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Meaning-making systems that I follow in my practice are created by the visual language in my films. Since I don't use dialogue in my work, I tell the stories through objects and characters, the protagonists being recurring archetypes that existed in my childhood, created with my memories accumulated in my Soviet upbringing.

I often refer to the individual work that I create as a pattern. I associate my practice with this word because of the random memories that are woven together to create a new narrative. What intrigues me about each memory is that it has the same root. All stories sound different but have the same idea in the way they affected me when I was a child. This biographical stories are turned into fiction as I give them a new reading.

The dialogue in its traditional form is replaced by the meaning that is collectively produced by interiors, protagonists, and their costumes as well as the objects that seem to be fixed to the surface they are displayed on. In her essay *Objects in Films: Analyzing Signs* Dr. Renira Rampazzo Gombarato says that objects are specially chosen to translate a character's interior state of mind or the filmmaker's aesthetical or ethical commitment to the narrative concept.

The object that I stumble across in a lot of cases when I film in my native city Baku is the image of Lenin in one form or another. It can be a bust or a pin, a green reading lamp popularized in the Lenin era, a propaganda poster, etc. In a totalitarian society, the figure of the leader serves as the only human embodiment of the divine omnipotence of the state. In literature and art, the leader acted in several guises. As a key figure in world history, he towered over the people. The huge monumental figures of Lenin and Stalin were supposed to symbolize the superhuman nature of the image of the leader. Their presence in the film brings in a feeling of confusion and misunderstanding of what time-space you are in. But it always signifies the same thing – the father figure, undeniable power, wisdom, and at the same time love. What does it mean for me when I include it in my short films? It symbolizes any form of power and acceptance of it. It makes me remember the loyalty that we all had to his principles. All kids in the class with no exception were trying their best in order to become deserving followers of Lenin's ideas. In our classroom, there was a poster that said "Lenin lived, Lenin lives and Lenin will live". And all Soviet children believed that. Years after the collapse of the Soviet Union I realized that what was often positioned as loyalty and respect was actually a form of fear.

I was drawn to these objects not only because they reminded me of that period of time but rather of the way I was perceiving the world back then – the more innocent and accepting "child-like" way. Then all information that was available was to be accepted as given. Seeing these objects through the lens of the camera made me realize how vocal the object may be. It made me remember that being a good student and adhering to the rules was all I was trying to accomplish.

A big part of who I am and what I believe in came from my own upbringing in the period of the Soviet Union. Those values were projected on all of us then until they seemed to become our choice.

It is interesting to trace the construction of ideology and its effect on the nation. The consistent and well-structured set of events slowly shaped the perception of ideology as an absolute truth. The art content played an important role in the development of a national mindset. Propaganda posters were an integral component in this impact chain. Other tools were poignant newspaper headlines that talked about achievements in different areas of economic development of the country, great enthusiasm in the Soviet march songs, etc.

The principle of propaganda was the portrayal of characters that live and act in a prosperous and joyful surroundings. Reports of heads of organizations were optimistically covering positive statistics on developments in education, cultural achievements, and general growth of material well-being. That information was to be received as genuine.

These images were demonstrated as a proof of a successful socialist society. People were driven by the idea of a bright future. That went together with the creation of an image of an external enemy. We needed to be ready to fight that imaginary enemy at all time and at any cost. The complete isolation from the real life of the rest of the world played a huge role in the upbringing of the new generation. The information was received only from the Soviet mass media. The lack of news from other countries portrayed these countries as an enemy.

In “The Quilted Child”, I am creating a response to what was happening around me when I was a child. The narrative is formed in the form of a quilt where three stories are pieced together to create one narrative. The story is told from the perspective of a child in relation to the understanding of those in power. I emphasize the importance of the teacher’s role in a life of a child. It is safe to say that the leverage on the child’s psyche was often in the hands of the teacher. The method of teaching was not to be questioned. The essays needed to reflect the common opinion and not the individual opinion of their author. It was also constantly reminded that the student is “younger” and therefore should not argue with the teacher.

