



ATLAS
of
be
LONGING

Sunday, 23rd

**MAYAK
(the LIGHTHOUSE)**
(78')

+ prerecorded Q&A with
Victoria Lupik (producer),
Daniel Bird (restoration
producer) and Vigen
Galstyan (film historian
and curator); Introduction
by Mehelli Modi (founder
of Second Run DVD)

at 15:45
Ciné Lumière

Monday, 24th

TAMING the GARDEN
(90')

+ live online Q&A with
Salomé Jashi

at 18:15
Ciné Lumière

Thursday, 27th

ROUND TABLE

discussion with the film
historian, Vigen Galstyan,
the filmmaker, Salomé
Jashi and the artist, Taus
Makhachava

at 18:00
online

please register on Eventbrite

Saturday, 29th

GAMSUTL (16' 01")
and **BAIDA** (15' 31")

+ discussion with the artist
Taus Makhacheva

at 14:30
ICA

**WHEN the
PERSIMMONS GREW**
(119')

+ prerecorded Q&A with
Hilal Baydarov TBC

at 15:45
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ATLAS OF BELONGING

Memory and Identity in the Cinema and Artists' Moving Image Work of the Caucasus

ATLAS OF BELONGING is a film season that presents a series of screenings and a round table discussion, exploring the relationship between liminal locations, identity and memory in the cinemas of the Caucasus region.

The films included in the programme are a combination of fiction, documentary and artists' moving image work from the past fifteen years, representing a diversity of voices and approaches reflecting on questions of belonging, home, uprooting and identity.

Yet, what all the filmmakers have in common is the perspective of an inside observer capable of distancing themselves while retaining a strong sense of belonging to the space on sensorial, emotional and intellectual levels. Having left and returned, each of them works with the fabric of the places they film to interrogate and reinvent perceptions.

Season Curator
Galya Stepanova

MAYAK (the Lighthouse)

23 Jan | 15:45 | Ciné Lumière

Maria Saakyan



RUS/ARM | 78 Mins | 2006 | dir. Maria Saakyan, with Anna Kapaleva, Olga Yakovleva, Sos Sargsyan | in Russian with EN subs

In her outstanding and critically acclaimed debut, the late director Maria Saakyan, brought to life a highly personal and radically poetic vision of war and its consequences. In a mystical landscape overshadowed by war and loss, Lena, a young woman arrives at her childhood home in Armenia with the hope of taking her grandparents away to the safety of a foreign city. But nothing seems as it should. Torn between the feelings of longing and detachment, Lena begins to welcome her surroundings, and soon the magic and aching beauty of her childhood memories begin to show themselves as she realises that leaving might not be the answer.

A Liminal Landscape

by Maria Kazarian

Armenia is a land of sun-scorched cliffs. It is a harsh and barren land, and only a selfless, strong and stubborn people could survive here, people capable of performing miracles, people of searching minds and talented, hard-working hands.

— Gevorg Emin

A land of ochre scenery and altitudinal zonation, Armenia, or *Hayastan*, is a small, mountainous country located in the South Caucasus. Often rhymed with the word *kar*, meaning rock, Armenia is also affectionately named *Hayastan-Karastan* by the locals, literally translating as *Armenia – Country of Rocks*. And indeed, the people of this small yet stubborn nation have invariably been characterised by their distinctive highlands, where images of pre-eminent rocks – for instance, that of the revered Mount Ararat – continue to encase their myths and legends, in turn lending to their rock-strewn heritage. Yet with the ever-contracting peripheries of *Hayastan*, it can be said that the rocky history of the Armenians continues to be determined by their myth, where an ever-growing list of severed territories and ensuing political conflicts mould an unstable and vulnerable identity – one which remains under construction as it struggles to situate itself in the present, whilst attempting to retrace its contentious past.

Such is the framework behind the late Maria Saakyan's *The Lighthouse*, or *Mayak* (2006), an allegorical portrayal of home-seeking and home-founding set against an unspecified war, taking place in an undefined region during an unstated time, somewhere in the highlands of the post-Soviet Caucasus. Coordinates are of little importance here, as Armenian emigrée Saakyan's subtle yet resounding musings make unfaltering reference to her homeland throughout the film, which was shot in the Lori Province of Armenia. Perhaps modelled in the image of Saakyan herself, the story follows the Russian-speaking protagonist Lena, also an emigrée, visiting her native valley. Joyful and sunny dreams of Armenian dancing, accompanied by a folkloric voice singing to the mountains, awaken Lena as her train from Moscow pulls in at the station. However, she soon finds bucolic memories of her childhood obscured by recurring gunfire and an ominous mist, or perhaps smoke, enveloping her craggy village. Screeching

flocks, menacing aircrafts, night-time raids, missing menfolk, and a general sense of indetermination within the hazy limbo prompt Lena to initially cry out, 'It's impossible to live here!'. But while she unsuccessfully encourages her remaining family to flee, like them, she eventually discovers an immobilising stubbornness to remain rooted in her barren yet precious land.

