Xitana
A film by Sophio Medoidze

A horse, in close-up, its profile traced in the air by the hand of the cameraperson; another horse, this time in the distance, running free and seemingly having bucked its rider, who straggles behind it; a beautiful fog-covered mountain landscape, shot from the window of a moving vehicle. The opening shots of Sophio Medoidze's *Xitana* are fleeting and mysterious, and unmistakably lyrical; underscoring that mood is the soundtrack, a haunting flute-like melody. These short sequences seem like *snatches*, as you might say of fragments of overheard music: short, crystalline impressions. And the author – or the person *doing* the snatching, stringing together this garland of fragments – seems clearly implied too: the owner of that hand, which holds the shaky camera, or limns a horse.

The next shot seems to hold the mood at first. A young man, in sweat-stained t-shirt and khaki cap, leading a horse, looks with unmistakeable wariness at someone off-screen, seemingly the person behind the camera. His handsome face, his camera-shy diffidence, the trilling of the wind instrument on the soundtrack, the horse and the landscape behind him… We might almost be in one of Pier Paolo Pasolini's mid-period films, in which young (male) performers in non-western locations (Yemen, India, Uganda…) stand ambiguously in front of the camera, simultaneously 'in character' and themselves, the objects of both directorly compassion and an inescapable exoticism.

But then something changes. Just as the man's eyes flit from offscreen directly into the camera, the music cuts off mid-trill. We hear the snorts of the horse, the gentle hubbub of other people talking and laughing in the background. Everything changes, slightly. A spell is lifted, or rather a set of expectations is dispelled; the fairytale gives way to something funnier and stranger. A conversation begins, between the man and a female voice offscreen, in Georgian: "What's your name?" she asks. "Irakli." The camera bobbles around to pull in other men standing around, drawing them into the conversation: "Did you take part?" she asks. "We were there…" More horses, more faces. The camera tracks down one man's legs, to discover a tear in his trousers at the knee and grazes: "Did you fall down?" All of the men seem self-conscious being confronted by the camera and this unseen questioner. "Cheese," says one of them in English, looking into the lens, grinning sheepishly. As he says it, the sound cuts abruptly again, and the music returns.

All of this takes place in the first minute of the film, but it is a kind of microcosm of Medoidze's method. Her films are animated by a peculiar uncertainty principle which propels the viewer from image to image, abruptly and repeatedly shifting between different layers of reality. Often depicting her native Georgia, Medoidze's films are mosaics in which scenes of mythic otherworldliness oscillate with documentary details, often small and comic. No sooner have you been seduced by some seemingly out-of-time setting – an ancient monastery carved out of a cliff-face, a half-glimpsed ossuary – than you are jarred back into a more recognisably contemporary reality by a joke, a glimpse of teenage boredom, some embarrassing tourist behaviour, or an obtrusive drone.

Xitana's ostensible subject matter is certainly extraordinary. The men we see are villagers from the remote mountain area of Tusheti in North East Georgia, taking part in festivities for the Atengenoba summer festival. Life in the region has remained largely unchanged for centuries, but, as the film suggests, there is increasingly negotiation with the demands of a wider world. The film is centred around a traditional bareback horse race across a pebbled river valley, which looks both dangerous and thrilling; we see some disjointed moments of the race and its aftermath, with the winner parading a victory flag. But Medoidze's camera is constantly flitting to the periphery of the race and the festivities, in particular the locals' quiet exasperation at tourists and their guides ignoring the rule that women should not approach the shrines on which the celebrations are focused. Medoidze's voice tries to explain this, from behind the camera, to a female Korean tourist who wants to take pictures; later one of the locals says, wryly, that as soon as some women approached the shrine, it suddenly started to rain.

In the longest piece of dialogue in the film, another offscreen voice – a man's – tells a story about the first airplane that passed over Tusheti, supposedly in 1954. It flew over a wedding, where all the guests stopped and stared in amazement. But it turns out that what ruined the wedding, and was considered more miraculous, was not the airplane but the bride's reaction: she had lifted her veil, which she was supposed to keep in place for three years, to get a better view. The anecdote is delivered in the manner of a familiar joke, both celebrating the image of Tusheti as a world apart and deflating it with self-mockery. But again, it is a female figure – albeit a local this time – who provides a scandalous interruption of the norm.

The film puts us, as viewers, in an ambiguous relationship to all this. It settles its gaze repeatedly on tourists obtrusively taking pictures – standing in the river, almost under the hooves of the horses, to get the perfect shot – but at the same time it acknowledges that Medoidze's is one more camera, one more intrusion. The complex interplay of very different filmic styles in *Xitana* is partly a registration of this doubleness. There is certainly a Pasolini-like element of celebration of the premodern, especially in an ecstatic sequence where the climax of the race is intercut with nightvision shots of bones in a cave. But rather than Pasolini's static theatrical shots, Medoidze employs some of the language of avant-garde filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage or Owen Land; her shots are reworked with stop frames, superimpositions, colour filters – devices which insistently highlight the constructed element of this experience, even as they intensify it for the viewer. And in stark contrast to these moments we find the informal, almost video diary-like quality of other sequences, with the conspicuously handheld camera, offscreen commentary and the free hand pointing or gesturing. These sequences pull us back down to earth, put us in Medoidze's shoes along with the other observers and outsiders.

The finger that points: this image – with which *Xitana* begins – recurs throughout Medoidze's work, at once casual and disarming. The poetics of pointing are not well established – the American painter Al Held once remarked, disparagingly, that all conceptual art was really "just pointing at things." But to point at something is already to imply there is something yet to be discovered, even if it is hiding in plain sight. The philosopher and physician Raymond Tallis has written about the importance of this elemental gesture, in

which, “I make myself and the object stand out, along with the relationship of the one to the other. The object and I are italicized, usually for the benefit of a third party.”
Tallis argues that there is a profound self-reflexivity in the act of pointing: it implies an empathetic relationship to other minds, which I can imagine following my gaze or standing in my position. But it also points back to itself, to “the sense that there is more to be sensed.”

Medoidze’s work is full of that playful sense of curiosity, as well as self-awareness about the act of sharing it. If anything, Tallis’s notion of pointing as an *italicising* the pointer is too broad here – Medoidze reminds us the gesture can be made in innumerable ways: ingenuously, accusingly, sorrowfully, parodically… There is no neutral act of pointing, just as there is no way to point a camera without making a hundred smaller expressive decisions. That understanding is the source of Medoidze’s kaleidoscope of filmic languages – ethnographic, diaristic, abstract, mythopoetic – which are constantly qualifying and contradicting each other: they are pointing to their own limits.

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