very well who and what her husband is, but she needs hope, she needs dreams. In this reality, where she has no genuine prospects, she starts inventing things. And this is quite a natural thing. Maybe the image of the father is very powerful, it dominates everything.

Women survive these conditions more easily, they are more flexible. Men are more shocked. They need more time to revive. Women have less ambitions, less illusions.

JL: The men seem emasculated, for lack of a better word. They can’t

provide for their families. They can’t be the savior, the superman. That crushes them.

DW: Is the father away working somewhere?

RP: Yes, we are supposed to think that he is somewhere outside the country working.

JL: He comes back and he gets very depressed.

RP: Yes, he couldn’t make his family rich, or something.

JL: When he begins questioning his son at breakfast...

RP: He’s just trying to find something to talk about, because they have really nothing to say to each other. This is the tragedy. It’s not only that he didn’t bring a lot of money and gifts, there is now such a gap, it’s been so long, that they have nothing to do with each other.

You can forgive somebody for not making money or having a good job, but in this case, he is a destroyed individual. He is an empty person, which makes things very difficult. Even when they walk in the bazaar, he’s not the kind of man who intervenes. So, you have the boy who thinks his father will come, and this or that will happen, suddenly the man is absolutely passive. So this is crushing too.

DW: So when the boy tells everyone he’s quitting the distillery, it’s because he thinks his father is coming back with money and will solve everything.

RP: Yes, he thinks that when the father arrives, in a few days, everything will change and they will leave for the city.

JL: Is that Tbilisi? The skyline looks the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz* in the distance.

RP: Yes, Tbilisi.

DW: So the boy will stay working at this horrible place?

RP: And the father also, it seems.

DW: When the boy attacks the boss, this is anger and frustration at the world in general...?

RP: Perhaps you remember the scene in the car when the boss is saying that the father is not going to take him anywhere. The boss is the one who is saying, “Forget about it, I know life better.”

DW: He’s pouring cold water on the boy’s illusions.

RP: At the moment when the boy starts punching the boss, he is a random victim. Anyone would have done. But the man was the one who was teasing him before, saying, nothing will happen, you will come back to the distillery.

DW: What about the party scene? The young people...

RP: These are people with no particular demands, they are happy with what they have. Students, ex-students—in Georgia we call all of them “punks,” but they are people who don’t care about money, somehow they get by.

JL: The boy’s older friend was quite moving. He takes care of the boy.

RP: He’s a bit older, he’s stronger, more independent. He also works picking up empty bottles and selling them. It’s possible to live like this.

DW: How typical are these conditions?

RP: All of this actually exists. Georgian society is now very polarized. There is a small percentage of the population that really lives, everyone else just tries to survive. We don’t have a middle class, we have an upper class, and many people who are merely surviving. These people in the film are not the very poorest, but almost the poorest. In the city, it’s different. A little bit better. But this reality exists. People are just working for bread, just to survive day to day.

Our government is now trying to create a façade of the city. There is the city center, where we have beautiful streets, a lot of lighting, much more than here in San Francisco. We have new parks, fountains, luxurious features. On New Year’s Day, there were streets that were so illuminated you felt you were in Las Vegas. But just a few blocks away, by car five minutes away, you will see conditions like those in the film.

I think this film might make certain people angry. In the government, but also in the population, because everyone wants to see a beautiful,

flourishing country, good wine, wonderful tourist places, beautiful nature. Instead, you see the reality, naked reality, which not everyone is ready to see.

It's a bit narrow-minded. The truth is difficult sometimes. We all live in the city, but some of us try not to notice these things. You don't look at this misery.

DW: Why are *you* able to do that?

RP: I don't have a clear answer. In some way, I consider myself patriotic, I have a chance to go anywhere to live, but I choose to live in Georgia. I want to contribute in some way to the development of the society. Maybe not economically, but in some other way. I don't want to make a beautiful picture about Georgia, this time it's more important to tell the truth. To tell it this way, not a commercial film with lots of laughs, saying that this is a wonderful country with a developed economy. I think that is cheating when you do that, to pretend that everything is all right.

JL: A truthful film in this case is also beautiful. You are looking at invisible people, people who are not generally shown. Looking carefully at them, an aspect of life that is not often shown, makes you a better artist. Many opulent films are empty, not interesting.

RP: The next film I make might be quite different. We have a few scripts, and we have to decide in which direction to go. You can't always make such social films, sometimes you simply want to make an entertaining film. I don't want to lose important things at the same time as I make, for example, a funny film. Film is a powerful medium, so film is a means of entertaining and influencing people too.

DW: You can't do the same thing. It's a natural evolution. How do you do that and keep the level of truthfulness? You speak about Fellini, or Visconti...the great filmmakers, this is what they do. What about Georgian filmmaking?

RP: There is a new generation coming, because we had 20 years of nothing. Finally, the time for a new generation has come. They are absolutely different from the Soviet-era filmmakers. We had a system, not socialism, not communism. The Georgian filmmakers were well known for their metaphorical films, to get around the official system.

DW: This film is different from the other Georgian films I've seen.

RP: The new generation is more realistic; I really believe that in three or four years we will have a new wave of Georgian filmmakers. Under the Soviet Union, Georgian filmmakers were quite well known. We are developing something interesting.

JL: Behind the recent tensions was also the US pulling the strings. Georgia is quite important strategically.

RP: We know this. That's why we are also suffering. There are not only advantages but disadvantages to that situation. As soon as US bases will be located in Georgia, we will become a target. It's a very dangerous situation.

DW: And the Russian government is rotten and demagogic. There's nothing to choose between any of these governments.

RP: We have a difficult character, we are not so flexible at navigating in politics, as they are in Azerbaijan or Armenia. Armenia uses Russian money, American money, and does a lot of business with both. Armenians in Russia are quite active. Azerbaijan is quiet, because they have their oil. But we have nothing, no oil, no business, we are just making a lot of noise.

DW: The people in all these countries suffer.

RP: That's the situation in Georgia, for sure.

To be continued

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