"Center" and "Periphery": Shaping the Cinematic New Soviet Woman*

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Abstract

Women's emancipation was a pivotal component of the Bolshevik agenda. However, constructing a New Soviet Woman was a laborious task, because traditional feminine traits and beauty standards were at odds with the Party's requirement towards the citizens to build the socialist state. As the Bolsheviks used cinema to enlighten the illiterate masses, cinema, ideology and politics were closely intertwined. Films of this period hold a key to the following questions: what were the defining traits of a New Soviet woman? How was she required to act in critical situations? How she was supposed to do dress and look? This article will address the aforementioned questions through an analysis of three Russian films and one Georgian depicting an urban working class. The imbalance originates from the fact that, while Moscow generated films portraying contemporary life during the 1920s, the Georgian studio started production of films from the modern era only near the end of that decade. The films were chosen based on their exploration of women's challenging issues concerning sexual freedom, marriage, motherhood, and abortion. These films are *Katka the Apple-seller,* directed by Fridrich Ermler's *Katka the Reinette Apple Seller (1926)*, *Bed and Sofa* directed by Abram Room (1926), *House on Trubnaya street* by Boris Barnet (1928) and *Saba* directed by Mikheil Chiaureli (1929). Analysis also incorporates the center-periphery dichotomy, framing the center as more modernized and the

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periphery as less developed. Situating the findings in a wider framework, the paper challenges the division into “center” and “periphery” in the context of women’s emancipation.

Keywords: emancipation, femininity, sexuality, motherhood, androgyny.

"Merkez" ve "Çevre": Sinematik Yeni Sovyet Kadınını Şekillendirmek

Özet

Kadınların özgürleşmesi Bolşevik gündeminin önemli bir bileşeniydi. Ancak, “yeni Sovyet kadınını” inşa etmek zahmetli bir işti çünkü geleneksel kadınsı özellikler ve güzellik standartları, Parti'nin sosyalist devleti inşa etmek için vatandaşlara yönelik gereklilikleriyle çelişiyordu. Bolşevikler okuma yazma bilmeyen kitleleri aydınlatmak için sinemayı kullandıkça, sinema, ideoloji ve siyaset iç içe geçmiştir. Bu döneme ait filmler şu sorular için bir anahtar niteliğindedir: Yeni Sovyet kadınının belirleyici özellikleri nelerdi? Kritik durumlarda nasıl davranması gerekiyordu? Nasıl giyinmesi ve görünmesi gerekiyordu? Bu makale, kentli bir işçi sınıfını tasvir eden üç Rus ve bir Gürcü filminin analizi yoluyla yukarıda bahsedilen soruları ele alacaktır. Dengesizlik, Moskova'nın 1920'lerde çağdaş yaşamı tasvir eden filmler üretirken, Gürcü stüdyosunun modern döneme ait filmlerin üretimine ancak o on yılın sonlarına doğru başlamasından kaynaklanmaktadır. Filmler, kadınların cinsel özgürlük, evlilik, annelik ve kürtaj gibi zorlu meselelerini irdelemelerine göre seçilmiştir. Bu filmler Fridrich Ermler'in yönettiği Elma Satıcısı Katka (1926), Abram Room'un yönettiği Yatak ve Kanepe (1926), Boris Barnet'in yönettiği Trubnaya Sokağındaki Ev (1928) ve Mikheil Chiaureli'nin yönettiği Saba'dır (1929). Analiz aynı zamanda merkez-çevre ikilemini de içermekte, merkezi daha modernleşmiş, çevreyi ise daha az gelişmiş olarak çerçevelemektedir. Bulguları daha geniş bir çerçeveye yerleştiren makale, kadınların özgürleşmesi bağlamında “merkez” ve “çevre” ayrımına meydan okumaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: özgürleşme, kadınlık, cinsellik, annelik, androjenlik.

Center and Periphery: Contextualizing Women's Emancipatory Discourses

After the 1917 October Revolution, Bolsheviks aimed to achieve a very ambitious purpose. In the words of historian Peter Kenez, they "did not merely want to control the government, right wrongs and eliminate abuses; they aimed to build a new society on the basis of rational principles and in the process to transform human nature and create the new socialist human being" (26). Bolsheviks also positioned themselves as the primary bearers of modernity and enlightenment, both in Russia and other Soviet republics. Women's emancipation constituted a significant part of their envisioned transformation. The construction of a modernizer identity also excluded the existence of any pre-revolutionary emancipatory movements, which were consequently neglected and erased from historical records (Gradskova 79). In Georgia, the official narrative neglected the women's emancipatory movements in the imperial period, a historical oversight rectified only recently, almost a century later (Gaprindashvili 21-22). These movements bore fruit after the fall of tsarism during Georgia's short-lived independence (1918-1921): the Act of Independence, founding document of the Georgian Democratic Republic, granted women the right to vote and take part the elections, leading to five women becoming members of the parliament. The constitution adopted in 1921, days before their defeat at the hands of Bolshevik troops, established equal political, civil, economic, and family rights for women. Later official pronouncements conspicuously omitted mention of these endeavors. The Bolsheviks positioned as the primary creators of the order of modernity from the chaos of "backwardness". Thus, the ideologues consistently ignored all the similarities between Soviet Georgia and its predecessors (Barkaia 36).

