

## Cultural Heritage in World Socialist Cinema

### A POLITICS OF THE PAST

In the opening creative discussion at Tashkent in 1968, Boris (Bension) Kimiagarov, one of the key figures of Soviet Tajik cinema, began his comments with a verse from Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi that spoke to the importance of friendship and peace. Qasmi was well known to most South Asian participants of the festival. A celebrated Urdu poet, he was also recognized as an important influence on Indian film lyricists, thus contributing to the great literary tradition of Indian film song-and-dance music—making it a particularly appropriate reference at a festival dominated by Indian popular cinema.<sup>1</sup> Qasmi was also a member of the Progressive Writers Association of Pakistan and a believer in the compatibility of Islam and communism, both of which he saw in local Punjab culture and traditions that he so famously captured in his poetry.<sup>2</sup> Kimiagarov's reference to Qasmi was thus a strategic choice, intended to show several aspects of shared cultural knowledge. Indeed, Urdu socialist poetry had been translated and circulated widely in the Soviet Union as part of its advancement of the progressive Afro-Asian literary program.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Urdu—understood as a designated pan-Indian “Muslim” language—was taught both in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in recognition of a shared Indo-Persian civilizational past, as well as Soviet Central Asia's self-designated role as a model of progressive cultural Islam.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Kimiagarov in his speech made a mistake—referring to Qasmi as “an Indian poet.”<sup>5</sup> Given the history of Partition, Pakistan's official pro-US stance, and its tensions with India, this misidentification was particularly loaded and problematic but also very telling, unintentionally revealing the inherent fissures within such nomenclatures. Of the three Urdu progressive poets who were widely translated and read in the Soviet Union, Qasmi and Faiz Ahmad Faiz were Pakistani, while Kaifi Azmi was Indian. All three of them originally came out of (albeit

different sections) the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA), which predated India's independence and partition.<sup>6</sup> The AIPWA endowed Urdu literary culture with its anti-imperialist spirit and its support of socialism, which served as an opposition to the anticommunist, anti-Soviet establishment in Pakistan well into the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Progressive Urdu poets on both sides of partition "sought to affirm the one-ness of the old Urdu literary community that spanned the borders and its shared Indo-Islamic heritage."<sup>8</sup> Both sides had ties with film culture; thus, Azmi's writing for the screen also brought Urdu literary heritage into the Bombay film industry.

Kimiagarov's mix-up, more than a mere cultural blunder, thus unwittingly betrays the truth of historical contingency of national labels, which comes out forcefully against the background of other configurations of shared cultural heritage. As such, it unintentionally draws attention to the possible divergences between political alliances and religious, cultural, and linguistic affinities as manifested at the Tashkent festival (and elsewhere). The former were fully tied to the nation-state structures, while the latter could not be contained by such (recently established) national boundaries.

Such intertwined and contradictory identities would be familiar to Kimiagarov, who was born into a family of Bukharan Jews in Samarkand (modern Uzbekistan), becoming one of the founders of the Tajik film industry in the 1940s. An ardent socialist internationalist who participated in the Afro-Asian circuit already in the 1950s, he won the top prize at the Afro-Asian Film Festival in Cairo in 1960 for *The Fate of a Poet* (*Sud'ba poeta*, 1959), a biopic of Rudaki, a foundational figure in the history of classical Persian literature and Tajik national culture. The Soviet Central Asian republics' own status as nations (with their specific cultural and linguistic contours and geographical borders) were only a few decades older than India and Pakistan's statehoods and had been devised through a similarly traumatic process of political ruptures, negotiations, and impositions.<sup>9</sup> Soviet cultural and political spokespersons in the 1950s were quick to use the history of Partition as a contrast to the Soviet multinational approach to both statehood and identity. Thus, in his reflections on the trauma of South Asian leftist poets' experience of Partition, in 1950 the prominent Tajik poet and diplomat Mirzo Tursunzoda explicitly opposed it to the harmonious state of affairs between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as Soviet republics.<sup>10</sup>

But despite such pronouncements, the profound violence inherent in such complicated histories of nationhood, more often causing the experience of non-belonging rather than unity, would likely resonate with Kimiagarov's own experience (as well as many others'): he was able to enter the prestigious Moscow film institute (VGIK) as part of the quota program for advancing ethnic minorities in the 1930s, weathering the Soviet "anticosmopolitanism" (i.e., anti-Semitic) campaign of the 1940s and 1950s within the nascent Tajik film industry, and becoming one of the foundational figures in the cinematic (re)construction of Tajik national

heritage—a status, however, that was often subtly questioned because of his Jewish origins.

Kimiagarov's cinematic adaptation of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (*The Book of Kings*), the most important literary epic of Persian civilization, brings out the complexities of the notion of a national cultural heritage within a socialist and postcolonial context. Together with a similar project, an Uzbek cinematic biopic of the polymath of the Islamic Golden Age and Ferdowsi's contemporary Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni (also screened at Tashkent), these films form the core of this chapter. I see them as part of a larger body of cinematic works whose explicit goal was to explore and (re)constitute the cultural—in particular, literary—heritage of the socialist and postcolonial world, what I refer to collectively as *world socialist cinema of cultural heritage*.

#### HERITAGE CINEMA

Eric Hobsbawm famously proposed the notion of “invented tradition,” whose function is to “establish continuity with a suitable historical past.”<sup>11</sup> The reconstruction of such a “suitable historical past” and its cultural objects is precisely what is at the core of all heritage cinema. The task of creating a sense of a connection with the fractured past and culture that had been radically transformed, appropriated, and at times eradicated by colonialism was a particularly urgent part of the program of decolonization. At the same time, while finding precedent for nationalism's contemporaneity through (re)creations of a cultural past remains fundamental in these cinematic narratives, this process is complicated by the persistence of both future and past imaginaries and historical realities that exceed the national(ist) vision. This tension emerges particularly clearly within the socialist context of heritage cinema and its international sites of circulation.

Taking precedence over affirmations of nationalist imaginaries, as is most common for heritage cinema, its socialist iteration was marked instead by an emphasis on class and anticolonial struggle as constitutive of history (at times including the supposed primitive communism of premodern social organization). Its geographic contours somewhat overlapped—but also often conflicted with—the program of universal cultural heritage and civilization embodied by UNESCO. The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention, which officially shifted the notion of cultural heritage from the national to the world framework, coincided with the second edition of the Tashkent festival, and UNESCO films began to be included in the festival selection.<sup>12</sup> The Soviet articulation of world cultural heritage, which predates UNESCO's existence, goes back to Anatolii Lunacharskii's publishing and educational campaigns of the 1920s, which, combined with earlier twentieth-century Jadid/late Ottoman conceptions of universal culture, shaped the Central Asian sphere.<sup>13</sup> By the 1950s, given the Soviet Union's own geography and geopolitical ambitions, its construction further expanded from

Western (European, white) culture to Asian (and, to a lesser extent, also African) forms.<sup>14</sup> The specific genres and modes of socialist cinema of cultural heritage ranged from historical epics to biopics of famous historical figures and adaptations of literary classics to ethnographic and other documentaries highlighting the presence and vitality of various forms of traditional cultural production. Each cinematic form was governed by its own set of generic formal and ideological rules, but when seen together, heritage films constitute another prominent strand in the socialist and postcolonial filmmaking showcased at Tashkent, as well as other venues.<sup>15</sup>

It shouldn't be surprising that the idea of heritage should have such broad resonances and polyvalent receptions, given the importance of the notion of heritage in the mass mobilizations of the twentieth century, allowing for the creation and management of collective identities of nation-states and international organizations alike. Nor, of course, am I describing a phenomenon exclusive to the socialist or postcolonial world: in the US, as Kathleen McCarthy demonstrates, cultural development similarly framed foreign-aid programs. It was important that "development was tailored to local capacities and conditions and of controlling some of the fallout from modernization."<sup>16</sup> UNESCO was particularly well suited to promote projects centered on cultural heritage in the developing world as part of cultural diplomacy, not least as a way to deal with internal conflicts caused by modernization in the West. My analysis of world socialist heritage cinema foregrounds its dialectical relationship with the cinema of socialist industrial modernity, endowing the latter with a "usable past," ultimately serving the same goal of advancing the ideology of socialist development. At the same time, as we will see throughout, it will prove inseparable from the socialist ethos of armed struggle (which forms the last chapter of this book).

Cinema offered its own version of cultural heritage, in part to substitute for the loss of the oral networks that communicated intangible traditional knowledge and practices that were ruptured by industrialization and modernization. These were the very processes of which cinema, paradoxically, was both a product and a powerful agent. As such, it promised not only traditional culture's preservation through film recordings but also its relegitimation for increasingly larger—and potentially international—publics. The legitimation process fed back into cinema itself, making it a prime mode of cultural production, even as at the time cinema was not itself considered part of "cultural heritage" or worthy of the same attention and status as other artistic forms, whether tangible or intangible. In the world socialist context, direct association with classical literature—the ultimate heritage media—gave film additional symbolic value and prestige, which underlay even such "inferior" forms as popular genre films or institutional documentaries. Since the institutional power of an international festival itself was a form of official validation, as well as of cultural diplomacy, it is not surprising that heritage films formed a privileged genre at Tashkent.

From the perspective of our contemporary film culture, the prominence of epics and period dramas—and other such instantiations of heritage cinema—at an international festival, let alone a socialist one, may appear surprising. In film scholarship, such films have been conventionally associated with culturally conservative nationalist agendas, frequently tied to colonialist and imperialist ideologies, especially in their epic iterations (think of David Lean's cinematic oeuvre as a paradigm here). Relegated to middlebrow or genre cinemas and, in the case of period dramas, presumed to be popular primarily with women and queer audiences (unless they are directed by famous international auteurs), “heritage films” are unlikely to make it to “serious” film festivals (the exception to this is, perhaps, the interest in Return to Source films from sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, which were part of the film festivals’ turn toward “global art cinema”).<sup>17</sup> As we will see, world socialist heritage cinema follows quite a different trajectory, both in terms of its ideologies and in its reception and circulation histories. Kimiagarov's Rustam Trilogy (*The Legend of Rustam / Skazanie o Rustame*, 1971; *Rustam and Sukhrab*, 1973; and *The Legend of Siavash / Skazanie o Siiavushe*, 1976) and Shukhrat Abbasov's *Abu Raikhan Beruni* (1973), the cinematic texts on which this chapter focuses, all follow the line of the socialist internationalist interpretation of cultural heritage; moreover, they do so in a way that, as we will see, resonates far beyond their Soviet production context, most concretely as part of the international revival of Ferdowsi and al-Biruni in the 1960s and 1970s across Asia. This revival was supported in part by the UNESCO cultural program, which specifically sought to integrate the cultural and scientific history of Asia into the broader framework of world heritage. For the pan-Islamic cultural community both Ferdowsi and al-Biruni could be deployed to show the contributions of Muslim intellectuals to science and literature, becoming indispensable shared cultural references. At the same time, their legacy was claimed within the ongoing process of postcolonial nation building. And finally, within the explicitly political Afro-Asian framework, both Ferdowsi and al-Biruni in their cinematic manifestations figured as progressive historical antecedents to a secular yet religiously inclusive, ethnically and linguistically diverse, and rationalist and humanist vision, ultimately embodying an ethos of peace—a vision, as we will see, that at times transcended the officially sanctioned definition of internationalism, pointing to other, alternative imaginary formations.

