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The Spatial Representation of Tbilisi
in Georgian Poetry
Georgian Modernism and Soviet Modernisation

Bela Tsipuria

The urban imagery and modes of spatial representation of Georgia’s capital Tbilisi\(^1\) in Georgian poetry of the 1910s-1930s are heavily affected by changing political contexts. The implementation of Soviet totalitarianism started at the end of the 1920s, and was fulfilled within a few years. This process reshaped the whole construct of culture and society. In the period of the independent Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921), Georgian poetry had experienced freedom of artistic representation and became orientated towards the European modernist cultural context. In the next period however, new forms of representation of its environment and urban space were outlined in accordance with the new Soviet-Stalinist narrative developed by the Soviet centre. Georgian poetry was forced to echo ideological messages, and its poetic language and imagery came to be formed by political leaders rather than by poets. This narrative suggested, or rather enforced, a new worldview, a new picture of the world. The whole cosmology became related to the Bolshevik Revolution as

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\(^1\) Tbilisi was founded initially as a capital of the Georgian kingdom in the 5th century AD. The city always played a central role in Georgian statehood and has served as the capital of the Georgian state throughout the centuries. Thanks to its location on the crossroads of East and West, it was an important political and economic point in the region. In the 19th century, when Georgia was colonized by the Russian Empire, Tbilisi was an administrative centre of the whole Caucasus. With the collapse of the Empire in 1917, and the establishment of the Georgian Democratic Republic in May 1918, Tbilisi logically became the capital of the independent country. This lasted until the repeated Russian colonisation and Sovietisation in February 1921. In Soviet times, Tbilisi was the capital of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (SFSR) until 1936, and then of the Georgian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic).
the starting point of new life with Stalin’s leadership at the forefront, the materialisation of mankind’s dreams of happiness, equality and prosperity. The spaces of Moscow, the Soviet capital, and all capitals of the Soviet Socialist Republics, including Tbilisi, had to be reconstructed. New architecture re-conceptualized urban spaces, while poetry was to provide verbal support and praise for the new developments introduced by the Communist Party. A new image of the city was shaped, focused on the construction and modernisation of the central parts of the city, in accordance with the Soviet narrative of modernisation.

A new image of a modern Soviet Tbilisi replaced the image, the memory, and the legacy of modernist Tbilisi – which had briefly but actively become a modernist/avant-garde cultural topos shared by Georgian poets as well as Russian, Jewish and Polish poets/artists in exile, having arrived from the cities of the collapsed Russian Empire, finding a safe haven in free Georgia during the troubled times of the Russian Revolution and civil war. During that modernist moment, Tbilisi had become the “city of poets” – as defined by Grigol Robakiidze (1880-1962), the leader of the Georgian modernists – where poets created a new lifestyle, a new image, and new urban reality in accordance to their artistic views and life experience. With the ambition of establishing Tbilisi as an emerging modernist/avant-garde cultural centre, poets claimed that true poetry can be created only in Georgia.

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3 See P. Iashvili, a Pirvelitqma a [a The First Word a], Tsisperi Qntsbebi (Kutaisi) 1, 1916, p. 3; Gr. Robakiidze – Gveli Peraingi, Phalestra [Novels: Snake’s Shirt. Phalestra], Tbilisi, 1988, p. 245.
As one of the major authors of geocriticism Robert Tally suggests, «finding ourselves always in the middle of things is no less spatial than temporal, as we need to find ways both of representing our own position in the dynamic world system (an intensively local theoretical practice) and of imagining the world system in which we are positioned (a seemingly impossible global version), and apparently we need to do both at once and at all times in a continuous project of mapping and remapping».

From the late 1910s until end of the 1930s we can see at least three different modes of presenting Tbilisi’s special image in the world.

Firstly, there is the model developed by the Georgian modernist poets with their free artistic choice, and their long-term goal of cultural self-determination in the global world. These poets indeed found themselves in a process of reestablishing Georgian statehood and reconceptualizing Georgian literature, which should rejoin Western cultural flows and become a part of the context of European modernism. This was, indeed, a project of remapping, or relocating, Georgian culture. Georgian modernists saw the world as a truly dynamic system, and wanted their country, their native culture, to be part of it. Tbilisi’s local space was imagined as a part of the larger Western world, and poetry empowered this vision. Poetic achievements were seen as a legitimizing force, which could help make the country a valuable contributor to global culture. The poetic spatial image of Tbilisi was reinvented in some ways and adjusted to the theme of urban life as imagined in European modernism; on the other hand, the

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historic past of the city and its authenticity were represented as
unique qualities to be esteemed in the global Western world.

While this mode of spatial representation of Tbilisi dominated
in the poetry of Georgian modernists in free Georgia and in the
eyears of Sovietisation, it continued to appear in their poetry
after the mid-1920s, but this time as a space of loss.

Secondly, poets in exile operated with another model of represen-
tation, finding a safe haven in Tbilisi and, obviously, seeing
this as a short-term solution related to the rapidly changing
circumstances in their home countries. Their poetry reflected this
ambiguity. Living in exile was not their free choice; it was not an
artistic choice at all, but a reality connected to the painful expe-
riences of chaos. Although they started to enjoy the safety,
cultural freedom and abundance of food and wine in Tbilisi, this
was still a place of exile. Thus, the spatial image of the city is less
defined, observed in the context of the uncertain situation in their
home countries. When creating an artistic image of Tbilisi as a
locality, they represented this liminal space as somewhat de-
tached from the global world, and at some point, poeticized this
liminality.