As the metropole of the Soviet Union, Moscow planned and implemented political agendas, transmitting them unaltered to the other republics. These republics were not uniform; they displayed internal heterogeneity and differed substantially from one another. Metropole was reinventing its own "East", its own "Other/s", that stand as signifiers of backwardness, and various patriarchal customs, which ultimately oppressed women. Starting from

imperial times, Georgia and the Caucasus more broadly represented "exotic East" for Russia, as Susan Layton has shown in her seminal work (194). Although, Russia's annexed territories significantly diverged from the European Orient and they necessitated 'editing' within the imaginary to align with Western Orientalist stereotypes (Tlostanova, 71) After the creation of the Soviet Union, this imperial imaginary found its continuation in the films produced by Georgian State Film Studio, which would only depict the country's past and not the contemporary setting/problems until the very end of the decade. While consideration of the center as "innovating" and "modernizing", and peripheries as "passively imitating", is problematic and has often been characterized as "gross misconception" (Nygård & Strang 82), the Soviet discourse often used this simplistic dichotomy. Oksana Bulgakowa observes how Moscow emerged as the Soviet Union's primary metropolis in the 1930s cinema (61-64), but the origins of this idea are discernible in the 1920s press. Illustratively, a critic from *Sovetskii ekran* relegated Leningrad to provincial status relative to Ukraine and Georgia, noting that only Moscow studios engaged with contemporary themes, thus underscoring Moscow's position as a modernizer (Rist 2). Soviet Georgian officials consistently overstressed the backwardness of the periphery and predominance of the patriarchal attitudes compared to the center. The ORK (Transcaucasus Society for the Affairs of Female Workers and Peasants) asserted that women's involvement in industry and social activities in the region was significantly hampered not only by domestic duties (as in the center) but also by outdated social attitudes toward women's active roles (Shaverdova 4). Although this was not only a problem for the periphery, Lev Trotskii's article also highlighted the reluctance of accepting active women within metropolitan circles (27).

These examples reveal that the dynamics between the center and periphery exhibited complexity, subtlety, and hierarchical intricacy. Within the Russian context, Moscow's status surpassed that of Leningrad, while other republics held peripheral positions in relation to Russia. However, the peripheral Soviet republics also produced their own centers (cities) and peripheries (rural areas). For Moscow, Tbilisi (Georgia's capital) held a peripheral status.

Nonetheless, Tbilisi also exhibited its own internal "Other" in Achara, a western Georgian region with a Muslim population (Barkaia 35). Maia Barkaia reveals how specific expressions, such as "backward child of the East" were attached to Muslim women (35). However, that in the Georgian Democratic Republic, a Muslim woman was elected through the means of democratic elections in one of Georgian villages (Karajala) (Khvadagiani, par. 3) undermines the Soviet narrative of a repressed, powerless Muslim woman. As Krista A. Goff notes, the center-periphery framework can conceal complex power relationships within the Soviet republics (5). But this article does not delve into these complexities. Focusing on cinematic representations of urban life, the study examines how Moscow, as a major metropolis, and Tbilisi, as a capital of the peripheral republic, portrayed the newly emerging figure of the Soviet woman in their respective films. The study seeks to shape the contours of what an urban, working-class New Soviet Woman was like: how she looked, how she dressed, how she acted in various situations in her contemporary surroundings. The primary interest of this article is to examine these representations through the lense of center/periphery dichotomy and explore what are the meanings of those differences, if there are any. Before undertaking a cinematic analysis, however, it is crucial to first address the ongoing scholarly conversation regarding the creation of the New Soviet Woman.

The Making of New Soviet Persons

The construction of the new people required an entire set of operations. With the New Soviet Man, it was relatively easy. He had to be "a highly moral, socialist paragon of virtue, dedicated to the final goal of communism" (Miller 13), whereas the case of the New Soviet Woman was far more complicated. Obviously, she also had to embody all these characteristics, but this was not all. Contrary to the New Soviet Man, who fitted in the accepted masculinity (strong, muscular, etc.), the New Soviet Woman required redefinition of femininity as well. After all, she had to be engaged in production and remain in reproduction (Attwood*, Creating the New Soviet Woman* 1-2) and this was no simple task. The Bolsheviks recognized

the subjugation of women and advocated for their liberation, a process Kollontai described as elevating the "baba"—a derogatory term for uneducated and superstitious women—to the status of a comrade and fighter (qtd. In Wood 1). However, according to Elisabeth A. Wood, their decision to pursue this course of action between 1905 and 1917 (described as "still uneven") was likely driven by a preemptive concern regarding the recruitment and organization of women workers by competing political factions (30). After October Revolution Bolshevik government made steps to improve women's condition: they facilitated divorce procedure, mandated equal rights and equal pay for women (although to what extent all these steps worked in reality in favor of women, and their controversial effects, is a different matter). Women now had a right to receive education and freedom to choose profession and location for living. The state initially intended to take domestic work from the private sphere to public and liberate women laborers from this routine. Now other proletarian women would do the housework for proletarian women (Barkaia 37). However, this initiative was never fully realized afterwards. Abortion was legalized in 1920, yet this decision was not motivated by concerns regarding women's rights or bodily autonomy. The reason behind it was the devastated economic situation and lack of childcare for orphan children after the WWI, 1917 Revolution and Civil War. Thus, it was considered as a temporary "necessary evil", which would disappear as soon as material conditions would have ameliorated (Barkaia 43). In general, as Yulia Gradskova remarks, the Party's efforts on woman's question were rooted in the economic and political interests rather than women's genuine empowerment (10).

