

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.

THE CAUCASUS CINEMA

OVERVIEW

Film is an art form that has social, cultural, and historical significance, is an invaluable resource in the study of history, and one that reaches a mass audience and connects people with a shared experience. Every film is a cultural artifact that reflects the values, feelings, thoughts and myths of the society that produced it.

Film can be considered the most social art form as it can reach and affect people inaccessible to print. Like myth and dreams, film seems to touch both the individual and collective psyche of its audience.

Film reached the Caucasus in the 19th century, and the films produced at this time were either directed by Russian or foreign filmmakers.

During the Soviet era, film was one of the important propaganda tools used to spread Communist ideology in the cities. It was a powerful weapon to educate people according to the values of socialist realism. Cinema was also an institution that would facilitate politically educate the masses, also would be used in the struggle to eliminate illiteracy, and would help to legitimize communist ideology and power.

On January 17, 1922, Lenin issued the "Directives on the Film Business", which instructed the *People's Commissariat for Education* to systemize the film business, registering and numbering all films shown in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

The Soviets began to crackdown on foreign films for the sake of ideological correctness in the 1930s and reduced financial support. Movie theaters had material shortages, equipment was old, and the employees were underpaid. National cinema went into a state of dysfunction. The films from these years were mostly Russian productions and made in the Russian language.

Socialist realism became the dominant theme of the arts, especially between the 1930s and early 1950s and the cinema became a propaganda tool for Joseph Stalin. During World War II, the Soviets also started a campaign to promote patriotism through films.

The late 60s and early 80s witnessed heavy censorship on movies. The themes of the films were mostly concentrated on historical-revolutionary subjects. Some of the films were banned by the Soviet authorities due to formalist charges. The policies of perestroika and glasnost relaxed the censorship on cinema.

19TH CENTURY



SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA:

Rustaveli National Theater: The first cinema in Georgia, the *Rustaveli National Theater*, was established in Tbilisi on November 16, 1896. The theater building was built for an *Artists' Society* and it was renamed after Shota Rustaveli.

Rustaveli Theater

AZERBAIJAN: The history of cinema in Azerbaijan began on 2 August, 1898. The first silent movies were documentaries like *Oil Gusher in Balakhany*, *Fire of the Bibi Heybat Oil Gusher*, *You're Caught Up* and *Caucasian Dance* all filmed in 1898 and directed by Alexandre Michon.



Alexandre Michon

A French photographer and cameraman, and pioneer of Azerbaijani cinema, Alexandre Michon settled in Baku and created a photo studio. In 1898, Michon began documenting everyday life in Baku. He also filmed *The Folk Dance of the Caucasus* and *The Oil Gush Fire in Bibiheybat*.

Questions:

1- How did the societies in the Caucasus balance accepting outside innovations while still preserving their cultural traditions?

Readings:

- 1- Mikaberidze A., *Historical Dictionary of Georgia*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007.
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- 3- Rollberg, P., *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema*, Scarecrow Press, 2008.
- 4- The History of the Film Industry in Azerbaijan. Silent Films (1920-1935)
<https://azerbaijan.az/en/related-information/258>

20TH CENTURY

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: The first Georgian film premiered on May 15, 1908. There were several movie theaters built in Georgia in the first half of the 20th century. The first documentary film *The Journey of the Georgian Poet Akaki Tsereteli to Racha-Lechkhumi* (Akakis Mogzauroba) was released and directed by Vasili Amashukeli and Alexander Digmelov in 1912.



The first feature film, *Berikaoba Keenoba* was directed by Aleksandre Tsutsunava in 1909. He also directed the other feature film *Christiné* in 1916.

Aleksandre Tsutsunava

In the 20s, there was a short period of commercialization, when the Soviet monopoly on movies was eased in Tbilisi, and Georgian directors were able to make their own films, a mix of light entertainment and revolutionary ideology as in Ivan Perestiani's *Arsen Dzhordzhiashvili* (1921) and *Little Red Devils* (1923).