The third spatial model of Tbilisi was developed as a part of the
larger Soviet ideological agenda. While Georgian modernists were
forced to poeticize a new image of the city in their texts, the new
mode was becoming materialized on the ground. In accordance
with new plans, parts of Tbilisi were redesigned and re-
constructed. The world system in which Soviet ideology now
spatially positioned the whole Soviet country, including Tbilisi,
was a system in which everything was constricted within Soviet
borders, and concentrated around the Soviet centre. Thus, in
Georgian poetry of the 1920s-1930s, Tbilisi was suggested as a
local model of the USSR, which can be seen as a substitution of
the global world. This new image of the capital of Soviet Georgia, as well as other Soviet capitals, was adjusted to relate to the concept developed for the Soviet centre, the metropolis of Moscow. This was a conceptually new approach to modernity, so-called Soviet modernization.

The objective of the article is to see the spatial representation of Tbilisi in the diachronic dimension, against the background of Georgia’s modernist cultural development and, on the other hand, political changes introduced by the Soviet regime; to show how the ideological dictate of the regime and enforcement of new cultural priorities can affect the acceptance and representation of the reality by authors.

**Tbilisi on the Crossroads: East and West, Tradition and Modernity**

« Tbilisi’s strategic location in the South Caucasus, at the juncture of major historical empires and religions in Eurasia, has ensured its turbulent history and a polyphony of cultural influences. [...] Its urban forms and spatial fabric similarly inherited a peculiar mix of different cultural layers, superposed on the city’s rather peculiar topography ». With its rich history, its geopolitical location on the crossroads of Europe and Asia, its regional economic function, its architecture, the multiethnic composition of its population and, accordingly, its multicultural tradition, as well as its rapid economic development and modernisation, the city provided fertile ground for poetics and the creation of new images within the modernist context. With these qualities, the city fit into topical discussions of European modernism: the relation between East and West; the re-evaluations of Western rationalism; and the search for different

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perceptions of reality. Georgian modernists were aware that through rethinking the spatial model of the city and adjusting it to European ideas – by showing similarities with Western cities and, on the other hand, by emphasizing the differences – they could spark interest in the Georgian cultural context.

The most notable Georgian poets were united in the group “Blue Horns”. They deliberately pursued the goals of modernising Georgian culture and creatingspaces parallel to European cultural centres in Georgia. The group included poets like Grigol Robakide (1880-1962), Titsian Tabidze (1895-1937), Paolo Iashvili (1894-1937), Valerian Gaprindashvili (1888-1941), and Giorgi Leonidze (1899-1966). They identified themselves as Georgian symbolists, while also making reference to a broader scope of European modernism. The most important Georgian poet of that generation, Galaktion Tabidze (1892-1959), also practiced symbolist aesthetics, but stayed apart from the group. These poets found Tbilisi inspiring and unique. Most of them moved to Tbilisi in 1917-1918 from western Georgia, with its centre Kutaisi being much more ethnically and culturally homogenous, and having a more uniform urban structure.

In the 1910s the Georgian modernists tried to rethink Georgia’s cultural identity and analyse its historic influences, discussing Georgian culture as a two-faced Janus – one face looking towards the East and another towards the West. As a city on the crossroads, Tbilisi concentrated influences: as Georgia’s political centre from early medieval times, it preserved medieval castles and the landmarks of ancient Georgian Christianity, with its oldest churches dating from the 6th century. Certain districts of the city developed their qualities on the basis of Georgian material culture, customs, and traditions – including holiday celebrations, clothing, food, wine, and housing – mixed with details brought by multiethnic communities to the city. Throughout the centuries
Tbilisi was inhabited not only by Georgian, but also by Persian, Jewish, Arabic, Armenian, and other communities. It was considered a centre of Armenian culture in the early 20th century. The city preserved oriental influences brought by merchants, and in the second decade of the 20th century, it was still receiving caravans from Eastern countries. From the second half of the 19th century, « Tbilisi, hitherto a compact settlement with a medieval social organization and an irregular oriental-style layout, started a transformation towards “European-style” patterns. Through an active city-building process, it gained the feature characteristic for a colonial “dual city” with an oriental-type, irregular, topographically diverse and culturally mixed Old Town, and newly-built European-style areas, established in accordance with a regular plan on relatively flat terrains (e.g. Sololaki) »7.

The district of Sololaki is depicted in one of Galaktion Tabidze’s early texts, a short story entitled The Night Cord (1910). The text reveals a young poet’s excitement with the rich district and, on the other hand, his sense of exclusion from its reality: « There are streets in Tbilisi: clean, with high buildings... built in new style, with two, three, four or, often, five storeys. No single-storey buildings at all. They are painted in pink or green, in the corners, walls are decorated with finely ornamented stones. At the stairs you can see large marble columns, with statues of lying lions or ancient Roman women. These statues create an inviting appearance for each house. At entrances you can see metal nameplates. Look thoroughly also at the windows of these houses: they are made of whole glass: beyond them you can see draped embroidered curtains, they depict women with flowers, or just flowers: iris, violet, lilac and rose. Some curtains are of ivy color, some are white, pink or green. In windows there is always a vase with fresh flowers or tropical plants. Often, a passerby can ima-

7 Ibid., p. 41.
Gaalaktion Tabidze.

gine the life and leisure of these rich people. He stares at these huge mansions, at these finely cleaned streets and, here or there, fine gardens in front of courtyards. Trams do not pass these streets, as if they are afraid to disturb this cosy and calm life. Sometimes a carriage or an automobile clatters by, no other vehicles are allowed there. This well-cared and beautiful quarter of the city is called Sololaki.  

