

**MYTH AND MORALITY IN
TENGIZ ABULADZE'S "POKAIANIE (REPENTANCE)"**

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Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As, to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honor shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And Art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill:
Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that to die, I leave my love alone.

The vulgar tyrant Varlam Aravidze quotes this Shakespearian sonnet LXVI (minus the two final lines) to an admiring but justifiably uneasy audience of his future victims in a scene from *Pokaianie (Repentance)*, Tengiz Abuladze's phantasmagoric film about fascism and the abuse of power.¹ The sonnet is a perfect microcosm of the film, and its documented injustices (and

1 Tengiz Evgen'evich Abuladze, b. 21 January 1924 in Kutaisi; studied Rustaveli Theatrical Institute, Tbilisi; 1946-1953 studied All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, with Sergei Iutkevich; 1953 began professional film-making career in Georgia. *Pokaianie* is the third film of Abuladze's trilogy, which began with *Mol'ba (Supplication; 1968)* and *Drevo Zhelaniia (Tree of Desire; 1977)*; *Pokaianie* is Abuladze's seventh film.

The filmscript for *Pokaianie* was written in 1981-82 by Nana Dzhanlidze (Abuladze's daughter-in-law), Rezo Kveselava, and Abuladze himself; filming was completed at the very end of 1984, with camera work by Mikhail Agranovich and staging by Georgii Mikeladze. With the support of Eduard Shevernadze (then general secretary of the Georgian Communist Party), Abuladze escaped potential censorship problems through a loophole in the Goskino bureaucracy. He explains: "We learned that Georgian television has four hours of film production a year they may fill with whatever they like. All the approval you need is to send the name of the director and the subject to Moscow. We telegraphed: Tengiz Abuladze will shoot a moral and aesthetic subject" (*Variety*, 1 July 1987, 72). Thus Georgian television ordered the film and put up the money; filming was done at Gruzia-film; the work did not pass through Moscow censorship.

The process was not without problems. A planned May 1985 Georgian premiere was cancelled because unauthorized videotape copies had attracted the attention of the KGB, which alerted Moscow. General Secretary Gorbachev had, possibly, already heard rumors of a "secret" anti-Stalinist film.

tragic love) proceed to unfold on screen in disturbing ways.

Pokaianie was completed in late 1984. It was first shown to shocked and unbelieving viewers at closed screenings in Tbilisi (at Gruzia-fil'm studios) on 17 May 1986 and in Moscow to various groups of "cultural workers" in October 1986. The film immediately came to symbolize Gorbachev's *glasnost*'. Its subsequent all-Union release in January 1987 convinced Soviet citizens, as no other single event could, that Mikhail Gorbachev was serious about reform.² We must view it as a landmark film that signaled the end of one era and the start of another.

Pokaianie is a difficult film to discuss, first because it is a philosophical film that addresses many complex, multivalent topics, and second because it uses the analogical, non-linear language of image, metaphor, and symbol. It erases traditional boundaries -- boundaries that separate past from present, reality from nightmare, absurdity from logic. The film contains elements of Russian and Georgian legend, folklore, myth, Greek tragedy, world culture, and the Christian tradition. It has been called a "film parable" (*kino-pritcha*) and "socialist surrealism." Abuladze himself labels it "lyrical tragifarce" and "tragic phantasmagoria."³

The problem of *Pokaianie*'s genre has concerned critics from the beginning and rightly so, for the film's genre is also a key to its meaning. One key to understanding *Pokaianie* is to view it as "tragic phantasmagoria" (Abuladze's term) or, more precisely, phantasmagoric tragedy. If we traditionally define the tragedy's structure as the recounting of important events in the life of an important person, culminating in catastrophe caused by *hubris* (arrogance) and *hamartia* (fatal flaw), and the tragedy's function as the arousal of emotions of pity and fear in the audience followed by a catharsis of these emotions, then *Pokaianie* fits the classic mold. To see *Pokaianie* exclusively as a classical tragedy, however, is insufficient.

