Document Citation

Title	**Unforgiving memory**
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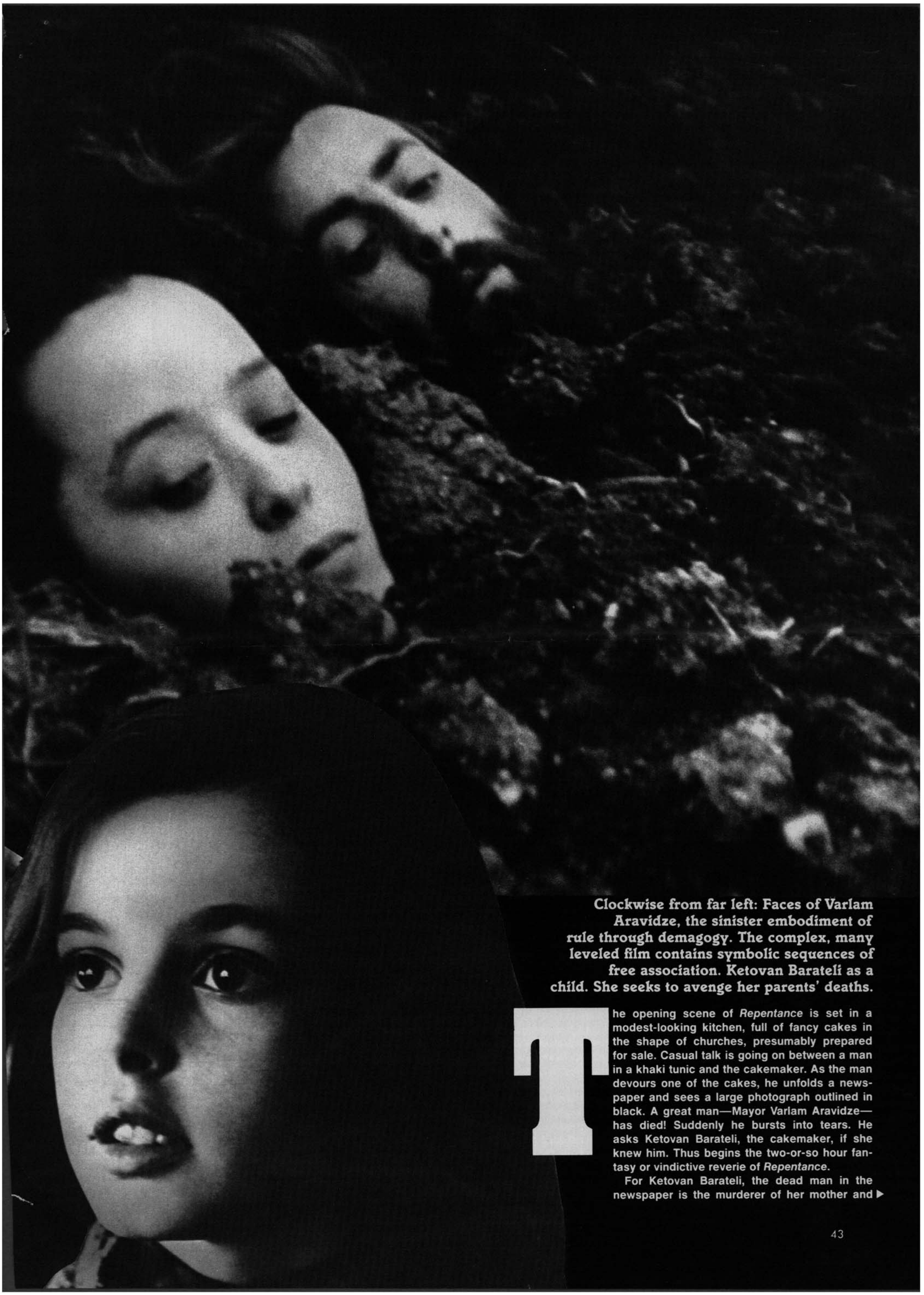
Source	*Soviet Life*
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	6
Subjects	Abulaze, Tengiz (1924-1994), Kutaisi, Georgia (Republic), Soviet Union
Film Subjects	Pokajanie (Repentance), Abulaze, Tengiz, 1986

