

Repentance

(Pokaiane/Monanieba, Soviet Union 1984; D.: Tengiz Abuladze)

(Picture 2) The non-Russian Soviet republics experienced a revival in film production from the beginning of the Sixties, a phenomenon that was later described in film history as the “emancipation of national cinematography”. Georgian film production in particular experienced a renaissance in this context, developing from the beginning along its own lines in a way that was largely independent of the Russian art of film-making.

In Georgia, a new language of film was successfully developed in the studios of the capital Tbilisi; a language which seemed to be firmly rooted in the national film tradition. The success of Georgian film-making was attributed to the genre of tragicomedy, which was based on the clash of the old patriarchal ways of life with modern civilisation. The basic situation had seemingly infinite variations: a farmer comes to town, a wine-grower comes to the front; a party secretary fights against local customs which in the modern state are seen as corruption, however within the patriarchal world of the village are the behavioural norm. Georgian film-making places the parable-like rounding of its stories in contrast to the medium’s rough style of depiction. “Metaphorical laconism is the general form of oriental thought”, opines Georgian filmmaker Èl'dar Shengelaia. Features of Georgian films therefore often include taking refuge in poetic and humorous language, which allows a symbolic and metaphorical distancing - most impressively in Revaz Chkheidze’s masterpieces and especially in the works of Otar Ioseliani.

(Picture 3) The film we are now about to watch bears the difficult-to-translate title of *Pokaiane* (in Georgian *Monanieba*), which in English translates as a mixture of “confession”, “atonement” and “repentance”. In 1987, *Pokaiane* was the Soviet cinema sensation of the year, and received numerous national and international awards. In this year in the Soviet Union alone, the film was seen by 13.6 million people. *Pokaiane* was the last Soviet film which enjoyed such widespread circulation, reaching as it did 1200 rental copies. Even prior to its release, few Soviet auteur films were able to kindle such intense discussion in society.

(Picture 4) *Pokaiane* is one of a trilogy of films by director Tengiz Abuladze, for which, together with “The Plea” (1967) and “The Tree of Wishes” (1976), he was awarded the Lenin Prize in 1988. In this cycle, the director deals with the origin of evil and its destructive force,

as well as themes of danger, mistrust and hostility. The language of the film, which turns away from realistic forms of representation, is based on the topoi of Georgian history, literature and folklore, and brought Georgian film-making to worldwide attention. The first two films of the trilogy were, artistically and politically speaking, however, merely a prelude to what, “after many years of thought”, Abuladze managed to bring to the screen after just five months of shooting. *Pokaiane* is an anti-Stalinist film, in fact a film which protests against all forms of dictatorship, and also a film about the irreconcilable conflict between generations.

(Picture 5) The piece also has a somewhat chequered history: it was produced hastily and illegally in the Chernenko period of 1984/85, and if the censorship authorities had had their way, it would have been completely destroyed. However Abuladze was able to save a copy. This copy was reproduced on video and circulated secretly in Georgian intellectual circles during the subsequent months, until in 1986 Elem Klimov, the new head of the Soviet Film Federation, came into contact with it. He was inspired by *Pokaiane*, as were influential officials such as the Central Committee Head of Propaganda Aleksandr Iakovlev and Chief Ideologist Egor Ligachev. Finally, it reached General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who just a few days after a private screening in the Kremlin, released the film to national distributors.

In the Georgian capital Tbilisi, where local party leaders wanted to prevent its reproduction, the then Soviet foreign minister and former Georgian Communist Party leader Eduard Shevardnadze pushed the release through. Within a few days, the film was a huge success. A Georgian Party newspaper celebrated *Pokaiane* as “a symbol of the moral renewal of society”. Many spectators applauded phrases such as “if we want to, we can capture the cat in a darkened room, even if it isn’t really there”, a phrase with which the dictator hero of the film justifies his terrorist methods.

(Picture 6) The film itself has three levels of action which fit inside each other; the individual elements go together, mosaic-like, to form the complete picture. The whole edifice would collapse if you would remove just one stone. This was why Abuladze opposed censorship of the film so vigorously, and didn’t agree to a compromise. The prologue of the film should to be deleted, as in it the CPSU was accused of serious errors in past policy. This would have brought the rather generalised cinematic parable slightly too close to Soviet reality for comfort. But Abuladze denied, and so every scene of the film remained.