The Georgian elite in the first half of the 19th century made the cultural choice to Europeanise their lifestyle and architecture. In

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the second half of that century, this choice became much more
democratic, adopted by a larger number of social classes and
families, thanks to the active social role of the generation of the
1860s, including Georgian writers and public figures. In terms of
the lifestyle of the last decades of the 19th century, Tbilisi was
comparable to European cities: the Georgian city population
enjoyed social life, reading daily newspapers and literary journals,
visiting Georgian theatre and performances of Italian opera at the
opera house, attending elite parties, ordering goods from Europe.
European architects had been invited to build public buildings in
the city since the mid-19th century. By the end of the century,
wealthy citizens, mostly merchants of Georgian and Armenian
origin, invited Europeans to build their mansions. As art histori-
rians observe, these architects synthesized European architecture
with the architectural specificities of Tbilisi: making the works
by European architects in Tbilisi distinct from what can be seen
in Europe*. One of the most notable buildings, built in 1903-1905,
was the mansion of David Sarajishvili (1848-1911), a scientist,
entrepreneur and philanthropist. Even before the modernist ten-
dency came to dominate Georgian literature, the Art Nouveau
style in architecture was adopted in the last decades of the 19th
century and the first decades of the 20th, harmonized with tra-
ditional buildings and their wooden balconies in old Tbilisi style.

In the 1910s, when a new generation of Georgian artists
appeared, modern districts offered them places to live, walk, and
perform. The main modernist events and larger soirées were
usually held at the Tbilisi Conservatory, as well as at the café-
restaurants International and Imedi. In the same districts, on
Rustaveli Avenue or on its parallel streets, Georgian and Russian
modernists established new taverns/cafés modeled after the art-
stistic cafés of Paris and Saint-Petersburg, such as for example

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* M. Mania, European Architects in Tbilisi, Tbilisi, 2008.
Fantastic Tavern (1918), Argonaut’s Boat (1918) and Qimerioni (1919)\(^{10}\).

From posters and newspapers of those years we can see how active poetic life was, how Georgian and international poets performed side by side and how frequent the modernist/avant-garde soirées were. We may assume that the Tbilisi public was actively involved in this\(^{11}\). At the same time, the poets visited the old districts, enjoyed traditional food and wine in taverns, and felt a touch of the oriental world at marketplaces.

From the memoirs of Nino Tabidze (1900-1965), Titsian Tabidze’s wife, we can see how the diversity of the city affected the artists’ lifestyles. On the other hand, we can also see how the artists, with their creative activities, values and approaches to individuality and social environment, influenced life in the city: the members of the Blue Horns group interacted actively with other artists – Georgians and internationals: Nino attended soirées of famous Russian Silver Age poets, including Konstantin Balmont (in the winter of 1917) and Igor Severyanin. Later that year the Blue Horns held their first soirée at the Tbilisi Conservatory hall. They also visited the Georgian Tea House – a charity café opened in support of Georgian soldiers sent to fight in WWI; here the Tbilisi elite and young artists would gather, and ladies from Georgian aristocratic families would volunteer to wait at the tables. Poets would walk on Rustaveli Avenue and interact with people there. Paolo Iashvili would always give to a beggar on the avenue, and if he did not have any cash, he would raise money from passersby and give it all to him. Poets organized a charity


\(^{11}\) See http://modernism.ge/?action=posters&lang=eng.
dinner in the theatre hall in support of young Georgian painters who were heading to Paris to continue their education and to develop a strong modernist tendency in Georgian art. The beneficiaries were Lado Gudiashvili (1896-1980), David Kakabadze (1889-1952) and Elene Akhvlediani (1901-1975); the latter started a still popular trend in Georgian art – old Tbilisi city landscapes. At least a thousand people gathered at that dinner, where Paolo Iashvili served as toastmaster and sparked a “real poetic firework” of toasts. At a corner of Rustaveli Avenue, where strong echoes could be heard, poets would gather at nighttime to recite poems, disturbing the locals with these “experiments”. Afterwards, they would approach the house of Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869-1923), whom they regarded as an elder friend, and who is now regarded as a national poet of Armenia. Tumanyan would often take part in the poetic soirées by the Blue Horns. Titsian Tabidze would take Nino to the old Tbilisi districts and show her caravans at the marketplace of Meidan. The couple liked to walk in the narrow streets close to the Georgian cathedral Sioni, where carpets were laid right on the pavement. Nino’s place was close to the Armenian church Vank. Titsian later wrote a poem Vanq Church (1918) and dedicated it to Nino. Georgian poets initiated the opening of café Qimerioni in the basement of the building of the Tbilisi Artistic Society (now Shota Rustaveli Theatre). Georgian artists Lado Gudiashvili, David Kakabadze, Mose Toidze (1871-1953), Polish artist Sigizmund Valishevsky (1897-1936) and exiled Russian artist Sergey Sudeikin (1882-1946) painted murals there. The small space of the fantastic
Tavern, an artistic café started by futurist brothers of Polish and Georgian origin Ilia (1894-1975) and Kirill Zdanevich (1892-1969), would be packed with almost the whole multinational artistic community of the city – vivid debates on Zaan poetry would often be instigated there by Aleksei Kruchonych (1886-1968). Titsian Tabidze and Georgian artist Dimitri Shevardnadze (1885-1937) visited all the small taverns around the Tbilisi railway station in search of paintings by Niko Pirosmani (1862-1918), a Georgian naïve artist discovered by the Zdanevich brothers and Lado Gudiashvili. They approached Pirosmani’s art from a modernist perspective; the great artist rose to fame posthumously.°

We can see how the city as a cultural topos contributed to the creative process. As Harsha Ram emphasizes, Tbilisi in this period is a 'bohemian space in which literature is performed, consumed and lived'°. On the other hand, modernist ideas inspired Georgian poets to consume their own city as a cultural resource. They presented Tbilisi from various angles: as an active modern urban centre; as a place where cultural diversity is celebrated; as a space for dialogue between West and East, modernity and tradition.