Goskinprom: The Georgian film industry developed and was nationalized due to the establishment of the first film studio, *Goskinprom* (State Film Production organization) in the *Commissariat of People's Education* in 1921. *Arsena Jorjashvili* (The Murder of General Griaznov) (1921) was the the first Georgian-made feature film directed by Ivan Perestiani. In 1923, Perestiani also directed an adventure and action movie that depicted the Civil War, *The Little Red Devils* (Tsiteli eshmakunebi) which heroicized and legitimized the Bolshevik view of history.

In the 1930s the Soviets began crackdowns on foreign films for the sake of ideological and reduced their financial support to the film industry. Movie theaters suffered material shortages, old equipment could not be repaired or replace, and the employees were chronically underpaid. National cinema slid into a state of

noticeable decline. The films were mostly Russian productions in the Russian language with only limited number being made in Georgian.

In cinema, as in all the arts, Socialist realism became the dominant style, particularly in the 1930s and early 1950s. Cinema simply became another means for Joseph Stalin's propaganda. During the Second World War, the Soviets also started a campaign to promote patriotism through film, and films such as *Georgii Saakadze* (1943) depicted the Russians and other nationalities fighting together against fascist occupiers.

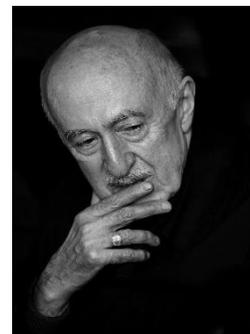


The *Tbilisi Cinematographic Studio* was established in 1938, and large-scale historical epics were filmed there in the 40s. Mikheil Chiaureli filmed *Georgii Saakadze* (1943), who was a 17th century Georgian leader who defeated both the Turks and the Persians. Chiaureli also became Joseph Stalin's favorite director for his significant contribution to the creation of Stalin's personality cult. He produced *Velikoe Zarevo* (1938), *Giorgi Saakadze* (1942-1943), *Kliatva* (1946), *Padenie Berlina* (1950), and *Nezabivaemii god 1919* (1952) and the others.

After World War II, in Georgia a new generation of young artists and directors in the movie industry was able to produce films free from official ideology. The Georgian film industry began to develop in the 50s - 60s, with the establishment of the *Gruziya Film Studio* and with the appearance of directors and screenwriters like *Tengiz Abuladze* and *Rezo Chkheidze* who together created the feature film *Magdanas Lurja* in 1954.

The directors Otar Ioseliani and Giorgi Shengelaia created short documentaries like *Tudzhi* (1964) without verbal commentary introducing a new wave in innovative feature films.

Otar Ioseliani



The years between the late 60s and early 80s are considered the golden age of the Georgian film industry. The film studios produced 60 films a year. *The Faculty of Cinema* was created at the *Shota Rustaveli Institute of Theater* in 1972, and later it became the *Tbilisi Institute of Theater and Film*. The screenwriter Rezo Gabriadze and the film director Eldar Shengelaia's collaborative films *Arachveulebrivi gamofena* (1968), *Sherekilebi* (1973) and *Tsiferi mtebi* (1983) were produced in this period.



This period also witnessed heavy censorship of movies. Some of the films were banned by the Soviet authorities due to formalist charges. Films like Otar Ioseliani's and Tengiz Abuladze's films were suppressed and kept away from public view. Abuladze's *Repentance* (1984) was banned for its semi-allegorical criticism of Stalin and its portrayal of the brutality of Stalin's purges. When the policy of *Glasnost* was introduced in the Soviet Union in 1985, Abuladze's *Repentance* was finally released in 1987.

Tengiz Abuladze

During the Georgian Civil War, due to the economic crisis, the Georgian film industry began to decline in the early 1990s. In spite of that, film companies produced a number of films and directors continued to stage films in Georgia. Géla Babluani directed *Udzinarta Mze* in 1992. Film director Dito Tsintsadze staged his film *Sakhli* (1991), *Stumrebi* (1991) and *Zghvarze* (1993). Many directors like Otar Ioseliani, Mikheil Kobakhidze, Nana Jorjadze and Dito Tsintsadze emigrated to Europe and Russia. The Georgian film industry began to flourish in 1993 and new film companies and film studios were opened. Private companies and international institutions also began to finance the production of documentaries, educational films and short movies.

