

**Correspondence and Cable-Cars  
/  
Letter from Chiatura, Georgia**

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Zürich, November 2018

Dear Reader

The editor asked me to share some ideas about the notion of correspondence. I am doing this in the form of a letter. A couple of decades ago this would have been very normal. Between the 18th and the late 20th century, thoughts were developed by correspondence. To respond to each other – from Latin *correspondere* (“mutually answering each other”, “harmonize”, “resonate”) – was an effective form of reflection and theorizing. Slower than a “conversation” and more focused than mere “resonance”, the notion “correspondence” implies that there is a spatial and temporal distance between the correspondents and ample time to reflect. This tradition ended in the late 20th century. I rarely have the patience to write a letter. I exchange ideas quickly in the office, on a panel, on the phone, by e-mail. I interview people or I am being interviewed, because this takes less time than writing an article and because it is more flexible. Like most people I consider meaning not as a static thing, but as a process, something that has to be negotiated, revised, questioned, not fixated. To some extent this idea already prevails in the tradition of exchanging letters and even in Antiquity in Plato’s famous imaginary dialogues with Socrates. But today, interlocutors can react immediately. They can adjust their opinion constantly. With this letter, a hybrid between a journalistic report of a news-correspondent and a theoretical speculation, I will try to slow down a little and ask how the notion of correspondence can be brought into play again.

In October 2018, I traveled with my students on a seminar week to Georgia. We visited the capital Tbilisi. From the ruins of socialism, culture sprouts everywhere. The fear that Russia might invade Georgia is palpable. But the youth does not let this spoil its optimism and celebrates techno parties in the foundations of bridges. The literary, theater and art scenes are triumphant. An architectural biennial has also been launched. Old caravansaries remind of the time of the Silk Road. A synagogue, a mosque, even the ruins of a Zoroastrian temple testify to religious tolerance. Like many troubled

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See F. Beyschlag, P. Krusch, *Deutschlands künftige Versorgung mit Eisen—und Manganerzen. Ein lagerstätttekundliches Gutachten, im Auftrag des Vereins Deutscher Eisen—und Stahlindustrieller und des Vereins Deutscher Eisenhüttenleute*, Berlin (no publisher), Dezember 1917, pp. 142-143.

2

*Ibid.*, p. 143

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Richard Levine, Glenn Wallace, "The Mineral Industry of Georgia", in *2007 Minerals Yearbook, U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey*, 2010, p. 17.2.

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In 2016 the mines were shut down for four months because of lack of demand. See *Democracy and Freedom Watch*, 14 April 2016 ([www.dfwatch.net](http://www.dfwatch.net), accessed November 2018).

cities, Tbilisi is “poor and sexy.” It attracts the *jeunesse dorée*, investors and the creative industries—and is considered a “new Berlin”. After embracing the wooden balconies, crumbling Art Nouveau palaces and Soviet monuments of the capital it was not easy to move on to Chiatura, an industrial town two hours west of Tbilisi. Towards the late 19th century, Chiatura was one of the world’s largest producers of manganese, an element that is essential for the fabrication of stainless steel. According to a study published in Germany during World War I, exploitation of the reserves started in 1848 and began to raise substantially in 1879. In 1911 and 1912, most of the ore went to the German Empire.<sup>1</sup> Like today, as it is trapped by its own resources of gas and oil, Russia was already subject to its natural riches. In the words of the authors: “Russia has enormous reserves of manganese, for which the indigenous iron industry has no use. It depends on export.”<sup>2</sup>

You might not be familiar with the economic history of Georgia, so please allow, dear reader, some more information: Following the Russian Revolution, the manganese was still extracted by international companies and exported. Only in the 1950s it started to go mainly into Soviet steel production and Chiatura prospered. Public buildings were erected. And, most interesting, a dense network of cable-cars was installed, which brought the ore from the mines to the factory and the workers from their home to the plants and the city center. Like the opulent subway stations in Moscow and Leningrad, the stations of the cable cars were designed as palaces for the workers, with colonnades and ornamentation. But since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the independence of Georgia in 1991 and the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, Chiatura is a “shrinking city.” About half of the original deposits remain. The reserves are estimated to be 239 million tons in seven mines and four quarries. 261.000 metric tons manganese ore, and 400.000 tons manganese concentrate.<sup>3</sup> The Georgian Manganese Holding, daughter of the British company Stemcor, which owns the Zestafoni Ferroalloy Plant and Chiaturmanganumi in Chiatura and employs about two thousand people is said to have invested a 100 million dollars in the mines and plants.