#### HERITAGE CINEMA AT TASHKENT

Most of the heritage films screened at the Tashkent festival were highly celebratory of the notion of cultural heritage. Only a few offered a direct Marxist and postcolonial critique. Perhaps most notable among these was Souheil Ben Barka's Moroccan entry, *A Thousand and One Hands* (*Alf Yad wa Yad*, 1973), which exposed the exploitation of women and children's labor and the commodification of national culture in Marrakesh's carpet industry. Philippe Mory's Gabonese film

*The Tam-tams Are Silent* (*Les tam-tams se sont tus*, 1972) also offered up a sharp denunciation of the Westernization and commodification of African traditions (although the film was also complicated by its rather ambivalent gender politics). Soviet critics praised both films for demonstrating neocolonialism's devastating impact on national cultures, implicitly juxtaposing the failures of postcolonial states with the successes of socialist state policies.

(Auto)ethnographic cinematic celebrations of various forms of local cultural traditions were otherwise prominent in most postcolonial contexts: Sudan, Lebanon, Zambia, Nepal, and Iran presented films showcasing their respective traditional dance cultures. Architectural landmarks were central in Iran's documentary selection, as well as in Moroccan and Tunisian entries. Egypt, Laos, Lebanon, and Mali all screened documentaries focused on local decorative arts and crafts. Various African documentaries highlighted local musical traditions.

As most of these films were state-produced, they advanced the vision of the postcolonial nation-state as a guarantor of cultural heritage. But there was perhaps no organization that did this as effectively as India's Films Division (FD), whose ethnographic documentaries were screened frequently at Tashkent throughout the 1970s. Integral to the FD's vision of modern development was the study, preservation, and celebration of various aspects of traditional Indian culture in its different regional forms, confirming simultaneously the diversity and unity of the Indian nation-state.<sup>18</sup> These films set out to show a national audience how the "continuous and unbroken [Indian] civilization" symbolically brought together various ethnic and religious groups (papering over the unspoken rupture of Partition).<sup>19</sup> Yet they also proved to be a successful export, showcasing India's cultural heritage and its importance to the world.

While less visible at Tashkent, on the other side of Partition, Pakistan, during the rule of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in particular, also foregrounded such objects of heritage as classical Hindustani music, (Persian) manuscript painting, and the various local folkloric Indigenous cultural expressions, which found their place in cinema. Further demonstrating the shared internationalist reach of these ideas, Pakistan's cultural sector reforms were spearheaded by none other than Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the famous communist internationalist poet and leading figure in the Afro-Asian Writers' Association, who became active in Pakistan's cultural policies in the late 1960s.<sup>20</sup> Scandalizing Pakistan's conservatives, these projects, however apolitical they may appear, were explicitly associated with the Left, especially once Bhutto's populist government came to power. With the establishment of the state film organization, and with even greater ideological urgency placed on cultural institutions after the loss of Bangladesh, Pakistan's efforts of showcasing its "unbroken" cultural heritage paralleled India's.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, as Faiz's involvement in these cultural projects indicates, for the Left the stakes in (re)articulating a broader vision of cultural heritage went beyond nationalism: they served as part of an implicit internal cultural polemic that framed Pakistani culture through collectivities other

than either the nation-state or Islamic universalism. Indeed, Pakistan's envoys to Tashkent in the 1970s frequently articulated cultural affinities alongside political solidarities (such as their repeated affirmation of support for Palestine during the creative discussions) to substantiate their membership in the cinematic community the festival represented. Such repositioning of cultural heritage was in fact part of their ongoing attempts to seize control of national(ist) projections away from the Pakistan state's monopolistic claims on its political and cultural identity.<sup>22</sup> Tradition, in other words, was clearly framed as a political issue, one linked directly to issues of postcolonial development and international solidarity.

UNESCO-produced documentary films that began to be screened at the festival in the 1970s demonstrated a similar dual focus on traditional culture and development beyond national borders. But within nonfiction, the modality of films that perhaps most effectively traced modern and international dimensions within traditional culture were documentaries on cultural festivals of the era; these films were often part of the Tashkent festival selections. Most prominent among them were the pan-African cultural festivals, which became the subject of documentaries and newsreels from all over the world. As ideologically varied as Dakar's 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts, the 1969 First Pan-African Cultural Festival (PANAF) in Algiers, and the Second World Festival of Black Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos in 1977, these international events generated a considerable amount of media attention. Simultaneously celebrating specific national participations, showcasing nonnational regional traditions, and making implicit arguments for pan-African cultural unity, these films inevitably also foregrounded the massive modern infrastructure (from spectacular architectural landmarks, built specifically for the occasion, to audiovisual technologies and media capabilities, to air travel arrangements and crowd control) enabling such events.<sup>23</sup> Ethnographic documentaries likewise thematically and formally foreground change even while emphasizing supposed cultural continuity. In the context of international institutions such as UNESCO, moreover, the emphasis on cultural heritage and its crucial contributions to universal world culture paved a way for the "underdeveloped world" to resist the prescribed temporality of its "backwardness"—not merely to follow but to lead in the global world order.

If orality, music, and dance were often constructed as universal shared markers of Blackness, the Soviet Union was primarily associated with literary culture. Since at least the 1930s, literary adaptations, biopics, and historical epics formed a crucial part of the Soviet film repertoire, in line with socialist realism's literary origins and insistence on the primacy of the film script. The official privileging of these genres was particularly visible on the level of international coproductions with Asia and Latin America from the 1950s through the early 1980s.<sup>24</sup> It should not be surprising that this extended to international exhibition practices and import-export objectives, making such films particularly prominent at Tashkent.<sup>25</sup> And while Africa in some ways constituted an exception to this, many Asian, Middle Eastern, and



Latin American literary cultures were, indeed, deeply intertwined with cinematic ones on both the formal and institutional levels.<sup>26</sup> In the course of the twentieth century, famous writers often produced both screenplays for films and film criticism, and many of them played key roles in emerging film educational institutions. From shared epic and mythological motifs (particularly visible through Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literary antiquity) to traditional and contemporary poetry (which often entered films through song lyrics) to modernist twentieth-century literatures (from Tagore to Mahfouz to Latin America's magical realist Boom), literary articulations of world heritage played a key role in the formation of modern national and international (cosmopolitan, internationalist, or universal) cultures, not least through their cinematic mediations.<sup>27</sup> Such connections to literature further legitimized the status of cinema in tandem with participating in the modernizing project of creating mass literacy.

Soviet republics consistently represented the largest number of adaptations of literary classics and biopics of cultural figures, which constituted a big part of the selections from Central Asia and Transcaucasian republics at each edition of the festival. Nor was the Soviet selection an exception: from Iran's *Dash Akol* (Masud Kimiai, 1971), based on Sadeqh Hedayat's writings, to Tagore's Indian film adaptations, such as *Wife's Letter* (*Strir Patra*, Purnendu Patri, 1972), to Turkey's cinematic version of Chengiz Aitmatov's short story "The Girl with Red Scarf" (*Selvi Boylum, Al Yazmalım*, Atif Yılmaz, 1977), to Brazilian Leon Hirszman's minimalist and experimental *São Bernardo* (1972), based on Graciliano Ramos's novel, and Mexican Roberto Gavaldon's psychedelic *The Mushroom Man* (*El hombre de los hongos*, 1976), based on a novella by Sergio Galindo (both films dealing with the psychic and physical violence of colonial-era plantation cultures), to Ousmane Sembene's film versions of his writings—literary adaptations from all over the world were well represented at Tashkent.<sup>28</sup>

The subgenre of historical epics and romances frequently formed an important part of such cinematic articulations of the intersection between cultural heritage and anticolonial struggle, well represented by Pakistan's Bengali-language historical biopic *Nawab Sirajuddaula* (K. A. Rahman, 1967), which was screened at the first edition of the Tashkent festival. For countries sharing physical borders and artistic heritage with the eastern and southern republics of the Soviet Union, their mutual literary heritage was an obvious choice; thus, Iran brought to the 1974 edition of the festival *Leyli and Majnun* (*Leyli va Majnun*, Siamak Yasemi, 1970), based on a classic tale well distributed in the Persian, Indian, Turkic, and Azeri spheres, which made it very familiar to many festival participants (but didn't prevent it from being pronounced a resounding disappointment).<sup>29</sup> But the failure of *Leyli and Majnun* did not slow the festival's exhibition of other historical epics and romances. Such films could successfully combine the spectacular pleasures of a period piece, the prestige of its literary origins, and anti-imperialist political orientation in a way that resonated across the national divides and different audiences. Highly reliant on an extensive technological cinematic apparatus in their construction of



spectacle (notoriously, epics required complicated and expensive locations and props) in order to successfully convey the impression of a “return to origins,” they almost inevitably serve as a showcase for modernity and technological progress.

In their broadest denomination, many of these “heritage” films could be collectively referred to as cinematic *epics*, albeit not in the precise literary definition of the term. In some cases, *epic* refers to the film’s historical literary origins. In others, it merely designates a grandiose and (melo)dramatic cinematic aesthetic associated with, on the one hand, high budget, large-scale studio productions (“prestige pictures”) and, on the other, adventure and/or romance (“tit and sand” movies in the old Hollywood parlance). Thus, broadly understood, epic cinema proved to be a particularly effective way of integrating cultural heritage within the postcolonial and even revolutionary orientation, constituting a key element of the decidedly modernizing ethos, which governed the global socialist imaginary of a festival like Tashkent.

The Soviet scholar of Oriental literature specializing in epic poetry, Iosif Braginskii, reflecting on the 1973 conference of Afro-Asian literature, referred to it (in a variant of the socialist-realist slogan) as “socialist in its content . . . , diverse in its national forms, and internationalist in its spirit and character, representing an organic fusion of spiritual values created by all the peoples of the world.”<sup>30</sup> Appropriately, Braginskii’s maxim helps us see how, as a form, the historical literary epic was particularly suitable for socialist international aspirations and how—notwithstanding the ongoing slippage of its epic, dramatic, and melodramatic aspects as mutually constitutive of its cinematic adaptation—this form proved to be particularly successful at a venue like the Tashkent festival.

#### EPICS AND SOCIALIST WORLD HERITAGE CINEMA

Within film scholarship and criticism, cinematic epics tend to be associated with Hollywood or dominant European cinemas in the West. As such, they are assumed to be major vehicles of ideologies of empire in both style and content, an anathema to progressive (realist) or radical cinemas: “Epic spectacle has been considered an emblem of political bad faith and cultural vulgarity, a vertiginous assault on the senses that produces a kind of adrenalized stasis in the narrative that compels either laughter or consent.”<sup>31</sup> Recently, scholars have focused on contemporary iterations of the epic genre as part of world cinema, a development that is symptomatic of the globalization of film markets. Dina Iordanova offers a rare discussion of the alternative genealogy of this contemporary dynamic by referring to epic films from the Global South and former Soviet Union, but, as she notes, this corpus is “not likely to be listed in the annals of the epic genre” owing to the Western dominance of the genre in film histories.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond genre studies, however, film historians working outside Western contexts have long been aware of the prevalence and importance of the epic for the development of cinematic cultures worldwide. As Iftikhar Dadi argues, in South Asian cinema, literary and theatrical forms tied to epics—“oral legends such as

dastans, poetic forms such as the lyric ghazal and the longer masnavi, and imaginative ‘historical’ themes in Parsi theatre”—continued well into the 1960s to be included in the imaginative interpretations of Mughal, Rajput, and Maratha historical narratives.<sup>33</sup> Bhaskar Sarkar offers further reflection on how acknowledging the centrality of these genres should compel us to rethink the relationship of cinema and modernity more broadly. According to him, in much of the world, epics “continue to purvey a kind of cognitive framework that structures the understanding of historical experience; that is to say, experience becomes a contextual iteration of the epic”—a temporal construction that illustrates “the possibility that the social formation of which this cinema is a constitutive part will never fit readily into Western teleological models of history or modernization.”<sup>34</sup> The strong presence of the epic genre at Tashkent both complicates and ultimately supports Sarkar’s conclusion. These films formed an active part of cultural and political negotiations between “modernity” and “tradition,” or “progressive” and “reactionary” politics, in a transnational “non-Western” context; even if many of them engaged with Marxist conceptions of history, they inevitably exceeded its linearity. By drawing on diverse historical trajectories that traverse the modern geopolitical boundaries of nation-states, these epics indeed resist easy identification between cinema and the nation, laying bare “the multiple textures and fissured temporalities of postcolonial modernities, which trouble historicist assumptions about the gradual subsumption of all local difference by a teleological and unitary history.”<sup>35</sup> Just as nationalist discourse sought precedent in these stories, their identities were also complicated by them. Despite being produced under the regime of secular modernization, technorationalist development and hegemonizing nation-building, shared imaginaries of the epic past at times allowed the possibility for alternative potential future collectivities based on such shared affinities and identifications.