ARMENIA: At the beginning the Armenian cinema was under the influence of foreign filmmakers who traveled through the Caucasus.

The first movie filmed in Armenia was a documentary on the funeral of Khrimian Hayrig, Catholicos of all Armenians (1907), and the second was a documentary on the burial of Catholicos Matheos (1911) filmed in Etchmiadzin. In 1915, the first Armenian feature film directed by A. Minervin *Under the Rule of the Kurds* was released.

During the Soviet era the Armenian film industry was put under strict state control. The *Armenian State Committee on Cinema, Goskino* was established through government decree on 16 April 1923 to monitor all film production.

In 1925, the first Armenian full-length feature film, realistic melodrama *Honor (Namus)* directed by Amo Bek-Nazaryan was released. Nazaryan was also the writer and director of *Patricide* (1923), an innovative silent film *Zare* (1927), the comedy *Shor and Shorshor* (1928), and the somber *Khaspush* (1928), the first Armenian sound film, the social drama *Pepo* (1935) and *Anahit* (1947).



Amo Bek-Nazaryan

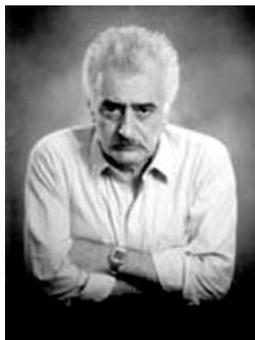
Goskino (Armenkino, Yerevan Film Studio, Armenfilm, Hay film): In 1922, the *Armenian Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom)* passed a decree to nationalize all movie theaters. In 1923, *Sovnarkom* founded the *State Cinema Organization (Goskino)* and it became part of the *Commissariat of Political Education*, and the state appointed Daniel Dznuni as the director of the studio. The studio's name changed over the years. It was renamed *Armenkino* in 1928, *Yerevan Film Studio* in 1938, *Armenfilm* in 1957 and *Hay film* named after Amo Bek-Nazarian. They also established the *State Photo and Film Factory (Gosfotokino)* in Yerevan, creating a film laboratory that opened in 1924. This film factory was renamed *Armenkino* in 1928.

The Nairi cinema was one of the oldest Soviet cinemas in Yerevan, 1920

There are many other leading directors like Patvakan Barkhurdyan who directed *Evil Spirit* (1928), *Funeral of A. Spendiarov* (1928), *Five Right in the Target* (1928), *The Sixteenth* (1928), *Under the Black Wing* (1930), *Kikos* (1931), *A Child of Sun* (1933), and *The Guardsman's Wife* (1943); and Amasi Martirosyan who directed *Gikor* (1934) in Armenia.



In the 50s and early 60s, every year the studio produced four feature films which were mostly revolutionary fiction as in Erazm Karamyan's and Stepan Kevorkov's *Personally Known* (1958). Kevorkov and Karamyan's film *An Extraordinary Assignment* (1965).



Stepan Kevorkov also served as executive director of Armenfilm Studio between 1949-1951 and became the first secretary of the *Armenian Filmmakers' Union* from 1956 to 1964.

Frunze Dovlatyan

By the mid-60s, Armenian national cinema experimented with a new direction in the film industry combining a Soviet multinational framework with a traditional one as in Frunze Dovlatyan's war story films *Hello, It's Me* (1966) and *The Brothers Saroyan* (1968); Henrik Malyan's *The Triangle* (1967) and *We and Our Mountains* (1970). Artavazd Peleshyan created radical aesthetic innovations by blending documentary film with poetic fiction as in his *The Color of Pomegranate* (1967).

Armenfilm was moved to a new studio in a Yerevan suburb in 1976. Director Edmond Keosayan was one of its directors who directed *The Elusive Avengers* (1966), *The New Adventures of the Elusive Avengers* (1968) and *The Crown of the Russian Empire or Once again the Elusive Avengers* (1971).