2 On 13 November 1986, occasional closed screenings of *Pokaianie* for "cultural workers" were banned and the film's fate hung in the balance. At the end of the month *Moskovskie novosti* carried Vladimir Lakshin's enthusiastic review of the film, and rumors flew around Moscow that Mikhail Gorbachev himself had seen it and approved it. *Pokaianie* officially premiered in Moscow at the Tbilisi theatre on 26 January 1987 (in connection with "Georgian Film Week" ["Nedelia gruzinskogo kino"]), then began its national run in six Moscow theatres four days later. 700,000 people saw it in the first ten days (*Lit. gazeta*, 25 Feb. 1987, 8). Goskino estimated that 25,000,000 Soviet viewers would have seen it by the end of its run (*Variety*, 1 July 1987, 72). *Pokaianie* received the special Jury's *Grand Prix* at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival.

3 Tengiz Abuladze, "Nowhere and Everywhere. At No Time and Always..." (Interview by Neya Zorkaya), *New Times* 16 February 1987, 28.

Pokaianie resembles more closely an extreme variant of the classical tragedy: the revenge, or blood tragedy. Originally Senecan, this tragic form was most widely popularized by Elizabethan dramatists.⁴ The main theme of the blood tragedy is the revenge taken by the victim's ghost or the victim's son (often urged on by the father's ghost) against the perpetrator of some heinous crime. The themes that appear in the revenge tragedy are insanity, suicide, intrigue, adultery, blood, and the use of sensational horrors (such as supernatural intervention and a generous number of dead bodies upon the stage). Stock characters include ghosts and tyrants. There is much introspection, soliloquy, philosophy, and tragic irony. The violent emotional impact of the revenge tragedy is periodically defused by contrasting episodes of comic relief and black humor, but these also serve to highlight the moral evil of the crime. The most important function of the revenge tragedy is the exploration of social perimeters and moral categories, while its psychological purpose is to restore balance to a society knocked off balance by catastrophic events. This definition precisely fits *Pokaianie*, making it a modern revenge tragedy.

To adapt the 17th century Elizabethan or Jacobean revenge tragedy to his poetic and cinematic deliberation on the ideological excesses of the 20th century, Abuladze necessarily includes elements of fantasy and even the supernatural. He explains his use of the fantastic to achieve a state of heightened reality: "Are purely realistic means sufficient?" he asked in an interview in *Literaturnaia gazeta*. "Musn't one inevitably turn to surrealism, to the absurd? To the grotesque, to phantasmagoria? . . . In many of its manifestations history is so fantastic and so absurd that the means realistic art provides are insufficient to fully and authentically recreate history -- it demands forms and style that more closely correspond to its essence."⁵

Pokaianie treats a difficult historical subject, for in spite of the film's numerous allusions to cultural phenomena outside the Russo-Georgian tradition, in spite of its blurred temporal and spatial categories, in spite of discreet references to political events in Western Europe, South

4 The finest productions of classical tragedy and Elizabethan drama in the former Soviet Union were the province of the Rustaveli Theatre of Tbilisi. We may assume that Abuladze, who spent eight years at the Rustaveli's Theatrical Institute, was familiar with the genre of the revenge tragedy. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602?), Thomas Middleton's *The Revengers Tragedy* (1606-1607), and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) are three widely-known examples of the classic revenge tragedy.

5 *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 25 February 1987, 8.

America, and East Asia, the Russian viewer inevitably associates the contents of the film with the events of the Stalinist terror.⁶ The figure of Stalin has achieved mythic, archetypal permanence in the Russian psyche, and the only way to confront this mythic figure of evil in the national psyche is by an act of mythic defamation (and thus exorcism and catharsis).

Abuladze's blend of the revenge tragedy with archetypal and phantasmagoric elements lifted his film into the realm of the mythopoetic and allowed the film to touch the Soviet viewer profoundly. Soviet viewers' reactions to Abuladze's film were visceral and intense; while not all viewers reacted with complete approval to these "tragic pages in the biography of our country," very few viewers are apathetic to the "lessons of the past" that the film teaches.