Tbilisi was represented as an urbanized space, in accordance to the aesthetic modes developed in European modernism. Paolo Iashvili was inspired by the theme of urbanism in the poetry of Belgian symbolist Émile Verhaeren, and dedicated a sonnet to him. The sonnet is part of the Triptych – Mallarmé, Verlaine,

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° The reconstruction of the lifestyle and activities of young Georgian modernists in Tbilisi given in this abstract is based on memoirs by Nino Tabidze. See N. Tabidze, Tsvartistka Cantadisas. Tsisiani da misi Megobrebi [The Rainbow at Dawn. Tisiani and his Friends], Tbilisi, 2016, p. 34-64.

Verhaeren – a tribute to great symbolist poets\textsuperscript{14}. Each sonnet combines intertextual allusions and the author’s attitudes towards them. The images accentuated in the sonnet to Verhaeren are clearly derived from his poems: the scream, red horror, the soot, smoke, blood, sea of flames, and finally, the silence. In addition to this poem’s demonstration of intertextual/intercultural connections with European modernism, Paolo Iashvili further develops this approach and creates the poem \textit{The Peacocks in the City} (1916), which is published in the same issue of Blue Horns, an eponymous journal of the Blue Horns group, two issues of which were printed in 1916 as a statement for the newly established group. \textit{The Peacocks in the City} is a long phantasmagorical poem, depicting an apocalyptic scene of red peacocks flying into the city. Notably, the very same key images make a strong intertextual connection with the poetry of Verhaeren. However, we can assume that the city depicted in the poem is not some European city: it is Tbilisi. Although the poet does not specify the city, the central images – agonizing heat, the boiling sun, the air flaming from the heat, and even the architectural element of glass-galleries – are associated with Tbilisi, with its characteristic strong Summer heat\textsuperscript{15}. By representing the familiar image of Tbilisi poetically as a modernist urban space, Paolo Iashvili pursues the goal shared by the whole group, and the whole generation: recreating the image of his own city and country in the context of European modernism, and relocating Georgia and Georgian culture into a European frame.

The everyday life of Tbilisi in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century involved a touch of the Orient, and this is reflected in Georgian poetry of that time. To Georgian modernists, this quality of their city is represented within the scope of the modernist debate on Occident

\textsuperscript{14} P. Iashvili, « Triptiçj », \textit{Tsisperi Qantsobi} (Kutaisi) 2, 1916, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{15} P. Iashvili, « Parchavangebi Qalqapi » [« Peacocks in the City »], \textit{Tsisperi Qantsobi} (Kutaisi) 2, 1916, p. 7-8.
and Orient, West and East. With its historic experience of political and cultural relations in both directions, Georgia and its capital Tbilisi provided an opportunity for revealing the coexistence of both cultural traditions.

By the end of the 1910s, the old Tbilisi districts were still full of small taverns and traditional craft shops squeezed in narrow streets and run by craftsmen guilds. These districts had their own subcultures – each ethnic and religious community celebrated its own holidays. Traditional urban poetry and bardic songs were accompanied by Georgian and oriental musical instruments, performed for craftsmen and merchants, shoppers and visitors. This subculture was not adopted by the middle class or the elite as the cultural model for Georgia’s further national development, though they could nonetheless enjoy it, and saw cultural value in its authentic environment. The modernist poets valued this popular poetry as something simple, naïve and sincere. They applied this poetics experimentally in some of their texts as a suggestion for an alternative poetic voice. Titsian Tabidze uses this approach in his poem *Mukhambazi that Cannot be Sung* (1925). The Georgian poet Ioseb Grishashvili (1889-1965) at some point decided to become a voice of this subculture, and started poeticizing it in his texts, researching and documenting it in his works.
After a few years, when repeated annexation by Russia and the Sovietisation of Georgia changed the cultural and economic reality of the country, including the everyday life of the old Tbilisi districts, the generation of Georgian modernists saw this disappearing subculture from another angle, which will be discussed below in the part: *Sovietisation and the Distorted Spatial Image of Tbilisi*.

**Hunchbacked Tiflis in Mandelstam’s Dreams**

Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) was one of the exiled poets who found a safe haven in Tbilisi for a short time in the years of the Georgian Democratic Republic: fleeing the Russian civil war, he reached the city of Batumi via the Black Sea in 1920; he was rescued there from quarantine by Blue Horn members Titsian Tabidze and Nikolo Mitsishvili. He spent almost a month in Tbilisi and participated in Tbilisi’s modernist milieu, interacting with Georgian Blue Horners and Russian modernists. On the 26th of September a poetic soirée was held in the hall of the Tbilisi Conservatory for two poets, Osip Mandelstam and Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967). Grigol Robakidze, leader of the Blue Horns group, opened the soirée with a speech on contemporary Russian poetry.

In 1920 Mandelstam wrote the poem *I Dream of Hunchbacked Tiflis* (Мне Тифлис горбатый снится...., revised in 1927 and in

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1935), conveying nostalgic feelings towards Tbilisi. Mandelstam returned in 1921 and spent a few months working on translations from Georgian poetry – Vazha-Pshavela and the Blue Horners. It is interesting to observe how the spatial image of Tbilisi is recreated in the aforementioned poem and how this is related to his understanding of Georgia’s cultural roots. The poem depicts a nostalgic image of the city as it was revived in the poet’s memory and in his dreams. Reminiscing about Tbilisi, the artist does not focus on the diversity of the city, its spirit of development and modernisation. The image of Tbilisi here is not its central streets and Europeanized parts – where Mandelstam used to stay and perform – but its old part with its hunch-backed houses and carpets over the balconies, with taverns overseeing the river Mtkvari/Kura, where gastronomic senses blend with goggy moments: “Of hunchbacked Tiflis I am dreaming / Sazandar coils