Full of mysterious twists and turns, much like the winding roads of Lena's village, Saakyan's lyrical exploration of identity carefully resists spatiotemporal concreteness. Addressing the liminality of memory, heritage, and borders of a war-torn land through oneiric and free-flowing sequences, the amorphous storyline and the anonymity of Lena's space heighten feelings of cultural and territorial loss which often bypass official narratives, evoking an enduring ethos of uncertainty and vulnerability. As a result, the timeless and versatile qualities of the film give new relevance to silenced conflicts such as those of Nagorno-Karabakh, buried deep in the Armenian mountains and at present fighting to retain native territories, whilst Armenia itself begins to exist more in the margins of a collective consciousness than within its physical parameters. And in presenting a mythical idea of a place and a heritage which seem almost intangible and out of reach right from the very beginning – where the dreamlike, storybook opening unfurls a tattered Armenian manuscript – Saakyan transcends cultural limitations by foregrounding interstitial elements of survival to reinterpret the harsh realities of the present. Now more than ever, the aesthetics connected to the visual culture of the Armenians call for a (re)discovery of the past to establish a sense of what is new in an act of revolt against tradition and the historical frameworks of injustice. For the searching mind, Maria Saakyan's *The Lighthouse* is one such starting point which seeks to reimagine the vectors of memory, beautifully illuminating a path to the potential futures of Armenian identity.

Maria Kazarian is an artist and writer based in London.

TAMING the GARDEN

Salomé Jashi

24 Jan | 18:15 | Ciné Lumière | Preview screening



CHE/GER/GEO | 90 mins | 2021 | doc | dir. Salomé Jashi | in Georgian with EN subs

A group of engineers work around the clock to uproot and transport enormous centennial trees from their homes, across land and sea, to a dendrological park on the Black Sea coast owned by one of Georgia's wealthiest politicians. As they carefully take out every root of these graceful trees from their soil and home, the everyday life, relationships, feelings and routines in the villages where these trees come from become overshadowed by the departure of the trees — the silent observers of their histories for many decades. A poignant reflection on the ways in which modern power affects the environment we exist in, and above all our relationship with our own roots as well as with nature.

Dendrological Dislocation

by Galya Stepanova

Salomé Jashi's *Taming the Garden* opens with a sequence of carefully framed meditative shots of men fishing somewhere on the Georgian Black Sea coast. A few moments in, a wider frame reveals a tree floating across the water close to the horizon. And as peculiar honking sounds of invisible birds build amidst the lull of the waves, an atmosphere of mystery establishes itself hinting at the enchanted yet dislocated setting which the film is about to immerse us in.

Dislocation in both literal and metaphorical senses is a key thread running through *Taming the Garden*. Attentively observing the difficulties of engineering with which centennial trees are being uprooted and transported across land and sea from their native villages to a dendrological park under construction, Jashi questions the nature of this endeavour. From conversations among workers and villagers, we learn that the park is being created by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a wealthy former Georgian Prime Minister, who has set out to relocate more than two hundred ancient trees across the country to build his Arcadia. Reactions vary from resignation and anger, to analysing the personal and community benefits of this operation. However, what appears to remain constant is a certain sense of disempowerment and loss that this unyielding project reveals among the people. A social dislocation of sorts that accompanies the dislocation of the trees. A deeper-rooted collective unease, Jashi is hinting at, that is being re-enacted with the removal of the trees.

At the centre of all this is, Ivanishvili, an omniscient figure around whom the film artfully builds suspense without ever confronting him directly. Since, if it were not him, it could have been somebody else with another totalising anachronistically modernist vision of the world. Instead, *Taming the Garden* culminates in his Garden of Eden, where beauty and absurdity meet in a sterile vision of nature, evocatively accompanied by the idyllic ironies of Celia Stroom's music and Philippe Ciompi's sound design. In this place, trees are held down to the ground by wires and watered by timed sprinklers, whilst the pink flamingos inhabit strictly designated areas. If we are to consider the meaning of Henry David Thoreau's words that: "A man is rich in proportion to the

number of things which he can afford to let alone,” then the impoverishment of this version of a relationship to nature, as it is subtly built up in the film by Salomé Jashi, will seem beyond measure.