With the efforts of feminist revolutionaries, Inessa Armand and Aleksandra Kollontai Bolsheviks also created a special women's section–Zhenotdel, responsible for work among women. The program known as "work among women" focused on outreach to women unaffiliated with the party, disseminating information about the new socialist state and its policies concerning women's rights at unofficial meetings. The purpose of this undertaking was to show to women the superior advantages of cooperating with the state, rather than opposing it. Debate raged around the various

components of “the woman question, ” making the female body a key area of contention (Grant 72). The Soviet government used and altered the image of women and the concept of women’s equality to enforce economic and demographic policy changes. Sexuality was also a subject of intense discussion. According to Professor Aron Zalkind, author of the famous *Twelve Sexual Commandments of Revolutionary Proletariat*, sexual desires had to be subordinated to class interests, contrary to free love theory. According to him, woman’s fragile tenderness had no use any more, thus women had to get on close terms with men economically, politically, and physiologically (Sabedashvili 136). The eminent Dr. Nikolai Korolev, in the same year, discussed the post-revolutionary necessity of complete and unconditional emancipation of women, arguing for their equal standing with men (Grant 74). Yet, how much freedom could they have, or as Zalkind put it, how close could they come to men, in terms of physical and social aspects? Responses to this question were not uniform. Korolev categorized female body types into three groups: the prerevolutionary ideal, the tsarist-era peasant housewife, and the New Soviet Woman. Pre-revolutionary beauty standards favored a slender, underdeveloped female form, whereas the typical tsarist peasant wife was described as short-legged, with a short neck, wide waist, and long torso. The New Soviet Woman occupied a position intermediate to the other two. However, it is important to note that Korolev's New Soviet women, while liberated, remained confined to the domestic sphere, emphasizing their reproductive roles (Grant 74). Susan Grant highlights the state's hypocrisy; despite espousing female emancipation and equality, women's liberation was implicitly restricted due to purported inherent female vulnerabilities (76).

The creation of the New Soviet Woman was also reflected in changes to women’s appearance. Representation of a new woman dressed in more masculine fashion became more and more prominent. The practice was prevalent in Russia, to the point of becoming stereotypical (Iutkevich 25-26). After the 1917 October Revolution, fashion was seen as tainted commerce fueling irrational consumption, incompatible with the Bolshevik’s new world (Bartlett 337). However, with the introduction of the New Economic Policy in

1921, which reintroduced private ownership and retail trade, fashion also returned. As Bartlett explains, for the devoted Bolsheviks, fashionably dressed NEPwoman epitomized the worst practices of capitalism, and the female body symbolized a locus of consumption and sensual gratification (Bartlett 350). Moreover, as Thomas G. Schrand (196) argues, the antipathy toward the feminine was observable in pre-revolutionary spiritual philosophy and within the Bolshevik party itself, where women were perceived as reactionary and counter-revolutionary. Thus, the revolutionary circles were satiated with repugnance towards feminine in general. As Eric Naiman remarks, at this time skinny, or rather androgenous women who rejected traditional feminine features were fashionable all over Europe and in the United states (309). Under the NEP, however, the slender female form transcended mere fashionability and was charged with ideological purity; whereas a feminine woman was a class enemy.

However, things were not unanimous and this portrayal of women proved to be controversial even amongst revolutionaries. Drawing on the early 1920s Russian journals, Elizabeth A. Wood posits that a common accusation leveled against the New Soviet Woman was that she eliminated all aspects of "femininity" in herself, thus failing to serve as a pleasure object for her husband (202). The New Woman was not quite popular among communist men, either. The communists as husbands fared no better, and occasionally worse, than ordinary workers and peasants. They did not let their wives to attend meetings or be politically active and they did not want a New Soviet Woman as a wife, but were rather going for nonparty women (Wood 205). Young women faced double standards: rejecting sex meant being labeled "puritanical", while pregnancy meant being labeled "loose". The contemporary women correspondents were describing the hardship of women's everyday lives. Following a full day of factory work, they were further obligated to perform domestic tasks. Obviously, the situation of single mothers was the hardest of all. Zhenotdel was constantly receiving the complaints of women who were abandoned by husbands, among whom some were communists. The resolution to this situation seemed to create kindergartens and cafeterias,

although in reality all these things could not fill the necessities. Even though Revolutionary Russia admitted women's full citizenship, but from all aspects, women had a double burden to work and taking care of the household and children (Wood 207).

The study of the Georgian journals of the period shows that atmosphere and attitudes towards the New Soviet Woman were very similar. The issues of *Mshromeli kali* (analogue of the Russian *Rabotnitsa),* demonstrate that a masculine New Woman type was quite common in Georgia as well. A letter published in 1924 there (that time called *Chveni gza*) gave general advice to the women delegates regarding how to work with peasant women. Among other points, the author placed considerable weight on the manner in which the delegates had to be dressed. The author stressed that smoking women with short haircuts and masculine attire, regardless of their eloquence, would be unlikely to impress peasant women. Working among city women was another matter, but the caution was still needed: "These women are more developed, but self-restraint is still necessary, as you will also meet here old-fashioned women" (Apaneli 34). Although the periodicals of the period featured numerous communist appeals for women's active engagement in the public sphere, these calls largely remained rhetorical and did not accurately represent the existing circumstances. For instance, as one delegate woman wrote in women's monthly journal in 1925:

> I cannot help not to mention one thing: communists' wives extremely avoid women's department, which makes a terrible impression on non-party delegate women. They say: Communists are calling for us to engage into women's department, whereas they are pickling their wives at home. Even if the Women's department called on every communist to ensure that their wives were actively engaged once and for all, these women came only for a week. We, non-party delegate women call on communists and their wives, to have a close relation with women's departments and hence give an example to non-party peasant women and their families (Khutsishvilisa 36-37).