movies

UNFORGETTABLE MEMORY

By Vladimir Lakshin

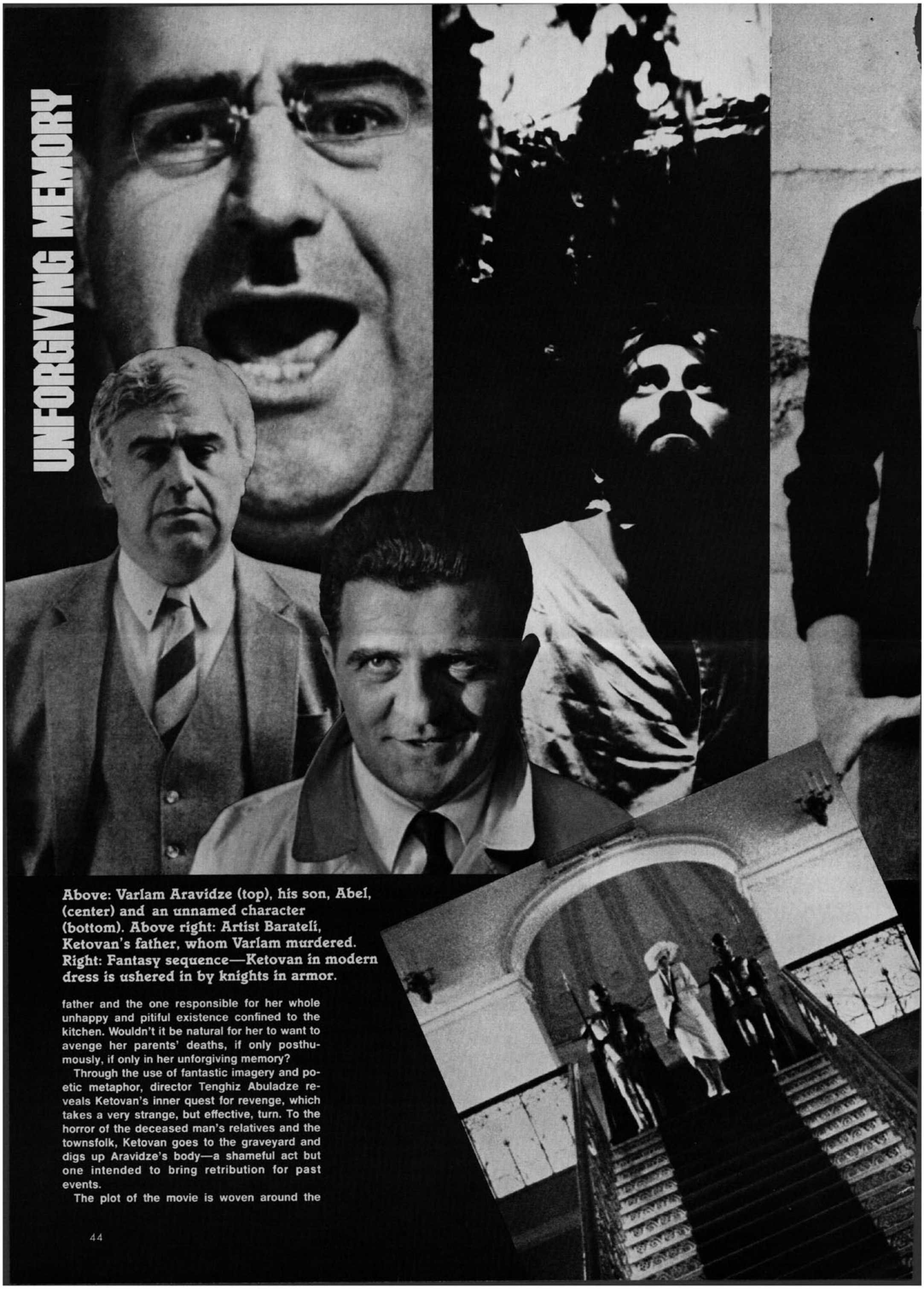
Repentance, a remarkable movie directed by Tenghiz Abuladze, has been a box office hit since its release earlier this year. Presented here is writer and literary critic Vladimir Lakshin's review of the film, which appeared in _Moscow News_.



Clockwise from far left: Faces of Varlam Aravidze, the sinister embodiment of rule through demagogy. The complex, many leveled film contains symbolic sequences of free association. Ketovan Barateli as a child. She seeks to avenge her parents' deaths.

