

There Once Was a Singing Blackbird

OTAR JOSSELIANI

1970

Otar Iosseiani is known for his minimalist approach to filmmaking and his preoccupation with the everyday. *There Once Was a Singing Blackbird* is shot in black and white with a low contrast; the effect is sleepy and melancholic. The camera focuses on small details: the ornaments in a room, the leaves on a tree, the slow moving streets. The film's protagonist is Gia Agladze, a talented and lazy percussionist. Charming and personable he wanders around Tbilisi, constantly in conversation and constantly late. A simple trip down the street features at least three chance meetings and every time he resolves to change, he's promised his time to another.

In one scene, we see Gia sit at his desk to study. The clock ticks intensely in the background. The room is small and claustrophobic, but in reality it is a typical Soviet 1970s apartment. But, due to the close range of the camera and Iosseiani's specific mise-en-scene which is opposed to creating open sets, it appears suffocating. The sound of the clock gets louder and Gia lies on his bed and pulls the duvet over his head. A perfect analogy for his attempt to escape the machinations of time and responsibility. When there are no distractions, he is almost crippled by his inability to be in the moment. He tells the surgeon, 'Well actually, I am always doing something. But in the end I have nothing to show for it.'

There is a deeper point made here than Gia's laziness or inability to focus. Gia is undoubtedly a product of a superficial society. There are many scenes which show his fixation with women. In the streets he frequently stops female friends and accompanies them. He stares out the clockmakers's window at a beautiful woman on the street and drifts off from the conversation about his incessantly terrible time keeping. Even when he sits in the library he is constantly distracted by women.

1970s Georgia was seeing the affects from the era of stagnation, or 'zastoi'. The economic situation seemed impossible to improve. An entire generation was swept up in the hopelessness of the situation. Gia is part of this generation, young and talented but without any kind of mobility. Through this character, that has internalised the poor economic situation, Iosseiani launches a veiled criticism of the state.

Iosseiani's camera pans in a meandering way. It almost lazily tracks characters through the streets, doing a slow swing to whoever the focus of the scene is. It is a lazy quality that mimics Gia's own movements through Tbilisi. When he is late for an orchestra rehearsal, the camera follows him through the streets. From his lift, to him taking the tie from the French horn player and to his leaving behind the performance for a dinner party. He says he won't stay, but he sits down none the less. In this way, as viewers we feel subject to the random and hazy journey Gia takes through life. There is a tension at play here: the content of his days are pleasant, but the stress comes from us knowing what he has avoided in order to engage in frivolities. Eventually, even fun has diminishing returns. This is most acutely seen when the orchestra's performance is interspersed with his seat at the dinner party. The ballerinas dance, the musicians play and meanwhile Gia sits upstairs and listens to a woman sing a sleepy song. Gia re-enters the orchestra to play a drum roll, right at the very end. He comes in in perfect time to do so. The conductor turns to him angrily, his eyes wide. Gia shrugs in response. And yet people forgive him, even though his behaviour is ludicrous.

Whilst on the one hand, Iosseiani condemns the young man for his unreliability and his superficial lifestyle; there is something strangely impressive about his zest for life. Watching *There Once Was a Singing Blackbird* one cannot deny that for all of Gia's faults, he experiences a great deal. His is a strange kind of inertia, an inertia that comes from doing too much of one thing as opposed to too little of everything. Iosseiani also focuses on the beauty of such exploits: the artistry of the clock makers, the beautiful singing at the supra and the joy of human connection. Whilst Gia wastes his time, he wastes his time in a beautiful way. Gia is the blackbird of the title, and whilst he may flutter around aimlessly, he brings joy and song to those he encounters. The film is full of seemingly contradictory symbols. Iosseiani was a musician himself, he understood the nature of an orchestra, where so many strings of music collide to make one beautiful whole. In some ways, by singling out the percussionist, he makes a comment on the futility of one individual line or note when it is removed from the whole.