Thus, even if local actors cultivated the difference between the more advanced center and more backward periphery, the examination of periodicals does not reveal any substantial difference. The published thematic stories which aimed to accentuate woman question and their problems portray very interesting picture of the challenges the society faced. The subjects of these stories were changing from year to year, depending which of the problematic questions was in heydays of debates: they varied from the stories of young Muslim women, becoming liberated by familiarizing herself with the party ideology and with the help of Komsomol members, to liberation of an oppressed housewife from an abusive husband, sometimes with the help of a delegate woman. An often recurrent trope exposed male party members with double standards, who at the same time were calling on women to freedom (be it social or sexual), and on the other still treated their partners in the traditional (abusive) way. These stories on the one hand offered role models to women readers, and on the other provided ideologically charged solutions for the problems they faced in real life. For the illiterate part of the population, such role models were offered by cinema.

Cinematic Representations of the New Soviet Woman

In Soviet society, cinema had other function than producing mere entertainment melodramas, at least according to the ideological claims, even if the audience was clearly prioritizing western or soviet commercial films over ideological ones (Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses*, 7). Beginning from the early 1920s, the cinema was the main branch of art, according to Lenin. The majority of population was illiterate, and here was cinema, a new medium, which could deliver a message regardless of audiences' cultural and literacy backgrounds (Taylor 31). Hand in hand with *agitfilms*, feature films also were charged with educative function. In short, cinema fulfilled multiple tasks, which alongside such a major mission, as the propaganda of the Bolshevik system and consciousness, also combined other "minor" assignments, which had "economic, educational, artistic and social aspects" (Rimberg 39). But first of all, the cinema had to create the role

models of the New Soviet Man and the New Soviet Woman. In Oksana Bulgakowa's words, the films

> [...] were concerned with the process of the re-education of the masses, and this did not end when the Bolsheviks came to power, it was only just beginning. That is why the "growth and liberation of consciousness" was so vital, and formed the link between cinema and real life. The purpose of the heroine and that of the plot were identical (154).

Therefore, analysis of cinematic representations is crucial to understanding the demands placed on the New Soviet Woman and the conceptualization of the ideal citizen. Until the end of the 1920s from the Soviet studios, only Moscow was paying attention to the contemporary life (Rist 2) and Georgian studio took on this task after the 1928 All-Union Cinema conference, which mapped a new trajectory for all the studios. The article will focus on those films which pioneered in the portrayal of the New Soviet Woman and payed attention to woman's question, even if from a male perspective, were particularly significant in their influence and provide a nuanced portrayal of the contemporary society. These are Fridrikh Erlmer's *Katka the Reinette Apple Seller* (Katka bumazhnyi ranet, 1926), Abram Room's *Bed and Sofa*, originally called *The Third Meshchanskaia Street* (Tretia Meshchanskaia, 1927), and Boris Barnet's film *The House on Trubnaia Street* (Dom na trubnoi 1928). From the Georgian studio's works will be discussed Mikheil Chaiureli's *Saba* (1929) which was the first film to center on urban working class. The questions the analysis will focus on are the following: how did the New Soviet Woman look like? To what extent did she embody femininity? Was she allowed to express sexuality? A primary observation when analyzing these representations is the notable absence of femininity and sexuality in role models. These traditional female traits in the films of this period are reserved only for negative characters, for women of high society and/or anti-Soviet elements, philistines, and petty bourgeoisie of the NEP period. New Soviet Woman is either completely emptied from these characteristics, or gets rid of it in the process of becoming a role model, as we will see.

The contrast between sexuality/femininity and asexuality/modesty is particularly sharp in Fridrikh Ermler's film *Katka, the Reinette Apple Seller.* It tells a story of a village girl Katka, who had a misfortune to fall into a trap of an evil charming man in the city. The film has two female protagonists: the eponymous heroine, who initially came to Leningrad from a village to earn money to buy a cow, and now earns living by selling apples and is expecting a baby; and Verka, who sells perfumes. The presence and absence of coquetry/femininity serves as a signifier which respectively defines Katka as an honest, hard-working person and Verka as an adventurist who dreams to have a perfume shop of her own (Fig.1 and Fig.2). Sexual freedom is a central theme explored in the film, however Katka's character never displays any hint of sensuality, while Verka is extremely coquette. Katka is pregnant by the antihero, Siomka, who initiates a romance with Verka at the film's outset. Later Katka starts to live with Vadka, an unsuccessful intellectual, unable to cope with the new life and find his place in this new order. Following this, Katka begins to reside with Vadka, an unsuccessful intellectual, who grapples with the challenges of the new life and cannot find his niche in this new social structure.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

