Ilia Zdanevitch’s trajectory: bridging modernism from Tiflis to Paris

To address the theme of this conference, I would like to consider the role and contribution of Ilia Zdanevitch to Modernism. I am not going to perform an analysis of the work of Zdanevitch but rather consider the uniqueness of his artistic personality and his main offerings to the Russian and Georgian avant-garde as well as the European avant-garde. This very brief foray cannot render justice to Zdanevitch’s immense contribution to modern art, but at least it will place him amongst the notable actors of the Georgian modernism. In fact, right at the outset, one can say that through his life and his art, he played the role of a catalyst and first runner, bridging modernism from Tiflis to Paris.

Let’s focus on a few dates to frame Ilia’s life during the twentieth Century. Between 1911 and 1917, he studies law in S. Petersburg and participates in the Russian Avant-garde in S. Petersburg and Moscow. From 1917 to 1920, he is in Tiflis. From 1920 to 1921, he is in Constantinople awaiting a visa for Paris. From 1921 until his death in 1975, he lives in Paris, where he adopts the name of ILIAZD.

Ilia, Catalyst and Channeler

I don’t have to introduce Ilia Zdanevitch to Georgians. From a general point of view, Ilia’s contribution to the avant-garde relates to sound poetry, typographical art, innovative book printing and illustrated books, integration of poetry and painting, a synthesis of poetry-theater-danse, theoretical elucidation of principles of new Russian poetry, these constitutes a major undertaking in the diffusion of art and modern poetry. On the other hand, as rescuer of Georgia’s artistic heritage, would it not just be the case of Pirosmani, as an enthusiast for the Georgian medieval churches of which he has contributed to diffuse knowledge. To the long list, we can also add attributes by no means exhaustive: author and collector of travelogues, erudite and bibliophile, making up a truly versatile personality of Ilia, which we won’t consider here in entirety.

I will, therefore, mention here only a few aspects related to his life’s work. As pillar of modern art in Georgia, his major acknowledged contributions are his poetic and publication works. Which starts during his studies in Russia and continues when he returns to his birth place along with results of numerous avant-garde experiments. But first, it is in Tiflis that he gets acquainted with futurism when the painter Boris Lopatinski returns from Paris, bringing with him the futurist manifestoes of Marinetti, at the beginning of 1911. This word futurism will gain momentum when expounded by Ilia in January
1912 at the Trotsky Theater in S. Petersburg. It will resonate in multiple echoes from S. Petersburg to Moscow from hundreds of artistic and poetic mouths. One sees in effect how the single word, futurism, can comprise many different artistic and poetic trends with diverse orientations.

Creator of zaum along with Khlebnikov and Kroutchenykh, and as instigator of the creation of sound and visual poetry, he inspired generations for a few decades afterwards. Whether it is his Russian, Georgian or Parisian period, Ilia is at the intersection of numerous places and names and occupies the focal point of art history of the century, where art and poetry meet. As catalyst, Ilia works in a dynamic fashion with others. He develops numerous projects amongst his artist friends. We will mention only a few. He introduces the concept of “everythingism” amidst the Russian avant-garde along with futurist painters Michael Ledentu and Michael Larionov. By so doing, he occupies the left wing of the Russian avant-garde, and accordingly opposes what will become modern orthodoxy (art as a self-defined system by a set of intrinsic rules), to allow a heterodoxy that welcomes all forms of artistic expressions, past, present and future. He publishes the manifesto of *Painted Faces* with Larionov and Gontcharova (Argus, Moscow, Dec. 1913), attempting to reset art / life relationship.

![Figure 1: Larionov, Gontcharova, Zdanевич, *Painted Faces*, 1913](image)

In this context, one may also make reference to the theoretical elaboration of rayism of Larionov of which he was a part, based on his supposed authorship of rayist poems published in *Rekord* under the signature of a certain Anton Lotov. {\textsuperscript{i}}
He also writes a monography on the works of Larionov and Gontcharova (Munster, Moscow, 1913), the historical value of which is highly appreciated. In 1916, he joins a group of painters associated with M. Ledentu and Olga Leshkova, and produces a cyclostyled journal in Petrograd, called *Murder without bloodshed*, in which originated his first dra(ma) *Yanko, king of Albanese*.