Pokaianie is a framed film. It begins with a woman making pink and white tortes, decorated with small churches. A male companion stuffs his mouth with her cakes and gives her the news: tragedy has struck, their town has lost a "Great Man," Varlam Aravidze. But shortly after Varlam's funeral, his exhumed body appears on the grounds of his son Avel's house -- not once, but twice. To prevent subsequent exhumations and returns, the police metaphorically "arrest" the corpse and "jail" it in a metal cage over the grave site (an interesting irony, given the number of persons Varlam had jailed in his lifetime). On the third exhumation attempt, Tornike Aravidze, the "Great Man's" grandson (played by Merab Ninidze), shoots the gravedigger: she turns out to be Ketevan Barateli (Zeinab Botsvadze), the woman who was making tortes in the film's opening scene.⁷ Ketevan is put on trial, where, in justification of her

6 Lev Anninskii suggests that Abuladze's film *had* to take the form of "a parable, since the [Russian] viewer could not emotionally stand to hear the 'straight truth'" (*Znamia*, 1987, No. 6, 198). That Abuladze understood this is clear in two powerful scenes. In the first, a dark prison corridor is lined with women waiting to find out the status of their arrested relatives. When they approach a tiny window, they are told whether the prisoner is allowed to receive letters (i.e., the prisoner is alive), or whether he has been exiled with no "right of correspondence" (i.e., the prisoner has been shot). In the second scene, Ketevan, her mother, and an older woman are in a train yard, examining mountains of logs for marks made by the prisoners who felled them in the north. As the older woman (who is played by Abuladze's wife, Mziya) finds her husband's mark and laments over the letters of his name, the viewer is shown the chips and sawdust that fly as the logs felled by the prisoners are sawn, a realized metaphor of the proverb "Лес рубят -- щепки летят" ("chips fly when you chop wood," a reference to small things being destroyed when big things are dealt with). Both scenes are completely realistic; both scenes are very specific and portray actual events in the Soviet Union in 1937. And yet the reality they portray must strike a rational person as utterly fantastic. For many Soviet viewers, these were among the most painful scenes of the film.

7 Ketevan Barateli is based on Ketusi Orakhelashvili, daughter of a prominent Georgian Bolshevik who was purged; she herself had been imprisoned and exiled. Afterward she supported herself in Tbilisi by baking tortes. Many of the characters and events in *Pokaianie* have real-life counterparts. The story of the Barateli family is an

blasphemous act, she tells her life story. Her tale of the persecution and arrest of her parents, the artist Sandro Barateli and his wife Nino (Edisher Giorgobiani and Ketevan Abuladze, the director's daughter), and the terror unleashed by Varlam Aravidze forms the body of the film.

Ketevan Barateli relates how Varlam Aravidze (Avtandil Makharadze) rose to power as head of a town in “the nation that created [Rustaveli's] *Hero in a Tiger Skin*,” i.e., Georgia.⁸ His name underscores his mythic function: “Varlam” means “son of the people”; “Aravidze” comes from Georgian *aravin*, meaning “no one.” “And it is frightening,” said Abuladze, “that it was ‘No One’ who was able to instill such terror in people.”⁹ And, he might have ironically added, to command such devotion and love, for “the people” themselves made Varlam into an idol.

Varlam is not simply a metaphor for Stalin (who was also Georgian); he is the quintessential totalitarian dictator: Abuladze gives him Mussolini's black shirt, Hitler's mustache, Beria's pince-nez, and Stalin's boots (a pipe would perhaps have been too obvious). In character he is willful, vengeful, envious of those more talented or intelligent, and absurdly theatrical. An insecure megalomaniac, his lust for power leads to the annihilation of a huge number of individuals in the name of his image of Mankind. By personifying totalitarianism and fascism in Varlam Aravidze, the film makes a point that is obvious to Western viewers, but

allegory of the tragic fate of the poet Titsian Tabidze and his family. Much of the dialogue, with some modification, is also taken from actual, recorded situations (for example, Mikhail's absurd confession that he and 2,750 co-conspirators were digging a tunnel from Bombay to London). “Мы делали фильм, сознательно сочетая в нем фантазмагорию, условность с точными деталями. Практически за каждым эпизодом в фильме стоит невымысленный факт, реальный человек,” Abuladze explained in an interview (*Literaturnaia gazeta*, 25 Feb. 1987, 8). This gives the film credibility and veracity, even in its most fantastic segments, and demonstrates the many ways in which life is often (tragically) more absurd than fiction.

