



# WHAT IS THE OBJECT OF DESIRE OF KAZAKHSTANI VIDEO ART?

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### Abstract

The primary objective of this article is to analyze Kazakhstani video art as a phenomenon, which using international artistic language, and can mark out contemporary art of new independent state as a recognizable cultural territory. This area is discrete and consists of an individual identities of its inhabitants, where each artist is building his or her own tactics and strategy of the desire to be recognized. For the purpose of summarizing of this process the author is using the Jacques Lacan's discourse of desire as the hermeneutic key to the most video art pieces made by Kazakhstani artists and a common ground for their force for recognition by worldwide art–community.

**Keywords:** Jacques Lacan, discourse of desire, Kazakhstani video art, identity, modernism, contemporary art, the Other, international Biennale, video Festival

## «ҚАЗАҚСТАН ВИДЕОАРТЫНЫҢ ТІЛЕК НЫСАНЫ ДЕГЕН НЕ?»

### Абстракт

Бұл мақаланың негізгі міндеті Қазақстанның халықаралық көркем тіл ретінде пайдаланылып келе жатқан және жаңа тәуелсіз мемлекеттің қазіргі заманғы өнерін танымал мәдени территория есебінде таныта алатын видеоартын құбылыс сияқты талдап шығуға арналған. Аталмыш территорияның ауқымы шектеулі, ол өздерінің бір–бірлеріне ұқсас тұрғындарынан тұрады, мұнда суретшілер танымал болуға бағытталған өз тактикасы мен стратегиясын құрады. Осы үдерісті талдап қорыту мақсатында автор Жак Лаканның тілек дискурсын Қазақстан суретшілері жасаған видео жұмыстарының көпшілігіне, сондай–ақ олардың әлемдік арт–қауымдастықтың арасында танымал болуға ұмтылулары үшін ортақ платформаларының герменевтік кілт ретінде пайдаланады.

**Трек сөздер:** Жак Лакан, тілек дискурсы, қазақстандық видеоарт, ұқсастық, модернизм, қазіргі заманғы өнер, басқа, халықаралық Биеннале, видео фестиваль.

## **ЧТО ЕСТЬ ОБЪЕКТ ЖЕЛАНИЯ КАЗАХСТАНСКОГО ВИДЕОАРТА?**

### **Абстракт**

Основной задачей данной статьи является анализ казахстанского видеоарта, как феномена, который использует международный художественный язык и может маркировать современное искусство нового независимого государства как узнаваемую культурную территорию. Эта территория дискретна и состоит из отдельных идентичностей её обитателей, где каждый художник выстраивает свою тактику и стратегию желания быть признанным. В целях обобщения этого процесса автор использует дискурс желания Жака Лакана как герменевтический ключ к большинству видеоработ, созданных казахстанскими художниками, а также как общую платформу для их стремления к узнаванию мировым арт-сообществом.

**Ключевые слова:** Жак Лакан, дискурс желания, казахстанский видеоарт, идентичность, модернизм, современное искусство, другой, международная Биеннале, видеофестиваль

An attempt to find its own identity on the basis of the adopted and, to a certain extent, expropriated semantic codes of the global cultural and artistic trends is the main characteristic feature of the development of contemporary art in Kazakhstan. Thus, after Kazakhstan became independent, modern Kazakh artists faced an urgent task of forming and developing of new Kazakhstani identity using their own identity and artistic practices as a model. Contemporary artists from the very beginning used video art as a special form of international artistic language, which can mark out their recognizable territory. However, unlike the national schools of cinema and the Kazakh cinema school in particular, video art cannot be seen as a holistic phenomenon in contemporary culture of the country. Although artists have used video as medium for over 20 years, it is virtually impossible to describe it from the viewpoint of common trends and features. Yet there is some common ground. The hermeneutic key to the most video art pieces made by our artists could be Jacques Lacan's discourse of desire [1]. It is well known maxima by Lacan, which explain us that desire is fundamentally

the wish for recognition: 'The object of man's desire, and we are not the first to say this, is essentially an object desired by someone else. One object can become equivalent to another, owing to the effect produced by this intermediary, in making it possible for objects to be exchanged and compared. This process tends to diminish the special significance of anyone particular object, but at the same time it brings into view the existence of objects without number' [2]. Kazakhstani video-artists either consciously or unconsciously follow the script given by the master of philosophy.

