

Blue Mountains

ELDAR SHENGELAIA

1983

Blue Mountains (1983) ends with the implosion of the aspiring novelist's publishing house. Clearly a symbol of Soviet bureaucracy and its capacity for ultimate self-destruction, this moment is a dazzling and wickedly humorous indication of Georgia's deep seated disillusionment with the USSR.

Soso, an employee of the publishing house, takes multiple copies of his manuscript around the building. Despite having seemingly friendly relations with all the publishers, everyone responds to his request with something that can only be described as friendly, but complacent apathy. In fact, practically everyone in the building is complacent. No one understands the basic necessity to get anything, or even just something done. Irodion, one editor, claims he doesn't have time. They simply "won't let him go." Irodion says this whilst boiling an egg in his office. Another elderly man, more honestly simply says, "Everyone is in such a hurry," in response to Soso's requests that he read his manuscript. In another office, the men continually play a very involved game of chess. A throng of men stand around the board shouting positions for the pieces to move to; they are never in agreement and the game rarely progresses.

With this film, Shengelia wanted to show the strange inaction presided over by Soviet bureaucracy. Everywhere red tape, employees with ill defined work remits, and a secret culture of inequality: it is always possible to pass the buck to somebody else. A subtle comment the film is making is one of progression stifled by ineptitude, desires are not taken seriously and the director of the publishing house is never there. An old man waits constantly to see him, no one will help him, aside to tell him to wait for the director just a little longer. In a moment of wonderful satire, when he finally encounters the director, this same old man is offered a job, one that looks very much like the endless waiting game he was suffering before. There are many moments of exquisite irony akin to this, the most hilarious being that the only person who will read Soso's manuscript is the man working in construction. Being overeducated for the job he has, he will occupy himself with Soso's manuscript. Ultimately, this is what leads to the building's collapse. It is a fertile analogy; it simultaneously speaks to art's capacity to destroy systems, the power of the working man and also to the Kafkaesque uselessness of a system riddled with issues.

Soso's manuscript is either called, 'Blue Mountains' or 'Tian Shian'. This is mimicked by Eldar Shengelaia's naming of his own film, called explicitly either, Blue Mountains, or An Unbelievable Story (1983). A deliberate parallel is drawn between Shengelaia's own experience as a director working in the Soviet system with the plight of his protagonist. Blue Mountains (1983) was invited to screen in the prestigious Director's Fortnight strand of the Cannes Film Festival in 1985. The film was able to evade censorship, due to its obscure plot. Moritz Pfeifer for the East European Film Bulletin rightfully points out that films from the era that critiqued the state tended to use a similar device: 'A common recipe for these films is to look at some social microcosm – a banquet, a university, a cruise – and to use it as a metaphorical pretext to unmask the absurdities of the political macrocosm: corruption, oppression, groupism. One reason for this indirect style was that the more complex the metaphor, the more difficult it was for the censors to block a scenario.' However, despite this successful evasion, and even winning a USSR State Prize for the film, Shengelaia was prohibited by the Soviet authorities from attending Cannes in 1985.

Shengelaia is known for a particular blend of tragicomedy, one that exemplifies a quintessentially Georgian approach to life. His sharp eye for satire and the strange rhythms of life can be seen throughout his impressive oeuvre. But, it is valuable to consider why Shengelaia picked this moment to critique the Soviet system. The political landscape of Georgia in the 1980s was one of dissatisfaction, the Thaw had revived a deep sense of nationalism in the country, and the stark economic downturns of the 1990s lay in wait, anticipated by many. Shortly after Blue Mountains (1983), Shengelaia began to devote the vast majority of his time to the Georgian Independence Movement, just ahead of its popular take off in 1989. He would not return to filmmaking until the 1990s.

Blue Mountains (1983) ends with the image of the new high-tech building, a replacement after the original one fell apart. It is a prophetic vision of a new Georgia yet worryingly, in this vision, the publishing house is still run by the same useless people who ran it before. A satirical perspective that suggests Shengelaia, whilst politically engaged, feared that perhaps only facades change.