The opening scene of *Repentance* is set in a modest-looking kitchen, full of fancy cakes in the shape of churches, presumably prepared for sale. Casual talk is going on between a man in a khaki tunic and the cakemaker. As the man devours one of the cakes, he unfolds a newspaper and sees a large photograph outlined in black. A great man—Mayor Varlam Aravidze—has died! Suddenly he bursts into tears. He asks Ketovan Barateli, the cakemaker, if she knew him. Thus begins the two-or-so hour fantasy or vindictive reverie of *Repentance*.

For Ketovan Barateli, the dead man in the newspaper is the murderer of her mother and ▶

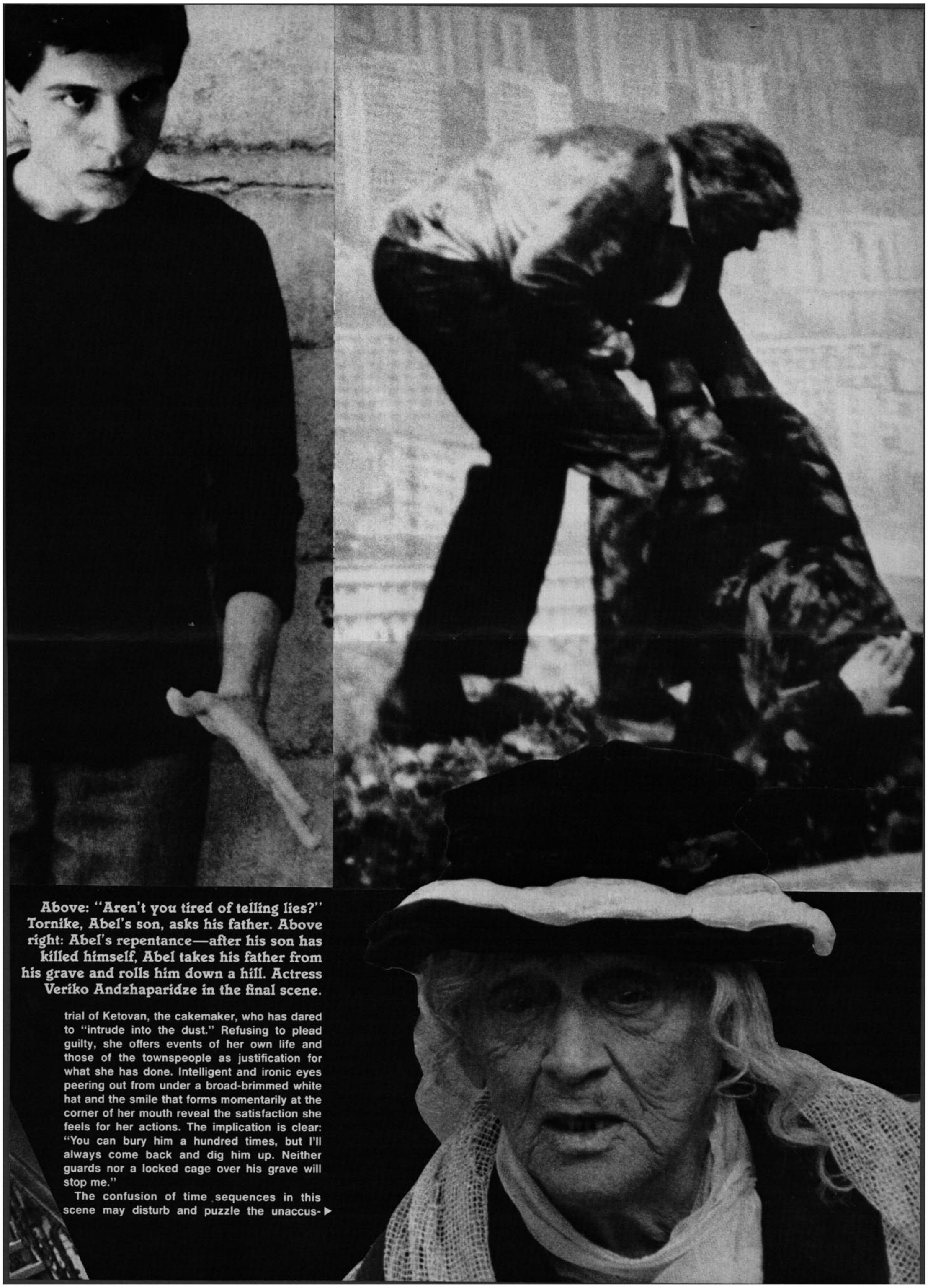


Above: Varlam Aravidze (top), his son, Abel, (center) and an unnamed character (bottom). Above right: Artist Barateli, Ketovan's father, whom Varlam murdered. Right: Fantasy sequence—Ketovan in modern dress is ushered in by knights in armor.

