

“REPENTANCE”: TRANSFORMATION AND PUBLICITY

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Different historical forms of trivial relationships were established at different stages of public development based on both ethnical and social grounds. Over time, these forms also changed and developed. For example, since the primitive communal system, mankind has gone through various steps and consequently has changed many rules and structures of life.

Along with societal development, human beings also changed. Their thinking, taste, consciousness also changed. Different countries live differently and acknowledge order that is quite different from each other. Gradually, it became obvious that human beings cannot stay unchanged. They do not have the ability always to be equally tuned towards the surrounding environment; in other words, they cannot always live the same way and be subject to the same order. But why? Probably mainly because the contemporaneity of each epoch is composed of different signs characteristic only of that epoch. In this case, it is interesting to understand what context can an individual movie punctually reflect the events that are happening in society and create contemporaneity itself, whether it has an ability to articulate and analyze problems.

Tragic years of our history touched everybody. One can find lots of unhealed wounds here. Through torments, tortures, and bloodshed over hundreds of years, ethnic groups have collected the best and eternal values, dignity and kindness characteristic to nations in misfortune. Thought-provoking is the fact that the biggest sacrifice is made by the best part of a nation. But the question is: Have our roots been cut? Have the best traditions handed down from generation to generation ceased? In response to these questions, Georgian film director Tengiz Abuladze made the movie *Repentance*. “Everything begins with an artist’s specific attitude toward social-societal events, scrupulous analysis of their/her own ideas and artistic position, and only then it is possible to express whole-heartedly what you want to tell people; it is only

then that you realize that your desire to create a movie is untamable. I had been moving toward *Repentance* for a long, really long time, probably my whole life.”¹

The word *repentance* means feeling of regret and acknowledgement of sin and crime through prayer or poetry. It is a Christian term and, by definition, excludes action using force. Repentance is a spiritual category versus physical. If catharsis does not take place, repentance will not happen. In addition to many other factors, the changes taking place from the mid-1980s, known as Perestroika (transformation), and publicity can also be explained by the screening of *Repentance*. One could even hear many saying openly that the 27th Congress of the Communist Party in 1986 began with Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev’s speech and Abuladze’s movie. At the time, I was about to graduate and clearly remember one report titled “Transformation and New Thinking for our Country and for the Whole World.” We were forced to learn the thesis from this speech. The letter sent by famous thinker Academician Likhachev to the Litterateurs’ Assembly in 1985 was considered a stimulus for creation of the movie by many people. The author summoned everybody for spiritual repentance in this letter. But the fact is that the film director began thinking about the movie a bit earlier. This is what he recalls: “Subconsciously, the idea originated when I began working on my first movie of the trilogy, *The Plea*, in 1967.”

The movie was launched in 1981, in the so-called golden era of stagnation. 1982 was wholly spent on working on the script. Principal photography started in 1983 but was halted soon, the reason was the arrest and death sentencing of Gega Kobakhidze, who was playing Tornike, the lead character in the movie. It was later dubbed as *the Plane Boys Case*. Filming resumed the following year and was completed in 6 months. The film was commissioned at the end of the same year, and on December 31, 1984, the pre-New Year edition of *Sovetskaia Kultura* (Soviet Culture) newspaper, in its peculiar

way, announced the completion of Abuladze's film.

Working on the movie began when Brezhnev—formally alive but “as good as dead”—ruled the country. Ill and weakened Andropov and Chernenko also followed him. US Vice President George Bush had to travel to Moscow every year, to deliver condolences to the country's leadership. Consequently, the film, way ahead of its time, only later acquired seminal meaning corresponding to the then contemporary life. And because of that, the filmmaker's distinct civic position and the movie itself are simply invaluable. The authors were not afraid to send their message openly when it was a tough thing to do. But they could not avoid fate and, for two years, the movie was left on the shelf. There is some symbolism to that. The movie as though took upon itself the crime and completed the sentence honestly. Thus, it protected the creative team and saved them from responsibility. Gorbachev, and his declared new way of thinking, made sure that the film's densely rolled tapes in metal boxes—resembling coffins in a way—saw the light of day. Abuladze finished working on *The Wish Tree* in 1977. Soon after that, he was invited to Yerevan, the capital of our neighboring Republic Armenia, to attend a movie presentation. On his way back, he had a terrible car accident. This is what he recalls: “When I first learned what I went through, to be more precise, what could have happened, I was absolutely confident why God kept me alive. I should have done something serious. I started considering *Repentance*”.²