Isn't it interesting to note also Ilia signing a call to workers' and soldiers' organizations as well as political parties, saying: "Artists of Petrograd, painters, poets, writers, actors and musicians have joined forces "for the Revolution", seeking to help revolutionary organizations and factions in the propagation of revolutionary ideas through art...". This text, appearing in the press on 28 March 1917, is signed: "Executive Council: O. Brik, V. Ermolaeva, II. Zdanevitch, A. Lourié, V. Maïakovski, Vs. Meyerhold, V. Tatline, S. Tolstoï, and V. Chlovski". This is the only such list of names, representing radically opposing trends in art (futurism, formalism and leftist art.....), but now united under the common ideal. ii

Afterwards, back in Tiflis, in November 1917, he creates the University of the Degree 41, along with the Russian poets Kroutchenykh and Terentiev, as well as his brother Kyrill Zdanevitch, virtually becoming the driving force of the avant-garde in Tiflis. These are all undertakings of acquaintances implicated in one cause, modernism. Ilia, with his clairvoyant spirit and his passionate energy plays the role of a channel.
From Tiflis to S. Petersburg, from S. Petersburg to Moscow, and back to Tiflis, and later to Paris, he promotes a network of exchanges and incessantly diffuses the good news, modernism. Now, Ilia finds himself in the middle of a situation that is concurrently contradictory and complementary at the same time in art and modern poetry. On the one hand there is the crisis of representation, the research of new art forms, the invention of abstract languages both poetic and pictorial, the formalisation of procedures for artistic productions. That we could call the rule-changing creativity. On the other, there is the quest of sources, the archaic and primitive forms of art, as well as the undertaking of the real, i.e. what is external to the framework of art. He is part of an aesthetic trend, neo-primitivism which constitutes a strong undercurrent in all of Europe on which modern art is profiled. In adopting a stand opposing the monolythic aspect of modernity, Ilia is seeking to demonstrate the diversity of trends.

**Insurrectional impulse**

In view of weakening Europe governments, industrial development, changes in cultural values taking hold amongst the youth, a foreboding of war and revolution is hanging heavy amongst poets and artists. The calls for the new and the calls for the future are being heard in the European capitals. Trips, transfers, exchanges, as well as heterogenic influences are speeding up the passage of time. The
modernity in Europe is supported by youth movements attempting to vanquish centuries of oppression and out of date academism. Taken prey by the confusion of war, coupled with an irrational world, a core of upheaval and insurrection explode manifolds. Within this “Internationale of the arts”, the discoveries and experiments in the artistic and poetic domains extend beyond the frontiers of nationalistic art. Besides, abstract painting and phonetic poetry, even if they incorporate a definite return to the sources are no longer attached to the soil. These are flying forms flowing across countries, languages and territories. The insurrectional forms of art of the future are traversing the world, and establishing a universal, planetary dialogue.

How beneficial it would be for us to hear Ilia lecturing about the Internationale and nationalistic art, as happens in January 1918 at the Little Fantastic Tavern. The tracts, manifestoes and lectures as performing art forms are unusual, but are now flourishing in the youthful ardour of a new culture. The taverns have become battlegrounds where life evolves, where poets howl, where language of reason is in ruin and pops like weapons when new verses are orchestrated and danced within a humanity wishing to liberate itself. In this sense, Ilia is a catalyst and front runner. Let’s better say, he is an agent of change, within a new sensibility.

In the Tiflis of 1917-1920, capital of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, the influx of foreigners, the circulation of people and ideas, the febrile artistic life can only point momentarily to a Renaissance. As in other European cities, Georgian modernity constitutes itself drawing impetus from centrifugal and centripetal movements of heterogeneous influences within traditional culture. Artists and intellectuals call themselves Parisians and Tiflis in spite of its precarious existence is proud to be considered the new
Paris. Paris the legendary city, the Eldorado of art and culture, is shining like a Beacon. No doubt that the Zdanevitch brothers whose father was a professor of French are pleased.

Now in this particular context, a question must be considered. What is *Georgian modernism* and what does it comprise? What are its manifestations and characteristics. Where do we see the *georgianity* as such? The cosmopolitism momentarily appears to mask the double layering. The same layering that pitches the imperial against the provincial, the Russian against the Georgian, etc. One wonders if through the invention of zaum, as in the case of Ilia, one is not able to put aside poetically such a real world impasse.