8 This statement by Sandro Barateli is the first concrete indication to the viewer that the film is set in Georgia. For those who are familiar with Georgian literature, the parallels between this film and the mythopoetic novels of Abuladze's countryman, the modernist writer Grigol Robakidze (1884-1962), are striking. Robakidze, although best known for his novel, *Zmeinnaia kozha* (*Skin of the Serpent*, 1926), also wrote *Ubiennaia dusha* (*Annihilated Soul*, 1933). Published in Germany, *Annihilated Soul* was an anti-Stalinist novel in which archetypal figures were inserted into a concrete historical setting. These figures, representing the Sumero-Akkadian divinities Tammuz and Ishtar (embodying the concepts of Good and Evil), operate simultaneously on both material and spiritual-psychic planes. Robakidze's novel develops the metaphors that rule our moral being, seeking (as does Abuladze) the ultimate source of Good and Evil. Ironically, Robakidze left Stalin and Soviet Georgia to live out the rest of his life in Hitler's Germany.

Note: In this paper, all quotations from the film are based on the Russian voice-over text, read by the Georgian poet Mikhail Kvilividze (manuscript in private hands). Most Soviet viewers would have seen the film with Russian voice-over. All translations (of voice-over text, articles, and other materials) are my own.

9 Tengiz Abuladze, “Я сделал этот фильм для молодых...” (Interview by Alla Gerber), *Iunost'*, 1987, No. 5, 85.

that many Soviet viewers continued to resist: fascism is not the exclusive province of the Axis powers. Fascism in the Soviet Union always had a German face, until *Pokaianie*.

In the morally just world of the film, the sins of Varlam Aravidze do not go unpunished, but are visited upon his children.¹⁰ Varlam's son Avel', who bears the name of the world's first victim (Adam's son Abel, killed by Cain), has inherited his father's kingdom, and with it the cliquishness, self-delusion, and corruption that is a basic feature of life under and after Varlam.¹¹ If Varlam lied and terrorized in order to achieve his own perverse goals, Avel' lies comfortably and out of habit. The distorting Lie has become the Norm (an accurate reflection of the "Period of Stagnation").

At her trial, Ketevan Barateli confronts the Aravidze lie with the force of truth revealed by time (*Veritas filia temporis*). Her testimony tears young Tornike, Varlam Aravidze's grandson, out of his third generation complacency. Horrified, he asks his father for the facts about his grandfather. Avel' answers his son with the morally fallacious arguments that have always been used to justify tyranny: "The times were complicated; it's difficult to explain it now..." "Things were different then ... we were surrounded by enemies." "I'm not saying we didn't make mistakes. But what are the lives of one or two when the point is the happiness of millions?" His son asks him, "But aren't you tired of so much lying? How long are you going to console yourselves with lies?" Tornike's revulsion and withdrawal from his father compel Avel' (and the Soviet viewer) to reassess the events of the past.

The forceful truth of Ketevan's story leads ineluctably to Avel's repentance. Varlam is now dead; he cannot repent. Tornike is a victim of blood and history, but he has done nothing personally that demands atonement. He shot at Ketevan, but he did so to protect his grandfather's body and in ignorance of the larger context. In any case, the truth destroys him. Ketevan, who speaks for all victims who come to accuse their torturers, is serene and

10 This is a multiple reference, harking back to Exodus 20:5 ("For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me"); to Euripides' "Phrixus" ("The gods visit the sins of the fathers upon the children," l. 970); and to Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* ("The sins of the fathers are to be laid upon the children" III:v:1).

11 Both Varlam and Avel' (the father and the son) are played by Avtandil Makharadze. He performs his two roles with such virtuosity that each character acquires an independent moral and psychological reality without losing the sense of genetic continuity.

composed in her sense of moral right; she has no need of repentance. Avel', however, remains an acquiescing “collaborator” in Varlam's tyranny.