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and moans / On bridge with people teeming / Capital carpet-gleaming / As Kura runs below ».\textsuperscript{20} The space depicted in the poem is truly Dionysian; it evokes subconscious thoughts and irrational emotions and allows readers to detach themselves from previously experienced familiar spaces, from reality. This is the space of oblivion. Here, people can feel themselves beyond the physical world and consciousness: « In the tiniest of flasks / You will find a man in bliss / Teliari if you will ask / You will float on a flask, / And in fog will float Tiflis ».\textsuperscript{21}

Mandelstam’s 1922 essay \textit{A Few Points on Georgian Arts} (Кое-что о Грузинском искусстве)\textsuperscript{22} in many ways supports the feelings expressed in his earlier poem, though his emotions are now developed into a cultural position: « Georgia was seducing Russian poets with its specific eroticism, love, which is a feature of its national character, and its light, chaste spirit of getting drunk, some kind of melancholic and festive drunkenness, in which the soul and history of this people is immersed. Georgian eros – this is what attracted Russian poets. [...] Its ancient art, the mastery of its architects, painters, and poets is infused with refined lovingness and heroic tenderness. Yes, culture can get you drunk ».\textsuperscript{23}

On the other hand, the essay sparked controversy, and the Georgian poets did not accept its main points. They found Mandelstam’s position offensive and Titsian Tabidze responded with his own essay\textsuperscript{24}. Mandelstam expressed moral support for Russian imperial politics, saying that it never damaged Georgia’s au-

\textsuperscript{20} O. Mandelstam, \textit{Of hunchbacked Tiflis...}, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{23} O. Mandelstam, « Few Words... », op. cit., p. 177.
\textsuperscript{24} On this issue see P. Nerler, \textit{Osip Mandelstam...}, op. cit., p. 314-315.
thentic culture, that it treated it with respect and never pursued the goal of Russification of the nation. Such a claim did not reflect historic reality, but rather imperialist discourse. In the essay, Mendelstam claimed that Georgian modernists were causing damage: as surrogates of European modernism, who have been growing up with menial admiration for French modernism, they negatively affected Georgian cultural tradition. Their orientation towards the West and their goal of Europeanisation were denounced as wrong, since in Mandelstam’s understanding “the essence of Georgian culture was always its facing towards the East, although it never fully merged with the East and stayed separate.” In considering aspirations of modernisation and Europeanisation incompatible with the nature of authentic Georgian culture, and in advising Georgians to keep facing the Orient, Mandelstam, obviously, follows the tradition of 19th century Russian writers, who, as Susan Layton observes, from the very early decades of Russian colonisation accepted the Caucasus and Georgia as the Orient: “Russians conversant with western orientalia and the European imperial manner in Asia readily latched onto the Caucasus as their “own” Orient.” Tsarist Russian expansion into the Caucasus had a diverse nature, and was characterised by “relentless war against the “savage” Muslim tribes and embattled protectoral relations with Christian Georgia.” In contrast, however, Russian military and civil servants, as well as Russian writers, did not find much diversity in the Caucasus and perceived it all as an oriental space. From

25 Ibid., p. 173.
26 Ibid., p. 180.
27 Ibid., p. 173.
29 Ibid., p. 2.
30 This issue was actually addressed by Georgian writers in the 1920s, including Mikheil Javakhishvili (1880-1937), who, in his novella Lambalo and Kasha (1925), shows how Georgians felt offended while Russians – epitomised here in the character of Russian bishop Paul – consciously ignored the ancient tradition of Christianity in Georgia, while
Susan Layton we also know that in «the romantic era, with its mania for visiting the East, persons desiring exotic experience clearly found it much more satisfying to orientalize Georgia rather than to contemplate its similarity to Orthodox Russia or its antagonism to Islam»31.

Finally, Mandelstam’s orientalisation and exoticisation of Georgia and Tbilisi is, in accordance to Edward Said, one of the main «figures of speech associated with the Orient – [among] its strangeness, its difference, its exotic sensuousness»32. The Tbilisi of his dreams is consistent with the tradition of «Romantic representations of the Orient as exotic locale»33. Tbilisi’s exoticism and Georgian culture’s seducing eroticism are Saidian modes that, on the one hand, are obviously transmitted to the modernist poet from the Russian imperial discourse through the texts of Russian romantic poets. Developing his position in the essay, Mandelstam indeed refers to Mikhail Lermontov and other Russian poets of the 19th century, and speaks of a «Georgian tradition» in Russian poetry34. On the other hand, the spatial representation of Tbilisi is related to the poet’s personal emotions, his dreams, his memories.

Hunchbacked Tbilisi and Georgian culture were badly The damaged very soon after these texts appeared, spirit of modernisation caused much of this damage, however it was not European modernity or the modernist cultural style that caused such change, but the Soviet version of modernisation, invented and implemented by the Soviet regime.

34 O. Mandelstam, «Few Words..., » *op. cit.*, p. 177.
Sovietisation and the Distorted Spatial Image of Tbilisi

On 25 February 1921, after the defeat of the troops of free Georgia by the Russian Red Army at the outskirts of Tbilisi, the Red Army entered the capital. From the Russian centre, a Bolshevik government was installed in the country. In 1922 Georgia became a part of the newly established USSR, a modernised version of the Russian Empire.

