

Real and Surreal in the First Anti-Soviet Film: Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance*

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Abstract: *Tengiz Abuladze's (1924-1994) film Repentance (1984) is still regarded as one of the most anti-Soviet films produced within the former Soviet Union. While Soviet censorship was still harsh in the years when the film was made, it was the first, not only in Georgia but in the whole USSR, to openly and critically address the issues of Soviet totalitarianism and the Great Purge.*

The article suggests viewing the film from multiple angles, recalling the facts and circumstances that affected its production, including political support and/or censorship, fatalities, and artistic difficulties. The article demonstrates how the film director, aiming to reconstruct and reflect on the real history of one of the most brutal periods of the recent past, seeks artistic forms and approaches that will represent reality also through surreal and phantasmagorical scenes. The decision to blend the aesthetic elements of realism and surrealism in the film can be seen as an emphasis on the dual nature of Soviet history: it was real, yet so unbelievably brutal and illogical that it acquired surreal features. This fusion made the story somewhat eclectic but allowed us to see it as timeless, a struggle between good and evil. Repentance was precisely the first cinematic victory in the battle against the 'empire of evil'.

Keywords: *Anti-Soviet, film, Abuladze, brutal, phantasmagorical.*

Introduction

Tengiz Abuladze's (1924-1994) film *Repentance* (1984) is still regarded as one of the most anti-Soviet films produced within the former Soviet Union. While Soviet censorship was still harsh in the years when the film was made, it was the first, not only in Georgia but in the whole USSR, to openly and critically address the issues of Soviet totalitarianism and the Great Purge. A more intense process of revealing the taboed moments of Soviet history and

reflecting on suppressed, unrepresented collective traumas related to them began in Georgian culture during the Perestroika (1985-1991) and, even more strongly, after the fall of the USSR in 1991, when Soviet ideological censorship was cancelled, and the dark side of Soviet history had to be understood. A large body of literary texts, films, public essays, and research works began to appear in Georgia, aiming to rethink Soviet reality. A little later, the independent Georgian state banned Soviet symbols (by law in 2011) and established

the Museum of Soviet Occupation (2006) to declare its stance on the Soviet past. However, Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance* remains unsurpassed in Georgia and in former Soviet countries for both the sharpness of its civic position and its artistic quality.

Soviet Politics as a Supporter and/or Censor

At the beginning of the 1980s, labelled by Soviet propaganda as the period of 'developed Socialism', it would seem still very early to openly address such a ruthless and tabooed moment of Soviet history as the Great Purge. However, Georgian literature and film have been pushing the limits of representation for a couple of decades. In the background of these achievements, Tengiz Abuladze decided to speak out about the issues that, until then, had only been hinted at by Georgian writers, theatre directors, and film directors.

The film was made with the agreement of Eduard Shevardnadze (1928-2014), then the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Georgia. He, apparently, understood very well what influence a work of art – and most of all, a film – can have on society. From the very beginning of his party career, Shevardnadze established relations with Georgian cultural figures, supporting their projects within the limitations imposed by the Soviet centre, thereby building his own social capital. At that time, the young generation of Georgian filmmakers indeed benefited from this

attitude. Among them was young director Rezo Chkheidze (1926-2015), who was directing *The Soldier's Father* (1964) at Georgian Film [Kartuli Filmi, the only state-owned film studio in Georgian SSR], and Shevardnadze, then not a high-ranking party official, the head of the Tbilisi district where the film studio was located, personally took on the role of patron. Although the theme of the Great Patriotic War (as World War II was known in official Soviet discourse) was a high priority for Soviet propaganda, there were few Georgian films about it. *The Soldier's Father* turned out to be an award-winning film, acclaimed throughout the USSR. At the award ceremony in Moscow, Rezo Chkheidze spoke of the contribution of young party official Eduard Shevardnadze, and this became the beginning of Shevardnadze's career ascent. In the early 1980s, already serving as the head of the Georgian SSR, or the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, Shevardnadze began to humanise his image, also by supporting various cultural initiatives and seeking contacts with Georgian cultural figures. He sought to make three major films – the first portraying the patriotically minded and dedicated Georgian party official, whose prototype would be himself (the film *Earth, This Is Your Son* (1980), directed by Rezo Chkheidze); the second about the Great Purge – Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance*; and the third, unrealised, a film about the