I was growing up without asking questions, trying to figure it all out on my own. I would answer them myself because everyone around me was busy with their own tasks. The big chaos came with the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was eleven years old then. I was trying to figure out my attitude and perception of what was happening in and out of the house without being bothersome. As a child, I truly believed that Lenin was the only one I could confide in. The idea of that trust is reflected in the scenes where a character a school girl is holding on to the bust of Lenin as to the most valuable of her possessions.

My work is based on daily scenes, domestic situations, educational institutions, and their role in our lives in Azerbaijan in the 80s and 90s when everything and everyone was highly influenced by the Soviet Union regime and later its collapse. In the Soviet Union in the 30s the main idea was to form a “new” Soviet person who will be loyal to the country and party. In her research,

Maria Romashova notes that future Soviet citizens should be persistent, hardy, and devoted to the motherland and the party. This was clearly imprinted into every child in every school in any Soviet Country. It was crucial for each child to adhere to these standards without a clear understanding or questioning the authority of an older and therefore superior person.

One of the challenges that came with independence was the language.

My first language was Russian. It was spoken in school and among family members. I read Russian literature and listened to Russian pop music. I was fascinated with constructivism and Soviet propaganda porcelain plates by Sergei Chekhonin. Now I often ask myself if that was because it was the only thing I was familiar with.

People who grew up outside of the capital Baku were able to better retain their identity because they were not as influenced by Russian culture. It was difficult for us Russian-speaking kids to connect to them. That created a division between the Russian and Azerbaijani-speaking populations. With time Azerbaijani language was becoming more widespread and a new generation would prefer to communicate in Azerbaijani. It became impossible to work towards regaining your identity without the knowledge of your own language. I myself went through the transition where the official language was Russian and Azerbaijani was taught as the second language whereas now in modern independent Azerbaijan, it is mandatory to speak Azerbaijani to get a job.

It was challenging to go along with the language transition in an organic and effortless manner. What is your identity now and how do you retain it? What does the end product of such a transition look or feel like? How to adjust to this new reality? What does it mean to be a real Azerbaijani? The idea of that struggle is one of the reasons for my films being silent.

Etel Adnan's essay "To Write in a foreign language" made me think about the role of the Russian language in my practice. Being able to speak Russian certainly made me feel superior to everyone who did not. The idea of using two languages Russian and native Azerbaijani became one of the things that I was passionate to work on in my films.

As I was diving deeper into my memory box I was finding more things that still troubled me. One of them was the idea of equality in relation to identity erasure and abuse of power. For example, as I later learned, girls' school uniforms were inspired by a maid's uniform. The important piece in the uniform was an apron (pinafore), white on festive occasions, and black on weekdays. Wearing an apron six days a week has shaped girls' perception of their role as a wife, mother, and homemaker. That was enhanced by introducing the division between boys and girls in "Arts and Crafts" class where boys would practice in the wood workshop and the girls would learn how to sew, iron, and cook. The elementary school teacher's desk would typically be installed on the higher stand overlooking the class. This suggested the superior position and indisputable power.

An important element in ideological education for children was military training in school.

Sacrifice in the name of the Motherland, the people, and the leaders of the Communist Party was among the main virtues of the Soviet people. In my short film "The Quilted Child" I chose to use the marching song about a boy Pavlik (Pavel) Morozov. Then proclaimed Soviet hero Pavlik denounced his father and later was killed by his grandfather. It was encouraged to put the interests of the country above the interests of your own family. He was proclaimed a national treasure.

I put a great amount of emphasis on the visuals as well as on my audio choices. I start my process by arranging all the visuals first. In the time of creation and editing, it becomes clear that the role of the visuals is to deliver the information to the viewer. The completing layer comes with adding the sound that when merged with the visuals creates a dialogue.

I showcase the transgenerational impact of the Soviet culture is shown by placing both kids and adults into the narrative. By creating fictional or recreating real scenes from my Soviet childhood I demonstrate the disturbing calmness and inevitable acceptance of this ideology as one and only truth.

