


CULTURAL SYLLABUS

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The Thaw to the Present

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CONTENTS

Preface	9
Acknowledgments	11
 <u>PART FOUR</u> 	
Cinema of the Thaw 1953-1967	14
<i>Alexander Prokhorov</i>	
<i>The Cranes are Flying</i>	
Introduction	32
Reconfiguring the War and Family Tropes	37
in Thaw-Era Homefront Melodrama	
<i>Alexander Prokhorov</i>	
<i>Ballad of a Soldier</i>	52
<i>Vida Johnson</i>	
<i>Lenin's Guard</i>	59
<i>Alexander Prokhorov</i>	
<i>Wings</i>	
Introduction	67
Flight Without Wings: The Subjectivity	70
of a Female War Veteran in Larisa Shepit'ko's <i>Wings</i>	
<i>Tatiana Mikhailova and Mark Lipovetsky</i>	
<i>Commissar</i>	
Introduction	84
Soviet Structuring Myths in <i>The Commissar</i>	88
<i>Elena Monastireva-Ansdell</i>	
 <u>PART FIVE</u> 	
Cinema of Stagnation Late 1960s-1985	104
<i>Elena Prokhorova</i>	

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Elena Korisheli's ecstatic rendition of the "Ode to Joy" points up the links between Fascism and Communism, and the diegesis (Sandro going to his death) belies the future brotherhood celebrated by the ode. Abel's performance of "The Moonlight Sonata," Lenin's favorite piece, reinforces his conformism. The heavenly chorus from Gounod's *Mors et Vita (Life and Death, 1885)* sounds at the end of the film; the work is an oratorio on death, judgment, resurrection and eternal life—a summation that opens the film to the universal.

Finally, a Shakespearean subtext across the different tales also contributes to the universal valence of *Repentance*. Varlam recites sonnet 66, which in the film alludes to the impending purges. He ends his life like the guilt-ridden, tragic figures in *Othello* and *Macbeth*, fearing the sun, imagined blood dripping from his fingers. His son, Abel', quotes *Hamlet* for his own self-serving purposes in response to Tormike's question about Varlam's deeds: "It was a question of to be or not to be. We were surrounded by foes."⁶ In accord with the inexorable workings of fate, Tormike kills himself with the rifle that was a gift from his grandfather, the same weapon with which he wounded Ket'i.

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS REPENTANCE'S STYLISTIC DEVICES

Josephine Woll and Denise J. Youngblood

Abuladze's repertory of stylistic devices is varied and impressive. As Tatiana Khlopyankina noted, *Repentance* "speaks to us in the language of metaphors and symbols."¹ These stylistic devices include numerous visual anachronisms, fantasy and reverie, music, literary and historical allusion, in addition to the imaginative use of color, cutting, camera movement and the extreme close-up. The most consistent, most obvious, and perhaps most important device contributing to the picture's overriding surrealism appears early in the film—anachronism.

Anachronism

Movie anachronisms typically situate items from the present in the past, as the famous example from the Twenties, of Rudolph Valentino's wristwatch-sporting Sheikh, demonstrates. Abuladze, however, prefers what we might dub a "counteranachronism": the placement of details from the past into the present. These details undercut the viewer's efforts to establish the timeframe from the mise-en-scène and therefore serve as universalizing signs in the cinematic text. In the opening scene, the baker (Ket'i) and her guest are dressed in more or less modern (if not obviously contemporary) clothing, yet Ket'i's customer comes by the window in the evening clothes of a more formal era, riding in a horse-drawn carriage, perhaps a re-enactment of traditional wedding rites. Likewise, when Varlam is unearthed for a second time, the police haul him away in an

⁶ Josephine Woll and Denise J. Youngblood, *Repentance* (London and New York: i.B. Tauris, 2001), 60, 62. See detailed analysis of color, music and literary references in the following reading.

¹ Tatiana Khlopyankina, "On the Road That Leads to the Truth," in Michael Brashinsky and Andrew Horton, *Russian Critics on the Cinema of Glasnost* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 51.

obviously outdated vehicle that looks suspiciously reminiscent of the "paddy wagon" or Black Maria that carried victims of the Terror away during the Stalin era.