The pioneers of the Kazakh video art used video camera as an extension of their own self and even identified their video art with their personality or body. The founding father of our video art Shay-Ziya captured multiple inequities of life in the 1990s and inserted in the viewers' eyes his own ethical lens leaving no opportunities for an alternative interpretation of the seeing. The patriarch of the Kazakh contemporary art Rustam Khalfin used video to underline the quality of «a video sequence as the eye's living experience, lustfully taking over the world», to use Victor Misiano's phrase [3]. These days almost all contemporary artists

use video to a certain extent to express their ideas and desires. It is sometimes said that each artist wants to 'make their own cinema' [4]. I beg to disagree with this claim. They rather use the language and the shape of a moving picture to construe their own artistic Self. In other words, video art becomes a product of the virtual fulfilment of their desires.

The artist's disappointment with the current state of affairs in his own country and his emotional reflection on the injustice of the existence is evident in the works by the artist Erbossyn Meldibekov. In his video *Pastan* (2001) (Figure 1), the artist who often works with sculpture builds a social sculpture of himself, rhythmically beaten up and abused on the street. Like somnambulist, the artist is indifferent to all the attacks on his freedom and personal immunity thereby personifying the behavior of the society in Kazakhstan.

In another film, *The Independence Day* (2012), the social sculpture has a corporal and literal incarnations as the film is based on a home video filmed on a mobile phone by one of the eyewitnesses of the cruel dispersal of the demonstration in Zhanaozen on 16 December 2011, the day of the independence of Kazakhstan. The artist combines the terrible footage of the cruelty of the authorities beating up unarmed people with his later convincing reconstruction/play of the demonstrators



Figure 1. Erbossyn Meldibekov, 'Pastan', video—still, 2001

fleeing from persecution along the streets of the city. Apparently, Meldibekov once again identifies himself with his people and its unhappy existence. The artist does not provide any recipe for a change, he simply identifies the given reality with a certain ease made possible by the simplicity of the form and avoidance of special effects. The artist allows himself to use only one particular stylistic device; his works always have some black humor. The ontological laconicism of Meldibekov's works has a strong suggestive effect of a painful compassion to the desire for a change, implicitly demanded for by the artist and the society. This desire is supported by artist's black humor/irony, which he is using always in all mediums, as was indicated in the article by Russian art critic Andrey Fomenko [5].

Almagul Menlibaeva creates a kind of video—palimpsest of different overlapping images where she freely mixes archetypes with the local realities. In her *Exodus* (2009), the Biblical narrative is referenced to the nomadic migration, which thus turns into a part of a global tragedy, as it is now a migration from the village to the city, the abandonment of authentic culture in favor of impersonal consumerism. The artist laments the exodus of the traditional nomadic culture from the society. The desire to interpret history as a myth unwillingly leads the artist to the circle of primordial traditional practices. Menlibaeva uses the notion of the *egregor* in her statement as a cultural and psychological experience shared by the society. The story in her latest cinema and video objects is apparently narrated on behalf of the Archaic Atavism. An idyllic female image of a lover—goddess—*peri* plays an important role in the artists' video pieces. The woman, according to Menlibaeva, is a superior being

responsible for the world order. In the film *Aisha Bibi's Butterflies* (2010) (Figure 2), the image of the ideal lover is surrounded by a symbolic sequence of objects: the elements of the architectural ensemble Aisha Bibi, the decorative order of traditional Asian fabrics, pieces of clothes and other signs referring the viewer to the alluring and mysterious legend of unearthly love embodied in the tombstone. In this peace «love is understood as something impossible to possess; as a fundamental lack, as per psychoanalysis; a desire that is eternal and thus dynamic, in motion; a voluntary nomadism as endless as The Silk Road» [6].