These films functioned to mediate among the different notions of past and future. The heroic form of the epic offered an aesthetic in which the past and ongoing legacies of colonialism could be symbolically overcome while helping create an imaginary of world culture that challenged its Eurocentric assumptions. In the Soviet Union, among other socialist countries, they provided audiences with narratives of historical continuity of national cultures while also inevitably conjuring different imaginary communities that endured far beyond the confines of a nation.

#### CENTRAL ASIAN EPICS AND NATIONAL HERITAGE

The predominance of Central Asian epics at the Tashkent festival correlates to the strong presence of screen adaptations (along with historical-revolutionary “Easterns”) in the Central Asian cinemas of the 1970s more broadly.<sup>36</sup> While their high visibility at the Tashkent festival reflected this general trend and served their own local and national purposes, these developments were also crucial for Soviet cultural diplomacy.

While “the Soviet East” constituted a crucial site for conducting cultural diplomacy with “developing countries,” by the late 1960s, presenting Central Asian republics as models for the development of the “noncapitalist” countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America became increasingly less plausible. As they were fully integrated into the Soviet socialist economic model, the pattern of the centrally planned economies of the Central Asia republics were thus virtually impossible for other countries to reproduce (this was demonstrated, for instance, in the Soviet experience in the building of Aswan Dam in Egypt, as we saw in chapter 6). Moreover, by the late 1960s the industrial policies of the republics were starting to show systematic inefficiencies, to the point that they could hardly be presented as desirable models to follow.<sup>37</sup>

What remained compelling, however, were the Soviet cultural modernization programs. Showing itself as a modernizing state, fully committed to the preservation of its cultural heritage, was therefore crucial to the Soviet Union’s ability to pose as a model for Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In terms of practices, in addition to supporting progressive cultural movements and offering education and training, this included translations, publications, festivals, exhibitions, and other public cultural work dedicated to the history and culture of “the East” (as well as Africa and Latin America). It also involved developing close relationships with institutions that were seen as primary agents for cultural preservation, such as UNESCO, and seeking to play a leadership role in promoting progressive cultural agendas within them; one such agenda was defined specifically as advancing the role of non-Western cultural production within the conception of world history.<sup>38</sup> For the Central Asian republics, which identified themselves as “part of a cultural sphere that emerged from a shared Persian and even pre-Islamic heritage,” there were deep affinities to be exploited, particularly in relation to South Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran.<sup>39</sup> As Kimiagarov’s reference to Qasmi demonstrates, film events could also be effectively integrated within this larger project.

Drawing exclusively on historical accounts that privilege the diplomatic and ideological priorities of the Soviet state, however, risks misrepresenting these developments as originating exclusively from “the top” and serving primarily state national interests. This has been the traditional approach in scholarship on Central Asian historical epics and biopics—seen, at worst, as a total imposition of Soviet cultural policies and a negation of the emerging school of poetic realism and, at best, as an escape and a way to disavow the present.<sup>40</sup> Only occasionally are these films acknowledged as important to the growing national self-consciousness of the republics and contributing to the development of their own cultural identities, independent of the Russo-Soviet “center,” “stimulating the evaluation of the nation’s spiritual roots.”<sup>41</sup> Yet they are ultimately dismissed as being “in essence, Soviet.”<sup>42</sup>

True, the epic genre fits well in the Soviet cinematic landscape of late socialism, where, as Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova demonstrate, such state-mandated “prestige productions” played an important ideological role, and

a financial one as well, given the box-office success of entertainment-driven genre filmmaking.<sup>43</sup> While Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* (*Voina i mir*, 1965–67) was meant to conquer European and American screens as much as it was to boost nationalist sentiment, its Central Asian counterparts were being marketed to an explicitly Asian audience for international circulation, while also actively participating in cultural nation-building within the republics in the framework of the Soviet Union's multination state.<sup>44</sup> As early as 1958, a Sovexportfilm official based in Iran lobbied for the production of films explicitly geared toward both Soviet and international "Eastern" audiences, citing the *Shahnameh* as one of the "many subjects at our disposal."<sup>45</sup> Nor were such productions in any way contrary to the traditional socialist-realist formula (attributed to Stalin) that Soviet art should be "socialist in content, national in form." With their heavy reliance on theatricality and the written word, they could be in some ways reminiscent of older cinematic forms, both Soviet and pan-Asian, while in others their techniques may come across as considerably more experimental. In other words, "national in form" could—and did—mean a lot of different things, while still remaining not only acceptable but desirable to Soviet film authorities.

But the desirability of these projects should not mislead us into thinking that the cinema epics either originated or were administered exclusively from the center. In fact, despite the oft-repeated rhetoric in support of national cultures, Moscow authorities often resisted republics' attempts to produce cinema, which explicitly engaged with their heritage. From the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the planning committee of the central Soviet film organization demanded more films on contemporary topics, with only a handful of "prestige" projects focusing on historical or literary adaptations, entrusted to the most established directors with impeccable communist cred, usually the heads of their respective republics' filmmakers unions. This makes the overall shift toward historical epics in central Asian cinema all the more exceptional to Goskino's general policy of discouraging this genre, which was costly to produce and potentially rife with ideological problems.<sup>46</sup> Thus, *Makhtumkuli* was the only "historical" film out of 123 films approved as part of Goskino's "thematic plan" for 1967.<sup>47</sup> By 1972, the new decree on the development of Soviet cinema placed even greater emphasis on films addressing "contemporary themes" against what the document referred to as "the 1960s infatuation with historical narratives."<sup>48</sup>

Yet, against Goskino's demands, studios in Central Asia and Transcaucuses repeatedly requested changes in their thematic plans that would allow film treatments for "the study and engagement with the national cultural heritage."<sup>49</sup> Such arguments pressed a sensitive strategic and politic point, given the continuous emphasis on the role of these republics in international exchanges, which depended on the projection of an image of cultural autonomy and a commitment to the preservation of cultural heritage. So, despite the thematic plan for the USSR at large, Central Asian and Transcaucasian studios kept producing more

literary adaptations and historical epics and biopics. The potential political multivalence of such heritage projects (to say nothing of their costs) did not escape the attention of Soviet bureaucrats, who often criticized studios for these indulgences.<sup>50</sup>

Most of the heritage films screened at Tashkent, were, without a doubt, “prestige” productions, created with high production values, helmed by ideologically reliable older directors, with an international market in mind. In fact, the films in Kimiagarov’s *Shahnameh* trilogy were by far the most expensive productions in the history of the Tajik Film Studio, made at a time when it was undergoing serious financial cuts. Abbasov’s al-Biruni biopic came out of the considerably more financially stable Uzbek studio and was heralded as the “most important historical biopic of its time,” a model for other republican studios to follow, even before filming had been finished.<sup>51</sup> Both were made by established directors who had played key roles in the development of their respective studios and occupied important positions at their republics’ filmmakers unions. The importance of these projects internationally was twofold. First, as these films dealt with canonical figures and texts, claiming the works as part of the Soviet Central Asian literary legacy inserted the Soviet Union into the recognizable framework of world cultural heritage. Second, they demonstrated that the affinities traversing world culture could comfortably fit within the framework of Soviet internationalism.

Moreover, in terms of its local and national significance, because historically it was precisely Uzbek and Tajik national identities whose histories were particularly contested, the issue of a shared cultural heritage was much-debated in Soviet culture and scholarship.<sup>52</sup> In the 1920s, when the group labels *Uzbek* and *Tajik* were applied, these categories did not correspond to any self-identifying markers of the people living in those areas. Above any ethnic or linguistic considerations or broader geographic areas, the people identified with their specific locales and religion.<sup>53</sup> Soviet policy makers thus had to find new categories of belonging for dividing these areas into national republics, which was crucial for Soviet state formation and ideology. As recent scholarship demonstrates, they engaged with some existing categories from those initially created by Islamic modernizers, the Jadids (whose identitarian nationalism in some ways foreshadowed the ideological foundations of republics), institutionalizing this emergent understanding of distinct ethnicities and nationalities in forging a (multination) state.<sup>54</sup> Their mobilization required a massive apparatus and took decades to fully realize; thus, cultural institutions—from scholarly and educational programs to museums, operas, theaters, and, crucially, cinema—all played a key role in this ongoing project.<sup>55</sup> From the 1930s, and into the post-Stalinist era, official cultural and scholarly practices crystallized and naturalized the categorization of the Central Asian republics’ distinctive national ethnic characters and histories; a crucial part of this work was staking claim to famous figures of the shared past.<sup>56</sup> Cinema, with its particular capacity for the recreation of cultural heritage, actively participated in this process.

The degree to which the performance of “national character” through Kimiagarov and Abbasov’s films is consistent with this process is, indeed, remarkable. Thus, Haugen describes how the difference between Kazak/Kyrgyz and Uzbek cultures was articulated along nomad/settled lines, with its varied interpretations: the Uzbek occupied the settled side, staking claims to modernization and science as a result of this development trajectory, while the other (“nomad” Kazak/Kyrgyz) side presented it as inherently “conservative and religious.”<sup>57</sup> Tajiks, in the meantime, were largely recognized on the basis of the linguistic lineage as “carriers of an ancient Iranian culture.”<sup>58</sup> As we will see, these early Soviet conceptions and polemics are reflected perfectly in the Rustam Trilogy and the al-Biruni biopic: the former adapting the classic literary text of Persian civilization as a “Tajik national epos,” the latter locating the polymath scientist and scholar of the Islamic Golden Age, presented as a challenger of Islamic dogma, in modern-day Uzbekistan.

#### CENTRAL ASIAN HERITAGE AND INTERNATIONALISM

By the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, these national histories were further embedded in the various regional and international(ist) articulations of world culture from Afro-Asian solidarity to UNESCO. One of the key protagonists here is Bobodzhan Gafurov, whose work and institutional activities reflect both nationalist and internationalist trends. Gafurov was one of the earliest Soviet historians of Tajikistan and first secretary of the Communist Party of the Tajik Republic in the 1940s and 1950s. He stepped down from his party post in 1956 to assume the directorship of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, the primary institution for Soviet scholarship on Asia and Africa.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout his career, Gafurov proposed a view of the history of Tajikistan that was profoundly nationalistic, opposing the consensus that the Tajiks were culturally Persian by “asserting that the Tajiks were at least as ancient a culture as the Persians and had been the great disseminators of Persian culture.” Gafurov thus challenged the status of Iran as “the sole heir to [Persian] antiquity,” arguing that cultural and historical primacy should be accorded to the regions that would subsequently become Soviet territories.<sup>60</sup> He advanced the notion of the autochthony of the ancient Tajiks, to the point that the publication of his last book, *The Tajiks: Early, Ancient, and Medieval History*, “sparked outrage in Uzbekistan, where the Academy of Sciences of Tashkent officially complained to the Central Committee of the CPSU that individuals regarded as Uzbek, such as al-Khorezmi, al-Farabi, and al-Biruni, should not appear in a book about the Tajiks.”<sup>61</sup> This dispute helps us see Kimiagarov’s 1970s appropriation of Ferdowsi’s epic as a claim to put Tajik national heritage in continuity with Persian culture and Abbasov’s Uzbek biopic of al-Biruni as its Uzbek nationalist counterweight.

