Document Citation

Title	**A Soviet 'Repentance' for Stalinism**
Author(s)	Sheila Benson
Source	*Los Angeles Times*
Date	1987 Dec 04
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Pokajanie (Repentance), Abulaze, Tengiz, 1986

MOVIE REVIEW

A Soviet 'Repentance' for Stalinism

By SHEILA BENSON,
Times Film Critic

Ketevan Abuladze, left, and Edisher Giorgobiani in "Repentance."

The savagely brilliant "Repentance" (Century City 14, Beverly Center Cineplex), set in a small city in Soviet Georgia, may come as a shock to Americans on more than one level. Since it surfaced at Cannes and then at Telluride and Toronto, the talk has been about the force of the film's anti-Stalinism, possibly leading U.S. audiences to expect a dark and dry polemic.

If so, they overlooked the fact that the director, Tengiz Abuladze, is a Georgian and, in the words of Jay Leyda, scholar of the Soviet film, "It is nearly impossible for a Georgian to make an ordinary movie."

And so, for all its thinly veiled allegory, "Repentance," and particularly its first third, is lit with bursts of satiric humor, with music, bits of opera and great flights of surreal imagery, which only serve to intensify its growing horror. And it is never less than physically gorgeous.

The film is a story within a story, opening and closing in the cluttered, folksy kitchen of a beautiful, sad-eyed woman, Ketevan (nicknamed Keti), who is making cake after cake, all in the shapes of small village churches.

Her visitor is sort of Saroyanesque comic relief: a mustachioed soldier absently munching the steeples off her cakes. He's shocked by the newspaper's front page: Varlam Aravidze, the city's last, great mayor, his own personal friend, has died. As we move into Varlam's funeral and what follows, we are also moving into Keti's reverie of the recent past.

The funeral's bombastic excesses, punctuated by the little soldier's eye-rolling and gnat-catching, are nice enough for silent-film comedy, but what follows is pure Bunuel—or

Please see 'REPENTANCE,' Page 10

'REPENTANCE'

Continued from Page 1

Abuladze. To the increasing consternation of his adult son, Avel, daughter-in-law Guliko and grandson Tornike, Varlam will not stay buried.

Dawn after the funeral finds his bulky figure, arms folded, propped up against a tree in Avel's courtyard. Reburied, he appears again and again. Finally, his "persecutor" is caught. It is a woman who will admit the deed but not her guilt: As long as she lives, she says with defiant dignity, the tyrant Varlam Aravidze will not lie decently buried.

And as she explains why, we move back in time to see this woman as the beautiful little 8-year-old Keti, blowing soap bubbles from the window of her artist-father's house on the day Varlam was elected mayor.

(In this superlative cast, an actor of stunning range, Avtandil Makharadze, plays Varlam and Avel: Varlam, histrionic, cunning, operatic; Avel, naturalistic and contemporary. They are such extraordinarily different characterizations that apparently even Soviet audiences had trouble realizing that this was a dual role.)

Our first glimpse of Varlam alive and at his prime is chilling. As he stands on a balcony, with his *Fuehrer's* mustache, his Mussolini black shirt strapped by leather suspenders, his Stalin-like shock of hair and his pince-nez glinting in the sun, Varlam is a kind of composite dictator. (It is not lost on Soviet audiences that Joseph Stalin and his notorious secret police chief, Lavrenti Beria, were both from Georgia. And no one from any culture will miss the Edward Gorey-like raven, gibbet and noose, just to Varlam's right.)

Abuladze keeps his touch lightly wicked during Varlam's first political address, packs it with silent-film slapstick touches, with a pinky-comic floating cherub wearing a Varlam mustache, but the comic moments are winding to a close.

Varlam enters as a heavily flirtatious, opera-loving fool, enchanted by Keti's entire, beautiful family—her chestnut-bearded and Christlike father, Sandor, and her exquisite, exotic mother, Nina (played by Abuladze's own daughter). But soon Varlam hides his dangerous side less and less, his contempt for art, religion, humanistic values. As his detractors begin to disappear, guards in medieval armor stalk the city, their arrival a stomach-clutching signal of despair.

This reign of terror is given great images: Nina's dream in which she and a fleeing Sandor try to hide among clods of dirt, only their beautiful, eggshell-fragile faces above ground, while Varlam's mounted knights thunder past their ears.

Most searing of all is a sequence that Abuladze has taken from a true incident: Some of the women of missing men hear that trees carved with the names of exiled prisoners have turned up at the logging camp. Wading in water, the black-clothed women move from log to log, finding their husbands' and sons' names among them, caressing the truth within the wood. As Keti and Nina search for Sandor's name, the logs are split and cut; truth is reduced to toothpicks and then to sawdust.

It is the film's most terrible moment, worthy of Andrei Tarkovsky. Not all of "Repentance's" controlled fury has this power; some of the heavy-laden symbolism remains opaque and baffling, and there is nearly a quarter more story to come, the part dealing with the legacy of the adult Avel and his tortured teen-age son, Tornick.

Yet the questions of conscience with which Tornick assaults his father are crucial to Abuladze's rigorous moral conclusion, since the director clearly considers Avel an even greater villain than his father. (Abuladze was co-writer of the screenplay, with Nana Djanedlidze and Rezo Kveselava.) Most likely these are the most troubling moments for Soviet audiences as well, which have reportedly greeted the film with minutes of standing applause as well as stunned astonishment at its close. In truth, they are more melodramatically staged than any other section of the film.

Yet "Repentance," for all its occasional allegorical mysteries, is coherent and powerful, and unswerving in its persistence that Stalinist evil not remain below ground. The fact that "Repentance" has been chosen as the official Soviet entry in the best foreign film category at the Academy Awards is only part of the heartening aura that attends its arrival.