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Sol Dla Svanetia **(Salt For Svanetia)** **(SOVIET-B&W)**

Hong Kong A Goskinprom (1930) production. Directed by Mikhail Kalatazov. Screenplay, Sergei Tretjakov; camera (b&w), Kalatazov, Salva Gegelasvili. Reviewed at Hong Kong Film Festival, March 27, 1989. Running time (at 24 frames per second): **61 MIN.**

■ Celebrated as a classic example of silent Soviet documentary, "Salt For Svanetia" would by today's standards be considered *dramatized* documentary, since it was filmed according to a screenplay, and, though it uses non-professional actors, is filled with stage scenes.

Svanetia is a valley in Georgia, 6,000 ft. up, where the Greater and Lesser ranges of the Caucasus meet. Access to the area is blocked by snow for most of the year; even in July (as we see) there are snow storms. The people who live here struggle to survive, growing barley, and building homes from slate chipped from the mountains.

What they lack most is salt: To obtain it, animals lap up human urine or lick the sweat from a man; a newborn baby is devoured by a wolf seeking the salt in its blood.

According to the film, Svanetia's chief problem is its religion and age-old customs, which only exacerbate the difficulties of living in the region. Thus, a woman is left to give birth to a child alone, since she goes into labor during a funeral ceremony, which is considered blasphemy.

This was the first film made by director Mikhail Kalatazov, who also co-photographed. In 1957, he directed the Cannes prizewinner "The Cranes Are Flying." Here, Kalatazov is concerned with getting across the message that communism will help modernize Svanetia, so that its age-old problems will be overcome. The film ends in a triumphant note, since a new road is being built up to the mountain valley.

With its lovingly shot images of poverty and hardship, "Salt For Svanetia" has, understandably, been compared to Luis Buñuel's "Land Without Bread," which was made a few years later. "Salt" still impresses for the sheer beauty of its images and for its illumination of an almost unknown world. Despite its contrivances, these qualities endure. —Strat.