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By Kate Rich

After last November's elections in Georgia were widely condemned as rigged, three weeks of citizen street protests ensued. Although these barely provoked a ripple of western media interest, they did lead to the toppling of Shevardnadze and his government. Kate Rich, coincidentally in Tbilisi for the opening of her Bureau of Inverse Technology show, reports on the eerily choreographed and televisual nature of this latest velvet revolution

Being at a glamorous revolution is temporarily indistinguishable from delusional paranoia: sensations of being observed from a distance by important people; being part of world-scale events; plausibly having your actions controlled by powerful external forces; all the news refers to you.

I went to Tbilisi for an art exhibition of the Bureau of Inverse Technology, arriving after dark Monday November 17. The revolution looked sluggish, small clusters of people outside the parliament. People were estimating radical political change could take about 8 months. The television was more proactive, earlier that day National TV Rustavi 2 had initiated a honk your horn against the government protest. The BIT exhibition was opening Saturday. Thursday morning I was on Rustavi 2 breakfast show with a British Council translator, to chat about media-art. The presenter asked amusingly if she could borrow the Bureau's miniature spy plane, to fly it over the parliament and spy on the President. On the other side of the glass from the on-air studio, one kid was making an incredibly complex drawing out of pencil shavings and another one was playing chess against himself in front of flickering banks of video monitors, creating a credible background impression of a dynamic newsroom. When we got back to town, everyone recognised us. The car radio was getting live 101.9 (jazz) FM Berlin for several hours a day, eerily unexplained: a web stream hijacked and retransmitted locally by someone with access to commercial-quality radio equipment, or satellites. The crystal quality made it surreal, the weather and club listings for Berlin.

The revolution remained slow and obscure until Thursday night when technological premonition interrupted dinner; the local stringer for German television started getting calls from ZDF with the revolution schedule, his mobile was going crazy. He filled us in: the revolution would start Friday afternoon, with a huge demonstration on Saturday. Some kind of accreditation from the US State Department had come through in the form of an outraged denunciation of the rigged election in Georgia three weeks previous.

Things switched gear. Opposition leader Saakashvili – Misha – immediately offered to 'trample' the ruling government and left early next morning for the provinces, to raise the people. By Friday evening Rustavi 2 was out on the highway showing the speechless uncut footage of oncoming car headlights streaming toward the capital.

Saturday November 22 dawned sunny, hyper-clear, televisual. By noon, the opposition which was literally everyone, was massing for a manifestation about 1km from the gallery. An older artist guy who had told me all about himself at someone's studio a few nights earlier, was now addressing the entire population of Georgia from a tiny balcony above the crowd.

Right on 5pm the exhibition opened and the people stormed parliament: we watched it crammed around the TV in the security guys' room next door to the gallery. No-one in the room recognised any of the stormers, reported to be thousands of students organised under the slogan 'Enough', a Soros-seeded student movement. It was a great opening, everyone was excited, TV presenters were there. The secretary to the British Ambassador, a veteran of the Serbian revolution and just back from

London ‘briefing’ the Home Office was showing everyone his new-issue satellite phone.

The demonstration continued through the night. The television was approaching total videoart, no-commentary, the camera hovering awe-struck over the crowd, zooming in on individual rebel faces. An elongated moment of media synaesthesia as all feeds – mobile phone calls, Rustavi 2, Euronews, CNN, heads of state – converged on the ground we were standing on. The gallery loaned their video-projector to the revolution where it was used to project live television coverage of the massed crowds back onto the massive screen on the parliament facade. Sunday morning was dead quiet, people paralysed by their televisions as if by the World Cup; waiters frozen in cafe corners. The Russian Foreign Minister had addressed the crowd from the revolutionary balcony which seemed a strange piece of international diplomacy. In the afternoon, a heroic shift: looping footage showed police abandoning their caps, marching tearfully alongside their oppositional brothers. News remained fragmented until dinner when Shevardnadze resigned and the streets went insane, vast firework displays and more World Cup action, youths hanging out of cars waving man-sized opposition flags – ENOUGH with a fist logo – revived from the revolution in Serbia. People were already nostalgic for Shevardnadze – the wily grey fox. Ingrid, who is Belgian, had radio stars from her childhood phoning her mobile, wanting to chat to her live on air – the degree of attention was kind of embarrassing.

Read the same story from diverse media perspectives:

‘When NGOs attack’

<http://www.counterpunch.com/levich12062003.html>

World Socialist Website, ‘Georgia’s “Rose Revolution”: A Made-in-America Coup’

<http://wsws.org/articles/2003/dec2003/geor-d05.shtml>

Eurasianet: news and analysis funded by the Soros foundation.

<http://eurasianet.org/resource/georgia>

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