Taming the Garden takes its time to construct a world that hints at something larger than what is visible on the screen. It goes much beyond a procedural documentary about the creation of a dendrological park in Georgia, becoming an almost mythical portrait of a contemporary socio-political setting structured by the relationship between man and nature.

Galyna Stepanova is a curator, researcher and non-fiction film producer living in London and Prague.

This text was originally commissioned for online publication by the Open City Documentary Festival; it can be found at: <https://opencitylondon.com/news/dendrological-dislocation-an-essay-by-galina-stepanova/>



Gamsutl | Dagestan | 16.01 min | 2012

Baida | Dagestan | 15.31 min | 2017 | in English | Commissioned by the 57th Venice Biennale dir. Taus Makhachava

Taus Makhacheva, the Moscow born artist with roots in the Caucasus region of Dagestan, is known for her video, installation and performance works that conceptually, and often humorously, examine questions of historical narratives, regional and cultural identity. Her practice probes the resilience of man-made objects, customs and concepts vis-à-vis nature and the passage of physical and historical time.

In *Gamsutl*, Makhacheva stages a masculine body re-enacting the spatial memory of the forgotten past of an abandoned ancient Avarian mountain settlement, once a stronghold which is now being taken over by nature. And in *Baida*, the artist collaborates with the performance maker Tim Etchells, to create a video 'documenting' a supposed performance that was to take place during the 57th Venice Biennale. The concept was scripted by Etchells based on the research Makhacheva did with the fishermen from the village of Starii Terek who are working in precarious conditions on the Caspian Sea in Dagestan.

Recreating Dagestan's physical and mental spaces
through the lens of Taus Makhacheva
by Lucia de la Torre

The tension between creator and viewer is intrinsic to the artistic experience. Similar to it is the relationship between the self and the other in questions of identity. This tension is palpable across the work of Taus Makhacheva: blending fine art, film, and performance, her diverse body of work speaks of the multiple layers of one's personal and cultural identity – from the perspective of internal creation and interpretation, as well as external perception.

Born in Moscow, multimedia artist Taus Makhacheva splits her time between the Russian capital, her family home in Dagestan, and London. A result of her multicultural background, Makhacheva's work often turns on questions of national identity and geopolitics, explored through the prism of the relationship between place, memories, and the physical and mental spaces that the latter inhabit. Many of her conceptual works are also centred around natural landscapes, and the role these play in transcultural exchange. Her works often pose intellectual questions from the perspective of those seeking to create meaning, and those attempting to perceive it, and short films *Gamsutl* (2012) and *Baida* (2017) are prime examples of the artist's multifaceted, conceptual oeuvre.

In *Gamsutl*, the viewer is placed in front of the monumental sight of an ancient Avarian settlement, where buildings carved from rock dot a hill overlooking a Dagestani valley. From the film's perspective, the settlement looks like theatrical scenery. While *Gamsutl* withstood upheavals in the region throughout the centuries, from the 1950s, its population started to leave, and it gradually became a ghost town. Yet far from a sad sight, its symbiosis with the nature overtaking the stone buildings is humbling and comforting. Throughout the film, a single male dancer captivately moves in the empty spaces of the settlement. Appearing at once mesmerising and misplaced, the dancer seems to pose the question of whether, if at all, the past can be revived, and explores what physical memories remain embedded in a space once those who inhabited it are gone.

While *Gamsutl* feels like a comforting contemplation of the passage of time, *Baida* is an unsettling watch on indifference and the limitations of transcultural experiences. The video, scripted by visual artist and writer Tim Etchells, captures a performance set up for the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017, which was inspired by Makhacheva's conversations with fishermen from the Caspian Sea village of Starii Terek, in Dagestan. Intrinsic to their work is the risk of being lost at sea and never found. If their boat capsizes, the fishermen tie themselves to the boat, so that their families will be able to find them and bury their bodies.

The performance's profound message – a reflection on the precarity of human labour and man's struggle for survival, at the risk of being lost to nature's overwhelming power – is placed in contrast to the experience of a few biennial visitors, who set on a trip to the open waters of the Adriatic to see the art installation. The film captures how the visitors, disappointed at the sight of a capsized boat without performers, merely brush over the meaning of the artwork in the midst of a torrent of thought where the voyeuristic nature of their engagement with art is evident, as the experience of Caspian Sea fishermen gets relegated to a mere source of entertainment. This, in turn, exacerbates the feeling of being lost at sea – just like the Caspian fishermen, the meaning of Makhacheva's artworks risk being lost in a sea of indifference.

Set in conversation, *Gamsutl* and *Baida* act as multiple faces of the poloedrum of individual and collective identity in the North Caucasus. While *Gamsutl* stands as an insider's look at the past, *Baida* offers the perspective of an outsider looking in. In both films, nature plays an overwhelming role, bringing the intellectual exercises to a close as the ultimate force that, eventually, takes over human meanings.

