

**SAID ATABEKOV'S
MAGICAL HISTORICISM**

Viktor Misiano, 2011

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Said Atabekov belongs to the generation of Kazakh artists who came face to face with the ambitious goal of creating the art of a new country. This goal was not chosen by them, in the same way that independence was not chosen by the citizens of the newly-formed country. No one asked them about it; it was simply that independence, by the power of circumstance, became a political and social reality. And that is why the necessity of constructing a new national identity caught the citizens of the country off-guard, and the rupture from the past was accompanied by trauma.

One of the consequences of Kazakhstan's independence became what could be called a double orientalization. The first instance of orientalization deals only with geopolitical identification.

Previously, when Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union, was the capital of Kazakhstan located in Europe, Kazakhs could at least partially feel European. Upon independence, Kazakhstan became part of another, Asiatic continent completely and unreservedly. However, the second instance concerns cultural-historical identification. The rupture with the Soviet past, and the necessity of a new state-forming narrative, turned the imagination of ideologues and many other intellectuals towards a legendary, premodern past; to the nomadic epos, to folkloric traditions. Similar to the way that the new state ideology in post-colonial countries had a tendency to render the colonial period into oblivion, the Soviet period was being pushed out in Kazakhstan, having become a dark spot in history. However, it was precisely this period that was an epoch of modernity for Kazakhstan! Central Asia did not know another modernity! As a result, history became fractious, void of natural succession, as if mutilated...

However, the repressed—as Sigmund Freud has written in his famous work on “uncanny”—reappears in perverse forms. And in another essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud attested that mourning is work, which (like any other work) can be completed and successful, or the opposite, incomplete and unsuccessful. An incomplete work of mourning leads to melancholy, which signifies the inability to separate oneself from loss, placing oneself and one’s loss at the centre of the universe. And indeed, the massive work with memory in post-Soviet culture began immediately with the memory of the displaced but personally experienced Soviet past, along with the forgotten, but reappearing memory of the pre-Soviet epoch. And this work created more texts about memory than texts of memory. It is common to call these types of post-traumatic memory texts “acting out”, when trauma shifts into discourse, creating infinite reproductions and regurgitations of delusional images.

Saïd Atabekov’s authorial poetic was borne out of a similar experience, and it could be given the name of magical historicism. It is a question of a specific experience, when the here and now is in hostile relations with the direct historical past. And therefore, any attempt to describe the available reality must lead to the questioning of the past. Moreover, the focus of special interest and simultaneously of traumatic repression is found precisely in the recent Soviet past, because reconstructing history’s natural succession has an existential meaning for presently-living generations attempting to reconstruct the wholeness of life. However, this past that has been personally experienced and then lost, returns again as something entirely foreign, mysterious and almost exotic. As a result, a typical effect of overlap for post-catastrophic temporality comes into play: consciousness, aiming to diagnose the present in its historical perspective, attempts to jump over the immediate present as well as the recent traumatic period, and retreats into a more and more distant past.

In reality, history, as it is presented in Saïd Atabekov’s work, is void of a connected linear narrative. Neomythologism became Atabekov’s way of organizing narrative. A mytho-poetical imagination, built on the “infinite return of the similar,” allows him to infuse his visiting obsessive images-delusions with some stable metaphorical meanings to turn them into mythologems, leitmotifs passing through his authorial narrative. And precisely the occupation of an artist-myth-creator trying to remedy a post-traumatic need, a creator of a unique and universal authorial world, was to place himself at the centre of the universe.

In his early works, Atabekov put forward the figure of an artist-myth-creator almost literally—personally and performatively. The fact that the artist comes from Shymkent in Southern Kazakhstan was influential. This territory is connected with Ghenghis Khan’s conquests; reminders of Tamerlane’s empire are preserved in the ruins of the fortified cities of Otrar,

Sairam and Sauran; and local legends insist that Noah's Ark did not stop on Mount Ararat, as is written in the Bible, but on Mount Kazgurt, close to Shymkent.

Since 1992, Atabekov worked as part of "Red Tractor", an association of artists who set their goals on rehabilitating a pre-Islamic past, and learning pantheistic rituals still preserved in the local lore. Invoking the first origins of civilization, Atabekov and his associates were restoring the idea of art as a syncretic act, which comprised of actions, sounds, images and material creations. Already then, Atabekov turned to the construction of fantastical costumes intended to embody the idea of the imagined Orient and Antiquity. Musical instruments, specially constructed but not void of folly, or even absurdity, were used in "Red Tractor's" actions. Together with this, according to the laws of myth, many different time strata were encountered in the horizontal mythological timelessness of Atabekov's neo-shamanic actions. Realities of a prehistoric past (by and large, invented) criss-crossed here with the realities of a post-industrial contemporaneity (personally seen and experienced). For example, one of Atabekov's acts was accompanied by drawing chalk outlines of figures on the ground, similar to those that the police leave behind at the scene of a crime. In his video-performance "Neon Heaven" (2003), wearing an ornate cap and a colourful robe, he sat at the entrance of a supermarket. While doing ritual bows, he would be detected by the infrared sensors of the automatic doors and they would open and close as the artist returned to the Hieratic pose of an Eastern idol. Thus, Atabekov bridged the Orient and Globalization, a sacral miracle and a banal element of contemporary technology.

With time, the images-mythologems that once dominated over Atabekov, became more stable in character, arranging a complex horizontal and hierarchical system of connections between themselves. Thus, one of the penetrating themes of Atabekov's myth-creation becomes the idea of an ecumenical combination of all major denominations. The mythologems of the cross, the half-crescent, and the six-pointed star permeate his art of the last ten years as a leitmotif. Moreover, archaic idols and "Ghenghis Khan's grave," a nomadic horseman, a Kalashnikov machine gun, the red star and the UN logo in his video and photo work—among his other motifs—ascend to different epochs of world history, closing off the circle of the cyclical myth onto itself. Finally, with him, the universal and the subjective, the historical and personal merge together. The artist's primary sources are his wife, his children, his close relatives and friends; his immediate surroundings are also mythologized—the objective environment, the surrounding landscapes.

However, Saïd Atabekov's neo-mythologism cannot be narrowed down to simple fantasy or Orientalist decorativism. After all, myth is the most ancient system of ascertaining knowledge.

However, Atabekov's myth-creation is not only an attempt to clarify relations with a past that is beyond clarification, but also to provide a diagnostic of contemporaneity. Thus, in one of his works, he turns to the image of an ancient ritual festival, "Battle for the Square" [trans. (Rus) "*Bitva za kvadrat*"] (2007). On a multi-screen video installation we see an epic event—hundreds of horsemen are in direct physical combat on the steppe, disputing with one another over trophies. The artist turns these images into an epic metaphor of the age-old human confrontation, which nevertheless has a highly pressing significance. What is represented here is a neoliberal market ideology that has encroached on this territory, with its apologetics of competition and the cult of success, which Atabekov displays as a return to brutal archaics. Thus, what is simultaneously and implicitly present, is the "figure of silencing" inherent in post-Soviet culture—the ideology of the preceding Soviet epoch, with its utopic values of human equality and brotherhood.

Thus Saïd Atabekov's work is not simply about history, but but also duel with her. As an artist and individual he does not want to be a toy of historical circumstances, and wants to create his-own historical temporality. He does not want to forget what seems to him important to remember, even if that recollection is fraught with trauma and pain. He opposes that nowadays would define the past, and wants that past would help him to understand the current moment of history.

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