But these nationalist polemics are cast in a different light when placed within the international context of Afro-Asian movement. In fact, Gafurov, in his position as the director of Oriental Studies, was also intent on investing Soviet Orientology

with much more politically explicit overtones, encouraging work on the national liberation struggles of “the people of the East,” and actively supporting the agenda of Afro-Asian solidarity organization.<sup>62</sup> In the late 1950s, he led the initiative to reorganize Orientalist studies in the Soviet Union “as a complex research institution with an international focus aimed to support research institutions in decolonizing countries with knowledge and expertise.”<sup>63</sup> His goal was to redirect the Institute of Oriental Studies’ agenda toward more contemporary scholarship, and while he also did a lot to restore the more traditional research on the cultural and religious heritage of the region, he did so through shifting away from its earlier Russophone philological models toward work done by the emerging intellectual cadre within the Central Asian republics and framing it in decidedly contemporary geopolitical terms. The global geopolitical relevance of this approach is best exemplified through Gafurov’s relationship to UNESCO.<sup>64</sup>

As the president of the Soviet East-West Committee (part of the Soviet Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO), Gafurov cultivated relationships with international organizations, whose representatives participated in many public congresses organized by the Soviet Afro-Asianists; for instance, UNESCO was the major sponsor of the 1958 Conference for African and Asian Writers in Tashkent, the prototype for the festivals of the Afro-Asian cinematic circuit of the late 1950s and early 1960s and, eventually, Tashkent.<sup>65</sup> His collaborations with UNESCO often focused on the differences between Soviet internationalism, with its anti-colonial militance, and Western liberal conceptions of world culture—the latter advocated by former colonial powers as a neutral depository of universal values finding their highest expression in the great works of (safely long gone) antiquity. Gafurov actively polemicized with UNESCO against this position; thus, “in a letter to Rudolf Salat, Director of the Department for Cultural Cooperation [of UNESCO], he argued, it ‘would hardly be right or expedient to concern ourselves solely with the past, leaving all the cultural values that are created in the present and in different countries out of consideration.’”<sup>66</sup> Underscoring this commitment, he took up the position of main editor of the journal *Asia and Africa Today*.

Given the dominance of historical and philological studies in Soviet scholarship, including Gafurov’s own, his position allowed for mediation between the explicitly political agenda of the Afro-Asian association and its cultural-historical orientation, albeit invested with a clear political anticolonialist stance. As Hanna Jansen notes, even Gafurov’s first book, which came out in 1944, “emphasizes cultural entanglement and unity, highlighting moments of cultural and intellectual synthesis brought on by encounters between wandering Sufis, Muslim court poets, and tradesmen.”<sup>67</sup> His subsequent *History of the Tajik People* (1949), the first official Soviet history of the Tajik Republic, she claims, “reads like an illustration of Nehru’s suggestion that the liberation of Afro-Asian cultural and intellectual heritage would serve to reorient Western narratives of civilization and history. As Gafurov asserted, the aim of *The History of the Tajik People* was to adjust serious shortcomings in Western knowledge of the East: showing that Central Asian



peoples all had made an 'original influence on the general treasury of human culture,' and the research of their historical trajectories should be supplemented with "the general moments in their histories, illuminating what united them."<sup>68</sup>

Jansen argues that the emphasis on a shared literary heritage that binds together a transnational, anticolonialist consciousness was an expression of the lived experience of figures like Gafurov and Satym Ulug-Zade (a Tajik scholar-philologist, specialist on Rudaki, and the screenwriter for Kimiagarov's *Fate of a Poet*, as well as Iarmatov's Uzbek cinematic biopic of Avicenna). For Gafurov, this unity was closely linked to maintaining an Islamic identity, which formed a key part of their cultural upbringing. "In Gafurov's historical writings of the 1930s and 1940s, Islamic civilization was reimagined as a source of belonging and popular unity," providing additional affinities with many other Asian cultural figures who formed part of the Afro-Asian movement.<sup>69</sup> For non-Muslims like Kimiagarov, the association between a shared literary heritage and religion was more ambiguous, but such ambiguity could find its own embodiment in the ancient pre-Islamic Persian civilization, as we will see in our discussion of the Rustam Trilogy. Simultaneous affirmation of the cultural aspects of the Islamic civilization, while somewhat undermining its specifically religious legacy (in accordance with the official Soviet position), is also evident in the choice of al-Biruni as another emblematic figure of the Soviet heritage of cultural Islam.

While Afro-Asian solidarity provided a key heuristic for Central Asian intellectuals, this alternative socialist version of internationalism and development came to have a powerful impact on UNESCO, which was becoming increasingly shaped by both Soviet and, by the 1970s, Third-Worldist presence in the institution. In turn, Soviet scientists and cultural bureaucrats like Gafurov fully invested their cultural capital in the organization and its programs. It is also during the 1960s that cinema began to play an active role in projecting UNESCO's vision of global culture, with the organization sponsoring many film festivals, especially those focusing on Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as operationalizing its own film productions, some of which ended up at Tashkent, and promoting others. The Soviet biopic of al-Biruni, whose millennial celebration was taking place in 1972–73 around the world, with UNESCO sponsoring many of these events, was one such project.

#### AL-BIRUNI: MILLENNIAL CELEBRATION

Al-Biruni was a polymath—a scholar of physics, mathematics, astronomy, and natural sciences, along with history and linguistics—and sometimes considered the father of comparative anthropology and religion. Born in what is now north-western Uzbekistan, he spent his life under the patronage of various rulers in the region and wrote more than a hundred books on an encyclopedic range of topics. Along with Avicenna, he is considered one of the most important scholars of



FIGURE 7.1. Al-Biruni on the cover of the *UNESCO Courier*, June 1974. Photo reproduced by permission of UNESCO.

the Islamic Golden Age. Incorporated into the European Middle Ages' scholastic pantheon (under the name of Alberonius), unlike Avicenna he fell into obscurity, becoming a subject of serious scholarly work in the West only in the twentieth century. How he became the subject of Abbasov's film, and how such a film project would be green-lighted by the Soviet cinema bureaucracy, speaks to what his work came to symbolize in the search for a world cultural history that was not dominated and shaped by Europe—how he became a person of academic interest to Third World nations, the socialist bloc, and UNESCO, which fostered the study of al-Biruni in several locales at that time.

The June 1974 issue of the *UNESCO Courier* was dedicated entirely to al-Biruni (fig. 7.1), with an introductory article, "Al-Biruni—A Universal Genius Who Lived in Central Asia a Thousand Years Ago," written by none other than our familiar Tajik scholar Bobodzhon Gafurov. Gafurov's article was followed by several others exploring al-Biruni's contributions to world civilization—pieces written by French, Iranian, and Afghani scholars—and concluding with the "photo-report 'Al Biruni on the Screen,'" on the making of Abbasov's film. Its production stills in the journal were used not only to advertise the film but as visual accompaniment to the scholarly articles in the issue (fig. 7.2). Thus, an image from the film depicting al-Biruni and Avicenna appears in reference to the essay on the famous polemic between the two scholars. Other images in the film—of al-Biruni "talking to an Indian sage during the travels he undertook before writing his monumental 'India'" and

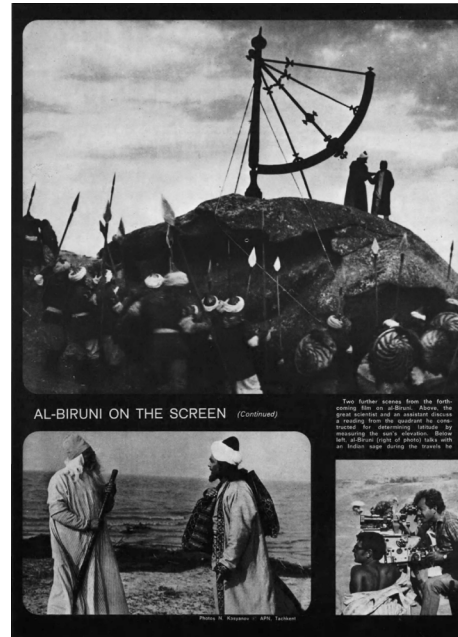


FIGURE 7.2. Coverage of Abbasov's film in the *UNESCO Courier*, June 1974. Photo reproduced by permission of UNESCO.

“discussing a reading from the quadrant he constructed for determining latitude by measuring the sun’s elevation”—are also used in reference to the other articles on these topics in the same issue, thus underscoring the film’s educational and even scholarly function within UNESCO’s conception of the international millennial celebration. The *UNESCO Courier* explicitly highlighted the significance of the film in that the screenplay was written by a scholar, translator, and author of al-Biruni’s Soviet biography.<sup>70</sup>

Abbasov must have been pleased to get this kind of publicity for the film, as the *Courier* was published in fifteen languages and distributed all over the world. Nor was his the only al-Biruni biopic that year: Mohammad Reza Aslani—a famous Iranian poet, writer, painter, and filmmaker—released his own documentary, *Abu Rayhan* (1973).<sup>71</sup> The following year, Iran, making a heavy play to capture al-Biruni, as it were, for the Persian side, came out with another film under the auspices of the Ministry of Art and Culture, *The Congress of Abu Rayhan* (Barbad Taheri, 1974).<sup>72</sup> In retrospect, the international UNESCO-sponsored al-Biruni revival was an extremely important marker of the deprovincialization of the Eurocentric intellectual history of Islamic civilization and Arabic science, as well as, more generally, various “ancient” non-Western traditions. Within the context of UNESCO, al-Biruni’s studies of religion and cultures (such as his book on India) were particularly relevant in the project of finding a precedent for tolerance of other cultures and belief systems on which one could base a global system of

coexistence.<sup>73</sup> A polyglot, al-Biruni apparently had knowledge of Khwarezmian, Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, as well as Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac. His multiculturalism thus informed his encounters with civilizations other than the Persian-Islamic culture into which he was born (whether Turkic, Greek, or Indian), making them central to his work and of interest to Soviet scholars working in Central Asia, many of whom were attempting to straddle their own historiographic divide between national cultures and transnational ones. This cultural aspect of al-Biruni's work was also particularly important for placing him at the forefront of the UNESCO project.

The Soviet al-Biruni film created the image of the Islamic scholar that was appropriate for a progressive socialist notion of cultural heritage: he was represented as simultaneously an Uzbek national hero (and Uzbek SSR named a prize for science and technology after him), a humanist-internationalist, an enlightened Islamic scholar, and a pan-Asian(ist), his legacy serving as evidence of the validity of a non-Western version of a universal history that did justice to the Islamic Renaissance, in particular, as a crucial intellectual development. This particular combination could speak simultaneously to multiple imaginary communities represented at the Tashkent festival, where it would screen in 1974 to great acclaim. The film's director was one of the best-known filmmakers of the postwar Uzbekistan film studio, who established himself with such popular films as the comedy *The Whole Mahalla Is Talking about It* (*Ob etom govorit vsia makhallia*, 1960), whose humor revolves around the conflicts between "the old" and "the new" Tashkent, and *You Are Not an Orphan* (*Ty ne sirota*, 1963), based on the true, and locally celebrated, story of an Uzbek family who adopts fourteen war orphans of different nationalities—a celebration of Soviet internationalism. In other words, working with a script by Pavel Bulgakov (a leader at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan), Abbasov was a perfect candidate to undertake the high-profile project of making a Soviet Biruni picture for both local and international circulation.