More important examples of this self-conscious placement of details from the past into the present can be found in the continued use of costumes recalling the late Middle Ages or Renaissance, especially various types of armor. This device, though it has been disparaged as "more than simple," in fact provides one visual link between the officialdom in the second framing story's courtroom scenes and those surrounding Varlam in the flashback. (Another is color, to be discussed below.) Although no particular time period is overtly established for the second framing story, the way the Aravidzes and their friends are dressed for the funeral indicates a more or less contemporary timeframe. Likewise, the white suit Keti wears for her courtroom appearance, although absurdly glamorous for the occasion, is of a reasonably modern cut. But the guards who escort her into the courtroom are arrayed in full armor, and the panel of comic-opera judges, lawyers and court officials are dressed in faux-Elizabethan garb. (In an especially ironic visual pun, the bewigged head judge plays unsuccessfully with a Rubik's cube throughout the proceedings. In this particular instance, which is the anachronism?) The overall effect is nonetheless obvious: this "trial" is an Inquisition.

The flashback appears to be set in the Thirties, an assessment again based primarily on costuming, particularly on Varlam's frameless eyeglasses (recalling those worn by Lavrenti Beria) and his Hitler/ Mussolini-style uniform. But here as well, the cohort of guards and Varlam's enforcers wear full armor. We first see this when Varlam meets with Sandro, Moise and Miriam in the greenhouse garden; while they talk, the camera cuts away to the glass roof of the greenhouse. Armored knights are walking overhead, occasionally peering through the glass. These "knights-in-shining-armor" eventually come to arrest Sandro, and, decades later, Keti. The agents of the Inquisition also utter anachronistic incantations—"Peace unto this house"—at the very moment when peace will be no more.

There are fewer examples of the more typical kind of anachronism in *Repentance*. One of these is, however, both eerie and memorable. In the garden sequence just mentioned, as Varlam listens, with an expression of sympathy and understanding, to the trio's arguments in favor of saving the church as a symbol of history and civilization, the fruit-laden trees begin to look more and more sinister. The pendulous fruits are in fact listening devices, recording every word these aristocratic and superfluous Judeo-Christian humanists utter against science and progress.

Fantasy and Reverie

Also critically important in shaping *Repentance* as an exercise in surrealism is Abuladze's frequent employment of fantasy sequences throughout the course of the movie. These appear in both framing stories as well as in the flashback. Most obviously, the final scene of the film suggests that the *entire* film was, more than likely, nothing more than Keti's reverie as she decorated her cakes. But there are other important fantasies to consider, especially in the second half of the film.

The first of these occurs in the flashback, just after the unwelcome night visitors have left the Barateli apartment. As Sandro plays a mournful tune on the piano, Nino dozes. She dreams a fateful dream, about what in fact will soon befall them. In her dream, she and Sandro are vainly attempting to flee pursuers first unseen, then revealed as a demonic Varlam (in an open roadster) accompanied by his knights on horseback. Nino and Sandro run through sewers, through city streets, then out of town, until finally they are in the foothills high above Tbilisi. In a nod to another great surrealist film, Dali's *Un Chien Andalou*, Abuladze next shows us Nino and Sandro buried up to their necks in a newly plowed field. (There is a similar scene in Eisenstein's *Que viva Mexico!* as well.) Varlam, standing in his car, cheerfully belts out an aria from *Il Trovatore* (another Italian allusion) to his captive audience. Upon awaking, Nino tries to persuade her husband to run away, but Sandro ruefully responds that they will be "tracked to the ends of the earth." His arrest immediately follows; this is dream is prophesy.

Nino's second dream is also visionary. After Sandro's arrest, as Nino becomes more and more desperate, struggling to save herself and her daughter, she dreams that Sandro is walking along a prison corridor on his way to his crucifixion. Nino is awakened from this nightmare by the sound of explosions: the historic church, symbol of the town's long and proud history and culture, has been destroyed (a pointed historical reference to the demolition by Stalin of the Cathedral Church of Christ the Savior in Moscow in 1931). Sandro, she knows instinctively, is dead.

The third important sequence in the flashback to consider as an exercise in surrealism is not a dream *per se*, but a fantasy representing the interrogation and torture of Sandro and Mikhail Korisheli. This fantasy is all the more vivid because it follows a long, intensely realistic and painful series of scenes showing Nino and Ket'i after Sandro's arrest. Abuladze juxtaposed the two quite consciously. As he explained in an interview with Lidya Pol'skaya that appeared in *Literaturnaiia gazeta*:

The entire image-system of the film permits multiple readings.