most powerful medieval Georgian King David the Builder (1073-1125). The film scholar Giorgi Gvakharia wrote: "We should think that Shevardnadze knew — *Repentance* would help his rise as a politician... He felt what would happen in the country, so he found the film supportive of his goals - that after the premiere, Georgian society would mention him as a co-author of *Repentance*, as well as 'Perestroika,' and credit him for the collapse of the Communist system. In that sense, Georgia's then First Secretary of the Central Committee, who by the time of the premiere of *Repentance* was already the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, was ahead of his time... unlike his colleagues, who from the beginning perceived *Repentance* as an anti-Soviet film"¹.

Despite Shevardnadze's patronage, Tengiz Abuladze was aware of the possibility that the film might never appear on screens, or that he and the production team might even be sent to the "den of the white bears," that is, to prison in Siberia. He often joked about this during the production process. Yet there was some truth in the joke. It is a known fact that the head of the Georgian KGB, Aleksii Inauri (1908-1993), reported to Moscow that Abuladze was making an anti-Soviet film. He even demanded the destruction of the filmed material. This happened after the dramatic and controversial events, the attempt of a small group of young Georgians to escape the USSR by aircraft hijacking (18-19

November 1983). After the challenge failed, the hijackers were imprisoned and soon executed. Gega Kobakhidze (1961-1984), a young actor initially playing the role of Tornike Aravidze, was among them. The premises of his house were searched, and the screenplay of the film was seized. Although many episodes of Tornike Aravidze's parts in Gega Kobakhidze's performance had already been filmed, he was, of course, unable to continue with the role. The young actor was outstanding in this role: great spiritual strength emanated from his presence; he was seen as a descendant of the Aravidzes, who was ready to take moral responsibility for the brutalities committed by fathers and grandfathers. It must be said that the film would have been entirely different with the participation of Gega Kobakhidze.

Preparing the Story to Tell

Private consultations concluded with an agreement on the themes of the films. There were many stories describing the cruelty of the repressions of the Purge. Tengiz Abuladze, together with the second director and co-author of the screenplay, Nana Janelidze (b. 1955), researched in detail the biographies of outstanding repressed figures of the Georgian intelligentsia — "Nana Janelidze met repressed people (or their relatives) and heard their stories. Nika Agiashvili, Nita Tabidze, Ketevan Javakhishvili, Lali Akhmeteli, Nino Uchaneshvili ... — these are just a

few of the people on whose personal histories this brilliant film was woven”². It should be noted that, in addition to meeting with descendants of the repressed, during the preparatory period, the film’s production team studied the press, literature, and posters of that time in detail. As an assistant of director, film’s crew member, I was personally responsible for this part.

The main intrigue, on which the film’s plot is built, is exhuming the corpse from its grave. This is the axis, the “intellectual skewer” of the film, as Tengiz Abuladze himself called it. “The film is based on a true story that happened in one of the villages in the Samegrelo region. Tengiz Abuladze was told this by his close friend Akaki Bakradze [literary scholar, 1928-1999]: writer Nodar Tsuleiskiri [1932-2015] has an interesting idea, and was told how a young man dug up the corpse of a deceased prosecutor, and placed it, watching over it, by the gate of the mourner. The young man’s father was an accountant. One KGB man made advances to his mother, sent his father into exile to the Gulag, and forced the mother into becoming his mistress. The insulted woman committed suicide. The boy grew up, and the KGB officer became a distinguished prosecutor; when he died, the young man took revenge by digging him up”³. The real story seemed more personal, but in the end, everything still came to the ugliness of the Soviet system — the use of power for evil goals, the Gulag, suicide, and exhu-

mation of the dead. In Abuladze’s film, unlike the real story, an impressive, generalised image of evil is created, in the form of the Aravidze family, which opposes and destroys all that is good and valuable, whether it be a historic medieval Georgian church or notable members of society. In the film, the Soviet official Varlam Aravidze is the one who does not deserve to be buried.