#### ABU RAIKHAN BERUNI: THE FILM

At the center of Abbasov's film is al-Biruni's relationship to power, both secular and clerical. The narrative chronologically reconstructs the scholar's life through a series of fictional and nonfictional episodes: the former touching on his private life, such as his childhood, the latter on the little that is known from the record. Rather than dramatically narrating the moments of scientific discoveries or framing eureka situations, as in conventional biopics of geniuses, al-Biruni's life story is centered on his attempts to survive and do work as a court scientist (astrologist) amid wars and famines, courtly intrigues, changing political demands, and ongoing crises. The scientific experiments and intellectual polemics are relegated to the background, cropping up mainly in dialogue and never dramatized. Instead,

the script reflects the central conflicts of his era in terms of the orthodox Marxist interpretation that poses a dialectic between progressive rational humanism and feudalism, on the one side, and religion, on the other. The film captures al-Biruni's conflicts in the various courts he serves, depicting him in struggles with ruthless feudal rulers and dogmatic clerics.

But where one might expect a Soviet film to denounce religion and its class structure, this film presents both the emerging nationalism and religion dialectically—as historically productive and necessary, while at the same time unable to entail liberatory politics. For this reason, al-Biruni's own faith and complete identification with Islam is never questioned or problematized, and the script remains loyal to the historical fact that his scholarship is articulated in terms of Islamic tradition. The rejection of his work by clerics does not shake his faith but points to the dogmatic blindness of his peers, who are unable to see that the dynamic “free-thinking” experimentalism of al-Biruni's relationship to the world, which extends to his interest in other religions and cultural organization, does not make him a heretic. Likewise, the emir of Tabaristan, Ghaboos (in whose court al-Biruni wrote his *Chronology of Ancient Nations*), is given the attributes of a good ruler, driven by “the love of his land” (i.e., emerging nationalism), as opposed to the purely expansionist imperialist drive of Mahmud of Ghazni, but he is also exposed as ultimately unable to honor either the sanctity of human life or the interests of the people. Mahmud's portrayal in the film, as was noted by contemporary Soviet critics, is similar to that of the Grand Duke of Moscow in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966), who is first presented as a national liberator and supporter of the arts but whose political oppression of artists is revealed as we recognize that he was responsible for the execution of the Jest.<sup>74</sup>

Against this historical background, al-Biruni's predicament comes out of his standing as an intellectual and artist serving the ruler in order to survive and work. He is meant to both outlast and potentially subvert the system of power in which the humanism of the intellectual is thwarted in its potentially progressive social effects. Unlike the more conventional earlier Soviet biopic genre that shows the heroes of the past actively aligning with the interests of “the people,” even joining the struggle against oppression, in Abbasov's film al-Biruni's attempts to physically fight injustice are shown as pathetically ineffective, resulting in total failure. The ultimate—and only—expression of ethical and political struggle available to him is through writing, through his quest to pursue and reveal the truth, not to his contemporaries but to future generations—that is, us, the audiences of the film. Books in this film assume particular grandeur, even materially, as their preservation and reproduction—that is, the tangible cultural literary heritage—is what made knowledge of the figure at the center of the film possible: the importance of the text is articulated throughout the film, most starkly perhaps by Mahmud, the ruthless ruler of Ghazni, who says that monuments perish with time, but books are copied, memorized, and continue to live in generations

to come. Thus, Mahmud seeks his own immortality through al-Biruni's writings, which is why he supports Biruni, in spite of his lack of obedience and his intellectual transgressions. Most of the developments of the plot revolve around books. For example, the slave Rayhana (Reikhana in the Russian), al-Biruni's disciple and lover, accepts captivity in order to save his manuscripts; al-Biruni himself enters into difficult alliances motivated purely by the need to save his books; and the threat of their destruction becomes a major form of al-Biruni's enemies' manipulation of him. The world of the film shows that books—as tangible, historical, and literary heritage—are the ultimate currency and the only true measurement of value.

The library here is a sanctuary, a refuge, the only place of affective and intellectual belonging and the only guarantor of progress. The scholar/artist in real time, engaged with practical politics, is impotent and limited, forced to compromise his own ethics in the face of ruthless power in order to serve the future with his writing. His main, and perhaps only, act of political courage is “serving the truth” through his work, thus serving posterity. Such an image—and understanding of politics and cultural heritage—was, indeed, extremely prevalent in the late socialist years: we see a version of this in Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, Tengiz Abuladze's *The Plea* (*Mol'ba*, 1967), and Giorgi Shengelaia's *Pirosmani* (1969), to name just a few of the most famous and artistically accomplished examples. It is easy to read this characterization of an artist as an allegory of the position of the artist/intellectual in Soviet times, as well as reflecting a much longer tradition of the understanding of the relationship between the artist and power precisely in the historical and cultural context in which the two are intrinsically connected. As such, this vision places extraordinary political and social value on the notion of cultural heritage. The nationalist or liberal universalist definition of this heritage doesn't sufficiently define it, even if its forms are, indeed, contained within these ideological platforms. This understanding of cultural heritage, which envisions it through its political liberatory potential, reflected both the Marxist socialist vision of history and the particular experiences of the twentieth century exponents of nationalism and socialism alike, making for a close affinity with the ethos and varied experiences of Asian, African, and Latin American filmmakers, who together formed part of the Tashkent festival community.

The film was warmly received at Tashkent when it was screened there in 1974, with particularly enthusiastic reviews from the Afghani, Pakistani, Indian, and Tunisian press—including the director of the Carthage festival, Moncef Charfeddine, who pronounced it one of the best films at the festival—which led to its sale to many Asian countries.<sup>75</sup> Even European critics, while acknowledging the dry “academic” tone of the film, mostly praised its educational impact and representation of the historical period.<sup>76</sup> Soviet critics, however, questioned the film's underwhelming cinematic execution, even as they applauded the excellence of the film's historical and scholarly conception. The general Soviet summing up was that “the



film's artistic outcome does not yet match the complexity of the historical problems posed by the authors."<sup>77</sup>

Similarly complex historical and literary problems—but rendered cinematically with considerably more flare and verve—come to the fore in Boris Kimiagarov's *Rustam Trilogy*, an adaptation of the stories from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, screened at the Tashkent festival's 1972 and 1978 editions. Its production and reception not only illustrate a similar approach to the question of cultural heritage but also bring out many of the same ideological and political contradictions. At the same time, these films fit perfectly with the vision of world cinema that emerges from our encounter with shared postcolonial and socialist spaces.

### SHAHNAMEH

Composed in Modern Persian, *Shahnameh*'s fifty thousand verses, compiled and written by Ferdowsi between 977 and 1010, constitute a compendium of Indigenous, pre-Islamic legends and historical episodes dealing with the four mythical dynasties of Iran. Scholars typically divide the book into three "ages." The first, the mythical, begins with the world's creation and the reign of the first Iranian king (and man on Earth) and contains stories such as that of the struggle between the blacksmith Kaveh and the demonic Zahhak, whose reign of terror as ruler ends with his defeat by the blacksmith. The "heroic age" contains the epic's best-known tales, which arise out of the military rivalry between the Iranians west of the Oxus River, in Central Asia, and the Turanians to the east. The stories of Rostam—or Rustam, in the Soviet transliteration (the version I will stick to for the duration of the chapter when discussing the film, while, as with the other characters, using the transliteration from Farsi when discussing the source material)—which are at the center of Kimiagarov's *Trilogy*, are embedded in this conflict. They tell of Rostam's many trials, his fights with evil demons, and his aid to numerous kings both to battle adversaries and to settle disputes. In one of the epic's most tragic episodes, Rostam also happens, in a case of mistaken identity, to kill his son, Sohrab (Sukhrab in the film). Another well-known story is that of the ill-fated peace-loving Siavash (Siiavush), Rostam's surrogate son and an heir of the Iranian king, who, after declining his stepmother's sexual advances, gets accused by her of rape and proves his innocence in a trial by fire but eventually commits suicide when captured by the Turanians. The death of Rostam—some three hundred years later—marks the transition to the third, "historical age" within the poem, which begins with Alexander's invasion and ends approximately in the seventh century. The stories from the "heroic age" of *Shahnameh*—best known, most beloved, and mostly centered on the figure of Rostam—are the ones that Kimiagarov adopted for his films.

The epic poem allows for the widest geographic imaginary of the world it depicts: although its emphasis is on the Iranians as a people, the Iran in the *Shahnameh* does not correspond to modern-day Iran, or even to the Iran of Ferdowsi's time, but to the ancient Iranian homeland—Aryanam Vaejah, which was largely



in Central Asia: modern Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. "In the poem's mythical and early legendary sections, Iran is in what is now northern Khorasan, and reaches as far north as present-day Bokhara and Samarkand . . . and it reaches as far east as the Helmand province in Afghanistan."<sup>78</sup> *Shahnameh's* enormous geographical reach speaks not only to the expanse of the Persian Empire, Persianate cultural sphere, and Ferdowsi's own breadth of literary references and sources but also to the history of the poem's reception, with numerous translations circulating over the centuries all over the Asian world and making an enormous impact on numerous literary cultures.<sup>79</sup> It is not surprising, then, that Central Asian scholars in the Soviet era claimed the epic as part of the Tajik national literary heritage. Although partially translated as early as the nineteenth century into Russian and Ukrainian, its full scholarly translation had to wait until Soviet Orientalists' enormous efforts of the 1950s and 1960s. Kimiagarov's cinematic adaptation of *Shahnameh*, while both highly personal and born out of his long-standing passion for Persian/Tajik literature, was certainly part of the larger project of bringing Ferdowsi's work into the Soviet imaginary of both Tajik national and world literary heritage.

The "contemporaneity" of *Shahnameh*—both as an enduringly popular living text and as a commentary on questions of war and peace—was repeatedly trumpeted in the press coverage of Kimiagarov's films. Anri Vartanov, a Soviet film and television scholar whose Georgian origins enabled an additional sense of cultural intimacy with the source material, provided the most enthusiastic, extensive, and insightful discussions of the Rustam Trilogy in the pages of the journal *Iskusstvo kino*. In his concluding review of the three films together, he emphasizes the fact that as part of the thriving oral tradition in Central Asia, recitation of bits of the *Shahnameh* continues to be enacted "in the most remote and hard to reach parts of the country," forming part of the "wisdom of the people"—through the sayings, proverbs, and teachings that have entered into the everyday culture of the widest social layers of society. This popular function of the text, Vartanov argues, is revitalized through the "naturally democratic" medium of cinema, helping it reach the widest possible audience.<sup>80</sup>

In this account, Vartanov seeks to rehabilitate the classical literary work as forming part of the living oral culture of the people across Central Asia—a position that was first articulated in the Soviet cultural discourse vis-à-vis *Shahnameh* as early as the 1930s. As Samuel Hodgkin details, in 1934 as part of the celebration of Ferdowsi's Jubilee in the Soviet Union, the Kazakh Commissariat of Education entertained the idea proposed by the prominent Tajik writer Sadr al-Din 'Ayni of having *Shahnameh* rendered by an oral bard (*aqyn*), Türmaghambet Iztileuov. Rather than presenting a conventional translation, it offered the bard's version of these stories, drawn from "a long tradition of oral epics that recounted episodes from the various myth cycles based on which Ferdowsi composed his text."<sup>81</sup> At the time, when "the creation of a category of literary translation formed part of an effort to distinguish oral from literary verbal arts," Iztileuov's version was rejected, and he was arrested and shot during the Stalinist purges. It wasn't until the 1960s, as part

of the post-Stalinist reforms within Soviet Orientology that his rendition of the Rustam cycle was finally published.<sup>82</sup> Vartanov's comments affirming the vernacular cultural life of *Shahnameh* are thus part of these ongoing reformulations of the significance of the Persianate legacies within Central Asia in an effort to rehabilitate elite literary forms through their vernacular and, therefore, more democratic (re)appropriations. At the same time, it was also part of Vartanov's long-standing critical project of arguing for the legitimacy of popular media—cinema, as well as serialized television format—as narrative and visual modalities of contemporary mediations and reconfigurations of both vernacular folk traditions and literary epic genres. He explicitly states that in the case of Kimiagarov's adaptation of *Shahnameh*, the cinematic apparatus itself is not just an interpreter of the literary text but acts as a new storyteller, "taking up the torch from time immemorial." Thus, Vartanov again emphasizes the oral transmission and folkloric aspects of the epic.<sup>83</sup>