father and the one responsible for her whole unhappy and pitiful existence confined to the kitchen. Wouldn't it be natural for her to want to avenge her parents' deaths, if only posthumously, if only in her unforgiving memory?

Through the use of fantastic imagery and poetic metaphor, director Tenghiz Abuladze reveals Ketovan's inner quest for revenge, which takes a very strange, but effective, turn. To the horror of the deceased man's relatives and the townsfolk, Ketovan goes to the graveyard and digs up Aravidze's body—a shameful act but one intended to bring retribution for past events.

The plot of the movie is woven around the



Above: "Aren't you tired of telling lies?" Tornike, Abel's son, asks his father. Above right: Abel's repentance—after his son has killed himself, Abel takes his father from his grave and rolls him down a hill. Actress Veriko Andzhaparidze in the final scene.

trial of Ketovan, the cakemaker, who has dared to "intrude into the dust." Refusing to plead guilty, she offers events of her own life and those of the townspeople as justification for what she has done. Intelligent and ironic eyes peering out from under a broad-brimmed white hat and the smile that forms momentarily at the corner of her mouth reveal the satisfaction she feels for her actions. The implication is clear: "You can bury him a hundred times, but I'll always come back and dig him up. Neither guards nor a locked cage over his grave will stop me."

The confusion of time sequences in this scene may disturb and puzzle the unaccus- ▶

tomed filmgoer: The defendant, wearing a modern dress, is ushered in by medieval knights in armor. Judges appear in long black robes, while other characters read papers, smoke filter cigarettes and speak into microphones. The prosecutor plays with a Rubik's Cube. It soon becomes clear, however, that this is a deliberate device of the director and not a mistake. Actually, I'm not a big fan of avant-garde cinematography, surrealism or symbolism, but in this case, the provocative intermingling of historical images adds to rather than detracts from the film's impact. When does it all happen? At no particular time. And where? Nowhere and everywhere. It occurs wherever and whenever law and human dignity are trampled upon, making terror, denunciation and fear common practice.

Mayor Varlam's stout, self-complacent, pear-shaped face is not meant to bear any direct resemblance to any historical personage.

The mayor of the small Georgian town is no potentate, but the process of using personal power based on demagogy and repression to circumvent the law is universal. The social psychology behind the events in *Repentance* is what is important. Varlam is not presented as a mad bloodsucker or a maniac but as a personality type so as to rid people of the elemental awe and involuntary reverence that such people engender.

Varlam Aravidze, played by Georgian actor Avtandil Makharadze, sets out to win over the townspeople by gaining their admiration and submission. With promises and flattery, he attempts to buy the intellectuals and artists. He begins with benevolent and somewhat ingratiating smiles. He listens attentively to the elderly and praises the talented and the beautiful. But the truth is that he will never be satisfied until every living thing and all talent around him are destroyed. For example, Varlam perceives the family that does not pay him homage, the little girl who puts soap bubbles out of a window and a beautiful woman who doesn't look at him with proper admiration as mortal threats, who must be sent off to jail. The mayor possesses no mercy or remorse; and he has no reverence for anything of value, such as religion, history or national tradition.

His well-calculated showmanship permits him to change masks with diabolical ease. He is a fatherly mayor before the townsfolk, a patron of the arts before artists, a fine singer and a reader of Shakespearean sonnets before a woman. The arrests, tortures and executions that occur seem to have nothing to do with him. They are performed, as it were, against his will by others, most likely by his unworthy associates or by the same individuals who don't bat an eyelash over denouncing one another. Varlam derives secret pleasure from stalking his victims, toying with them cruelly and letting others do his dirty work. This is Varlam the Great, whose self-satisfied, clean-shaven, vulgar yet refined face continues to loom in the mind long after the movie has ended.

