

# My Grandmother

KOTE MIKABERIDZE

1929

A round table surrounded by tall seats and representatives is the centre piece of *My Grandmother* (1929). It configures as a bizarre and experimental mainframe of both the film and its narrative, and as a symbol for the way society is run. Using grotesque and surreal imagery, *My Grandmother* is a vitriolic and terrifying commentary on bureaucracy and its machinations. Each of the seats has a title on it, establishing who each person is. From the outside of the circle, one can see that the seats resemble doors. There are enormous and overflowing waste bins outside each of the doors, and on the nose symbol for the system itself: long, complicated and producing mounds of waste. Inside the circle, the superintendent cackles maniacally. A lovelorn official throws paper planes at a beautiful typist, the words 'I love you;' are written on it. His lips are painted to look almost like a puppet. His movements are jerky and strange. In the first five minutes of the film, after the typist's rejection, he shoots himself. We see the world through his eyes flicker and distort, which in the 1920s would have been the work of a highly innovative editor. He theatrically dies.

There are several incredible, experimental techniques involved in the making of *My Grandmother*. These, even the better part of a century later, still seem sophisticated. For the 1920s, this is practically unprecedented. Julia Zelman for *East European Film Ballerina*, described it best to view the film as, 'An explosion of experimental energy, channeled through every available camera trick and editing technique, than as a coherent film.' This is undeniably true: the sets are constructivist platforms that stun visually, from the aforementioned table and the large slanted staircase, which the workers never seem to climb, instead opting to slide up and down the bannister; there are double exposures, fast paced montage sequences and stop motion animation. In one scene a man with a briefcase, merely called 'man with a briefcase' enters the room. The letters in the briefcase fly out, seemingly independently. The letters go round the table, stopping at each individual before flying off; another analogy for the hopelessness of bureaucracy in the new Soviet Union. The bureaucrats write all over pieces of paper, randomly and haphazardly until they are virtually illegible. Signs read 'Do not smoke.' The workers smoke under them, lazily

blowing the smoke away from their faces. The main plot configures around a manager getting fired and needing to acquire a letter of recommendation from someone of esteem, or as they describe it a 'grandmother'. In shock at the expulsion from the office, he tries to hang himself. The toys and ornaments around him become animate. His wife and daughter dance. He sees his daughter about to open the newspaper which sparked the unfortunate chain of events: in an article he was named and shamed for his laziness and fired because of it. His likeness in the paper becomes animated and runs from his wife, a tiny illustration scampering across the floor. It is an incredibly surreal scene, and a visual masterpiece. After the insanity and freakishness of the office; this shows us life is bizarre, nonsensical and violent across society. Even his wife and child are uncanny and unsympathetic, and his surroundings are as hostile and strange as the office. His wife tries to fight him, and even throws him out the window. His daughter locks herself in a closet.

Whilst Kote Mikaberidze thought his film would be safe from the censors, due to his satirisation of bureaucrats and eventual celebration of the proletariat, this did not transpire to be the case. *My Grandmother* was shelved for around forty years. Eventually during the Thaw of the 1970s, it was released. In retrospect it is unsurprising the authorities found the film objectionable. There is no remit to the absurdity and the darkness inherent in the film, and whilst this should be allowed under artistic licence, the censors were unhappy with the challenges the film posed to viewers. The wife chases the manager, hoping to kill him. When his fortunes change, she begs that he take her back, crying what appear to be tears of blood. The end of the film sees the manager attempt to get his job back, with a letter of recommendation from grandmother. He bursts through the walls of the offices. He approaches a director with a letter of recommendation, who tells him, 'Directors change, positions stay.' Every time he tries to give his letter of recommendation the director disappears and is replaced by a new one. This is clearly a commentary on the ever changing face of bureaucracy. It speaks to the instability for the individual in each position, but simultaneously the eternity of position and power, which encompasses lives across society.