However, their relationship never even hints at sensuality and eroticism and is portrayed with such camaraderie that it elicits smile. The traditional gender family roles are reversed, which according to Julian Graffy is a particularly remarkable feature of the film: Katka is a breadwinner, whereas Vadka takes care of the household and the baby, changing nappies and ironing laundry (61). His inability to navigate the outside world is evident, as he struggles with even simple tasks such as selling apples. He is completely useless in the outside world and can't even sell apples. It is true that both Katka and Verka are "law breakers", because they both pursue an activity-selling goods in the street, which is illegal and prohibited at that time, however, the product that they are selling indicates to their position as heroine/antiheroine (Katka's healthy apples, product of agriculture versus Verka's perfumes, an ultimate connotation of petit bourgeois inspirations). As Denise J. Youngblood observes the film reveals "the inability of society to integrate not only obviously disaffected elements like the intelligent Vadka but also a member of the masses, such as a peasant girl like Katka, " who has fallen in with black-marketers. She is a

> [...] nonproductive member of the new Soviet society...[and] unwed mother on the fringes of a crime network." What is remarkable about this film is that villains are not "bourgeois remnants", but rather representatives of Soviet underclass, and the party is nowhere to be seen at all. All of these together turn the film into the "first clear-cut critique in Soviet cinema of NEP society and the market economy that supported hooligans like Siomka and Verka ("Cinema as Social Criticism" 68).

Although the diegesis develops in such a way that Katka gives up this "outlaw" activity and starts working in the factory, taking Vadka with her. They are both becoming proper Soviet citizens: New Soviet Woman and Man; whereas Verka is arrested for a complicity in a murder with Siomka. Thus, the film, besides subtle and acute social criticism, also articulates women's question, however the solution it provides to prominent "women trouble" of the period: getting pregnant and being abandoned by the partner is in the ideological line. In real life, anyone in Katka's position would most likely get an abortion, but the protagonist decides to keep the baby. In a sequence (which takes a place before her arrangement with Vadka) she happily glances at young pioneers, imagining the future of her child. This scene implies that there is no need for a biological father, because it is assumed the state will be there for the mother and child. However, in the end, when Katka gets a job at the factory, and Vadka stays at home, in the words of Julian Graffy "we witness the creation of an unconventional Soviet family" (61).

Abram Room's *Bed and Sofa* was the first film, which according to the filmmaker discussed the "pressing contemporary topics" of "Love, marriage, the family and sexual morality" in cinema (qtd. In Graffy 11-12). The original title designates the address of the house, where the plot develops. As Denise J. Youngblood notes it was "a key to the director's intentions and a portent of the film's problems", as it was a street in the commercial section of old Moscow and the root word referred to the pre-revolutionary petty-bourgeoisie ("The Fiction Film as Source of Social History" 52). It is an extraordinary film of the period: in Mayne's words:

> while it is obviously the case that all Soviet films reveal something of the political climate in which they were made, Bed and Sofa offers a unique opportunity to examine how the woman question is posed in a film that reflects quite directly upon contemporary events, and particularly as they affect women's lives and male-female relationships (110).

Spouses, Liuda and Kolia live in a tiny apartment on the third Meschanskaia street. Kolia, the husband, works at a construction

site as a supervisor. At first glance, he is a perfect New Soviet Man: strong, muscular, engaged in building the state. However, there is still a philistine order in his family: he does not treat his wife with necessary attention and affection, Liuda is always engaged in housework and "serves him" so to say. Husband and wife, man and woman occupy different spaces: public and private, respectively. Kolia goes to work. He works in construction, and as one shot shows, has the entire city under his feet; whereas Liuda always stays at home and a window her only access to the world outside home, to the public space (Mayne 114). Kolia invites his friend, Volodia, who has just arrived into city and cannot find a place to stay because of housing shortage, to move in with them on the sofa without even asking Liuda's opinion on the matter. When Kolia leaves the city on a business trip from his work, Volodia starts an affair with Liuda. In the beginning, he shows a great deal of attention, takes her to the cinema, brings her newspapers to read, etc. In short, he opens the public space to Liuda and consequently takes Kolia's place in bed. On his return, at first Kolia angrily leaves the house, when he learns about the affair, but later on he has to return, because like his friend, he cannot find anywhere to live and now it is he who has to move on the sofa. In the end, everything ends in *ménage à trois*. However, from this point, both of them treat Liuda like traditional husbands, consequently now Liuda "serves two masters instead of one" and regardless of the unconventionality of the lifestyle, nothing has changed in her position (Mayne 112). When Liuda gets pregnant, none of them wants to have the baby, because no one is sure about the identity of the father. Nevertheless, once in a clinic to make an abortion, Liuda decides to keep the baby, leaves both of them and rejects her petty bourgeois state of life: she goes on the train alone to start a new life. This is what Mayne finds unconvincing: Liuda`s sudden change of mind seems implausible and relates her decision more to the ideological needs, that is to encourage childbirth, regardless the legalization of the "necessary evil", i.e. abortion. At this point we witness Liuda's transformation: when she leaves the house, she is still dressed in petty bourgeois fashion: she wears a black leather cloche and a scarf with ornaments (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). As Djurdja Bartlett claims, the cloche was

