

**Dusan Radunovic**  
*Durham University*  
*United Kingdom*

**Vernacular Visions: Primitivism and the Imagination of Nature in  
early-Soviet Georgian Avant-garde**  
(With Reference to the Legacy of Davit Kakabadze)

This paper interrogates the status of the concepts of primitivism and nature in Georgian avant-garde art writing, visual art and film between 1915 and 1930. The notion that nature was not only the preeminent site of national imaginary, but also “the finest teacher” that the new Georgian art could have, which can be found in Davit Kakabadze’s early cogitations on art (1915), is a significant and polyvalent gesture. On the one hand, it unquestionably ventriloquizes the metropolitan modernism’s “invention” of the primitive (paradigmatic of this process was the Russian modernists’ “discovery” of the genius of the self-taught Georgian artist Pirosmiani in 1912). But on the other hand, Kakabadze’s all but Romanticist imagination of nature speaks of a paradoxical presence of a bucolic, naïve and pre-modern sensibility at the heart of modernist art in Georgia. Going further in the history of the Georgian avant-garde, this phenomenon is more than palpable in the developed, futurist phase of the movement. In the important collection of Georgian Futurists H2SO4 (1924), the poet and soon-to-become filmmaker Niko Shengelaia celebrates primitive cultural forms (knife dancing and horse riding), which, he argues, perform by different means the same cultural function as the futurist art in Russia (e.g. Meyerhold/Forreger’s theatre): they both “destroy” traditional art forms. Finally, at the end of the Soviet avant-garde experiment, when many of the Georgian avant-garde artists embraced the constructivist/productivist extension of the declining avant-garde ideology (Kalatozishvili, Ghoghoberidze, Shengelaia), the idea of nature continues to resonate strongly. By drawing on several film from the period for which Kakabadze was set designer (*Salt for Svanetia* [1929/1930] and *Buba* [1930]), the paper will reassert that the imagination of nature has remained the pivot of Georgian-Soviet vernacular vision of modernism.