But there are individual episodes that cannot sustain multiple interpretations. All viewers must understand them the same way . . . We deliberately created these shifts from polysemantic to monosemantic, from ambiguity to simplicity.²

The episode begins with a scene that recalls Anna Akhmatova's famous poem *Requiem*. Nino waits in a long line outside the prison, with other hopeless women, trying to learn where Sandro is and whether she can send him a package. She is curtly informed, by a faceless official behind an impenetrable window, that Sandro has been "exiled without the right to correspond." Next, Nino attempts to make a personal appeal to Varlam, degrading herself with a touching and futile appeal to her helplessness, her beauty and indeed her sexuality (to which Varlam has obviously previously been attracted). Finally, and most brutally, Nino and Ket'i learn



Fig. 99. Inscribed Logs

that logs cut by prisoner labor have arrived at a local lumber yard. They have been told that sometimes prisoners carve their names on them (Fig. 99). Mother and daughter move from log to log, ankle deep in mud, but their desperate search yields no result. And when the lumber goes to the saw mill, all traces of their loved ones will vanish, reduced to dust.

After these three dreadful scenes, the return to surrealism is a jolt, but not unwelcome. A realistic depiction of Sandro's interrogation would be unendurable. So we find ourselves in a sunny and pleasant, if somewhat overgrown, garden. A couple in evening dress are seated together at a white grand piano playing Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*. Sandro, looking worn and dishevelled, his shirt bloodied and torn, suddenly appears to disturb this pretty scene. The jolly youngish gentleman at the piano turns out to be Sandro's inquisitor; his female partner stands to reveal herself as Blind Justice. The inquisitor blithely informs Sandro that his friend Mikhail Korisheli has implicated him in a vast political conspiracy. (It was not uncommon for the charges to be discovered *after* arrest

2 "About the Past for the Sake of the Future" (O proshlom dlia budushchego), *Literaturnaiia gazeta*, 25 Febr. 1987, in Viktor Bozhovich, 16, in Further Reading.

in these extraordinary times.) Sandro is incredulous; he naïvely informs his persecutor that "if men like [Korisheli] are being arrested, you might as well arrest the whole country."

Korisheli is then brought in to corroborate the cheerful inquisitor's allegations. Korisheli is in very bad shape, both physically and mentally. His confession staggers Sandro: Korisheli admits to leading a conspiracy of 2700 men to "dig a tunnel from Bombay to London" and to "poison corn to annihilate the entire population." Lips trembling, Korisheli explains to the stunned Sandro that he did, indeed, implicate Sandro and others: "We must accuse as many people as possible and call them enemies of the people . . . We'll sign everything and reduce it all to complete absurdity . . . We'll sign a thousand stupid statements." Korisheli breaks down, howling in anguish. Sandro's eyes glisten with tears.

As the film returns to the "present," that is, the courtroom where Keti's trial is being held, the use of fantastical reveries as surrealist counterpoint to what passes for "reality" continues. Tornike has two important daydreams. The first, which we have already discussed briefly, occurs just as Keti finishes her testimony about Varlam. Tornike, in his mind's eye, now sees his grandfather's soul laid bare. Imprisoned in a decaying bunker, Varlam is a crazed and unkempt old man who fears the light of day as much as he fears the truth.

Tornike's second daydream, mentioned earlier, occurs when the Aravidzes return home after the trial's adjournment. As the scheming Guliko takes charge of the family's plot to put Keti away forever, Tornike is forced to realize that his mother is no more the person he wants her to be than was Varlam. In Tornike's fantasy, Guliko rejoices at Varlam's death, perhaps because it allowed her to assume the position of authority in the family and within their clique. By dancing around Varlam's corpse in the dream, Guliko might as well be dancing on his grave.

Music

The film's imaginative use of existing musical scores, selected by the film's screenwriter Nana Djanelidze, reinforces the surrealism of *Repentance* as well as underscoring intertextual motifs. The first

instance of this device occurs at Varlam's funeral, when the mourners break into song. The tune is *Samshtoblo*, which is not a funeral song, but rather a Georgian political anthem from the days of the short-lived Georgian Menshevik republic (1918-21).³ *Samshtoblo* therefore embodies Georgian independence, nationalism and opposition not to communism, but to Bolshevik (Soviet) power.

The next incidence of music employed as ironic counterpoint in the film is heard when Sandro visits the church *cum* laboratory to see for himself the damage the vibration testing has wrought. A radio is playing, and the music is definitely secular. We hear a doomsday speech by Einstein, immediately followed by *What Made Little Boy Blue?*, one of those jolly ditties that people in the thirties found so uplifting, whether they were suffering from the ravages of the Great Depression, fascism or Stalinism.

Other musical interludes also provide pointed intertextual references. Shortly before his arrest, Sandro plays Debussy's haunting and impressionistic *Les Pas sur la neige*, which was also an important musical motif in the 1976 Soviet film *The Ascent* [*Voskhozheniye*], Larisa Shepit'ko's harrowing cinematic tale of Soviet collaboration and betrayal during World War II.