Many people today continue to exist in the comforting state of nostalgia viewing the world through the Soviet lens. It is interesting to observe their actions when they are faced with the realities of today.

I keep coming back to the idea of undisputable power in my films.

I tend to go back to three main words that are connection, addiction, and fear. They are the driving force for me. It is challenging to analyze fear by making work about it. It is tense to experience both acceptance and fear at the same moment in time. In order to convey that I use the uniform that I would wear in my school and introduce gestures of sitting up straight in the classroom. This lets me talk about restrictions and obedience in all forms that overpowers whatever you are as an individual.

I intend to show what my interest is to evoke an interest in the viewer. The idea behind showing a statue of Lenin in my short film "The Gift" is not to tell a story about him in particular. It is an attempt to awaken certain thoughts in the viewer that will resonate with what my video work contains.

One of the subject matters in "The Quilted Child" is the concept of snitching. My elementary school teacher encouraged snitching on other kids in the class. This comes from a Soviet Stalinist era where that was done to show loyalty to the system. To eliminate the competition and to present themselves to the government as loyal citizens poets would snitch on other poets.

The same was encouraged in other spheres. It was also rooted in school. Growing with this and applying it to your daily interactions since you are six years old had a great chance to be

regarded as normal behavior. To question or to go against the proclaimed regulations was equivalent to showing disrespect.

The Soviet Union was consistently working towards the elimination of the identity of individual Soviet countries, so it homogenized education, music, etc. As a part of that tactic, they banned Azerbaijani musical instruments. So one Azerbaijani poet wrote about the musical instrument Tar saying you're old and Proletariat does not love you. In response, another poet Mikail Mushfig composed a poem called "Sing tar" where he reminded Azerbaijani readers of their culture and traditions. As a result of this battle, Mushfig was repressed and executed during Stalinist purges in 1938 at the age of 29. In my film "Ohu Tar (Sing Tar)" I am using the story of Mushfig to talk about the suppressed identity of Azerbaijan and the crucial cultural and political contribution of creative minds like Mikail Mushfig. Here again, I turn to the topic of denunciations and betrayals so widely encouraged in that period of time. I research the possibilities of building on our heritage and finding new interpretations of components of my culture such as traditional costume, music, and poetry. I believe exigency to tell for this interpretation in order for the story to be reborn. These stories help us understand the story of our family in relation to our own individual perception of who we are.

In my investigation of the identity crisis through the prism of everyday life I am questioning the dismay created around the image of the father figure in the house, on tv, and in society. Why was there never a conversation with the father but always with the mother? Why was the father untouchable, commanding, and shouldn't be bothered or asked anything? Which then leads to another question. What if my upbringing am I imposing upon my children?

The appearance of the government officials included the image of power, staying in line, pecking order, and strictness. How much of this do we bring into our children's lives from one generation to another, how does that clash with how our children are trying to move forward and what they're trying to achieve, and how these different generations interact with each other? How does or doesn't influence my children when they are growing up in a European society, seeing a different image from what they've seen back home? This is why I introduce the image of the child in my films questioning how much a system can influence a child's mind.

In "The Gift" I use the idea of the staged portrait. The characters are almost frozen or posing. I extract those characters from my own childhood to introduce them in the semi-contemporary setting. Here they are, representatives, of time and ideology.

In his psychoanalytical review, Ira Konigsberg notes: Writing in 1762, Rousseau described the child's original naturalness and innocence while recognizing that these characteristics are easily affected by the child's social and cultural context. It is an immense struggle to form your individuality in a reality where even creativity needs to be executed according to a set of rules.

In "The Gift" all characters together form a chain where each link is absolutely essential in order to tell the story. Here this chain represents the ideology that everything was to be systemized in a particular order. That order was needed in order to support the idea of a prosperous future. The stillness of frames symbolizes the period of uncertainty when post-soviet countries were

trying to regain their identity. Being like everybody else was undisputable and only way to be. There was no space for individual manifestation in any form.

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