It took him six months to recover. For months, motionless, hospitalized, and bedridden, he had all the time in the world to think and, in this process, he outlined his future movie. Although the plot of *Repentance* is well-known, let's go through it briefly. Ketevan Barateli lives on Varlam Aravidze Street and learns about his death from the newspaper. From this very moment on, the narrative takes two directions. On one hand, Abuladze builds the story on Ketevan Barateli's imaginations and visions. These are her recollections about her parents during Varlam's rule. On the other hand, her revenge adventures are narrated. Ketevan digs Varlam's corpse out of the grave, claiming that such people do not deserve to be buried. She is a woman of principle and tries to defend her position in court. This vision of hers is born after she learns about Aravidze's death. Obsessed with revenge, Barateli wishes to punish not only Varlam, but his son Abel as

well, though fails to consider one thing: an innocent man, Varlam's grandson Tornike, who commits suicide with the gun gifted by his grandfather. In despair, Abel has to disinter his father's corpse and throw it away in history's garbage-dump.

Still, who is Varlam Aravidze (surname translates as *son of nobody*)? This surname does not exist in reality. Nobody and nothing are not synonyms. If Varlam is nothing, his personae would not be worthy of being featured in such a monumental work. Varlam is not nothing, he is nobody and that is why he has a fictional, symbolic surname. When the movie hit the screen, there were speculations about Varlam's prototype. He was compared to dictators and tyrants of different epochs and formations, but Varlam's biggest glory is that he is a collective figure in the history of human development. More importantly, Varlam's character exemplifies totalitarian governance. Aravidze combines images of despots, from Nero to today. Those history-savvy will identify different “heroes” in Varlam's image. But these heroes change according to the stairs they ascend. The staircase itself remains firmly fixed. This is what actor Avtandil Makharadze, who performed two leading roles in the movie, recalls: “I did not have any portrait. I did not even look through photos from that period and did not read anything on purpose. I could only imagine what that era was like. We tried to avoid specifics in the character's appearance: the pince-nez was taken from one tyrant, the moustache from another, the black jacket from other....”

Repentance offered a deep spiritual interpretation of the era transcending the boundaries of a two-part movie narration. Through research, we assert that no positive idea guarantees morality, because sometimes human beings themselves are carriers of low and horrible potential of becoming tyrants, of turning to violence, brutality. It is in a way an ominous dream defining the film's rhythm. In a dream, everything is mixed up, and we cannot relax because it is someone else's dream and none of our business. Unless we wake up, we are alone in the war between evil and good.

The civic stance grows stronger by the scene, and moral philosophical heights are generalized. The filmmaker uses allegory not to camouflage his intent but to intensify and deepen the concept, to grasp the viewer's senses and emotions as the movie itself is part of catharsis and the author urges us toward it. Abel is not alone in

expressing repentance. Through his lips, the whole society, people who bent their necks before Varlam's power, take responsibility for the historical crime and will go through catharsis this way. The movie-investigation, the movie-analysis, the movie-position, the movie-behavior, the movie-phenomenon—this is an incomplete list of epithets used to hail the work in local and international newspapers. The movie enjoyed enormous feedback, and both the film-studio and director received letters for years from all over the country part of which Georgia once was, the Soviet Union referred to by the American President Ronald Reagan as “Evil Empire,” a term coined in June of 1982, in his address to parliament in London. The ideological confrontation ended on December 12, 1991, in a beautiful Belovezhskaya Pushcha where the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, and Kazakh-

stan signed a document abolishing the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Abuladze's movie played an important role in this affair.

At the 1987 Cannes International Festival, *Repentance* was awarded Grand Jury Prize, a major acknowledgement. In the fall of the same year, Nika Film Awards, known as Russian Oscars, was held for the first time. The movie was praised by all, and Chairman of the Cinema Workers Union, famous filmmaker Elem Klimov awarded prizes to different members of the art team in key nominations. At last, while announcing best movie of the year, he even joked, “I hope it's not *Repentance*.” This marked the film's triumph.

In contemporaneity and objective reality, Abuladze managed to find poetic and ascending poetic originals and expressed the era through them.

REFERENCES:

1. Newspaper “Georgian Film”, 1987, October 7, p. 3
2. Bozhevich V. “Repentance”, publishing house “Cinema Centre” Moscow, 1988, p. 18 (In Russian language)
3. The same, p. 20
4. A. Makaradze, “Kind Man in the Role of a Tyrant”, *Iskusstvo Kino*, #5, p. 11, 1989 (in Russian language).