Figure 2. Almagul Menlibaeva, 'Aisha Bibi's Butterflies', video—still, 2010, Exhibition e.city/Almaty/KazakhstanApollonia/ – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Strasbourg, France, 2014

All Menlibaeva's video works have a certain tempting magnetism promising a bright cathartic experience. The artist's desire to exist in this quasi-transcendental regime is carried out through almost alchemical mix of mythical and poetical hermeneutic of current topical narratives, the traditional filming of authentic characters in an authentic context, a precise and clear editing made from the first person and finally, a sensitive soundtrack by DJ OMFO, where each image is clearly outlined by acoustic means.

Alexander Ugay makes his films in the context of the research of the

personal and collective memory space, the transformation of reality under the pressure from the flows of time, structure and the topology of space. Ugay often uses the materials produced by other artists as organic tools for the construction of his own message. In his film *Bastion* (2007) (Figure 3), the artist turns to the heritage of Soviet Modernism and through it to the issues of the influence of modernisation of the society on the destiny of culture. The model of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* becomes the central object of the film, as it slowly moves across the waves of our memory. The artist sees it as the symbol of Modernity, the age that created new worlds and changed the face of history. According to Ugay, 'this video is a reversed nostalgia for the new utopias that are inevitable' [7]. The form chosen for the film is no accident; it underlines the author's intention to start a dialogue with the founders of avant-garde.

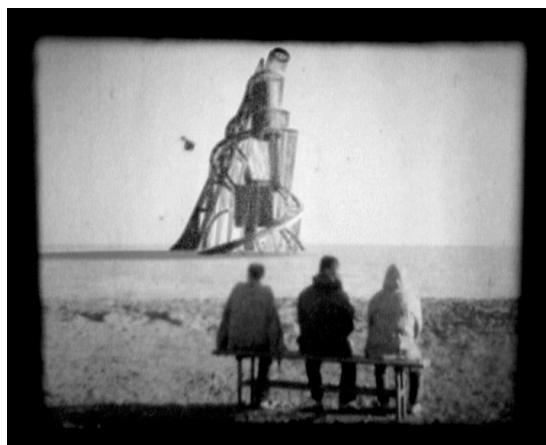


Figure 3. Alexander Ugay, 'Bastion', video—still, 2007

Filed on an 8 mm analogue camera, manually developed and edited by the artist, this film as such corresponds to the time when artists made 'a fairy tale the reality' [8] by their own hands. The avant-garde modus of production becomes an important part of the message in so-called cinematic objects, short films that Ugay made on film as a member of the group

*Armored Train* which can be seen as a paraphrase of the essential topics: Cosmic Uncertainty (2003), Tea Ceremony (2002) and others.

A visual dialogue with Gilles Deleuze, with the artifacts of the past and present in time and space is made explicit in Ugay's film *Earth and Shape* (2013–2015). The footage of architectural landscapes from different corners of the world – Astana, Karaganda, Almaty, Tashkent, St Petersburg, Seoul, Istanbul, Sophia and others is not mere geography but, according to Deleuze, the geography of the mind [9]. It is not a certain city or a certain land, but a new global mega polis in the state of no–shape. This freely forming space is distorted by phantomlike figures from Leni Riefenstahl's films. Athletes from *Olympia* (1938) serve as gestalt shapes from time to time appearing among the streets, squares and courtyards of the new city as if summoned by a certain power to mould the moveable no–shape in a concrete structure. The architectural objects of the modern cities have an eerie resemblance to the monuments of the past: ziggurats, towers, pyramids, antique temples live with us, here and now. The spiritual substances of the past, seemingly gone to Letha, re–emerge on the surface of our collective memory to reproduce annoyingly repetitive landscapes of meanings. The double exposure of today's Astana superimposed on the final scene from Yuri Roisman's film *The Cavalier of the Gold Star* (1950) in the end of the film refers us back to the dialogue with Stalin's 'paradise', warning us about a possible comeback.

The members of the group *Kyzyl Traktor* (The Red Tractor) Arystan Shalbaev, Smail Bayaliev and Syrlibek Bekbotaev are driven by the desire to present the Kazakh identity as a unique part of the human civilization

in all their artistic manifestations. Initially the leaders of the group positioned their movement as the Kazakh trans–avant–garde appropriating and adapting the ideas of eminent Post–modernist theorists and practitioners to the Kazakh context. The artists reveal themselves to the world as a new valid object whose novelty is linked to the references to the archaic roots of nomadic culture. They make use of the whole range of Kazakh rituals and traditions: shamanism<sup>1</sup> and Sufism<sup>2</sup> as the core elements of the spiritual heritage; mythology and poetics of the traditional musical heritage; the symbolism of the local everyday objects; authentic spectacles and specific features of traditional everyday life. Although all the above mentioned tools are used by the group within a critical discourse, they always have a Narcissist connotation.