During our visit, we found no evidence of the alleged investments. The international market obviously has not replaced the planned economy of the Soviet Union. We heard about blackouts and the interruption of the water supply, about accidents and strikes.<sup>4</sup> It rained. The sun was not visible the whole day. The gloomy mood matched the atmosphere of the partially decaying city, which lies in a dark, deep canyon, along a black river. It is hard to tell which factories are functioning and which ones are decaying. Everything is covered by a grey patina of manganese dust. I was amazed that in such a

The scenery of Chiatura is featured in Ariel Kleiman's film *Partisan* (2015) and in Rati Oneli's documentary *City of the Sun* (2017).



topography a city could even emerge. It draws steeply up the slopes. Some residential areas are located on levels high above the gorge. Aside from a few posters with politicians, I saw no advertising. Only the main roads are paved. Between the houses I stood in the black mud. In comparison, the set of Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* is idyllic.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the desolate situation, several of the cable cars are still operating, and our students were eager to ride them. Transport is free throughout the city. Some cable-cars transport the ore to the factories. Others connect the individual quarters with the city center. A new central hub is under construction. The stations from the early 1950s still recall former wealth, even though the paint has peeled off the columns and the fountains are dry. I'm afraid of heights, but I dared to get into one of the completely rusty cabins. I could not guess the original color anymore. The sheet metal walls are dented, the window panes cloudy, in the rusty floor gaping holes. I felt more in a *Mad Max* movie than in the Swiss mountains. The woman who operated the cabin and issued the order to depart via an ancient telephone offered to open the windows so I could take pictures. I preferred not to look down.

While I was trying to avoid looking into the abyss opening beneath me, I recalled the splendid view we had three days earlier when visiting Dawit Garetscha, a medieval monastery consisting of dozens of caves. In medieval times, the monastery was a town with 5000 inhabitants. It is located on a rim that is part of oblique sediments from the Miocene and Pliocene overlooking a plain that goes on to Aserbeidschan. In Chiatura as well, I could look over the plateau with its deep ravines and valleys and imagine the spectacle of the earth folding and eroding. Of course, there is no relation between the monastery founded in the sixth century and abandoned in the 13th century and the modern mining town. However, in my imagination, the two phenomena corresponded with each other due to the relation to the earth, the role of excavation and extraction, and the visibility of the terrain.

I can assure you that I was afraid. But everything went well and I stepped out of the cable car. I saw half abandoned khrushchyovkas, as the prefabricated concrete apartment buildings from the 1960s are nicknamed. Many apartments were empty. Windows, doors, metal frames were dismantled, the shells of the buildings remained. Only individual apartments seemed still inhabited, the remaining balconies serve as a wooden storage. Chicken are held between the apartment blocks. As I waited for the cable-car to take me back down to the valley, the essay *Naples* by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis came to my mind. The essay was published in *Denkbilder*, a series of short essays that were originally published in newspapers in the mid 1920s. In their essay, the authors

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Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacin, "Naples," in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections, Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, transl. by Edmund Jephcott, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 163-173, quote: p.165.

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Ibid., p. 167.

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Li Tavor, *Listen, Architects. Collective tape music composition with 50 architects and 50 smart phones. Field recording from the mining city of Chiatura, Georgia – Performed within the walls of the an abandoned sanatorim in Tskaltubo, Georgia*, 2018.

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Lara Almarcegui, Oral presentation, Tskaltubo, 25 October 2018.



evoke porosity as metaphor for the spatiality, the life and the society of Naples. They evoke the grottoes and caves carved into the rock that the city is built open and state: “As porous as this stone is the architecture.”<sup>6</sup> They perceived the city as a scenography for performance that is ongoing night and day, blurring the stage with the actors and spectators. The backdrop inspired the play, and the actors animate their environment. “Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theaters. Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes”, the authors write.<sup>7</sup> Naples is not only built on the ground of Vesuvius, it is also constructed with its material. Most buildings, streets, walls and squares are made of porous, volcanic stone. Benjamin and Asja recall that the city looks “grey” rather than colorful. The same relation of the ground and the town can be found in Chiatura. The processes of erosion and extraction are intimately tied to all three sites, they reveal the ground on which they stand. In Chiatura and in Dawit Goradsche, much of this life was absent, and in fact, today they look more like empty stages. Yet perforated spaces—porosity—prevails in both sites and corresponds to the urban structure that Benjamin and Lacis observed.