Yet another musical reference alluding to the fascist era can be found after Mikhail Korisheli's arrest. Nino tries to get her friend Elena Korisheli, a true believer like Mikhail, to understand the implications of the terror that surrounds them. Elena believes that, regardless of the fates of their husbands, the "great cause" they serve makes their sacrifices worthwhile. Face alight, she triumphantly begins to sing the Schiller *Ode to Joy* from Beethoven's Ninth ("Choral") Symphony, joined by a swelling chorus. (This music, which—like Wagner's—enjoyed special popularity during the Nazi era, serves as the segue to Nino's dream about Sandro's crucifixion.)

Finally, Varlam's fondness for Italian music, as exhibited in his visit to the Baratellis and in Nino's dream of their flight and live burial, is worth noting. Varlam, garbed like Mussolini, belting

³ Julie Christensen, 166, in Further Reading.

birthplace by the sea, nor in Tsarskoe Selo where she triumphed as a poet:

But here, where I stood for three hundred hours
And where they never, never opened the doors for me.⁴

We see Nino and Ketik, waiting "three hundred hours," before the doors that would "never, never" open.

Another important literary allusion is to the Georgian national poem, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, which Sandro mentions as a pointed rebuke to Varlam when they are discussing whether or not "the people" need re-education. This poem is absolutely central to Georgian cultural identity. It was written by Shota Rustaveli (ca. 1166-?) in the Golden Age of Georgian history, sometime during the marriage of Queen Tamara to Davit Soslan (1189-1207).⁵ *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* is first and foremost a romance, but it is also political, celebrating the virtues of enlightened rule. Rustaveli ends the epic this way:

They [the three sovereigns] poured upon all alike their mercy,
like snowflakes from heaven.
The orphans and the widows; the helpless and the poor were
enriched, made happy.
Evil-doers dared not appear but recoiled and vanished.
Harmony reigned, like sheep, goat, and wolf fed together.⁶

Sandro is obviously implying that Georgia's national bard would have disapproved of Varlam Aravidze's methods of rule and ideas about art. [...]

A few lines later:

And I pray not only for myself,
But for all who stood there
In bitter cold, or in the July heat,
Under that red blind prison-wall.

And very near the poem's conclusion, Akhmatova specifies the site of any monument erected to her in the future: not in her

out an aria while Nino and Sandro are up to their necks in dirt, certainly makes one of the movie's more obvious points about the links between Stalinism and fascism.

There are also two noteworthy musical interludes in the final scenes of *Repentance*. When Torruke confronts his father for the last time, Abel is seated at the piano playing Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. This piece, which links Abel to the founder of the Soviet state, was well-known to Soviet audiences as Lenin's favorite piece of music and has been used in other important Soviet films, like the 1934 classic *Chapayev*. And Tornike dies to the brash strains of the seventies' American pop music hit *Sunny*, as his parents' crass friends, as insensitive to Georgian culture as their predecessors, bob up and down in a parody of western dance.

Literary and Linguistic Quotation

Abuladze's literary and linguistic allusions are effectively marshalled to provide intertextual linkages. We have already mentioned that the scene of Nino and the other wives of the vanished standing in line recalls Akhmatova's *Requiem*, written in 1935-40, but unpublished until 1957 when it appeared abroad. The entire poem evokes the anguish Abuladze has rendered in images in *Repentance*, but *Requiem's* epilogue, memorializing those who were left behind, seems a particular source of inspiration:

There [in the queue] I learned how faces fall apart,
How fear looks out from under the eyelids,
How deep are the hieroglyphics
Cut by suffering on people's cheeks.

⁴ Anna Akhmatova, "Requiem" and "Poem without a Hero," trans. D.M. Thomas (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 31-2.

⁵ Donald Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 73-4.

⁶ Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, trans. Venera Urashadze (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1971), 221. There is also a prose translation of this poem into English: Rustaveli, *The Lord of the Panther Skin*, trans. R.M. Stevenson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977).

Varlam frequently demonstrates his command of the rhetorical flourishes of Stalin-speak. "Intimate boudoir art," he tells Sandro, is an "escape from reality." Varlam, like Stalin, is adept at verbal juggling acts, as when he informs Korisheli that he had (sadly) acceded to the will of the people by arresting "his relative" Sandro: "He's our foe, and we're his victims." The few times in the film that Varlam speaks Russian (with a heavy Georgian accent, like Stalin's) are especially noteworthy examples of Stalin-speak. For example, Varlam tells Sandro, without a trace of irony, that "modesty is a fine quality in a man." Stalin thought so too in his 1933 speech to the First Congress of Collective Farm Workers: "Skromnost' ukrashaet bolshevik" ("Modesty adorns a Bolshevik").