On his road to repentance, Avel' passes through the various steps of atonement. First he resists. He tries to remove Ketevan and the dilemma she poses, but she will not be bribed and she refuses to be threatened. Avel' then plays at “pretend” repentance. Daydreaming in the courtroom, Avel' descends into an underground chamber, a catacomb, where his hooded and mysterious “confessor” sits surrounded by the paintings and the crucifix taken from Sandro Barateli's walls at the time of his arrest.¹² The confessor, eating an oily fish, mocks Avel's self-deluding “pseudo-repentance.” It is not repentance that brings Avel', but fear: fear for himself, fear that he will lose his position, his son, and his comfort. This Jesuitical confessor is revealed to be none other than Varlam. The gothic underground chamber disappears, and Avel' is back in the courtroom, holding a fish skeleton in his hands. “Is this phantasmagoria?” asks Boris Vasil'ev in his review of the film. “No, this is the highest reality of great art. Tyrants always devour human hopes, leaving to their heirs only the fleshless skeleton of dead dogmas and copybook truisms.”¹³

Many Soviet viewers found young Tornike's desperate suicide, in response to the truth he was forced to confront, unpleasant and difficult to accept.¹⁴ Without Tornike's death, however,

12 The theme of art versus the totalitarian state is a strong secondary theme in *Pokaianie*. This allegorical scene in the catacomb shows that tyrants can hide and suppress art, beauty, and spirit, but they are powerless to destroy it entirely. The art on the catacomb walls belongs Sandro Barateli, whose name is also suggestive, as it clearly recalls that of another painter, Sandro Botticelli (1444?-1510), who incorporated his neo-Platonic philosophical preferences into his Renaissance canvases, many of which are ideological and intellectual arguments, rather than intuitively composed works of art. Varlaam specifically mentions Botticelli when referring to Barateli.

13 Boris Vasil'ev, “Prozrenie,” *Sovetskii ekran*, 1987, No. 6, 5.

The image of the oily fish is polyvalent. On the one hand, the fish is a symbol of early Christian baptism, and believers were called “little fishes” (*pisciculi*); here, with all the power of the primary image, Varlam “devours” the “little fishes” who believed in him. Later the fish came to stand for Christ himself (the “fisher of men”) since the Greek word for “fish” consists of the initials of the phrase “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior,” and the emblematic image of the fish was frequently found on the walls of the catacombs. In Varlam's “catacomb” Varlam himself takes the flesh from the bone of this symbol of faith and hope of resurrection. In another association to the fish image, 5000 were fed by five loaves and two fishes when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, but Varlam takes the whole fish for himself.

Beyond the fish's Christian associations (which are primary in the film), the fish is to water what the bird is to the air; it is the “bird of the nether regions” and represents hope of resurrection. The fish is sacred in certain Asiatic religions, and it is forbidden to eat it; in the old Middle Eastern mystery religions fish, with bread and wine, was a holy communion or sacramental meal. The fish is also a traditional symbol of fecundity and life renewed, so Varlam is actually devouring life itself (physical and spiritual).

14 Tornike was originally played by the young actor Gega Kobakhidze (of the famous Tbilisi acting family). Gega

Avel' is unable to repent. As long as the tragedy and pain on which his position in society rests do not touch *his* family or *his* existence, he has every reason to preserve the *status quo*, and his repentance would be hypocritical. Tornike's death, the redeeming "sacrifice" of Varlam's final victim, sobers Avel' and makes him face his responsibilities. Tornike's death is more than the death of a young man: it is also the end of the Arividze line. The perpetuation of Varlam's lie has cost not only the ruined lives of thousands; it has cost Avel' his son and the Aravidze line its future. Ends do not justify means. Only after Avel' recognizes this can he atone. He completes the work started by Ketevan when she first exhumed Varlam's body: Avel' digs up his father's body and casts it into a deep gorge, like Antichrist into the bottomless pit, for the ravens to eat.

Immediately after this intense scene, the film returns to the opening frame, where Ketevan is still making tortes. The viewer suddenly realizes that all that he has seen in the film, all that has evoked in him a feeling of catharsis, *has not happened* -- except in Ketevan Barateli's mind. What the viewer has seen as phantasmagoria is nothing more than the child Ketevan's nightmare memories of the years of the Terror. This stops the viewer for a moment, for the immediate implication is that the long-awaited catharsis has not and is never going to happen. All will go on as before, and the only place that the guilty will repent will be in the victims' day dreams. The act of confession and repentance that would realign the times that are out of joint does not happen. The past remains to haunt the living by threatening them with the living dead.¹⁵

Kobakhidze was one of a group of young people sentenced to be shot for highjacking an Aeroflot plane in Tbilisi on 18 November 1983. The KGB search of Kobakhidze's apartment after his arrest turned up the screenplay of the film, with the result that the film was ordered stopped. Superior bureaucratic maneuvering, reaching all the way to Shevardnadze's office, stymied KGB efforts, and the film was completed.