The depressing and nightmarish visions recreate an atmosphere of fear that paralyzes a seemingly monolithic society. We see a mad race through narrow streets and underground tunnels; we see tortures and desperate self-accusations intended to save the victims from the tightening noose. The logic of terror makes every defender of the wrongly convicted the next person to be accused. Anyone who dares to pity the latter is bound to become the next victim. Old men trying to defend a temple or painter Sandro interceding for the old men—all die one after the other.

The repressed seem to be under the illusion that the more absurd they make their testimonies and the greater the number of innocent people accused of outrageous crimes, the sooner the truth will come to light. The primitive estheticism of the interrogation scene—which immediately follows one where a handsome investigator in tails and the young Themis with a kerchief over her eyes sing duets by a white grand piano in a green meadow—seems incredible as does the confession of the accused, who admits plotting to dig a tunnel between London and Bombay with 2,000 accomplices. And yet this hyperbolic self-accusation is taken at face value.

It is in the nature of the subject chosen by Abuladze that the most authentic reality, confirmed by thousands of living witnesses, appears as outrageous fantasy, while the most improbable fiction portrayed in metaphor seems strikingly real. For instance, in one scene characters buried neck-high are forced to listen to the mayor sing operatic arias from a limousine. The scene set on the outskirts of the goods station is equally effective: Women and children wander among piles of wood searching for the names of their arrested husbands and fathers on the bottom of the logs. The final shot of the scene shows a conveyer belt carrying sawdust—a powerful symbol of crushed lives, the modern analogue of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness.

The significance of *Repentance*, however, does not lie solely in chilling scenes or the figure of Varlam Aravidze. It is the punishment not the crime, the repentance not the "sinning," that is the focus of the film.

Repentance as a rite is performed twice during the movie. The first instance is false, incomplete and akin to self-justification. Abel Aravidze, Varlam's son, is shown confessing to an anonymous clergyman, whose face is hidden by darkness while his brightly lit hands avidly skin a smoked fish. Abel complains to the confessor that he feels lost and no longer capable of telling good from evil. Suddenly the confession is interrupted by a familiar jeering laugh. Varlam's diabolical face appears from out of the darkness. He explains to his son that all his problems are caused by loneliness.

Real repentance—genuine and deep—is possible only after a genuine shock, or, perhaps, a sacrifice meant to redeem and expiate. Abel's shock comes from an unexpected and extremely painful direction. His son, Tornike, kills himself with a hunting rifle that he has received from his grandfather—Varlam. This is the retribution for all the lies and hypocrisy of the "ruling clan." The death of his son and heir brings Abel back to his senses. His second repentance is complete and unconditional but its cost is dear!

Repentance must be seen more than once to absorb all of its complex metaphorical imagery. However, even without a detailed analysis, the powerful emotional interaction between the screen and the audience is quite apparent. The director masterfully achieves the desired effect by simply confronting us with beauty.

Words cannot describe the faces we see on the screen. Artist Barateli and his wife, Nino, look out at us with sad and reproachful eyes. They pass judgment on the oppressors and torturers without speaking, throwing their verdict into the terribly blurred face of Varlam. The final scene, in which actress Veriko Andzhaparidze—incidentally, this was her last role—portrays an old woman climbing a cobbled street, muttering, "Varlam Street cannot lead to the temple," is unforgettable.

The daring but effective decision to cast the same actor, Avtandil Makharadze, in the two lead roles is noteworthy.

In my opinion, the film's special significance lies in the fact that Abuladze treats a painful subject mercilessly but with a sense of measure that keeps despair at bay.

The main question posed by the release of *Repentance* is whether this bitter memory of past mistakes and crimes should be revived at all? The film's answer is Yes.

While the trial of the "intruder" is taking place, Ketovan Barateli declares that judgment on her has already been passed. "Revenge cannot make me happy, rather it is my misfortune and my cross to bear," she says. But relief and hope are within grasp, through repentance, especially if it is done publicly. Only after Abel struggles to unearth his father's body and hurls it from the grave, only after the corpse is rolled down the slope of the mountain that towers over the sleeping town, is his penance complete, his burden relieved and his integrity and strength revived.

Repentance is sure to become a landmark in Soviet cinematography. It is bound to become a catharsis for many people and an eye opener for even more. The director received a special award at the Cannes Film Festival.

Abridged.