The film’s original title was *Memory*. The title of the novel by Nodar Tsuleiskiri was *Hyenas* [Aptrebi] (1985) and was considered as one version for the film’s title. The title *Repentance* belongs to the second director [now this position is called the first assistant] of the film, Neli Kutateladze. “The film’s vision is Orwellian, Varlam’s power is based on absurdity and ambiguity. The surrealism of his world is nothing other than the ambiguity of 1984”⁴.

Representing the Real, yet Surreal Soviet History

Together with the stories of their victims, the film tells the story of three generations of the Aravidze family: the grandfather, Varlam Aravidze, is the Soviet party official, responsible in Georgia for the exile and execution of innocent sufferers of the Great Purge – the most brutal repressions of the Soviet Stalinist totalitarian regime performed in 1936-1938 all over the Soviet state; his son, Abel Aravidze, is a respected and quite influential member of the Soviet, post-Stalin Georgian society,

who – like the whole society - never questioned the deeds of his father and his generation, and continued their living in an atmosphere of Soviet false values; the grandson, Tornike Aravidze, is a young man who was raised in complete ignorance about the recent past, but, when encountered with the story of the victims of the purge, desperately tries to take the responsibility critically, and, eventually, takes his own life. When generalized, Varlam Aravidze's character can be related to any dictator, foremostly, the central figure of Soviet totalitarianism, Joseph Stalin (1878-1953). Still, Varlam also carries clear features of Lavrenty Beria (1899-1953), Georgia's Communist leader and a hangman, personally responsible for the deaths and exiles of thousands of Georgians during the Purge⁵.

In the Georgian cinematography of the 1980s, as well as in literature and theatre, allegorical audio-visual storytelling was firmly established. The existence of a double layer in literature and film was obviously determined by Soviet censorship. In the screenplay of *Repentance*, based on a true story, the protagonist was intended to be a man seeking vengeance. During the preparatory period for filming, Tengiz Abuladze sought a form for the film — one that would convey the true story, but also allow for alternative interpretations and readings in case of necessity. Theatre director Robert Sturua (b. 1938) writes about *Repentance*: “The union of grotesque and the theatrical is bro-

ught to its maximum. It isn't easy to turn into an object of art that which is the theme of this film... I think Abuladze managed to unite an authorial, poetic cinema with real life, so that he did not entirely cross over to the other side. I look at life already through his eyes — this is his world, moreover, transferred into a somewhat poetic world by force. Through metaphors and strange comparisons, one can see psychological drama, lyrical scenes, farce, and grotesque elements. Everything was blended and never departed from real life”⁶.

The decision to blend the aesthetic elements of realism and surrealism in the film can be seen as an emphasis on the dual nature of Soviet history: it was real, yet so unbelievably brutal and illogical that it acquired surreal features.

The search for a surrealistic form began with a completely realistic alteration – the vengeance-seeking protagonist, Ketevan Baratelli, a daughter of the artist and the victim of the Purge, Sandro Barateli, was portrayed as an eccentric confectioner; she learns the news of Varlam Aravidze's death through a newspaper announcement read by the character of the driver, played by Georgian film director Rezo Esadze (1934-2020); throughout that episode, he ravenously eats the creamy models of the churches placed on top of the cakes baked by Ketevan. It is here that two connotative layers interact — the real and the phantasmagorical. The beginning and the finale of the film are built on the principle of a

classical tragedy. The whole course of the film can be taken on one hand as a true story and on the other as Ketevan Barateli's fantasy. The tragedy that unfolds could be taken as a dream. Thus, the film, a fusion of real and phantasmagorical, was born. Gogi Mikeladze (b. 1946), the film's production designer, has a boundless imagination, inventiveness, and taste, which permitted Tengiz Abuladze to unite apparently incompatible details in a single whole. One of the episodes of the film depicts iron-armoured knights, some on horseback and some in vintage Mercedes cabriolets, searching for artist Sandro Barateli (Edisher Giorgobiani, b. 1955) buried alive; his wife Nino (Ketevan Abuladze, b. 1959) is also desperately looking for him; a white-shirted peasant turns out to be a betrayer; victorious Varlam Aravidze (Avtandil Makharadze, 1943-1987) sings an aria of Mephistopheles; and all these appear to be Nino's dream. In a dream, you know, everything is compatible.