primarily a NEP woman accessory. Nevertheless, in 1926, it had "entered the public space in order to broker an ideological truce between fashionability and urban female workers" (345-346). However, in the last shot, as she looks towards the opening road with a smile, the cloche is nowhere to be seen, and she wears the scarf in a somewhat shabby manner, like a working-class woman. Thus, the character's inner transformation is expressed in her dress. Bartlett provides a meaningful observation regarding the clothing. The film's poster, designed by the Stenberg brothers, depicted the heroine with a beret, which she does not wear anywhere in the film. As a beret was common among working class urban women, "That small iconographic detail was enough to situate the heroine on the poster in the urban working-class milieu, because the NEP woman would have worn a cloche hat" (345). Thus, not only Liuda has not only liberated herself from the "meschanskii" petit bourgeois household order, but from the "meschanskii" look as well. Julian Graffy has suggested that leaving Moscow—"the ideological center of the Soviet state", instead of addressing the Party, women's committee etc., on Liuda's part is a subversive act, "a rejection of all Soviet systems" (73-74). Arguably for the first time in the film, we perceive Liuda is happy as she is on the way to start a new life on her own. Mayne is right: the film indeed reassures viewers that motherhood will bring her happiness. She, like the previous film's heroine, does not need a biological father to provide, assuming that the state will take care of her and her baby. Kenez notes that *Bed and Sofa* is rightly considered as "one of the earliest feminist films" (53). However, Mayne has argued that it might not be necessarily so, as asserting a woman's autonomy happens because of motherhood, which is more ideologically invested than authentically rooted in the character's development (125).

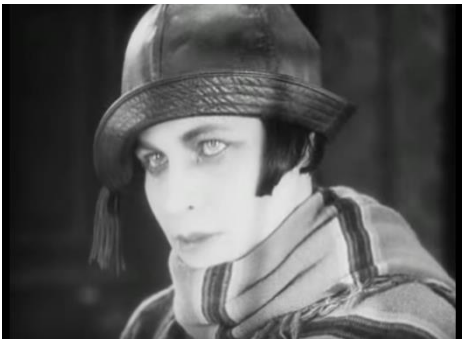

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Boris Barnet's film *The House on Trubnaia Street* (1928), called "a mini-encyclopedia of Moscow life" (Bartlett 343) offers even more multilayered variations of femininity. It focuses on a peasant girl who has just arrived in the city and is concerned with her emancipation and finding the place in the new environment, at what she successfully succeeds after many different turmoils. When the camera shows a woman with curly hair, reclining on a sofa in a pose reminiscent of Venus in Western oil paintings (Fig. 5), this immediately suggests a negative character, a vestige of the bourgeoisie, through her overt sexuality and femininity. Indeed, she is the exploitative wife of a hairdresser who hires a peasant girl, Parasha as their servant. Parasha—the protagonist of the film has a rival - the maid, Marisha, competing with her for the affection of the driver, Semion. Whereas they both belong to the same social class, the clear-cut difference between them is manifested in physical

appearances: Parasha is naïve, modest and a bit clumsy, lacking any feminine coquetry (Fig.8), whereas Marisha looks more like the tsarist times "lover's" type (as described in Korolev's typology) with tortuous curls, big eyes and fragile and tender posture (Fig. 9). Also, her clothes are more stylish: her character is 'allowed a modest cloche hat and a modish, yet functional fur coat to protect her from the harsh Moscow winter (Bartlett 343). However, she is too much feminine to be the "right" woman for the driver Semion and consequently he makes his choice on clumsy, robust Parasha who perfectly fits into the physical image of the New Soviet Woman designed by doctor Korolev. The film further offers images of two types of thriving New Soviet Woman. One of them is "moderately" emancipated: free from feminine coquetry; she is an activist comrade (Fig. 6). She is dressed in "mannish jacket, a simple dress with geometrical pattern and the obligatory headscarf tied at the back of her neck" (Bartlett 343). However, the second New Soviet Woman, a cigarette smoking androgynous, vigorous activist, is portrayed to the extent of grotesquerie and her appearance only functions in the film to create a comical effect (Fig. 7). Thus, whereas the film clearly makes a preference for the New Soviet Woman as propagated by official discourse (robust, strong, emptied from sensuality and traditional femininity) it still betrays an ambivalence towards the very New Soviet Womanhood by parodying it. This ambivalence was inherent in the very same official discourse as we have seen above.

Fig. 5

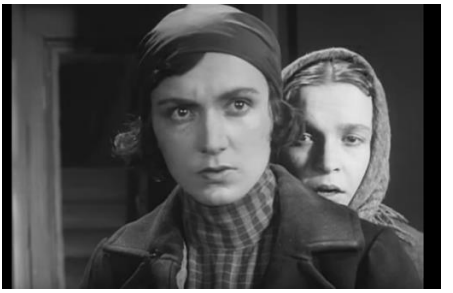

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

The first Georgian film of the 1920s to depict the urban working class was Mikheil Chiaureli's *Saba,* which premiered in 1929. The film is centered on the eponymous hero, an alcohol addicted Tbilisi tramway driver who cannot help but waste all his monthly salary on drinks with his friends. His drunkenness is further complicated as he becomes abusive towards his wife Veriko and son Vakhtang. The film focuses on the male hero and depicts his transformation from a drunkard and troublemaker to a decent Soviet citizen. This is a long process: when Saba's boss finds out about the family scandal, he fires him, and Veriko also divorces him with the encouragement of Olgha, a leader of the Young Pioneer's League who intervenes in the family affairs after noticing bruises on Vakhtang's face. However, Veriko's life on her own is not happy: both she and Saba are quite unhappy on their own, but she still refuses to reconcile with him. The drama reaches its climax when drunk Saba rides a tramway (stolen from a former coworker) and accidentally hits his own son and seriously injures him. This accident is followed by a public trial, which turns into a public denunciation, not of Saba, but rather of alcohol, which is the "enemy of socialism". The cathartic moment takes place when Veriko appears at the trial with their head-bandaged son and embraces Saba. The family is reunited. However, it is also clear that the protagonist of the film is not only a part of his own family but also of a wider, social community: the whole public sphere mobilizes in order to save him, and at the trial, he is embraced not only by his wife and son, but rather by the whole local community (Tsopurashvili, "Meet the New Soviet Woman" 102). The film's denouement, showing young pioneers protesting

alcohol while Saba reflects from a tramway which he is driving, suggests that domestic violence in working-class families is invariably associated with alcohol abuse.