You need to know, dear reader, that during our seminar weeks, we avoid mere sight-seeing. The musician and architect Li Tavor realized the music performance *Listen, Architects*.<sup>8</sup> She asked us to collect sounds. With our smartphones, we followed the hammering of the pneumatic drills, the rattling of winches, the chuckle of gutters, the gasps of diesel engines, the grunts of pigs and the clucking of chickens. After a few hours we left the city and drove to Tskaltubo, a town of spas. During Soviet times, workers from Georgia and other Republics used to relax in pompous bathing hotels. Now, like in Chiatura, many were abandoned. In a ruined pavilion, probably from the 1960s, we performed our concert. Li Tavor conducted the noise orchestra. The students pulled out their smartphones and played the recordings. Surrounded by the buzzing, rattling and hammering of the phones, my image of Chiatura became clearer. Only then did I realize that we were not *voyeurs* because we were looking for sounds and not confiscating images. Our attitude was not what is often referred to as “ruin pornography”, that is, the scandalous pleasure of observing misery from a supposedly safe distance. We were more akin to analysts who listen carefully in order to understand. Thanks to the access via my ears, I realized that Chiatura was not a ruin, but running. The artist Lara Almarcegui, who traveled with us, reminded us that mining is not an artifact “from the past, but something very much present”. Mining, she told us, had indeed disappeared from the sight of the industrialized countries but it was indispensable here.<sup>9</sup>

## Correspondences

Chiatura, Russia, United Press International  
Photo, 1960





Be assured, dear reader, I do not want to romanticize Chiatura. The town lost most inhabitants and went through long time spans without electricity and water. Workers have been killed in mining accidents related to the lack of maintenance. Wages are extremely low. The poverty is shocking. But as a phenomenon, the visit to the town offered me an insight on temporality and history. Rarely have I encountered a place, where all the ingredients of urbanity were so clearly visible. Like in an open book I could read—and hear—everything, from resource extraction, fabrication to distribution, from work to recreation. I could oversee the ground on which the city stands, the limits that define it, and also its infrastructure - the cable cars that kept it moving.

How does this refer to the topic of “correspondence?” What struck me most in Chiatura were the many cable cars. Without the network of cable cars that connect the spaces of work with the domestic spaces, material and people, the city would have not differed from other mining towns. With the cable cars running steadily over the valley, connecting the center with the most remote peaks, operating slowly yet steadily, I was able to perceive the town as a system of correspondences. In my mind it turned into an image of the way history works, a dense network transporting meaning, with much material lost on the way, with different media in use, full of contingency, incidents, uncertainty, but always moving.

Architectural history—and history in general—, in my view is discontinuous. I find concepts such as “influence” misleading, because they presuppose that a certain building is a direct result of an earlier one and that there is a continuity of meaning. I also find the concept of “typology” problematic because it conceives phenomena within a strictly given framework and reduces history to the act of repeating certain types. And I cannot follow the categorizations of “styles”, because they suggest that phenomena follow a common norm and can be squeezed into categories like books into bookshelves. To me it is as absurd to imagine that architectural theory is “based” on Vitruvius as it is to believe in historical “foundations.” History, in my view, is a dynamic process, not a given, it is a texture (rather than just a text) that is constantly transformed by the present but that also transforms our understanding of the present. Standing in the noise of a factory built in 1937 where manganese ore is processed, I thought that history in fact corresponds with the mining of resources (or sources, as historiographers say), for instance, archival documents or oral history. These resources are moved, processed, treated and moved again, not unlike the manganese ore that I heard tumbling down from carts into the mill, where it is broken up and granulated before being shipped to the iron works. Precisely in its decay, Chiatura was strangely intact and real. Unlike



most inner cities—including that of Tbilisi—nothing was “curated” here. And unlike the Ethnographic Museum in Tbilissi that contains a typological collection of displaced farmhouses rebuilt in a park that we had visited earlier, the town of Chiatura was not a museum. In Chiatura, place, time—as the rhythms and melodies of the sound recordings made clear—had not stopped, but kept going. I was not in the past, but in the present. A good place to write history.

Yours,  
Philip Ursprung