The film's cinematographer, Mikhail Agranovich, wrote: "A good director is someone who has idiotic ideas come to his head. Ideas that seem ridiculous to a discerning and rational person. Then it turns out the film stands precisely on that. That is, a masterpiece is often founded on idiotic ideas... To this day, I still dislike the white grand piano episode in *Repentance*. But in the end, such ideas win and the films are built on them, just like Fellini's pictures, which are built on icons and archetypes. Tengiz had only these types of

ideas come into his head. I recall a group of young people on set who were constantly carving out something new, inventing. And Tengiz collected the most exact ideas from them. As it turns out, it is very exact. Yet *Repentance* is characterised by a certain eclecticism, unlike the preceding two films, which are stylistically amazingly precise and cohesive"⁷.

The Director and the Crew

Tengiz Abuladze's special attitude toward the creative group's members is also noteworthy: he always took every valuable idea into account. He used to say "our film" and never referred to it as "mine." By this, the director constantly emphasised the importance of every role in the filmmaking process. It must be said that the creative group was indeed extremely devoted throughout the film-making process. I was fortunate to be part of the film crew, as the director's assistant, alongside young members, including future film directors Zaza Khalvashi (1957-2020) and Paata Milorava (1959-2014), as well as Gocha Abashidze, Tzitsi Jervalidze, and others.

After the director had to replace Gega Kobakhidze, the role of Tornike Aravidze was given to young Merab Ninidze (b. 1965), then still a student of the Institute of Theatre and Film, Tbilisi, who grew into one of today's most successful and internationally established Georgian actors. He recalls getting into *Repentance* as follows: "It is strange that my story,

and the beginning of the film, resemble each other — I too read in a newspaper about the audition for the role of Tornike. The newspaper reported that, for certain reasons, director Tengiz Abuladze had to replace the actor mid-way through filming and is now announcing a competition to select a new actor. That was it, without any additional information or explanation of reasons. Very soon, Abuladze's assistants came to the Institute to find candidates for the role. At that time, I was already a second-year student. Nino Tarkhan-Mouravi suggested to Malkhaz Aslamazishvili and Lela Tsiphuria that I also go through auditions. Indeed, I was called and I went"⁸.

Mikhail Agranovich was the third cinematographer whom Tengiz Abuladze hired for the film. The filming was started by Giorgi Gersamia (b. 1939). Unfortunately, the material shot with an old Soviet camera, Konvas, due to its insufficiency, was technically flawed. Solomon Shengelia, a cameraman from Batumi with an exciting vision, replaced Gersamia. Many shots he filmed made it into the film: the rally scene; Varlam Aravidze's madness scene, when, in a white shirt, in the closed circle of the bunker, he attempts to eclipse the sun; the dance of Varlam's daughter-in-law (Ia Ninidze, b. 1960) around Varlam's coffin, and others. Solomon Shengelia, as a cameraman for film chronicles, was most successful while filming outdoors, where he did not use artificial lighting. While interiors, where setting up lighting was crucial,

were an unconquerable difficulty. For consultation, Tengiz Abuladze brought two cinematographers, Lomer Akhvlediani and Alexander (Kukuri) Gvasalia, to Batumi, as a significant part of the film was shot there. Tengiz Abuladze had worked with Lomer Akhvlediani (1934-2022) on the previous, award-winning film *The Wishing Tree* (1977) and was eager to cooperate with him again on *Repentance*. Still, Lomer Akhvlediani was busy making Rezo Chkheidze's film from Shevardnadze's project *Earth, This Is Your Son*. Another candidate for the role of cinematographer was Alexander Antipenko (b. 1938), with whom Abuladze had cooperated on his film *The Plea* (1967), but he was busy with another film too. Finally, Mikhail Agranovich arrived from Moscow with the dream film camera, a reflex, and the shootings continued with Kodak as well. It can be said that due to these consequences, the tragic fate of Gega Kobakhidze, and technical problems, filming was done virtually three times.

Avtandil (Avto) Makharadze, the actor playing the roles of both Varlam and Abel Aravidze, wrote: "Tengiz often repeated one phrase — 'art is creation of harmony from chaos.' Why did he say that? Because his creation was that, from chaos he created harmony. He could take from a hundred words the one word that was most important for him. Tengiz took only what was necessary for his particular work - not just for the film, but even for a single scene or a single frame. Only he did this with astonis-

hing lightness, and you would not guess how many things he was interested in things people told him or those happening around him”⁹.

