CINEMA AND VIDEO ART FROM GEORGIA
By James Norton

Georgia has always been the home of primal forces and has pioneered the fundamentals of our shared culture. It was the mythical home of Medea and the Golden Fleece; it was the prehistoric site where wine was first produced; it was one of the earliest nations to adopt Christianity and it was the birthplace of Stalin. So it is fitting that the first cinema screening in the capital Tbilisi took place in 1896, a few months after the Lumiere Brothers' first ever screening in Paris. The first feature film to be made in Georgia dates from 1908 and we thus celebrate the centenary of a national cinema whose abundance of masterpieces belies the country's modest size and the climate of adversity it suffered in the 20th Century, but whose creative vitality, generosity of spirit and visionary ardour fully reflect the character of its people.

In the confused wake of the Russian Revolution, Georgia enjoyed a brief period of independence before being drawn into the suffocating grasp of the Soviet Union in 1921. Nevertheless, Tbilisi was at the time a hotbed of avant-garde activity and Kote Mikaberidze's *My Grandmother*, dating from 1929, is Georgian cinema's first true masterpiece. This long-neglected film is every bit the equal of the classics of Eisenstein. A dazzling, phenomenally inventive satire incorporating expressionist sets and acting, animation and puppets, the film proved so radical that it was banned for forty years.

Georgia has given the world a number of cineastes of international renown and the first of these to make his debut was Mikhail Kalatozov, whose *Salt for Svanetia* (1930) remains one of the most powerful portraits of the rugged Georgian landscape and the harsh life of its shepherds and astounding pagan rituals, all of which are naturally brushed aside by improving Soviet modernisation. Kalatozov went on to make one of the classic Russian wartime dramas *The Cranes are Flying* (1957) although his greatest work is now recognised to be the virtuoso *I am Cuba*, shot in Havana in 1964.

Kalatozov was one of many Georgian directors who found fame in Moscow, much as Western European talent has flocked to Hollywood. The most celebrated epic of what was known in the USSR as The Great Patriotic War, *The Fall of Berlin*, with its culminating image of the Soviet flag raised over the Reichstag and iconic tribute to the personality cult of Stalin, another Georgian boy who did well for himself in the Soviet Union, was made by the Georgian Mikhail Chiaureli, whose daughter Sofiko was to become the darling of Georgian art-house cinema.

In the 1960s Georgian cinema was allowed a degree of self-expression akin to the Czech New Wave, and retained a national identity unique amongst the Soviet states. Several gifted directors emerged with highly individual takes on Georgian visionary exuberance. Otar Iosseliani embodies the Georgian character better than anyone. His early films, of which *Pastorale* is the finest example, are freewheeling romantic and bohemian social satires, equal parts Fellini, Chekhov and the intoxication of a Georgian feast. As Iosseliani has remarked: "Everyone is born to drink the glass of his life." The film was banned for no other reason than its proof that Soviet dogma was a complete irrelevance to ordinary folk. In the 1980s Iosseliani sought greater artistic freedom by emigrating to France, where his most recent film *Gardens in Autumn*, a Buñuelian farce, is set. *Brigands* in 1996, revisited Georgia with a vengeance, dramatising the eternal return of historical cruelty in a triple-layered epic incorporating the barbaric medieval kingdom, the tortuous insanity of the Stalin era and the corruption of the modern-day arms mafia.

Pirosmani, made in 1969 by Giorgi Shengalaya, member of a dynasty of Georgian actors and directors, is possibly the most successful example anywhere of that hackneyed genre, the artist biopic. Its subject, Niko Pirosmanishvili, was a marvellous early 20th century naïve painter whose admirers included Picasso. The film is full of formal invention, episodic, with a disorienting chronology that avoids the clichés of other such biographies and gorgeous tableaux derived from the artist's enchanting works.