When artists and poets from different milieus (Russia, Armenia, Georgia) regroup themselves, their aim is “to change the Axis of the Earth”\(^iv\), as declared by the members of the Degree 41 in their Gazette. Opening blinders, bringing down barriers, a certain *planetarism*, futurist in nature, emerges. Tiflis, in turn, becomes a vibrant center of art and poetry. The supporters of Degree 41, the university, tavern, publications, lectures, posters, performances, all manage to put Tiflis on the map of European modernity.

![Gazette Degree 41, No 1, July 1919](image)

Ilia apprentices himself at Caucasian Printers to learn typography for over a year (1917-1918). He is responsible for the editions of Degree 41, books exemplifying new concepts and techniques of typesetting and layout, stemming from the experimental art embodying daring and fantasy. He directs the printing of numerous booklets authored by his poet and painter acquaintances, as well as his own poetic works. These artisanal editions reflecting great ingenuity despite the scarcity of materials, are ancestors of *books by artists* which have since then proliferated, becoming an artistic genre in themselves.
We will emphasize here only one aspect of Ilia’s works published during this time. What is remarkable is the incursion of otherness in his poetic works. Not only through the use of zaum, sort of abstract or phonetic language, which has the appearances of strangeness but also the airing of Albania, Easter Island, both of which alluding to distant lands and states of primitiveness. Through the animalistic character of the Donkey (main character), religious and cultural constraints are removed, and the sensuality of subconscious desires are brought out to life without feeling any guilt. Marzio Marzaduri shows how, already in the performance of his first very drama: Yanko krul albanskay, in Petrograd (1916), Ilia recalls the myth of Bacchus and the outcome of symbolic transformation of the Donkey. Through free thinking, corporal gestures, danse and communication with the public, Ilia attemps to bring out the archaic nature of man which, according to Russian futurists, coincides with modernity. In this cycle of tragic-comedies under the title of Aslaablitchia (Dunkeyness), the zaum language being a finer point of avant-garde poetry manifests what is most hidden in man, i.e. emotions, instincts and desires. Here the highest form of modernity feeds itself on the neo-primitivist substance so dear to the European avant-garde. This is what makes Octavio Paz state that what is the oldest links up with what is the newest, by this distance in time that makes the oldest the furthest, different and heterogenous as regard culture.³

In addition, on one hand, his dramas, a sound based poetry, can be conceived as extending themselves in dance and theatrical act (kind of organic synthesis within the arts). On the other hand, his ingenuity in typographical art which opens the ways for visual and graphic poetry of which one will see developments for more than 50 years afterwards, all that, all of which made him a Beacon and a pivot in the making of Georgian modernity.

But this time is only a time.
Bridging Tiflis and Paris

“When the air of Tiflis became really unbreathable and the road to the West was beginning to open, the old dream of my youth returned: let’s go to Paris! This was Paris, the map of which hung above my bed since my childhood and of which my father had spoken about. There, where lived famous writers and no less famous painters, where awaited me unbelievable success and glory to be snatched.”

On his arrival in Paris (Nov. 1921), Iliazd attempts to relaunch modernism, but the war has caused the various factions to scatter, destroying hopes, decimating the bold, whilst imposing the harsh reality of an indescribable butchery (1914-1918). Afterwards, in 1921, he writes: “The artistic milieu to which I have been attracted so strongly is now discoloured and weak. Modernism in art, for which I have fought all my life has evolved, transforming itself as new academism into art that is dry and cellular. There aren’t any new people nor any new ideas. There is an impasse from which I don’t know what will emerge. The main reason for this situation is certainly the war. The end of European culture is inevitable, and we, Russians, have been predicting this for a long time.”

He locates his friend, Larionov, who introduces him to the Parisian milieu. His immediate act is to diffuse the inventions and discoveries of Russian futurism through numerous lectures.

He reestablishes his University of Degree 41, situated in Café Caméléon, and sets forth its objectives. In November 1921, a notable lecture by Iliazd entitled Ilia Zdanevitch and the Russian surdadaïsm, is delivered in the presence of Tristan Tzara, Philippe Soupault, Paul Éluard, and al., for which he is
praised in Créer, as follows: “His Greatness is in emerging deep from his native Georgia has surpassed and overcome Dadaism as well as Futurism ... He has made Messrs Philippe Soupault, Paul Éluard, Tristan Tzara outdated, ... who have come tonight to offer their allegiance to their little brother.”