But this was not the only aspect of *Shahnameh*'s contemporaneity brought out by the critics as justification for its cinematic adaptation. The exhibition of Kimiagarov's films both in the Soviet Union and abroad was also presented as "playing an important role in the strengthening of international ties and mutual understanding among the peoples."<sup>84</sup> The significance of *Shahnameh*'s antiwar pathos was also the established Soviet Orientalists' line of the time, which credited the popular epic with being "the first in literary history poetic-philosophical exploration of the problem of the just war in the name of protection of the motherland and peace," thus demonstrating the geopolitical and decolonial relevance of traditional literary scholarship.<sup>85</sup>

Such strategic uses of Ferdowsi are far from exceptional, as Hamid Dabashi emphasizes in his history of the epic poem: "no other text in the history of Persian literary masterpieces has been so consistently used and abused in the services of state-sponsored linguistic and literary nationalism as has the *Shahnameh*."<sup>86</sup> Michael Fischer further posits that it is at least in part the centrality of its king-hero and father-son relationships that has made *Shahnameh* continuously relevant to the issues of state power: "The recited, living *Shahnameh* has functioned throughout the centuries to both celebrate Iranian nationalism and criticize the politics of the state. . . to moderate (to tell again in public; to temper) father-son relations within the family and patrimonial relations of king and subject, state and society."<sup>87</sup> And Franklin Lewis points out that "the production of Kimiagarov's trilogy coincided with a revival of the epic in Iran and in expanding international scholarship, with a real push given by Iran's Ministry of Culture and Arts, following the shah's path of highlighting the roots of Persian culture, which resulted in a monumental edition of Ferdowsi's bibliography."<sup>88</sup>

As part of this process, Tus in Iran, where Ferdowsi's mausoleum was located, became the site for a Ferdowsi-themed festival that screened all three of Kimiagarov's *Shahnameh* adaptations to date as part of a larger cinema exposition that included *Shahnameh and the People* (*Shahnameh Va Mardom*, 1975), by Nasib

Nasibi, and *Ferdowsi and the People* (*Ferdowsi Va Mardom*, 1976), by Hossein Torabi.<sup>89</sup> As one can judge from these titles, in line with the late Pahlavi Iran's state efforts to promote the national heritage, the emphasis of the festival was on "the people"—presumably a reference to the vernacular life of the epic as belonging to the masses but without a doubt meaning specifically the Iranians. The Soviet films occupied an ambiguous position in such a constellation.<sup>90</sup>

Nor was it the first time that *Shahnameh*—and Tus as its commemorative location—became a center of Iran's nation-state identity building, just as it wasn't the first time it was used in the Soviet Union: as we have seen, the 1934 Ferdowsi Jubilee offered a perfect occasion for state-directed reinterpretations of the text.<sup>91</sup> In Iran's case, as Dabashi argues: "Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* became a key poetic text in their [Pahlavi] ideological project of state building, with monarchy as the definitive institution and defining moment of that nationalist modernity. Reza Shah had decidedly modeled his persona and monarchy on pre-Islamic Persianate legacies. By 1934 he was constructing a mausoleum over the grave site of Ferdowsi in Tus. He made a recognition of Ferdowsi's epic a bedrock for his 'modernization' ambitions."<sup>92</sup>

This point is particularly important in that it illustrates the double move on the path to national modernization, where the legacy of national culture, in this case Ferdowsi's epic, functioned politically as an entry into the constitution of world heritage but, in doing so, problematized its nationalist definition. In fact, the first adaptation of the epic was filmed by the Imperial Film Company in Bombay by Abdolhossein Sepanta in 1934, intended to be screened in Tus as part of the celebrations surrounding the mausoleum. The choice of India as the producer was fully consistent with the higher level of development of its film industry but also with *Shahnameh*'s crucial cultural historical impact in South Asia, in particular as a frequent source for Parsi theater performances, the foundational artistic form for Indian cinema.<sup>93</sup> But on his viewing of the film, Reza Shah personally did not approve its release, which led to a reshooting of parts of the film, with Nosratollah Mohtasham in the role of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi in the altered scenes. Subsequently, Mohtasham was appointed as an attaché to the Iranian embassy in Bombay, underscoring the political weight of this choice.<sup>94</sup>

This early episode demonstrates how politicized the history of *Shahnameh*'s filmic adaptations was from their very inception, and the epic's appropriation within Soviet culture followed a similar, yet even more complicated, ideological operation vis-à-vis the epic's national definition. The demands and challenges of Soviet cinematic versions of *Shahnameh*, beyond implicit polemics over the operative national labels, were centered on its assimilation simultaneously into the broader categories of multinational nation-state, internationalist arena (global socialist), and world heritage media. The epic proved to be of a richness that lent itself perfectly to such multiple uses—as well as to multiple controversies, as will be evident from Kimiagarov's personal history.

## THE RUSTAM TRILOGY AND ITS ANTECEDENTS

Kimiagarov's first cinematic attempt to adapt the *Shahnameh* for the screen was *Kaveh the Blacksmith* (*Kuznets Kova*, 1961), based on a story taken from the mythical age of the epic's internal chronology. It had already been staged as an opera in Tajikistan in the 1940s, with Iranian émigré poet Abdulqasem Lahuti's libretto and Sergei Balasanian's celebrated score.<sup>95</sup> Its choice as a subject for film adaptation was easy: a fantastical tale, which fits in easily with the well-established Soviet genre of fairy tales, its plot—the revolution against tyranny—easily legible as protosocialist, with the working-class hero being at the head of the people as they defeat the evil ruler. Indeed, such a reading was consistent with its reception among the Left in Iran, too—as Dabashi notes, “opposing the Pahlavi monarchy, leftist literati, poets, and scholars (appropriated) *Shahnameh* for their own political purposes, emphasizing depictions of the plight of the proletariat, most significantly manifested in the story of Kaveh and Zahhak.”<sup>96</sup> Kimiagarov's film was modest in scale and went largely unnoticed in the Soviet Union and abroad. The director's international reputation was earned, instead, virtually the same year with a film centered on another classic author of Persian (and Tajik) literature, Rudaki, whose *Fate of a Poet* was awarded the top prize at the Afro-Asian Film Festival in Cairo. With this and other successes under his belt, he finally secured approval to take on a large-scale project of adopting the *Shahnameh*'s most famous stories through a series of films, starting with *The Legend of Rustam*.

The story of Rustam and Sukhrab had a long theatrical history in Soviet Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, where by the 1970s it had been staged several times. Even more important, the figure of Rustam in these productions was interpreted as constituent with the socialist-realist emphasis on war heroism, which Kimiagarov successfully integrated into his plans for the film, emphasizing in particular its relevance in the context of Soviet antiwar and anti-imperialist struggles. He repeatedly declared that the adaptation of the epic was important not only as a way of familiarizing wider audiences, both Soviet and international, with this classic of Tajik literary culture, but also underlining its “confirmation of the ideas of humanism, and its passionate call for the strengthening of peace and friendship among the peoples.”<sup>97</sup> All of the promotional material presents the Rustam Trilogy as a protosocialist antiwar epic arguing for humanism, heroism, and international solidarity—which elevated it to the politically privileged thematic category of a “war-patriotic” film (usually reserved for the films about the revolution and the Great Patriotic War), while also fitting the bill as an international prestige film, albeit directed more toward the eastern and southern film markets.

The Trilogy would end up costing the most of any film project in Tajik film studio history, in spite of such cost-cutting procedures as reducing the staff and other in-house expenses in compliance with a recent decree decrying the studio's financial mismanagement.<sup>98</sup> The production of the Trilogy, as with Bondarchuk's

*War and Peace*, depended on its epic scale, which required production values to elevate it as a showcase for both local and international audiences. Similar to earlier fairy-tale and folkloric productions such as Alexander Ptushko's films (which were, indeed, very popular Soviet cinematic exports), and like all epic spectacles, Kimiagarov's adaptation was intended not only as a celebration of premodern heritage but of state-of-the-art cinematic technology as well—thus potentially combining and reconciling the diplomatic objectives of the Soviet state with commercial interests. All of this was to be accomplished by celebrating Tajik heritage, extending it to the film industry; the latter was equally important to Kimiagarov, an important institutional player who had effectively helped to build the film studio.<sup>99</sup>

All this, however, is not to suggest that *Shahnameh* was a purely pragmatic choice for Kimiagarov. His passion for literature was long-standing; he started his professional life teaching Tajik language and literature, and he turned repeatedly to various forms of literary adaptations and biopics throughout his cinematic career. Literary and cultural erudition as a foundation for cinematic work had been promoted by Sergei Eisenstein, Kimiagarov's first teacher at VGIK. Eisenstein was well known for incorporating numerous allusions and examples from world literature, theater, and art in both his writings and his teaching. For many students this intertextual approach was incomprehensible, but in Kimiagarov's case, it both resonated with and influenced his interests, further enhancing his aesthetic vision with his newly found interest in Islamic visual culture. In his memoirs, Kimiagarov tells us that Eisenstein introduced him to the art of Persian miniature, showing him books illustrated with the works of the great miniaturist Behzād, which left a profound impact on Kimiagarov's own artistic vision. The VGIK art history professor Nikolai Tarabukin turned Kimiagarov's attention to the intricacies of Central Asian applied arts, in particular ceramics and textiles. Tarabukin approached them as art rather than as everyday utilitarian objects, which was a revelation for Kimiagarov. We can see how this engagement with both "high" and "popular" forms of cultural heritage find their way into the cinematic world of his *Shahnameh*, which so strongly foregrounds its frontal pictorial organization, as well as ornate costumes and sets.<sup>100</sup> In fact, his insistence that these visual elements are equally meaningful for his adaptation is consistent with the way the text of the *Shahnameh* exists, essentially, as a multimedia object: "The *Shahnameh* is a single, sustained act of creative ingenuity—from the manner in which it is composed to the ways it is recited, written, and illustrated."<sup>101</sup> Kimiagarov's formation enabled him to fully grasp this fact, which is evident in his cinematic adaptation, marked by all manner of visual excesses and extreme attention to ornamental detail (fig. 7.3).

In this, it was certainly not exceptional: despite the fact that the Rustam Trilogy is far removed from the aesthetic radicalism of Sergei Paradzhanov's *The Color of Pomegranates* (*Sayat Nova*, 1969), these films belong to the same broader historical



FIGURE 7.3. Ornamental details in *The Tale of Rustam*. DVD screen grab.

development within Soviet cinema, aimed at the exploration of the national heritage of the republics by immersing themselves in the literary, pictorial, and material cultures of their respective traditions (in the case of *Sayat Nova*, within a Transcaucasian rather than Central Asian context). Ironically, both Paradzhanov's and Kimiagarov's projects were embraced by their respective Armenian and Tajik film studios in an attempt to rehabilitate them after Goskino's stunningly negative critiques of both studios' ideological and organizational failures.<sup>102</sup> Armenian officials chose a young director who had just won a number of awards at European international festivals with his Ukrainian-Carpathian-revival *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Teni zabytykh predkov*, 1965), which had improved the standing of the Ukrainian (Dovzhenko) film studio with Goskino.<sup>103</sup> Tajik studio bet, instead, on the veteran filmmaker and one of the leading figures within the studio and the Filmmakers Union.