Even if the film features domestic violence, its focus is not on family abuse or on women characters. Yet it sheds light on the New Soviet Woman as an actor in the narrative. The principal women characters Veriko and Olgha, like Marisha and Parasha, also belong to the same class. However, their positions on the power dynamic spectrum are diametrically opposed. Veriko is locked in the private, domestic sphere, she earns her life doing laundry, a traditional domestic female labor, for others. It is a signifier marking her passive, oppressed and home-bound feminine position. Olgha is an agent of the society, a social activist, who intervenes into the private sphere when she sees necessity. Whereas Veriko is weak and vulnerable, Olgha is strong. This dichotomy is further reflected in their physical appearances; Olga exhibits more masculine features. Her physical construction is vigorous and rough, corresponding to the emancipated woman's bodily shape designed by Korolev, while Veriko is tender and slim, fitting in the prerevolutionary beauty standards. The camera position and body language also reveal their power full/less position in the filmic narrative: during the conversation Olgha is shown from low angle medium shot, using powerful body language and gestures, emphasizing her power and authority, which belong to the masculine, in masculine-feminine binary system (Fig. 10). Veriko's portrayal in a high-angle close-up shot conversely signifies her oppressed and passive feminine state (Fig. 11). This contrast is particularly evident when the two women are captured within the same frame. Olgha is in the foreground, with a strengthened back, reading something, whereas Veriko is in the background, shriveled with her head hanging (Fig. 12). The composition of the scene provides an understanding of the characters' personalities, which are retained throughout the film.

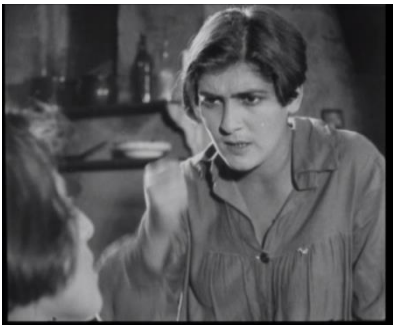

Fig. 10

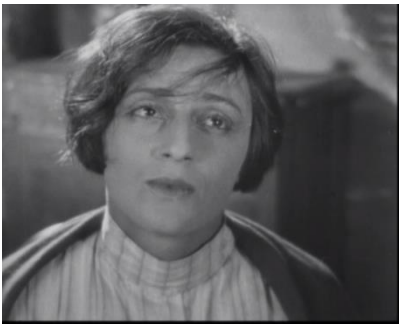

Fig. 11

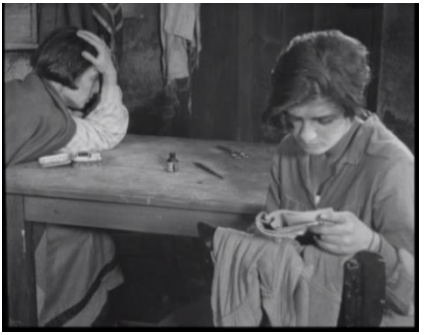

Fig. 12

As we have seen, the New Soviet Woman here too is androgynous, strong and empty of any femininity. The stress on preservation of the nuclear family singles out *Saba* from the previously discussed films. It would be inaccurate, however, to attribute this discrepancy

to the simplistic dichotomy of center and periphery, wherein the center is presumed to be more advanced and emancipated from patriarchal structures, while the periphery is characterized by traditionalism and kinship systems. In contrast to the discussed Russian films, which center on female protagonists, *Saba*, as noted above, presents a male lead. Hence, the viewer witnesses not the overcoming of oppression by a female protagonist, but the restoration and social re-acceptance of a male character previously ostracized. The perpetuation of nuclear families was a consistent feature in metropolitan narratives highlighting male perspective too. A good example in this case is Boris' Sigal's courtroom drama *The Trial of Stepan Korolev* (as a result of Drunkenness) written in 1924, which also focuses on the rehabilitation of an alcoholic worker and shares many similarities with *Saba* (Cassiday 159-171). Also, morale-dictating stories published in *Mshromeli kali* focusing on women's experiences often depicted heroines who would get a divorce from their abusive partners and have had happy lives afterwards, just like the protagonists of the discussed Russian films. Therefore, the only peripheral feature in this case is the Georgian studio's predominant production of historically-set, orientalist-themed films and not paying attention to contemporary life until the end of the decade. Several unrelated local sources in fact challenge the center-periphery paradigm, according which women in Russia were more modernized and free. Interestingly, it was the opinion of early Georgian feminists that the subordinate status of women was a direct consequence of the pervasive influence of Russian social structures and norms (Mikeladze 36-39). A veteran Bolshevik, Arakela Okuashvili, in his memoirs noted that in the 1900s' Russia, men performing women's (i.e. household) tasks were unimaginable, contrary to Georgia (Okuashvili 136).