He comes into contact with Marinetti who more or less ignores him. With Serge Romov, he presides over the formation of the group Tcherez (above), a transient group of Russian artists and poets based in Montparnasse, at the end of 1922. In the same vein, Iliazd visits Berlin, in another attempt to gain foothold in one more capital of modernism. He returns from there with the subject of a lecture (10 January 1923), entitled: Berlin and its frivolous literature, in which he opposes the Khaltoura, referring to transformations and ruptures in the avant-gardist literature reduced merely to stylistic formulations. Interestingly enough, the group Tcherez organizes an evening in honour of poet, Boris Bojniev, at the Licorne Gallery (29 April 1923). This musical and poetic evening offers the opportunity to present the drama Easter Island, his zaum poem danced by Lisica Codreano. Iliazd also reads A Dunkey for rent, the characters being played with marionettes. In the Gallery, is posted an Iliazd’s typographic rendition of a poem dedicated to Mrs. Vera Soudeïkine.

Figure 10: Sleeves for a Dress-poem dedicated to Vera Soudeïkine, 1922

He meets and ally himself with Tristan Tzara and attempts to conciliate the tenets of Dadaism with the goals of University of Degree 41 and those of the group Tcherez by organizing an evening called The Bearded Heart (6 Jul 1923). The programme includes the performance of Tzara drama: The Gaz Heart. But, this turns out to be a complete disaster (dispute between Tzara and Éluard). Dada died in Paris this evening and that’s where it’s buried.
In regard to all activities related to Russian Balls, especially the Transmental Ball (23 Feb. 1923) held to honour the zaum poets, Iliazd designs posters and prints cards, with the art for which he has become known. Not a single event involving Russian artists and poets is without Iliazd. Let’s mention in passing that the Russian artists Union is more numerous and better organized than its Georgian counterpart.

In Paris in 1923, Iliazd completes his last drama, the fifth one, entitled Ledentu as Beacon, dedicated to his friend Michael Ledentu, who had died returning from the front in 1917. This book is the summit of his art of the Georgian period, a typographical masterpiece with 52 original compositions, swarming with typefaces of all sizes and shapes and in which pages of orchestral poetry are extensively developed. We can see the concrete work on the printed letter’s physiognomy, on the indivisible unit of the letter of the alphabet as a real pass-sign of modernism. This work is considered as the most beautiful book of its kind in the Century. But the edition was in large part passed to the pestle (i.e. 150 instead of the expected 500, due to the lack of subscribers). This precise moment constitutes the Apogée and at the same time the descent into an other phase of modernism.
"This book represents the crown on the tomb of my lost friend and the crown on all that made us live for a decade. This book marks the end of the second phase of my work, that of modernism which was established over a span of 5 years. It is the synthesis and the disclosure of all that made the left wing of the Russian avant-garde survive for ten years, but now this life is over. (...) It is the testimony of a time that has irrevocably vanished. .... It is a crown on the tomb of our cause, because modern art now is really dead...”

From thereon, Iliazd finds it impossible to continue his zaum and his editions, due to a restricted audience. There is no more discussion or diffusion of ideas or materials. He consequently places himself in an exile of silence. A distancing happens thereafter, the bridge connecting milieus is reduced to a ravin and the fracture caused by war and the scattering and disintegration of the avant-garde following continues to deepen. The future is at a stand still. Only the past remains. In 1923, it is the grand farewell to his youth, end of a dream and of a utopia.

Thereafter, many years of silence separate Ledentu as Beacon and his first big Parisian book Afet (1940). It is published under the auspices of Degree 41 and is first of a series of 20 major illustrated books, produced until 1974.

In view of today’s topic, it is only in 1949 that a new vigor in regard to modern art and poetry is evident in Iliazd’s production. Numerous discussions with the Lettrists, who arrived on the Parisian scene in 1946, as well as the confrontation with Isidore Isou, reinstate a strong will in Iliazd to mount a battle canon against the usurper and plagiarist Isou, who pretends being the inventor of a Poetry of the Letter. Isn't it appropriate to note as well three conferences by Zdanevitch which are of great interest to us in regard to the "letterist" controversy: already in August 1918, "Orthography and Attraction of Letters"; in November 1918, "The magnetism of letters"; and in March 1919, "The Language and Functioning of
Letters". Without prejudicing the subject matter of these conferences, wasn't it sufficient to justify to oneself Iliadz's conference entitled "After Us, Letterism " (1947) and the preparation of the “Lettrist Anthology”.