After Kobakhidze's arrest Abuladze replaced him with Merab Ninidze, who physically resembled Kobakhidze. Thus Ninidze plays not only the role of Tornike, but also a subtextual role of young Kobakhidze in revolt against the Soviet status quo. Tbilisi television showed parts of the trial of the highjackers in late August 1984, while *Pokaianie* was being filmed. Abuladze's own grandson is named Tornike. (Source: native Georgian informant associated with *Gruzia-fil'm*, who asked that name be withheld.)

15 Abuladze makes use of the vampire motif, turning Varlam, pale even in life, into the gray Undead after death. He does not stay quiet in his grave. His corpse keeps returning to haunt the living, particularly his family. A vampiric Varlam also lives in Tornike's daydreams, lasciviously ogling Avel's wife Guliko from his coffin (the implication being that Tornike subconsciously understood that his grandfather and his mother were involved in a liaison); and begging his grandson to blot out the sun, which makes him drip blood. Here the metaphor is clear: the only way to destroy Varlam is to expose him and his heinous deeds to the bright rays of the Sun (truth), to the light of day.

Abuladze's immediate goal, however, is not catharsis, but repentance. First things first. Catharsis (purification, cleansing) occurs only as the final stage of repentance and that time has not come. Repentance begins with an avowal of one's guilt and sin and the acceptance of responsibility and punishment for them. To begin repentance, *Pokaianie* preaches, one must first release memory from bondage. History (all actions of men, good and evil) must be allowed to live in the light of memory, or it will become an "unclean thing of the night." *Pokaianie* focuses light on memory.

Many Soviet viewers did not like this film. There were still many viewers in the late after 1986, when the film was released, who did not want to talk about the Past, not because they were afraid to, but because they did not want to. There was as much sense of guilt among viewers as sense of victimization and suffering. "Why rake it all up? Why not just forget it?" were common responses.

The writer Petr Proskurin, speaking at a Plenum of the USSR Writers' Union shortly after the film was shown, asked: "Corpses again! Graves again! What a strange passion! And is the suicide of the young grandson of Varlam Aravidze, so passionately seeking the truth, really necessary?" A true Communist believer, Proskurin was appalled by Avel's blasphemous act in tossing the exhumed corpse of his own father into a gorge. "From the time that man became human, the violation of the dead has been considered the greatest sacrilege," moans Proskurin, who is not much affected by this particular corpse's crimes against the living in its infamous lifetime or familiar with his own folkloric traditions and historical precedents.¹⁶

Proskurin's article, and the articles of others who shared his point of view, show little understanding of the statement *Pokaianie* makes or of the moral problems it poses. When Ketevan, a woman, digs up Varlam's body, she is like Mother Earth, rejecting the pariah, the unclean dead, who is not worthy to lie in the earth.¹⁷ This powerful primordial symbol

16 Petr Proskurin, [Vystuplenie na plenum pravleniia SP SSSR], *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 6 May 1987, 9. In East Slavic and other folklores, "unclean" corpses, those who were prime candidates for ghostdom or vampirism, were not buried in the earth (as they could negatively affect the fertility of the soil and thus the livelihood of the community). Instead, they were often transported beyond the village boundaries, sometimes buried at crossroads, but often taken out to forests, caves, or ravines, and abandoned there. Proskurin has also conveniently forgotten the expulsionary treatment accorded to Stalin's body after the 22nd Party Congress.

