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PIROSMANI. Directed by Georgi Shengelaya. A Gruzia Film Studio production of Georgia, U.S.S.R. Written by Shengelaya and Erlom Akhvlediani. A Macmillan Films presentation distributed by Entertainment Marketing Corporation.

AMERICAN GRAFFITI. Directed by George Lucas. Produced by Francis Ford Coppola. Written by Lucas, Gloria Katz, and Willard Huyck. Re-released by Universal Pictures.

Pirosmani—not exactly a household word in America. It's the title of a Russian film made in Tiflis, Georgia, as well as the familiar diminutive for Nikola Pirosmanishvili (1863-1918), who was an expressionist of primitive bent. His paintings, especially of animals, are reminiscent of Rousseau's but not as well-known in the West.

This lack of recognition helps make the belated release of the 1971 *Pirosmani* one of the more vulnerable, quixotic events on the New York film calendar. The provincial filmmaker Georgi Shengelaya, a native of proud Georgia (where thousands recently demonstrated in the streets of Tiflis to preserve the local dialect as a constitutional right), does not attempt a hard sell of the *Pirosmani* legacy to the rest of the world. Rather, he has attempted to reshape a quiet, rudimentary film style around his topic and to draw viewers into Pirosmani's world at the turn of the century.

Pirosmani apparently led a relatively dull life. He failed in business, drifted around Tiflis, and exchanged paintings for board and drink; he was celebrated by the local authorities for a time, then rejected, and spent the last years of his life in an alcoholic stupor. Except for the symbolic liberties in the ending, in which townsfolk entomb the painter and later release him after an "artistic resurrection," the film accepts the staid, quiescent nature of Pirosmani's biography.

The nondramatic film—a tableau, really, not even a pageant—concentrates almost entirely, through framing and textures, on images of Tiflis. *Pirosmani* tries to convey a feel for the artist's canvases as the backdrop of his cinematic life. The film tends, then, toward light pastel as well as solid blue and brown compositions; and it intersperses groups of peasants, gypsies, and merchants, primarily around tables, throughout. Most of the compositions are striking, yet they still leave behind a doubt about what inherent relationship the rapid scan of moving celluloid images has to the true appreciation of a painter's work.

Pirosmani breaks even further from traditional biographies of artists by depicting Nikola himself as an almost catatonic drifter. The passion to create, the basic mystique associated by society with the artist, is never conveyed. This last gap makes the movie all the more exotic and defenseless. Given the option, I vastly prefer Kirk Douglas's anguished gnashing in front of the artful decor of Minnelli's *Lust For Life* and even Oliver Reed's muscular bellowing against the lurid imagery of Ken Russell's *Dante's Inferno: Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites* to a placid

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study in composition made for Georgians, connoisseurs of Pirosmanishvili, and art students.

Pirosmani opens this Friday at the Cinema Studio, where paying customers, bless them, have just supported Chaplin's silent *A Woman of Paris* for an amazing six-week run. Miracles can happen.

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