With the anthology *Poésie de Mots Inconnus (Poetry of Unknown words)* (1949), which is historically rigourous and artistically unprecedented, we reach one of the heights of Iliazd’s art in composition and typography. This monumental work produced to commemorate the contributions of the early zealots and to do justice to forgotten Futurist and Dadaists poets, consolidates texts in zaum, Russian, German and French. The selection of texts is based on the problematic of innovation (primo-genesis) in the poetry of the single letter, an essential aspect to modernism if any, based on the value of newness. This anthology represents a major contribution to avant-garde poetry of the Twentieth Century. The works of 21 poets are illustrated by as many artists of École de Paris. Amongst them, it is worth mentioning the poets Khlebnikov, Kroutchenyk, Terentiev, Iliazd, and the artists Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Giacometti, Miro, Chagall. The clever manner in which Iliazd composes this book using folded pages gives it a theatrical character. Its originality stems from the proliferating variety of formats introduced in the composition of the pages, integrating texts, typography and images in settings, hithertho never achieved.

Figure 13 : Page Khlebnikov/Chagall

The book encompasses two if not three objectives. Firstly, there is the question of a historical rectification of avant-garde poetry in view of lettrists’ pretentions relating to the new and the original. Secondly, the book constitutes concurrently a testimony to a generation, those who invented a new form of poetry thirty years earlier. Finally, Iliazd third objective is to deliver a beautiful book, based on his own strict criteria. That is to say, he tries to avoid what he calls the *ugliness of a vulgar publication*. 
This formidable collection of names famous on the art and literary scene in one book constitutes a summit in the history of modernism.

Beyond this specific book, for sure the continuations of futurist and *everythingist* activities of Ilia in Tiflis are visible in numerous manifestations and creations by Iliazd in Paris but we cannot enumerate these here. The names of his Parisian books constitute a chamber of echoes where resonate constantly the sounds of his Georgian youth. As example, can we mention a few short verses of his *Boustrophédon au miroir* (1971) in which we hear echoes of: *Ledentu, … Kyrill my brother, … Pirosmani, my painter, my mountains.*

![Pages of *Boustrophédon au miroir*, 1971](image)

Perhaps it is rather significant that in 1972, three years before his death, Iliazd publishes in French (“*Pirosmanachvili 1914*”) an article he has written in 1914 (pub. in *Vostok*) on Pirosmani, his favourite painter, about whom he has said that with him he has learned the meaning of life. Isn't it important to find the portrait of the most Georgian of painters, Pirosmani, engraved by the most modern of painters, Picasso. We perceive embedded within this countenance accentuated with all sorts of lines, a most extraordinary history of modern art.
Finally, in the succession of Events and anti-Events of the Century, there is a slow turning in time in which Iliazd pursues his *everythingism* in a panchronistic fashion, in which all centuries have become contemporary, because his authors are both of yesterday and today. For such a stateless person as Iliazd, the book has become his country, a territory to build on and to explore. It is a place of recollection and reflection where are erected not only many bridges, but also many monuments of the past and the future. As a final word, the life cycle of modernism or any other art form is dependant on context, momentum and prevailing historical conditions. The art form's survival is further predicated upon the strength of the individual will. One must, nevertheless, factor in transformations of the local and the global over history, the stratification of languages, territories and cultures, the need for survival, and the fact of solitude.

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iii This double articulation links Ilia to stances similar to Picasso’s African period of cubism, the German expressionists of Der Blaue Reiter in Munich, and as well Russian painters such as Malevitch and others who, around 1913, were espousing the ideas described in the neo-primitivist manifesto of Alexandre Chevtchenko.

iv Gazette, *Degree 41*, No 1, Tiflis, 1919.


viii André Germain, « Iliazd et le surdadaïsme russe », *Créer*, Liège, 2e année, Jan-fév. 1923.


x Annick Lionel-Marie, loc. cit., pp. 60-61.