#### THE RUSTAM TRILOGY: THE "ASIAN" AESTHETIC

Unlike the (post)modernist performative queer aesthetics of *The Color of Pomegranates*, Kimiagarov's versions of *Shahnameh* are done in a more conventional epic genre style, with a predominance of battle scenes and spectacular landscapes intertwined with a more static theatrical dramaturgy. Unlike Paradzhanov's, Kimiagarov's gender representations are highly conventional, and while narratively such conventionality is certainly consistent with Ferdowsi's source material, women characters are some of the least successful elements of the Rustam Trilogy. From performances to costumes, the male protagonists hold the audience's attention and elicit the strongest responses (something that is evident even in online discussions of these films by their fans, old and new).

Despite the Trilogy's relatively conventional form, however, the poetic language (the script of all three parts retained the verse structure of the original), its visual emphasis on the ornate and haptic materiality of sets and costumes, and the heightened expressivity of the camerawork—with its uneven tempo, frequently jarring close-ups, and zooms—combine to create a strong sensorial impact. The highly theatrical, declarative acting style further underlines the epic construction projected by the film, which refuses to provide in-depth psychological subjectivity for its characters (the way that Hollywood epic films, in particular, tend to do through

the combination of realist effects of method acting and added personal backstories or other elements of externalization of individual psychology). This has the effect of foregrounding the strangeness of the past, which further contributes to its overall pathos, which is successfully sustained throughout the Trilogy: exposing the bloodthirsty folly of those in power and the moral conundrums and emotional costs of their decisions for all those caught in the endless battles.

Both stylistically and thematically, Kimiagarov's *Shahnameh* aesthetic is rooted in his teacher's late work. Eisenstein was himself very interested in adapting the epic for the screen. In 1933 he discussed the production of *Shahnameh* with Vostokkino (a studio developed specifically to promote "Eastern" films, both fiction and non-fiction), evidently with the involvement of Teheran, with both the studio and the Iranians greenlighting the proposal. Yet, like many of Eisenstein's other initiatives, it was rejected by Boris Shumiatskii, the infamous head of the Soviet film industry, who tirelessly fought against avant-gardist "formalist excesses" and advocated for Hollywood-style entertainment cinema (the potential entertainment value of *Shahnameh* clearly escaping the Soviet bureaucrat). Eisenstein carried some narrative and stylistic ideas based specifically on the Rostam and Sohrab stories into scripts of his two similarly ill-fated projects: in 1937, *Bezhin Meadow* (*Bezhin Lug*) and in 1939 *The Great Ferghana Canal* (*Bol'shoi ferganskii kanal*).<sup>104</sup>

During Kimiagarov's time at VGIK, Eisenstein was working on his own epic creation, *Ivan the Terrible* (1944), and he shared his own creative process with his students. He showed his drawings and all other preparatory materials for the film(s), as well as using his recently completed *Alexander Nevsky* (1936) as a case study. Eisenstein's monumentalist aesthetic, particularly evident in *Ivan the Terrible*, clearly influenced Kimiagarov's approach. Curiously, already in the 1950s, André Bazin famously linked the visual qualities of *Ivan* with the "Asian aesthetic," which he attributes to the fact that it was shot in Kazakhstan. Rosalind Galt draws attention to Bazin's persistent gendering and orientalizing/racializing in his discussion of Eisenstein's "unnatural, overly composed film" as "Asian extravagance . . . understood in terms of stylization, excess, elaborately composed images, and the unreal."<sup>105</sup> Taken at face-value, Bazin's observation is consistent with Eisenstein's—and, more broadly, early Soviet—Orientalist associations between formalist (or avant-garde) and Eurasian (or "Asiatic") aesthetics. Whereas for Eisenstein such Orientalist tropes were a source of inspiration, for Bazin, the great theorist of cinematic realism, both the avant-garde and ornamentalism were ideologically—and ethically—unacceptable because they were inherently linked with bad politics.

Such associations, Galt further argues, became manifested even more strongly within postcolonial leftist discourses, which began in the 1960s to unequivocally link elaborately stylized films with conservative politics. Yet visualization of the markers of cultural heritage—such as textiles, dress, pictorial traditions, theatrical and literary forms—which may come across as excessive ornamentalism, can in fact function, as Galt argues (using Jorge Sanjines's writings), as cultural markers



and as resistance to regimes of value that are Eurocentric in origin. In a rare instance of leftist political discourse, which embraces the aesthetics of surfaces, Sanjines pronounces that “the political film, like the Andean textile, is well made, decorative, and attractive, and the worldview it expresses merges political thought with aesthetic pleasure.”<sup>106</sup>

At least one of the pleasures Kimiagarov’s films offer is precisely a tactile and haptic one: in one particularly memorable scene from the ending of the last installment of the cine-epic *The Tale of Siiavush*, when Rustam comes to avenge Siiavush’s death by punishing his step-mother, whose passion for him led not only to his downfall but to the new cycle of war, she is hidden in a secret room behind what the characters in the film refer to as “hundreds and hundreds of carpets.” The camera, with a slow pan, first lingers for an unusually long time on the silk surfaces of the wall hangings, before Rustam removes them, layer by layer, continuously revealing yet another shiny beautiful surface. While we may be tempted to read this sequence metaphorically, symbolism is not the structuring principle of the film’s organization of meaning. Instead, textures, surfaces, and things that densely populate Kimiagarov’s Trilogy need to be addressed on their own terms: as sources of spectatorial and haptic pleasure and as markers of the cinematic translation of a distant poetic regime—as well as of Persianate culture in its Soviet appropriation.

Vartanov, in his reviews of the Rustam Trilogy, rightfully emphasizes the importance of objects to the poetic world of what he calls folkloric and fairy-tale genres (among which he includes epics such as *Shahnameh* and the Mahabharata—as well as folk fairy tales). Objects in them are often endowed with magical powers and play an active role in the narrative. For centuries, Vartanov argues, this rich material (*predmetnyi*) world of fantasy and fairy tales was left to the imagination of listeners and readers—and only with the advent of cinema could film artists bring this materiality to life.<sup>107</sup> He therefore links Kimiagarov’s foregrounding of costumes, sets, and all other decorative elements in the film with the intensity of its action scenes and the overall spectacular elements of the Rustam Trilogy. These elements embody the folkloric and fairy-tale tradition within both the literary epic and the cinema—while also staying faithful to the historical artistic heritage his films are called upon to bring to life.<sup>108</sup>

Ornate surfaces and objects are not associated with a particular character and are not at all gender-marked (as our assumption would be to link it with the feminine realm); in fact, the warriors’ and shahs’ costumes, especially their head-dresses, are significantly more ornate and opulent than the dresses of the female characters. Thus the opening sequence of the first film, *The Tale of Rustam*, begins with a close-up of a highly ornate metal structure, whose shape is revealed, in a downward tilt, to mirror (or extend) the crown of the Shah of Kay-Kavus, the bloodthirsty and arrogant ruler of Iran, whose expressive but immobile face is positioned against the background of multiple bas-relief panels with deities’ equally expressive and terrifying faces. After a very long and uninterrupted shot, revealing, one by one, the various figures of the bustling court, Kimiagarov cuts back to



FIGURE 7.4. Battle scene in the finale of *The Tale of Siiavush*. DVD screen grab.

the shah and a series of extreme close-ups—his mouth, his ring-adorned hands, his eyes—before cutting back to a medium-shot of the shah’s court, oversaturated in its frontal composition with details clearly influenced by the Persian manuscript painting style (referencing also *Shahnameh*’s miniatures).

Just this opening sequence gives the sense, on the one hand, of the eclecticism of cinematic styles employed in the film and, on the other, of the visual predominance of ornamental detail. At the same time, as the dialectical counterpart of the emphasis on objects and sets, the frequent outdoor battle scenes in the three films certainly rival in their scale the most ambitious Hollywood epics of the pre-CGI era. The increasingly complex choreography of such sequences finds perhaps its most striking manifestation in the ending of *The Tale of Siiavush*, where, over the announcement of the new cycle of wars, we witness several simultaneous lines of warriors moving across the screen on multiple levels (fig. 7.4). This complex visual organization mirrors the complex narrative structure of *Shahnameh*, with its inter-referential parable logic of multiple alternating father-and-son and interclan relationships that Kimiagarov’s serialized screen adaptation seeks to capture.<sup>109</sup> This is how Michael Fischer describes *Shahnameh*’s organization: “The same conflicts are examined again and again with different characters and sometimes with the direct transitivity of generation: son in one story becomes father in the next, and what he did as son affects how he behaves as father. This extended parable or parabolic logic constitutes a structure of intersignification. That is, each story comments on prior and later ones. The beauty of this narrative structure is that one can tell the stories independently, or one can work them into more elaborate intersignifying chains.”<sup>110</sup>

Honoring the interreferential structure of the epic and the parabolic logic, which resists fixed interpretation of each episode because its meaning is complicated (and sometimes contradicted) by the others, creates a different, more ambivalent, poetic regime. Vartanov, in his review of *Rustam and Sohrab*, notes (and laments) the director’s “cautious” attitude toward the use of poetic imagery, giving the few examples where the formal elements of composition and camera-work communicate unequivocally the film’s pathos.<sup>111</sup> In other words, the formal elements in these films, despite their narrative straightforwardness, tend toward the excessive and the paratactical, which dilutes and disrupts both the classical and the romantic norms on which so much of the cinema is based. They create an ambiguity—which, however, is resolved not, as in the case of Bazanian realism,

through the individual viewer's ethical judgment but through the extratextual cultural and ideological context of the work's continuing reception and circulation. It is precisely *Shahnameh*'s complexity and ambiguity that enables its appropriations for the multiple political and cultural purposes of Soviet 1970s internationalism.

### SHAHNAMEH'S AMBIGUITIES

In the context of the cinematic network linking the socialist bloc with the Global South, the ethnic and national heterogeneity of both the *Shahnameh* and its adaptation by Kimiagarov proved to be a perfect site for the manifestation of cultural affinities—both historically grounded and more recently created. Its religiously and ethnically ambiguous pre-Islamic setting allowed for the largest possible identifications and collective imaginaries, an aspect that was equally relevant for the epic's reception over the centuries.<sup>112</sup> For the multiethnic, multinational, multi-faith (and, in the Soviet case, antireligious) pan-Asian community represented at a forum like the Tashkent festival, for mobilizing a sense of a shared future, the inclusivity of such imaginaries was as important as the their familiarity.

*Shahnameh*'s simultaneous embrace of heroic combat and antiwar pathos, much commented on in scholarship, provided further space for multiple ideological positioning, appropriate for a wide international reception. Kimiagarov's film versions advance this ambiguity by resisting assigning clear characterizations or identifying features to the two warring kingdoms within the epic, to emphasize that "there are no right or wrong sides in wars that are waged not in the interests of the people but against them."<sup>113</sup> Unusual for either epic or melodramatic consciousness, in Kimiagarov's films, even more than in the original text, the Iranians' (versus the Turanians') moral superiority is far from evident. The rulers of both are constantly tempted by their own desire for power and revenge or by demonic machinations (by the *divs*) or by petty vanity; on both sides are characters who are motivated by justice, peace, and the ethical treatment of others, often forced to make difficult—and even wrong—decisions, in some ways foreshadowing some of the discussions in recent English-language scholarship of what Dabashi refers to in his book as *Shahnameh*'s "anti-epic position."<sup>114</sup>

Thus, Amir Mahallati, a legal scholar and former ambassador of Iran in the UN, argues that the *Shahnameh*'s understanding of war is unusual for both, our conventional understanding of the ideology of the epic genre and for the specifically Islamic conceptions of what constitutes a just war. While war in the *Shahnameh* appears both inevitable and endlessly repeated, it is, at the same time, morally acceptable only as a last resort. Mahallati enumerates two legitimate and just causes for war given in the text: defending land and dignity (defensive war) and penal or corrective justice (punishing a person or a state for a crime or aggression). This logic is quite different from the standard understanding of military law under Sharia; instead, it is much more consistent with contemporary articulations of war

ethics and humanitarian concerns as expressed by international institutions such as the UN.<sup>115</sup> Recognizing this, Mahallati concludes:

For Muslims as well as non-Muslims living in the modern world, the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi is a testament against the “inevitable universal cultural clash.” Its anti-war positions, the elaborate ethics of war it presents, and the emphasis it places on universal wisdom, liberality and justice and the indivisibility of humanity at large, all speak to this philosophy. Ferdowsi’s political ethics and specifically his view of the ethics of war, well grounded in both reason and revelation, also reflect a solid and rich tradition that encourages peace activism in all levels of societies, while providing plentiful ingredients for modern anti-war philosophies and ethical theories for peace.<sup>116</sup>

Kimiagarov’s film adaptation readily lends itself to such a “universalist” interpretation. The Rustam Trilogy’s simultaneous embrace of heroism and its call to war as a last resort functioned perfectly in the context of, on the one hand, the Soviet and, more broadly, socialist Cold War position as simultaneously advocating for world peace and defending the necessity of armed struggle (a point on which I will elaborate at great length in chapter 8). On the other hand, the need to articulate—and debate—the definition of what constitutes a just war positioned it in dialogue with the emerging humanitarian discourses, which began to dominate within the international organizations (UN, UNESCO) right at the time when these films were made, therefore making such an interpretation potentially resonate within a less clearly Soviet or socialist-aligned—including liberal—form of internationalism (as articulated today by both Mahallati and Dabashi).