17 Originally Abuladze cast a man in the role of Varlam's exhumers, then dreamt that it should be a woman (*Literaturnaia gazeta* 25 Feb. 1987, 8). He made the change, and it was a good choice for several reasons: during

emphasizes the vastness of Varlam's sin. When Avel' throws Varlam's body into the ravine, he is not throwing his *father* to the ravens, but the vampiric tyrant Varlam. Varlam is anathema and can no longer be protected once his crimes have been exposed to the cleansing rays of truth. "And maybe you think that Aravidze is not dead!" the judge asks Ketevan. "Yes! He's alive!" Ketevan answers. "And as long as you protect him, he lives and continues to demoralize our society." Through memory Ketevan exposes Varlam for what he is: a destroyer in his lifetime and a vampire come to feed on his own after his death. "Memory," observes Aleksei Erokhin, "that is what repentance is."¹⁸

Pokaianie is not a conventional allegory, but a symbolic documentary, a document of the spirit. Although time and place are unspecified, the viewer sees the *realia* of Georgia. The time element is purposely distorted and the film takes place "never and always ..., nowhere and everywhere. Everywhere that laws and human beings are trampled underfoot, while terror, denunciation, and fear become a permanent state of affairs."¹⁹ Abuladze brings the Past into the Present, conflating time: the police henchmen wear medieval armor, Varlam drives a vintage automobile, the courtroom judges are wigged and gowned in European fashion; one of them plays with a Rubik's Cube (for the law is the ultimate puzzle and perhaps a game to some). "Any tyrant, any dictator, from Nero to the 'Black Colonels' of the SS, develops in the same way," explains Abuladze. "For this very reason we wanted to erase both time and place of action and to make the history and culture of different times work for us; we included numerous 'citations' in the film in order to expand its meaning."²⁰

Abuladze's arsenal of literary and artistic and historical "citations" is vast. These citations range from Hieronymus Bosch and Botticelli to Fellini and Bunuel, from medieval liturgical music to Beethoven to Verdi to jazz. Abuladze helpfully suggests that the viewer approach the film's spatial and temporal displacement as he would approach renaissance and baroque

the terror powerless women suffered dreadfully from not knowing the fate of their loved ones, but conventional forms of revenge were not available to them. Second, viewed traditionally as passive, a woman moved to such action as Ketevan undertakes serves to emphasize the enormity of Varlam's crimes. Finally, Nemesis, the Greek goddess of retribution (revenge) is female. Ketevan's name (in Russian "Katerina") means "always pure." Elegant, with noble bearing, she attends her trial dressed in white, the color of innocence and mourning.

18 Aleksei Erokhin, "Anafema," *Literaturnaia Rossiia*, 13 February 1987, 14.

19 Vladimir Lakshin, "Neproshchaiushchaia pamiat'," *Moskovskie novosti*, 30 November 1986, 11.

20 *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 25 February 1987, 8.

paintings in which Biblical subjects are portrayed in contemporary European settings.²¹ The symbolism and “citations” of *Pokaianie* are rich and extensive enough to warrant separate studies. This discussion limits itself to the moral categories explored in Abuladze's film and to their impact on the Soviet viewer when the film was first released. Still, it would be difficult to end any discussion of *Pokaianie* without addressing some of its major symbolism.

In the concluding frames of *Pokaianie* the famous Georgian actress Veriko Andzhaparidze, in her last film appearance before her death, comes to Ketevan's window and asks: “Will this road take me to the Church of the Mother of God? I'm asking you, will this road take me to the church?” Ketevan answers her: “This is the Street of Varlam. This is not the street that takes you to the church.” And the old woman responds, “It isn't? Then who needs it? What's it good for, if it doesn't take you to the church?”

The church in *Pokaianie* is less a specific religious reference than it is a “monument of culture,” threatened by the experiments being carried out in the scientific laboratory that has been built inside it. Varlam and his henchman Doksopulo see this as “science and progress.” “Don't you understand,” Sandro asks the ironically named Doksopulo, “that to destroy it is to sever the living roots which feed and spiritually enrich our nation. So, throw the works of Homer, Tolstoi, Dante, Rustaveli into the bonfire! Let Bach, Chaikovskii, Verdi be silenced. Let's raze St. Peter's, Notre Dame, the Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli...”²²

After Sandro's arrest, the church is blown up. The educated Russian viewer mentally sees another blown-up church in the place of Abuladze's Church of the Virgin: Moscow's Church of Christ the Saviour, built by public donation to commemorate the victory of 1812, blown up on Stalin's orders in December 1931 to make room for a Palace of Soviets that was never built. All that is left of this enormous cultural base, built over centuries, are the sugar icing churches that Ketevan makes. These sweet cakes have replaced spiritual food on the Street of Varlam, where Ketevan now lives. The church (*khram*) is the “temple” of truth, beauty, and art, the repository

21 *New Times*, 16 February 1987, 28.