[...] There can be no doubt that the most important literary reference in *Repentance* is Shakespeare's Sonnet 66. Varlam recites the sonnet from memory when he visits the Baratelis, and in its entirety — save for the last two lines. This sonnet, which is not particularly well-known, is absolutely critical to an informed understanding of the film. Varlam has already revealed the cultured side of his complicated persona to the Baratelis in his musical performance, but the recitation of Shakespeare is quite the most unexpected event of that fateful evening *chez* Barateli. (And for English speakers, hearing Shakespeare in the rhythms of the mellifluous Georgian language is quite a treat.)

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,

(Varlam omits the final two lines):

Tired with all these, from these I would be gone,
Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.⁷

Within the cycle of Shakespeare's sonnets, number 66, with its "schematic list of grievances" and its preoccupation with the world's basic injustice, has links to others with similar themes, as well as to Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech. On its own, however, and particularly without the last two lines that humanize and soften its tone of dull resentment, the sonnet stands as a catalogue of antitheses of virtues and their inversions.⁸ Each abstract noun — faith, honor, virtue, perfection, strength, art, truth — is defeated by a subjectless past participle and adverb — unhappily forsworn, shamefully misplaced, rudely strumpeted, etc. That Varlam should recite this particular sonnet seems ironic indeed, given that he wields the authority that tongue-ties art, and his "captain ill" demands the attendance of "captive good."

In sum, Shakespeare appears to have prophesied Stalinism and its attack on "gilded honor," "purest faith," and "simple truth" more than three centuries before the fact. The expression on Sandro's face at the end of the recitation makes it clear that he at last understands that he is powerless before the evil that Varlam represents.

Filmic Techniques

Purely cinematic devices [...] also play an important role in reinforcing the surrealism that is central to Abuladze's style. The color in the film is dense and vibrant. (Since the movie was originally

⁷ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 66," in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Cambridge edition text, ed. William Aldis Wright (New York: Doubleday, 1936), Vol. 1, 412.

⁸ David K. Weiser, *Mind in Character: Shakespeare's Speaker in the Sonnets* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 72. Weiser persuasively argues, on p. 73, that the last lines of the sonnet suggest that love "sustains the speaker and suggest[s] that personal relations can compensate for all the world's dishonesty. Love survives the destruction of all other ideals, because it is a personal rather than a conventional value."

way to make the audience realize from the opening moments that this is not a Hollywood film. The first shot in the film is one such example of Abuladze's aesthetic of the extreme close-up: a woman's hands making something—which turns out to be a marzipan flower—on something—which turns out to be an elaborate cake.

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Signs and Symbols

made for television, watching it on video actually provides an excellent sense of the intensity of the color saturation.) The color is in marked contrast to the pallid, washed-out palette of most Soviet films of the late Brezhnev era—and certainly in contrast to the grayness of Soviet life. For most Soviet audiences watching the film at the time of first release, the jolts of color would have been particularly noticeable and "foreign" in their stylishness. (Residents of Tbilisi, on the other hand, were by Soviet standards almost Italian in their sense of style.)

Moreover, the visually striking red-black-white color scheme (that of the Georgian national flag) that rears throughout the film suggests thematic connotations as well. In contrast to the black-robed judges and business-suited men, Keti and Guliko, the two moral opponents within the film's "present," both appear in the courtroom in outfits dominated by white. The luxuriant red carnations that blanket Varlam's coffin reappear in the bouquet Riktafelov hands to Nino and in those that droop in a vase on Varlam's secretary's desk. Nino's richly red robe, a mantle worthy of a queen, or indeed a Madonna, acts as a visual symbol of her warmth and maternal love; it disappears after Sandro's arrest. The same colors, woven into a characteristic Caucasus pattern, are visible in the rug hanging behind Varlam in the Barateli apartment.

In terms of editing, the takes are several minutes long (making a long film feel even longer, especially for western viewers accustomed to the rapid montage of television advertising or MTV). Quick cutting and noticeable camera movement are rare, except in the first three scenes. There the jump cuts reinforce the viewer's uncertain sense of what is going on. One good example from the beginning of the film is the cut from a close-up of the newspaper obituary notice to the flowers on Varlam's casket. Another is the cut from the mourners singing *Samskhiblo* to a close-up of Guliko's face, to flowers on the path, etc. (During the opening shots of the funeral procession, camera placement is low, so that we are at eye level with the coffin being carried down the stairs, a rather unsettling perspective.)

The use of the close-up, especially the extreme close-up, before rather than after the perspective has been established, is an effective