![The Soviet Red Army in Tbilisi in February 1921.](image)

The distortion of the spatial image of Tbilisi in Georgian modernist poetry is a result of dramatic changes enforced by the new brutal Bolshevik regime in Georgia. Georgia lost its long-expected and short-lived freedom. Not only the Georgian government, but most notable members of the elite were forced to leave the country. In the early 1920s, freedom of expression was suppressed. Executions started immediately after the annexation. In 1924, after the unsuccessful August Uprising against Soviet rule, some 12,000 were killed and up to 20,000 were sent to Siberia and
Central Asia\textsuperscript{35}. While the loss of nationally-minded and Western-oriented people changed the spirit of the capital and the country, changes in the economic system affected life in both modern and old districts. Starting in 1925, a centralized economy was introduced in the USSR after the so-called Soviet New Economic Policy. Private craft shops and crafts guilds disappeared from old Tbilisi, together with their people and their subculture. While the old districts became emptied of craftsmen and petty merchants, members of the bourgeoisie in modern quarters of the city were forced to leave their homes and businesses. The aristocracy and entrepreneurs fled to Europe, though some of them were allowed to stay and live quietly in small corners of their own mansions confiscated by the regime. When the new owner of David Sarajishvili’s house left the country, Georgian poets used their contacts and the house was given to writers. It became the office of the Soviet Georgian Writers’ Union and witnessed the controversial history of Soviet Georgian literature. Modernist artists in exile also left the country, some of them heading back to Russia, some to the West. Georgian artists were gradually forced to change their artistic styles. Literature was censored and freedom of expression was suppressed. Within a few years modernist tendencies were fully banned in Georgian culture. The Bolshevik regime intruded into all spheres of life, and damaged them. Tbilisi lost its national inner self, its multicultural character and its artistic spirit.

In 1920s Georgian poetry, Tbilisi was mostly depicted as a space of loss, a space of pain. In 1926, Titsian Tabidze dedicates the poem \textit{Tiflis} to the city. He reviews major historic attacks and invasions, and the historic enemies are generalized under the

ethnonym of Tatars. The last and still painful invasion, the Soviet annexation, is not named, but is implied in the text. Bolshevik censorship was strict in Georgian literature in the 1920s. Poets wrote about historic troubles in poetic ways, overloading their texts with graphic images and trying to associate the injuries of the past implicitly with the vivid pain of the present. Giorgi Leonidze applies this form of metonymy in his poem The 13th Century (1926), representing Tbilisi in the times of the Mongol invasion, while the tragic events of the 1921 Russian annexation are implied. The angel of death overshadows Tbilisi, «locking the heart of the city» and «planting death» in people’s hearts. Nino Tabidze’s memoirs include a note on the emotional attitude of these two poets regarding occupied Tbilisi. She remembers how the three of them used to visit Mount Mtatsminda – a mountain overlooking Tbilisi, a sacred place for Georgians, where St. David’s medieval monastery and the Pantheon of Georgian Writers is situated. From there, Titsian Tabidze and Giorgi Leonidze used to look down at the city and «weep», mourning the tragic days of invasions that the city had experienced. Of course, these memoirs, written and published in the Soviet period, could not identify more clearly the particular losses which the poets mourned in the 1920s. Titsian Tabidze describes Tbilisi as a space desacralized by its enemies: the domes of churches are slashed with swords. The poet identifies himself with the dramatic heroes who sacrificed their lives for Tbilisi, and accepts all the suffering that the city experienced throughout history. To him, Tbilisi itself is «a torture», «a hangman», and is «eternal». It is a fatal space for heroes and poets, and Titsian Tabidze declares himself to be one of them: «I am the poet who died from the agony of Tbilisi». In the poet’s imagination, his own death is merged with

the defeat of his city, his inability to speak out and adequately oppose reality make him feel like « a swan with its throat cut »\textsuperscript{38}. Soviet censorship already affected literature in this period; in some texts a sense of loss is presented without specifying any reason; in the 1920s, nobody was allowed to openly criticize Bolshevism, Soviet power, or Russia. In their texts poets avoided concrete indications of the problem, and sometimes authors were forced to conclude with some positive assessment of the changes happening in the country. As a result of such a conclusion, Ioseb Grishashvili’s poem \textit{Farewell to Old Tbilisi} (1925) was accepted by Soviet criticism, and included in the Soviet literary canon. In the final lines of this long poem Grishashvili indeed announces his decision to change his path and abandon old Tbilisi. However, the main impact of the poem comes not from this finale, but from the body of the text, from the affectionate and nostalgic depiction of old Tbilisi. Thanks to this, for several generations this poem became a key source for feeling some connection with the lost space, for seeing a lost image of the city. Old Tbilisi is pictured here with its charm, customs, songs, dances, boxing competitions, community holidays, and guilds. However, now the industrial sounds drown out the sounds of duduk, and the poet’s heart is overwhelmed with sadness. He sees how the city is losing its nature, its face, of which he himself was a part. While losing his ability to praise his city unequivocally, he will still proudly preserve its colorful images. He is abandoning his goals, and leaving old Tbilisi\textsuperscript{39}.

Grishashvili had special personal bonds with old Tbilisi. He was born and raised there, in a working class family. He himself was a carrier of the old Tbilisi subculture, and incorporated its


figures of speech and style in his poetry. He received a classical education and went to a gymnasium. From his early years he became fascinated with Georgian theatre and participated in various capacities. He was only partially included in the Georgian modernists’ community; his background was often identified as hindering him from being fully European. Later, he was not accepted as fully Soviet.

Grishashvili’s decision to change his approach, his voice, can be understood as forced, since he still manages to convey how he felt about the changes. Although the poem presents the transformation of old Tbilisi as caused by industrialisation, and the text does not imply a clear opposition to the regime which caused those changes, we should keep in mind that industrialisation and electrification were key themes of the Soviet rhetoric, and the dichotomy of old and new here is, clearly, the replacement of the traditional world with the new Soviet world. When the poet describes the aggressive and drastic changes as something unavoidable, this may be interpreted as his reality – with which he self-identifies – being lost and destroyed.