22 A reference to the Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta. The cathedral was built in the early 11th century in the former Georgian capital, on the site of the first Christian church in Georgia (4th century). It is an important monument of the Georgian national heritage.

of the spiritual ideals and moral values of a nation.²³ Varlam's road cannot lead to the church, for tyranny can only destroy culture, not create it.

Abuladze makes not only elaborate visual statements, but also ironic musical statements. A patriotic march drowns out the hackneyed speeches at Varlam's installation ceremony while water gushes unstoppable from a broken sewer pipe; the jarring incompatibility of liturgical music and a "Little Boy Blue" jazz number are the aural equivalent of the grotesque visual image of seeing a scientific laboratory in a church; Varlam's reception of the town's intelligentsia, who have come to plead for the church, is startlingly cut off by the sinister rush of Aram Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance"; Varlam sings an aria from Verdi's *Il Trovatore* off-key as Sandro and Nino lie buried up to their necks in a plowed field; a fashionably dressed Interrogator and a coquettish Themis (the goddess of Justice, here without her blindfold), posed as bride and groom, play Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" on a white baby grand piano at Sandro's fantasy interrogation; the Interrogator then leads the now blindfolded Themis off into the bushes (to "rape" justice); Avel' plays Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" (Lenin's favorite piece) moments before Tornike commits suicide with the rifle his grandfather Varlam gave him.

The most powerful use of music in the film comes in a scene with Mikhail's widow, Elena, a good and intelligent woman who is one of Varlam's most devoted followers. She tells Nino that the arrests of their husbands are purely accidental. "We serve a great cause. Future generations will remember us with pride... To the extent that our plans are of enormous proportions, it's natural that there will also be big mistakes... but my dear, I already hear it, I hear our beloved 'Ode to Joy,' which inevitably and very soon will sound all over the world." Symbolically holding a globe in her hands, Elena begins to sing Beethoven's "Ode" in German; soon her small voice is joined by an enormous German chorus. The joyful song continues to

23 While there is considerable Christian symbolism in *Pokaianie* (Sandro Barateli's Christ-like face and his "passion," the family crucifix, the religious content of Sandro's paintings, Varlam dressed as Father-Confessor, the Church of the Mother of God, the fish, etc.), the film makes no exclusively Christian statement. The Christian tradition itself becomes a symbol, representing the repository of cultural achievements and traditional moral and spiritual values. Abuladze returns to fundamental ethical norms as codified in the Ten Commandments. He has said in several interviews that "Thou shalt not kill" is the animating idea of his film. The other nine commandments also apply ("Thou shalt not bear false witness," "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images," "Thou shalt not covet," "Thou shalt not commit adultery" [Guliko and Varlam], etc.)

swell, but the viewer is no longer in Elena's office; he is in an underground chamber where Sandro is being tortured. Beethoven's music ends suddenly with an explosion: the church has been blown up. The next day Elena, too, disappears.

The time will come, wrote the film critic T. Khlopliankina in early 1987, when it will be necessary "to analyze this film frame by frame, to explain the symbolism of individual scenes, to think about why the details of contemporary life rub shoulders with medieval attributes -- in a word, *Pokaianie* will need to be analyzed cinematographically and philosophically." Such analysis could not take place in Russia at the time of the film's dissemination. "The dissection of the film with a scientist's scalpel just now is impossible," Khlopliankina wrote, adding, "almost blasphemous."²⁴ Presumably the subject matter of Abuladze's phantasmagoria was too disturbing, its implications too unpleasant, its mythopoetic level too unsettling and distressful for Soviet critics and viewers to deal with.

Many years have passed since *Pokaianie*, one of the first swallows of the spring of *glasnost'* and *perestroika*, was first released. The Soviet Union has since collapsed, but the "unfolding" of *Pokaianie* as a turning point in the Soviet culture of *glasnost'* and an emblem of the coming end of the Soviet period has still not taken place. Perhaps the time has not yet come for repentance.

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