Pirosmani was also the subject of a short film by Sergei Paradjanov, undoubtedly the greatest genius and trickster of Georgian cinema, indeed one of the very greatest of cinema anywhere. Paradjanov was born in Tbilisi to Armenian parents in 1924, trained in Moscow and progressed from the kitsch of Socialist Realism to an utterly original delirious intensity in a series of films made in Ukraine before finding his mature style with the unique and dazzling tableaux of *The Colour of Pomegranates* which he made in Armenia in 1968. Increasingly harassed by the authorities for his total disregard for convention, Paradjanov was jailed in 1973 on trumped up charges of corruption and homosexuality and was unable to work for a decade. It was only on

his release that Paradjanov completed his career in his native Georgia. *The Legend of the Suram Fortress* showed his originality and powers of invention to have remained intact in this medieval folk tale of courtly surrealism, introducing elements of oriental theatre, such as the use of long rippling bolts of cloth to represent the ocean, with puppets, reminiscent of traditional Armenian marionette theatres, and toy ships, together with optical distortions, deliberate anachronisms and a rich stew of ritual and magic.

Paradjanov was to complete only one more feature and on the second day of filming the autobiographical fantasia and love letter to his childhood *Confession* he collapsed on set on the terraces of his home overlooking Tbilisi, brilliantly decorated with red floral wreaths for the film and peopled with veiled matriarchs and sailor suited children. Filming was never resumed and a year later, in 1990, he died.

If Iosseliani is the Georgian character at its best and Paradjanov its vivid imagination laid out at the historic crossroads of the world, then Tengiz Abuladze was its vibrant and troubled soul. Having made his mark in 1967 with *Incantation*, a medieval saga of sectarian conflict, its dialogue chanted poetry, a film as close to the stark intensity of ritual that cinema has ever come, Abuladze made history in 1984 with *Repentance*. Made over a year before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, it is only fitting that a Georgian should have made the first and still one of the most potent frontal assaults on the evil of Stalin. In a transparently obvious and breathtakingly bold allegory, the body of a tyrannical mayor with Stalin's hair and Hitler's moustache, a combination which also resembles Stalin's hated henchman and compatriot Lavrenti Beria, is repeatedly exhumed and with it the crimes of the past are disinterred as his ghastly spectre once again stalks the land with tragic consequences. It was promptly banned but soon came to international attention.

As with this film, so with the country as a whole. In April 1989 Georgia was one of the first Soviet states to begin the tumultuous process of independence when demonstrators were massacred in central Tbilisi. Georgia finally became independent two years later but was soon embroiled in a deadly civil war. This turbulence and the inevitable economic instability have hit Georgian film production, but a stream of striking documentaries continue to emerge. Zaza Rusadze's *Bandits* is an essential primer in the past two decades of Georgian history – including a damning portrait of future president and hero of Perestroika Eduard Shevardnadze - and a snapshot of the intellectual dissident community in Tbilisi before independence, focussing on the hijacking of an airliner in Tbilisi in 1983 by a group of students desperate to escape to the West, and its horrific outcome. One of the film's most haunting revelations is that the leader of the hijackers was an occasional actor who made an appearance in *Repentance*, a role that was recast and reshot in the terrible wake of the hijack.

Levan Tutberidze's *A Trip to Karabakh* is a gritty yet soulful and wry thriller that brings Georgian cinema bang up to date. A group of Tbilisi stoners set off on a road trip in pursuit of a deceptively simple drugs deal which leads them into both sides of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. The film offers sweeping vistas of the contested steppe, knockabout performances and touching interludes of the domestic issues facing a young independent generation at a critical point in their history.

The heady and thriving atmosphere and labyrinthine splendour of Tbilisi today makes it one of the world's most enchanting cities, but Georgia is still not at peace with itself. Its potential membership of NATO and pro-Western leadership has aggravated its increasingly hostile Russian neighbour which has backed the secessionist Abkhazian republic in a deadly and volatile conflict which continually threatens to engulf the whole country.

No survey of Georgian cinema would be complete without a parting tribute to its most luminous star Sofiko Chiaureli who died in March of this year. Her final role was in the superbly impressionistic *The Lighthouse* inspired by the conflict in Abkhazia, in which she mournfully captured the terror and bewilderment of those trapped in the deadly phantasmagoria of a war zone. Married for many years to Giorgi Shengalaya, the director of *Pirosmani*, she does not however appear in that film but can be seen here in as the oracle in *The Legend of the Suram Fortress.* Chiaureli was Paradjanov's muse, the Tilda Swinton to his Derek Jarman, although ironically her exotic poses and highly choreographed gestures in his films belied a playful and expressive ability on the films of others, notably Abuladze's *The Tree of Desire,* more reminiscent of Fellini's leading lady Giulietta Masina. Chiaureli was the equal of both these actresses and is sadly missed.