Lucia de la Torre is a Spanish writer, documentary filmmaker and producer based in London.

WHEN the PERSIMMONS GREW

29 Jan | 15:45 | ICA | UK premiere

Hilal Baydarov



AZE/AUT | 118 mins | 2019 | doc | dir. Hilal Baydarov | in Azeri with EN subs

Having studied at Bela Tarr's Film Factory in Sarajevo, Hilal Baydarov's filmmaking career started only in 2018, yet in four years he has prolifically made eight films that have screened at festivals such as, Venice, IDFA, Visions du Réel and Sarajevo. *When the Persimmons Grew* is Baydarov's fourth feature documentary and the first film in the Katech trilogy, which explores the relationship between time, home and belonging.

A mother waits for her son in a solitary home of an Azerbaijani village. When the son finally arrives, it is time for the persimmon harvest season. As they grow closer after a long time apart, words and laughter start to emerge from the silence. Poetic and involving, Baydarov's film is an extraordinary meditation on time in life and in cinema.

Like persimmons drying in the sun

by Lucía Salas

I could no longer see the beauty in this scene after watching it over and over.

All I saw was time.

The fish would no longer be there if I went back.

The water wouldn't be the same.

Nor would the angle of the sunlight in the water.

I shot nothing, only time.

The camera only shoots time,

Takes its portrait.

— Hilal Baydarov, *Nails in My Brain*

A film is also a fragment of time. The almost two hours that make Hilal Baydarov's *When the Persimmons Grew* are part of his Katech trilogy, together with *Mother and Son* (2019) and *Nails In My Brain* (2020), all shot in Katech, Azerbaijan. Two people and their rhythms are the centre of this film. A mother waits for her son to come home. Time becomes dense while he is not there as light moves slowly from one point of the room to the other. On the train something similar happens to the son: the voyage home seems to be eternal. While she waits, the mother prays, walks, and prepares the persimmons for drying: together with family and friends persimmons are peeled, tied, hung, and then, as always, time will do the rest.

In this film, Baydarov explores a relationship between time and home in which being in a place of belonging alters the perception of time, or rather, it enhances it. What was invisible elsewhere becomes the centre of life here, as if things became visible only by achieving familiarity. There is a scene in which the son confesses to the mother that he can only feel seasons when he is at home. Back in the city, they disappear from perception. But is not only that in the countryside – where the harvest happens and life seems slower – time feels more present, but also that being in a state of removal from home – being elsewhere – is disorienting, and disorientation takes away the ability to pay attention, to understand time and our surroundings. Details are lost when removed from one's usual pace. He says in the scene: Home is a place where you can feel the time pass.

But not only does understanding come with time, but humour also, as in this film it comes directly from intimacy. Leaving and returning has also its own awkward pace, and it is time that allows relationships to work as the seasons. At the very beginning of their encounter, mother and son find their winter, they hardly speak. Then, the son will create elaborate conversations facing a jokingly elusive mother. He insists, she gets annoyed, time moves backward and suddenly there is a boy calling for a mother's attention and then, shifting once and again every time they share the screen, they become many things. In the end they almost can't talk again, but because they can't stop laughing. They have found their summer. The best jokes are made about things one knows well: one cow trips trying to climb a small hill, a shepherd waits for the daily train to come while his sheep are all over the tracks.

But the true beauty of this film is how it creates ideas about time in cinema. To understand time some people need not only to feel it passing – and becoming memory – but also to try to catch it, hold it in their hands, and make it more familiar, making it their own. Films like *When the Persimmons Grew* try to win the battle of time by creating one to be captured, creating memories specifically for this film, which we call scenes. And it alters time again, by playing with it, taking fragments of it, repeating it, cutting the minutes between one event and another, watching one second one side of a face and suddenly the other, creating flashes of home. Then the film slowly creates a familiarity with itself, with its shapes and forms, with the way time moves in it, the ways in which it organises a portrait of Katech, a mother and a son, and the persimmon season in two hours of life. It becomes a little miracle machine.

Lucía Salas is an Argentinian writer, programmer, and filmmaker based in Spain whose work navigates cinema, past and present.

Programme Curator

Galya Stepanova

Guest Writers

Maria Kazarian
Lucía de la Torre
Lucía Salas

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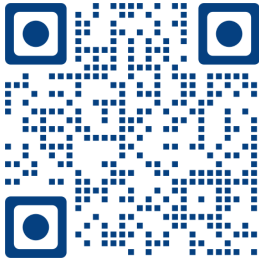
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