The poem encodes the poet’s vision, values and approaches, which he developed further in his research on old Tbilisi. Two years after the poem was written, Ioseb Grishashvili published *The Literary Bohemianism of Old Tbilisi* (1927)\(^{10}\). This book is one of very few studies on the old Tbilisi subculture that was developed by a knowledgeable person, simultaneously a researcher, an insider, and a poet. It contains chapters on the urban customs, on urban language, on the city theatre and library, as well as portraits of a few of the city’s folk poets of the second half

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of the 19th century.\(^{41}\) Combining the modernist concept of bohemianism with this urban subculture, the author emphasises the importance of seeing the popular subculture from a modern perspective: how the community develops its lifestyle; how diverse ethnic groups contribute to creating a multicultural atmosphere; how the different ethnocultural streams are synthesized in the unique culture of the city; the role of customs, habits, values, and behavioral modes within community; how poetry is created, accepted, consumed, and valued in the lower class; what the main poetic characteristics and qualities of these texts are; what the role of traditional musical instruments is in accompanying the verbal texts; how medieval poetic modes and figures of speech are recognizable in this type of poetry; how popular poets dedicate their lives to poetry, serving their communities; how the lives of these poets fit the modernist understanding of bohemianism; and how their texts are comparable to pure poetry.

One important clue for understanding the author’s personal position and his inner feelings is given in his afterword. Grishashvili reveals that while these “grandiose” things are happening around him, he locks himself in his “archaic” library and prefers to remain with his thoughts in the colorful completeness of old Tiflis, in the pure streams of its magical, beautiful poetry.\(^{42}\) Claiming that he is a modern man, Grishashvili nonetheless detaches himself from the Soviet reality. Obviously, this was still possible in Georgia in the 1920s, although in the 1930s Soviet totalitarianism intruded the lives and art of every Georgian poet – on the one hand decorating them with Soviet awards, and

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\(^{41}\) The most important *ashugh* (bard) Sayat-Nova (1712-1895), a city poet and musician of Armenian origin, who created poems in four languages – Armenian, Georgian, Persian and Turkish –, had been studied earlier by Grishashvili in 1914-1918.

on the other, changing the nature, aesthetics, and spirit of their poetry.

The book revealed Ioseb Grishashvili’s intention to document the lifestyle and preserve an image of the urban space which had been condemned to perish and dissolve into the new homogenized city. This transformation can be seen in the light of the overall tendency towards modernisation, urbanisation, and industrialisation, although Grishashvili showed that the process was harsher in the case of Tbilisi, since it was driven by Soviet power; this forced progression was aligned not with Western tendencies, but with the Soviet version of modernity.

**Soviet Modernisation and the New Spatial Image of Tbilisi**

By the 1930s, a new image of Tbilisi was being shaped in Georgian poetry in accordance to the new Soviet totalitarian cultural policy, developed in the Soviet centre and implemented all over the USSR. This new image contradicted the spatial representation of Tbilisi in modernist literature. While the image of modernist Tbilisi was focused on its uniqueness, synthesizing old districts with modern artistic spaces, its long history with its modern urban face, its oriental cultural layers with its Western-style districts, Soviet Tbilisi was represented as a homogenized space, which conformed to the main ideological messages. The space of Tbilisi became associated with newly built sites, with the new iconic Soviet buildings and, most of all, with the new Soviet people who inhabited it.

The reconstruction of the Mtkvari riverside for example was an incursion into the old districts. While reconstructing the riverbanks, counter to the natural shapes of the river, the whole infrastructure of watermills, taverns, shops, and rafts, as well as larger buildings, was destroyed. The small Madatov Island was
submerged. After the reconstruction, even pictures of the island were withdrawn from circulation, and for decades the name of the island was preserved mainly in a few poems by Galaktion Tabidze, including his *White Pelican* (1919), which depicts the area of the Madatov, its banks and rafts, a restaurant, the sounds of Sayat-Nova’s songs, and Pirosmani’s colors⁴³. Only in post-Soviet times has the name reappeared, and the space has been reimagined in postmodernist novels by Aka Morechiladze: *The Flight over Madatov Island and Back* (1998), *Disappearance on Madatov Island* (2001), *A Whale on Madatov Island* (2004).

On 17 February 1936, together with a few other Georgian and Armenian cities, the capital of Georgia was officially renamed. The decree was issued centrally, in Moscow, and defined new Russian and Georgian versions of the city’s name. The ancient name Ṭ’pilisi (აშშაქგი, Russian : Тифлис, English : Tiflis) was changed to Tbilisi (აშშაქ, Russian : Тбилиси, English : Tbilisi). Georgian linguists supported the new version, since phonetically it was related to the modern version of the word “tbili” (აშშაქ, Engl. warm), to which the name of the city was etymologically related⁴⁴. The two versions of the name can be associated with two periods and two modes of representation of the city in Georgian poetic and political discourse. Ṭ’pilisi/Tiflis is a city of modernist/pre-Soviet Georgian poetry, while Tbilisi becomes a part of the Soviet narrative.

The new urban concept of the capital was cultivated as part of the Soviet ideological agenda. The master plan (Genplan) for Tbilisi’s development was adopted in 1934, whereby the «growth

of Tbilisi was in line with the Soviet policy of stimulating hyper-urbanisation of the capitals of the Soviet republics. [...] Stalinist monumentalism with neo-classical and national elements, as well as Soviet constructivism is notable in Rustaveli Avenue and other main streets (e.g. the buildings of the Zarya Vostoka [...] newspaper, and the IMELI Institute of Marx, Engels and Lenin) »45.