Even within the Soviet context, among the intelligentsia in the post–World War Two era, any sense of military triumphalism would come across as ideologically suspect and, more specifically, associated with Stalinism. The very generational structure that underscores *Shahnameh*’s narrative—with its repetitions and reversals of father-son (and grandfather-father-son) conflicts—would, in the 1960s and 1970s Soviet Union, be inevitably culturally mapped onto Stalinist legacies. But as in Shepitko’s *Wings*, discussed in chapter 5 (albeit through the mother-daughter dyad), this generational divide was clearly marked yet full of ambivalences. In every part of the Rustam Trilogy, victory comes through loss—of innocent lives and of the surviving heroes’ moral integrity—an endless chain of sacrifices that are never fully recuperated and can only be justified through promises of “no more wars.” The loss of the sons—Sukhrab, Siavush—and their fathers’ moral responsibility for it, reverses the “natural” patriotic logic, whereby the younger generation carries on in the footsteps of the fathers. It is significant that unlike the narrative of the *Shahnameh*, Kimiagarov’s adaptation largely ignores the third generation, the grandsons, who in the epic frequently reverse the father-son dynamics again—refusing to emphasize the easily available trope of children as the hope for a better future.

Yet the narrative powers on, resonating, as we will see in the next chapter, with the socialist conception of war rooted in the inevitability of political struggle,

ultimately combined with antiwar rhetoric—but even more with the socialist understanding of war as a permanent horizon: on the one hand, the embrace of struggle and military heroism as the only possible defense against an endless threat of aggression (colonial, imperialist, or other) and, on the other, the impossibility of granting it any triumphalist aspect, foregrounding the costs of any victory. All victories are seen as fragile; the hope of real future peace is always delayed—a tragic consciousness, indeed. Yet, just as in the al-Biruni biopic, it is the figure of the poet—which is strongly foregrounded in Kimiagarov's adaptation—that invites us to contemplate the role of artistic creation in cultural reproduction: this ultimately creative act (the [re]telling of the epic) can offer an emancipatory reading against the substance of atrocities and endless wars, once again attributing a heightened social and political function to the artist and rendering political the question of cultural heritage.

The resonances of such a political and cultural sensibility—as situated as it is universalist—can, indeed, be legible beyond the Soviet sphere. Thus, despite his repeated insistence on the need to divorce the epic's text from its history of politically motivated appropriations, Dabashi, in his discussion of the *Shahnameh*, frames its sensibility within a distinctly twentieth-century cinematic—and recognizably Cold War—context:

The central narrative trauma of the *Shahnameh* is its moral memory of a tragic end to any imperial act of triumphalism—just before the text itself is appropriated as the insignia of imperial triumphalism of a new dynasty. This act of remembrance, at once triumphant and defeatist, exuberant and tragic, eventually becomes the most cogent constitution of the very subtext of the *Shahnameh* as an epic. That destiny is made precisely at the moment when it is interrupted. That central sense of tragedy becomes definitive to the archetypal modus operandi of the *Shahnameh* as a self-conscious epic, precisely the same way that Kurosawa's cinema thrives on the traumatic birth of a nation at the moment of its near annihilation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>117</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that Dabashi's reflection on what he considers the mode of revolutionary epic embodied in the *Shahnameh* connects it to his own generation's artistic and political sensibility: "Reading poets like Mahmoud Darwish, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Nazem Hekmat, Pablo Neruda, or Vladimir Mayakovsky, we read them with a sense of revolutionary epic. We read them with a sense of enabling fragility of time and space, both ours and not ours."<sup>118</sup> Despite the historical ambivalence, or the even more frequent outright rejection of the Soviet Union by Iranian leftists at the time, the choice of these poets, all canonical within the Afro-Asian writers movement, together with references to Kurosawa and Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the earlier quote, positions Dabashi's literary world within precisely the same community to which Kimiagarov's films at Tashkent were addressed. And this "sense of enabling fragility of time and space, both ours and not ours," is, indeed, a powerful hermeneutic for its engagement with

culture and politics, where the triumphalism of the state ideology—communist or nationalist—is negated by the tragic sense of its cost, the endless delay of true emancipation, the need for the continuous struggle. Yet it is also balanced, to an extent, by the knowledge that a community, however geographically dispersed, is being forged in this struggle. And it is also not surprising that Kimiagarov's own artistic trajectory was itself a demonstration of the tragic contradictions of the kind his films engage.

Despite all their aesthetic excesses, unlike Paradzhanov's masterpiece, Kimiagarov's extravagant *Shahnameh* adaptations raised no objections from Soviet censors for their formal or ideological qualities, earning him multiple awards on the republican and national level, as well as warm and lasting popularity with mass audiences. Yet the Trilogy's history proved as disastrous for both its director and its studio as that of *The Color of Pomegranates* (which was not released, but "shelved," for decades), albeit for different reasons.

After the release of the first two parts and during the filming of the third installment, which turned out to be the last, Tajik studio and Kimiagarov's crew came under investigation for financial mismanagement of funds. The films' budget was, indeed, enormous by Soviet standards (falling somewhere between one and three million rubles per film)—with cavalries brought in to film its battle scenes, parts of sets custom-made by artisans in Georgia using copper, costumes made with real furs and bespoke textiles, and the whole studio undergoing technical reorganization to accommodate the complex infrastructural needs entailed by filming complex mass scenes on location. All of this had, in fact, been laid out in the films' plan, which was approved by both the studio and Goskino. Yet the negative publicity had dramatic ramifications for everyone involved—resulting in a reshuffling of the studio's administration and even temporary arrests, including that of Kimiagarov himself. He was released after one day, after Davlat Khudonazarov, a young and talented filmmaker and Kimiagarov's cameraman, assistant director, and de-facto collaborator, appealed directly to the famous Tajik poet, scholar, and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Mirzo Tursunzoda, who got involved on his behalf. The investigation yielded no criminal activity; thus, no charges were brought. But Kimiagarov never fully recovered from the shock and humiliation. His health, physical and emotional, suffered dramatically, and he died a few years later, in 1979, at the age of fifty-nine.<sup>119</sup>

At the same time that financial mismanagement accusations were whirling around, controversies arose within Tajikistan about the fact that the film was cast with few ethnic Tajiks in leading roles. Rustam is played by Bimbolat Vataev (fig. 7.5), an Ossetian actor, but the overall cast reflects the full diversity of the region, with Georgian, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Tajik actors playing leading roles; yet the questioning of the national and ethnic identities of the characters, actors, and even the director continues to this day in the press and social media.<sup>120</sup> Even so, the film's ethnic diversity was repeatedly celebrated in the press at the time as

FIGURE 7.5. Ossetian actor Bimbolat Vataev as Rustam in *The Tale of Rustam*. DVD screen grab.



emblematic of Soviet internationalism—adding, no doubt, to its mode of multiple address at screening venues such as Tashkent’s.

#### SPECIFIC UNIVERSALS OF SOCIALIST WORLD HERITAGE CINEMA

The construction of cultural heritage as simultaneously national and yet distinctly internationalist in a way that was particularly relevant to the postcolonial world was, without a doubt, a highly successful way to legitimize the vision of the Tashkent festival’s geopolitics as the integration of the Soviet sphere with the Global South. In this process, the logic of nationalism was both reaffirmed and challenged, resonating at a distance with the cultural and political experience of the decolonial world.

In this, as in many other aspects, Tashkent continued the heuristic, suggested by the Bandung, where, as Duncan Yoon notes, “the invocation, however idealistic, of the linkages between Africa and Asia in a precolonial past provided an historical legitimacy to Bandung as an event.”<sup>121</sup> For the Bandung countries and the “Soviet East” alike, visions of a shared cultural past allowed for a “psychological opening that enabled a separation from ‘the more immediate past’ of European colonialism by establishing a mediated relationship to a distant past” of Afro-Asian coexistence.<sup>122</sup> At Bandung, just as at Tashkent later, shared literary references provided a primary way for such mediations: such as when the Philipino delegate, Romulo, in his speech at the closing session, which discussed precisely the nuances and porousness between national self-determination and humanist cosmopolitanism, cited Rabindranath Tagore’s poem “Where the Mind Is without Fear,” and Kimiagarov cited Qasmi to the same effect. As Yoon argues, even at Bandung, which was characterized by state-level diplomacy and centered on the notion of the autonomy of postcolonial nation-states, “Romulo recognized that the nation-state was already too narrow a category for a global definition of humanism, especially with the ‘new departures’ of a postcolonial multipolarity.”<sup>123</sup> Pan-Asian literary and artistic heritage could, indeed, provide a much more flexible proxy for such multipolarity.

Sometimes such iterations of a shared past could be based on actual historical continuities (as was the case with Central Asian and Persian epics). Other times,



the alternative precolonial communities could be imagined as metaphorically, if not literally, connected. The most impressive manifestation was perhaps the 1977 FESTAC imaginary of Black people, which included the aboriginal groups of the South Pacific as a symbolic extension of "Blackness"; the original plan had included the "four Black republics of the Soviet Union."<sup>124</sup> This operation of constructing versions of such specific universalities was widespread, taking place in virtually all the cultural festivals of the period. These constructions seem to gesture in their potentiality beyond their more fully realized alternatives (whether nation-state sovereignty or socialist internationalism), which from our contemporary perspective are marked by historical failure or political exhaustion. As Samera Esmeir argues in her discussion of the Bandung gathering as "reviving the ancient paths of crossing," such alternative archaic imaginaries manifest "the possibility of another collectivity or being-in-common, bringing back forms of life that were once possible, in the Indian Ocean and on the ship."<sup>125</sup> They evoke other forms of specific universality, open to new configurations of subjectivities, even as the pressure of postcolonial politics was actively foreclosing on them. Rather than pointing to a global totality, they gesture toward preexisting or compossible geopolitical communities that exceed the modern nation-state at the same time as they give it its legitimacy and power, simultaneously giving possibility to many local, national, and regional configurations of "universals."

The two heritage films I have discussed here are particularly good illustrations of the ambivalence of realizing such complex cosmopolitan solidarities, caught as they are in somewhat contradictory affects. These affects emerge with particular force through their engagement with this distinctly Marxist topos of history as a record of continuous conflict and struggle. The final chapter of this book turns to this perhaps most characteristic and visible formation within the cinemas of global socialism: war.