(Picture 7) The scenes are partly based on real events in Georgia in the Thirties, translated into absurd, multi-faceted and allegorical parables. Through his grotesque, surrealistic film language, in a sense Abuladze managed to shape an artwork into a theory of totalitarianism in Georgian. In an interview, he commented on it as follows:

“Like any parable, the film emphasises its specific historical subject matter, its specific content. One should not indulge in associations because they limit the message of the artwork. We tried to get away from specific history. Every tyrant or dictator - from Nero to the Greek colonels - has acted in the same way. We mixed fantastic, conventional images with real facts. Every single scene in the film is, to all intents and purposes, the reflection of a true story, an authentic character.”

(Picture 8) On a purely narrative level, the film is about Ketevan Barateli, a middle-aged woman who is taken to court for unearthing the corpse of dictator Varlam Aravidze a total of three times in the early hours of the morning. In court, Ketevan tells hows her parents were destroyed by Varlam Aravidze and his helpers. Under his cruel reign of terror, countless people suffered. Ketevan’s father, talented artist Sandro Barateli, died in prison. Then, one day, her mother disappeared, and the little girl was left an orphan. Her digging up of the corpse should therefore be understood as a symbolic struggle against forgetting.

(Picture 9) The semantic density of the film is based on the interconnection of the particular and universal, a point also signalled by the name of the dictator. It consists of the popular Georgian name Varlam and the fictional family name Aravidze, derived from the Georgian word *aravin*, which roughly translated means *no-one*. These two levels are then raised to a phantasmagorical level. With his hedgehog haircut and pince-nez on his nose, the anti-hero echoes traits of Stalin's Secret Service Chief, Lavrentii Beria, who in contrast to Stalin is today widely hated in his Georgian homeland. The character also sports a small, Hitler-style moustache. His movements, his habits and his language are sometimes strongly reminiscent of Stalin, while his black uniform and leather holster consciously awaken associations with Mussolini.

(Picture 10) The particular is linked to the universal in other figures too. Sandro embodies the artist who is committed to “true” art and sacrifices himself for its sake; Nino Barateli is his

wife and Ketevan's mother, who at the same time is visually stylised to represent the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows. In addition, she is the female counterpart to the diabolical father figure of Varlam.

(Picture 11) These figures are set in contrast to the people as a mass, who are provided with amusements and ideological slogans and who do not see through Varlam's medieval power plays with his loyal vassals. Once again, two types of vassal are outlined: one is the type of person who believes blindly in the force of good, who allows himself to be used by the system and in the end destroys himself. The second is the type of person who is prepared to execute inhuman commands at any price in search of personal advancement, and whose acts overreach even the ruler's vile intentions.

(Picture 12) The film thus has two main topics: on the one hand it deals with the crimes and excesses of Stalinism, fascism and dictatorships in general, sometimes in an artistically alienated fashion. On the other hand, it is about the processing of this dark chapter by the descendants of those involved, a necessary but all-too-often neglected activity. But the film does not show fathers of the Stalin generation clashing with their sons - this era was already over in the Eighties. Instead, it depicts the uncertainty of grandchildren in the face of the crimes of their supposedly honourable grandfathers. The grandson in *Pokaiane*, lied to by his father, learns during Ketevan's trial of his grandfather Varlam's complicity, when she recounts her childhood memories of the Great Terror, which was responsible for claiming the lives her parents. The well-established grandson is shocked by the truth, and even more appalled by his parents' attempts to conceal this truth as a crazy lie by claiming that Ketevan should be put in an asylum. For this middle generation of parents, representative of the Brezhnev generation in the Soviet Union, it's all about power as a means to preserve their privileges. At the end of the film, the grandson eventually shoots himself because he realises that he has the blood of millions on his hands and that his father is still trying to justify this. The moral younger generation perishes due to the immorality of their parents and grandparents.

(Picture 13) The central message of the film thus revolves around remembering and forgetting, and how the following generations must find ways to cope with the past. The film is directed vehemently against collective repression – however, Abuladze offers no social strategies to deal with collective guilt, instead calling for classic repentance with all its

religious connotations. The inadequacy and bias of human judgement is consequently contrasted to the Last Judgement (quote): “Every road leads to the Church, to God, and He is the Last Judgement”.

(Bild 14) Tengiz Abuladze described his film as a sad phantasmagoria and a grotesque tragicomedy. He makes use of the grotesque, the surreal, the fantastic and the absurd, as well as eccentric and comical style elements, because it seemed to Abuladze that the methods of realistic film-making did not deal with the story. His compatriot Èl'dar Shengelaia characterised this situation as follows:

“Realism is and remains a product of European analytical thinking. Oriental culture does not strive towards representation, but always towards symbolism, parable, ornament. And Georgian culture stands on the borderline between the two.”