The Trilogy

Repentance was intended as the third part of a trilogy, together with *The Plea* and *The Wishing Tree*. Tengiz Abuladze planned to incorporate the characters from his two previous films. The beautiful Georgian actress Lika Kavjaradze (1959-2017) was invited to Batumi, and the episode replicating her famous scene from *The Wishing Tree* was even shot, as she lies dying, dirtied with mud, humiliated. She would symbolise the victim of the Purge, the beauty smeared in mud, insulted and degraded. However, this episode did not make it into the film.

Another character from *The Wishing Tree*, Pupala (Sopiko Chiaureli, 1937-2008), was to be transferred into *Repentance*. Tengiz Abuladze contacted the actress and offered to transform her into an aged Pupala with the help of sophisticated makeup. Sopiko Chiaureli's answer was a counterproposal — her mother, the famous Georgian actress Veriko Anjaparidze (1897-1987), should be filmed instead, while the resemblance with the younger character from the previous film was also achieved through the outfit. Ultimately, it was decided so. The episode featuring

Veriko Anjaparidze was filmed in front of her house, located on what is now Veriko Anjaparidze Street in Tbilisi. However, the final walk of ‘Pupala’ into the depths of the city's streets was performed by a stunt. Since the makeup was mentioned, it is inevitable to note the contribution of makeup artist Soso Barnabishvili to the filmmaking process. The portrait transformations of Varlam and Abel are also a testament to his mastery.

Conclusion: Good and Evil

The Plea, *The Wishing Tree*, and *Repentance* form a trilogy, which can be called so only because of its conceptual unity: the eternal struggle between good and evil. Tengiz Abuladze noted in one of his interviews: “Our – and not only our – greatest mistake of any time, the fateful sin is that a huge part of society perceives the difference between evil and good in comparative terms, whereas in reality this difference is absolute.” *Repentance* was precisely the first cinematic victory in the battle against the ‘empire of evil’, the USSR, and remained so even in the 21st century. Huge success followed the film's release, which happened only after a two-year imprisonment ‘on the shelf’ by Moscow's censorship. In 1986, its rise began. *Repentance* remains the most artistically elevated anti-Soviet film.

Notes

- ¹ Goiorgi Gvakharia, “Tengiz Abuladze – 80 (Part Two)”, *Radio Liberty*, March 1, 2004 (in Georgian) <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1533940.html> (accessed October 23, 2025) (All citations from Georgian are made by the author of the article).
- ² Tamar Otiashvili, “Repentance – The Film Tengiz Abuladze ‘Returned from the Afterlife’ to Shoot”, *Nostal.ge*, August 14, 2018 (in Georgian) <https://nostal.ge/2018/08/14/monanie-ba-filmi> (accessed October 23, 2025).
- ³ *Ibidem*.
- ⁴ Gogi Gunia, “1984 in Cinema”, *Digital Culture*, October 19, 2013 (in Georgian) <https://digitalculture.ge/1984kinoshi/> (accessed October 23, 2025).
- ⁵ On the Great Purge and Beria’s role, see: Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and His*

Hangmen: The Tyrant and Those Who Killed for Him, Random House, New York, 2005.

- ⁶ Robert Sturua, “About Tengiz Abuladze”, In Tengiz Abuladze, *Reflections*, (Eds. Nana Janelidze and Nino Natroshvili), Cezanne Publishing, Tbilisi, 2009 (in Georgian) pp. 48-49.
- ⁷ Mikhail Agranovich, “On Tengiz Abuladze”, In Tengiz Abuladze. *Reflections*, (Eds. Nana Janelidze and Nino Natroshvili), Cezanne Publishing, Tbilisi, 2009, p. 210 (in Georgian).
- ⁸ Merab Ninidze, *The Main Thing Is Not to Become an Actor*, Intelekti, Tbilisi, 2015, p. 34 (in Georgian)
- ⁹ Avtandil Makharadze. “Tengiz Abuladze”. In: Tengiz Abuladze. *Reflections*. Eds. Nana Janelidze and Nino Natroshvili. Cezanne Publishing, Tbilisi, 2009, p. 206-207 (in Georgian).

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