Arystan Shalbaev's work *One Day of My River / Syrdariya* (2013) (Figure 4) is the artist's performance captured as a video sonnet. That the video starts and ends with the Syrdariya's waters and the river as a permanent location of the performance create the impression of one day's temporal limits. Seemingly, the artist lives in the river and even merges with it. His dreaming is accompanied by the sound of the shan–kobyz<sup>3</sup>; he works on

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1 Shamanism (/ˈʃɑːmən/ shah–mən or /ˈʃeɪmən/ shay–mən) is a practice that involves a practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to perceive and interact with a spirit world and channel these transcendental energies into this world. //Hoppál 1987. p. 76.

2 SUFISM (ARABIC: سُفِيْصَة), IS DEFINED AS THE INNER MYSTICAL DIMENSION OF ISLAM, YET MANY ALSO CONTENT THAT IT PRECEDED RELIGION. PRACTITIONERS OF SUFISM (TASAWWUF), REFERRED TO AS SUFIS (SŪFĪ) (/ˈsuːfi/; سُفِيْصَة), OFTEN BELONG TO DIFFERENT TURUQ OR 'ORDERS'—CONGREGATIONS FORMED AROUND A GRAND MASTER REFERRED TO AS A MAWLA WHO MAINTAINS A DIRECT CHAIN OF TEACHERS BACK TO THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD. // "TARIQA | ISLAM". BRITANNICA.COM. RETRIEVED 29 MAY 2015.

3 SHAN–KOBYZ – IS A METALLIC, TONGUE–PLAYED INSTRUMENT MADE OF SILVER AND OTHER PRECIOUS METALS. TO PLAY IT, IT IS HELD BY THE TEETH AND THE MOUTH CAVITY SERVES AS A RESONATOR. // [HTTP://WWW.SILKADV.COM/RU/NODE/2057/](http://www.silkadv.com/ru/node/2057/)



Figure 4. Arystan Shalbaev, 'One Day of My River / Syrdariya', video—stills, 2013

the deepening of the river bed; entertains himself with the rumbling fanfares; prays in a scull-cap; once again merges with the river. Here the artist's worldview is that of a universalist and an environmentalist as befits the heir to the nomads. Here everything is nature and everything merges in a renewed symbol which, like in a *kuyshi* (traditional music improviser) – addresses the topical issues via poetic imagery.

Smail Bayaliev's video *The Simurgh Bird* (2007) (Figure 5) also captures the

artist's performance at the significant site of the Sufi mosque of Hoja Akhmed Yassawi in Turkestan, a town in the south of Kazakhstan. The artist, clad in an Asiatic gown and the Soviet gas mask, peruses a large Book with the pages made of woolen Kazakh rugs, *syrmaks*. A superimposed picture centered with the help of a round orifice of the ocular, shows flocks of panicking and twittering birds fleeing from a falcon. The background soundtrack includes the recital of a mystical ballad about the difficulties of life and fate and the world order. According to a legend, the Bird of Fairness, the *Simurgh*, sits on the Tree of the World and disseminates different truths with its wings. The complex semantics of the video and sound hints at the loss of sacral meanings and the unification of traditions but does not articulate the author's position. A vague understanding of the artist's desire takes place between the captured and the articulated suggesting the need to learn



Figure 6. Syrlybek Bekbotaev, series 'The Music of the Steppe', video—still, 2014



Figure 5. Smail Bayaliev, 'The Simurgh Bird', video—stills, 2007

the secret message of the Simurgh.