Accordingly, a new image of Tbilisi was constructed within the ideological discourse, and implemented in the poetry. The image and the modes of its representation were not developed by the poets, but by the political leaders. The new poetic image of Tbilisi encoded “new stories” about the city and the country. While the Soviet centre was rewriting the history of occupied Georgia, it was offering its own versions of Georgian-Russian relations. Bolshevisation/Sovietisation of the country was pronounced as the highest achievement and the culmination of Georgia’s historical path, and the start of a happy new life. Tbilisi, as the capital of the Soviet republic, was to communicate relevant messages to the people. The political leadership of the country was promoting the spirit of newness through propaganda and renovation projects, by erecting new administrative buildings, by decorating streets with Soviet monuments, and by renaming toponyms to carry Soviet content. In the early 1930s, one of the main squares was reconstructed, and identified as the central point of the city. It was named after Beria in 1940, and after Lenin in 1953 (when Stalin died and Beria was executed)46. During the reconstruction, the building of the city dome was preserved, but the caravanserai built by Italian architect Giovanni Scudieri was removed. The reconstruction of Tbilisi was one of Lavrenty Beria’s major projects. At that time he was the head of the Georgian/Trans-

45 J. Salakvadze – O. Golubchikov, « City as a geopolitics... », op. cit., p. 43.
46 Already during the reconstruction, a monument to Lenin was planned; however, it was erected only in 1956, to dominate the square until it was removed in 1991 by the strong anti-Soviet national movement.
caucasian Soviet Republic as well as the Secretary of the Communist Party there. Beria coordinated not only political and infrastructure projects, but also controlled cultural life in Georgia, implementing doctrines developed in the centre, and, in 1937-1939 pleasing Stalin with poetry collections in which every major Georgian poet dedicated a poem to him. The poems were written in the Soviet panegyrical genre, which became dominant in Socialist Realism and, accordingly, in Georgian poetry of the totalitarian period. Poets were expected to praise Communist leaders Lenin and Stalin, as well as their deeds, and the changes occurring in the vast country. Tbilisi is not predominant in the books of poetry for at least two reasons: in the 1930s, in the years of Stalin’s agricultural reform and collectivisation, the urban experience was not the first thematic priority; another reason is that Stalin was born in the smaller Georgian city of Gori. Accordingly, this topos starts figuring in Soviet mythology and Georgian poetry, as a new symbolic centre of the universe. Nonetheless, the new image of Tbilisi was still worth emphasizing, and praising the “new life” of the old city under the new leadership was also a part of Soviet panegyrics.

The entire cohort of Georgian poets that had been developing the powerful movement of Georgian modernist literature in line with European modernism in the 1910s-1920s tuned their voices to the new ideological messages in the 1930s. But this was a false harmony: the process was orchestrated by the Communists, and the “happiness” expressed in the poems concealed the demoralizing impact of the regime.

Ioseb Grishashvili created a poem entitled Beria Square (1941), which responds fully to the spirit of transformation of the city. It was approved by literary critics, but later had to be renamed Le-

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nin Square. Novelty is the key notion of the whole text. The poem contributes to the Soviet panegyrical genre, as it praises Tbilisi and its new developments. The main themes representing Soviet Georgia are present here: the historic troubles and wars are part of the past, the present is bright; social inequality, injustice, and domination of the poor are in the past, and now every Soviet citizen is happy; the new Georgia is represented as a “free”, bright, flawless, perfect space. Tbilisi is represented spatially as an arena of conflict between the old and the new, whereby the old is defeated and the new is celebrated. The spatial and symbolic centre of the new city is Lenin square, which, of course, is correlated with Moscow – the Soviet centre, and the axis of the globe. The old order is represented by references to the city fortresses, which are part of the past troubles and wars. More interestingly, the old is also associated with the caravanserai, which had been removed from the square. Grishashvili, obviously, tries to legitimize the changes, to fill reality with Soviet content, and to add symbolic value to the reconstruction. He tries to present the caravanserai as a symbol of subjugation of the poor, and prosperity for the rich; thus its removal can be seen as a victory of justice and equity: the swallow announces the disappearance of the old-fashioned caravanserai. This detail, as well as the entire Soviet content of the poem seemed outdated a few decades later, although the poem remained popular thanks to its celebratory tones and metaphors, as when it depicts Georgia as a pure golden ring, and Tbilisi as a precious ruby. While the bird sings in order to celebrate happiness and new life, the same role is given to the poet: he “sings” and praises Soviet life, the Communist Party, and its leaders Lenin and Stalin. Georgian people are described as Jughashvili’s (Stalin’s) warriors, who will defend the accomplishments of the country. The image of the poet as a singer, who
chants hymns to the new Soviet Georgia, became a new model for accepting and representing the new mission of poets⁴⁸.

We can see that Soviet Tbilisi was a double of the real city, a referential space, organized according to the new legislation imposed by the Soviet/Russian occupier, who claimed ownership of the space that had previously been inhabited and animated by modernist artists. Tbilisi became a part of Soviet homogeneity, its space was organized and represented as part of total happiness and harmony, or rather the Soviet illusion of happiness. Thus the « [f]orced harmonisation of all spheres of life required harmonic unity of all its parts. However, since reality cannot be forcibly harmonized, all efforts are used to construct a wonderful illusion »⁴⁹. The space of Tbilisi was being forcibly adjusted to the Soviet idea of ideally organised, modernised urban spaces all over the USSR. This illusion of happiness was strengthened by the optimism of literary texts.

Beyond the illusion of happiness, the Soviet regime would soon show its most brutal face: by the end of the decade the poets who had been forced to praise the new life and the deeds of the party leaders – the modernisation of Tbilisi among them – became victims of the Great Purge in 1937-1938. Titsian Tabidze, Nikolo Mitsishvili and Mikheil Javakhishvili were executed; Osip Mandelstam did not survive the Soviet camps. In Tbilisi, in the Writers’ Union building, Paolo Iashvili took his own life as an act of protest⁵⁰. Two decades later, after having been lauded and awarded by the regime, struggling with the conflict between his inner self and the outer world, Galaktion Tabidze also committed

suicide. Ioseb Grishashvili was recognized as a Soviet Georgian poet, but kept collecting books and isolating himself in his library, which now belongs to the city. The artistic spirit, the dramatic history, and the vanished image of Tbilisi is preserved in their texts.