Lynne Attwood and Catriona Kelly have highlighted the importance of motherhood in the films of the era, as it often shown as a way of women's emancipation and liberation (278). The discussed Russian films, except *The House on Trubnaia Street*, testify to this. It is true that Olgha, the epitome of the New Soviet Woman in *Saba*, is an exception from this rule at first glance, as she does not have children of her own. However, she still fulfills this function by

nurturing youth, as she is an educator of a future generation as a leader of Young Pioneer's league, raising children for the state. These representations might suggest that the image of fighting and completely desexualized "mother" which later found embodiment in various monumental sculptures in different soviet republics, is already gaining her contours from the early soviet period (Tsopurashvili, "1920-iani tslebis akhali sabchota kali" 8).

The major problem with such a model of "empowered woman" was that it did not deconstruct or redefine femininity per se, but just defeminised women. Such a defeminised role model on its terms also failed to attract even ideologically motivated party members and by the beginning of the thirties, it became clear that women had to preserve their femininity, no matter how masculine their job was. During the mid-twenties, *Mshromeli kali* actively encouraged women's participation in communist party work and state-building. Starting from the late 1920s, the journal's temper changed: while retaining political themes, it gave advice more to housewives than activists. A new section, displaying models of clothes for women and children, was introduced with an accompanying instruction on how to sew them (initially it appears in the September-October issue of 1928, Fig. 14). In the beginning of 1930s *Mshromeli kali* still described the New Soviet Woman as an ardent worker, who had no time and interest in beauty treatments, as the years of five-year plans and collectivization were the times when women had to embrace the worker's identity (Barkaia 39). But in the second half of the thirties, with the revival of traditional feminine roles, that of a wife and a mother, brought the conventional understanding of femininity back. This was in tune with the center's discourse, with *Rabotnitsa* assuring the readers that women workers employed on metro construction dressed fashionably outside of work (Attwood & Kelly 274).

Conclusion

The comparison of the films produced in Russia and Georgia revealed no differences in the portrayal of the urban New Soviet Woman. She typically exhibits androgynous characteristics, substantial physical strength, and a complete absence of flirtatious

behavior. However, what sets a periphery produced *Saba* apart is that it is a male-centered film, whereas films produced in the metropole focused on women's experiences (but not necessarily providing women's perspective). In Georgia, narratives focusing on women's problems in the contemporary world were provided not in the cinema, but in short stories published in women's journals throughout the decade. Similar to the metropole films, they portrayed heroines who liberated themselves from abusive partners. However, the Georgian film studio's preference for orientalist historical films over contemporary narratives is a significant characteristic of peripheral cinematic production. To summerize, if storylines focused on women's experiences, they usually depicted women leaving families behind, and when they centered on male protagonists, they were characterized by preservation of the nuclear family, irrespective of their location. Abram Room's picture *Potholes* (Ukhaby, 1928), exploring a love triangle which ends with the unification of the nuclear family is such an example from metropole (Youngblood, "Fiction film as a Source for Soviet Social History" 57).[1]

The analyzed materials reveal that even if in the 1920s a fighting, independent and androgynous and/or not feminine, modest looking New Soviet Woman, was actively propagated, the attitude towards such a role model was equivocal and this type of woman was not unanimously approved even in the official discourse itself. As the letters from the women delegates demonstrate, the overall situation was quite similar both in the "center" and in the "periphery": the backlash accompanying the changes and reforms implemented by the party, was largely similar among both Russian and Georgian party members and activists. In terms of women's emancipation, Georgia's peripheral status is arguable: the movement for equal rights was present since the imperial times, which resulted in the five female members of the parliament during 1928-1921 independence. Russia took credit for the women's modernization in Georgia, as proved by a 1928 pamphlet, which claimed that "Georgian city woman, having lived with Russia for a

[1] As this film is not on familiar streaming platforms, it could not be included in the analysis.

hundred years, has Europeanized so much that she is almost indistinguishable from the Russian city woman" (qtd. In Gradskova 73). However, the local sources challenge this center-periphery paradigm, which assumes the center's advanced nature and the periphery's backwardness. Early Georgian feminists argued that the oppression of women was previously alien to Georgian society and directly resulted from the enforced assimilation of Russian societal norms. Historical accounts demonstrate that men did not undertake domestic responsibilities in the 1900s in Russia, in contrast to Georgia.

According to Lynne Attwood the reintroduction of femininity in the 1930s can be considered "as an attempt to provide a palliative to the heavy work women were expected to perform, and to find a way of combining their 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles'" and those who did not manage this, "were now a cause for concern" (*Creating the New Soviet Woman* 131-132). Another explanation can be found in Stalin's famous urging that "life has become merrier", as "for this myth to be all convincing, there had to be a relaxation of the austerity of the revolutionary period. Ordinary people were now supposedly able to live well and dress elegantly" (Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman* 132). The fact is that the 1930s officially took away from women all those liberties that Revolution seemed to have granted them: the divorce procedure once again became difficult to obtain, and abortion became criminalized. The state politics now was demanding from women on the one hand to fulfill their reproductive and domestic duties, and on the other, to be involved in wage labor, leading to the "double burden" that was never lifted during the existence of the Soviet Union.

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