A Syrylybek Bekbotaev's series *The Music of the Steppe* (2014) (Figure 6) (photo and video) focuses on the symbol of childhood memories, *besik* (a traditional cradle) and the author's admiration of everyday life's rituals involving the artist's family – mother, brother, grandmother, aunts, sisters and so on. The juxtaposition of the pastoral steppe landscapes and bright provincial dress in a staged performance driven by rhythmical movement enables the artist to elevate the monotonous life of a Kazakh village to a poetical level. The feeling of being protected as a child and certain spontaneity of life creates the impression of a naïve and fresh nature of the provincial world outlook. This kind of perception informs to a great extent the work of the artist who tends to reduce subtle nuances of a world vision to clear-cut and transparent images and objects.

The desire to mark out the art scene with gender equality informs the work of the artist Bakhyt Bubikanova. Her painterly *parsunas*<sup>4</sup> and graphic sheets are full of gender identity symbols, her performances play hide and seek in search of the Other [10]. The video performance *Sebastian* (2013) (Figure 7) is a simplistic illustration of this search with a half naked androgynous figure standing in the classical pose of St. Sebastian<sup>5</sup> tied to a telegraph pole suddenly acquires gender and turns out to be a young woman hanging out clothes on a rope. The work looks like a performed sketch, made on the spot with basic available means (filmed on a mobile phone and unedited). Such a straightforward

approach convincingly demonstrates uncompromised manifestation of the artist in the field of trans-gender mutations of the contemporary world. At the same time the work looks like a video-oxymoron when a tragic death turns into an episode of everyday routine.

Figure 7. Bakhyt Bubikanova, 'Sebastian', stills of the video performance, 2013



The search for identity through the Other is evident in the works by the artist Katya Nikonorova. In her desire to find herself she dresses up in the clothes alien to her 'Turkestan Russian' culture, or the culture of the Slavonic people living in Central Asia. In her work *Apai at Ivan Kupala's Day* (2012) (Figure 8) (St John the Baptist's Day) the artist presents a performance in the traditional Kazakh costume of an *apai* (an elderly woman) whipping cream in a special mortar with an idyllic landscape at the background as if on the day of the pagan Slavonic festival. The rhythmical whipping movements of the character gradually turn orgasmic and

4 Parsuna – first Russian portraits on canvas, existed at 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries like transition form from two-dimension icon painting to three-dimension portraits. Had a naïve formal characteristics.

5 St. Sebastian – early Christian saint, who according to iconography depicted tied to a post or tree and shot with arrows.



Figure 8. Katya Nikonorova, 'Apai at Ivan Kupala's Day', video-stills, 2012

finally result in the making of the product. The bold and satirical simplicity of the performance reduce the sensitivity of the national question and convey the artist's belief in the possibility of organic merge with a different culture.

Zoe Falkova's video art piece *Mnemosyne's Dreams* (2012) (Figure 9) personifies the desire to create an ideal video object. The artist's formalist approach is openly demonstrative and

are ambiguous, they argue between themselves, refute each other, flow one from another and generate new forms. This incessant stream of reflection using the video medium helps the contemporary Kazakh art to exist in the regime of constant sensitive analysis of all the facets of life becoming as Jacques Lacan called it 'the metonymy of our being' [1]. At long last I have to argue that Kazakhstani artists are successful enough in the



Figure 9. Zoe Falkova, 'Mnemosyne's Dreams', video—stills, 2012

skillfully mixes archive documents, stained film effects, medical schemes of the human body, angiograms of the human brain and a range of other technical devices particular to the contemporary clip culture. It is not easy to see through this imposing suggestive video product and to understand what is that the artist wanted to say. As the result, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory re-incarnated in the modern world, seems to remember everything about nothing.

As I have maintained above, the video art in Kazakhstan is an extremely discrete phenomenon or even a range of different phenomena, each of these making use of a moving picture to implement different strategies and desires. These desires

reaching of their aim to recognition and understanding judging by the long list of cinema festivals, biennials and other international events<sup>6</sup>, where they are represented their video art and by this – new cultural identity of Kazakhstan.

<sup>6</sup> Kazakhstani artists took part in such events as: Istanbul Biennial, Venice Biennial, Sydney Biennial, Shanghai Biennial, Oberhausen film festival and others; their video art objects are in the collections of famous museums – Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou, Paris, France; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA), Belgium; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands and others.



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