Many Armenian film directors like Sergei Parajanov received very harsh treatment from the Soviet authorities. He spent four years in prison during the 1970s and again in 1982.

In the late 80s, with *Perestroika*, the strict controls on the Armenian film industry were eased, however isolation from international markets continued.



After independence, due to increasing economic hardships, the Armenian film industry fell into a crisis similar to that in the former Soviet Union. After the abolition of censorship, with financial support from the new class of businesspeople, a new generation of filmmakers began to produce films based on social problems. In addition, more than twenty private film studios were established in Armenia.

Some filmmakers such as Edgar Baghdasaryan, Albert Mkrtchyan, Armen Dovlatyan, and Suren Babayan were able to partner with foreign directors and have their films shown internationally.

Edgar Baghdasaryan

AZERBAIJAN: In 1900, Q. Matye produced *The Life of Bakuvians and Their Movement Along the Velikokniaz Avenue* and *Bakuvians Walk in the City Park* in Baku.

The Georgian film director Vasil Amashukeli produced several films such as *Types of Bakuvian Bazaars*, *Seaside Walk* and *Work at Oil Derricks* in Azerbaijan in 1900.

Vasil Amashukeli

In 1915, a film production laboratory was established in Baku by the Pirone brothers. Film director Boris Svetlov from St. Petersburg produced several films with them. In Baku, Svetlov directed the film entitled *In the Realm of Oil and Millions* in 1915. He also directed the first version of the operetta *The Cloth Peddler* in 1916 in Azerbaijan.



A documentary film *The Celebration of the Anniversary of Azerbaijani Independence* was produced for Azerbaijan's independence day on 28 May 1918 during the short-lived *Azerbaijan Democratic Republic*.

Under the Soviets, the *Revolutionary Committee* of Azerbaijan issued a decree to nationalize all film studios in the country in 1920. With the Soviet monopoly on film industry, film studios made films combining Soviet ideology with casual entertainment. The government opened the first film studio in Baku in 1922, and the *Azerbaijani Photo and Film Administration* was founded in 1923.

The Legend of the Maiden Tower was the first Azerbaijani feature film released in 1924 and directed by Vladimir Balliuzek.



Azgoskino: In 1926 - 1930, the studio was called the *Azerbaijani State Cinema* (Azgoskino). The films produced in this studio were antireligious in tone as in *In the Name of God* (1925) by Abbas Mirza Sharif-Zade and in Bek-Nazaryan's *Sevil* (1929).

Abbas Mirza Sharif-Zade

In 1930 - 1933, the studio was renamed *Azkino*, and in 1933–1934 *Azfilm*. The films produced focused on forced industrialization as in the film *The First Komsomol Brigade* (1931).

In 1934–1935, the studio was called *Azgoskinprom*, and in 1935 - 1940 - *Azerfilm*. The studio produced its first sound film, *Baku's People* (1938) directed by Viktor Turin.

In 1941 - 1959, the studio was renamed the *Baku Film Studio*. One of the films produced in this studio was a romantic musical-comedy *The Cloth-Peddler* (1945), based on the operetta *Arshin Mal Alan* written by Uzeyir Hajibeyov in 1910.

During World War II, the government started a campaign to promote patriotism and friendship in films by depicting the Russians and other ethnic groups fighting together against fascism as in *One Family* filmed in Baku in 1943 and to raise national pride by presenting struggles to unify the existing khanates by the hero in the film *Fatali Khan* directed by Efim Dzigan in 1947.



Efim Dzigan

After World War II, film production dropped drastically in Azerbaijan for more than ten years. By 1950, the film industry entered its most severe quantitative and qualitative crisis. After Stalin's death in 1953, the film industry began to flourish. Instead of state-manipulated propaganda films, the new generation of young directors, actors, and screenwriters began to create outspoken films about real people and their social problems. However, there were also remade movies like *The Twenty-six Commissars* (1965), *The Cloth-Peddler* (1966), and *Sevil* (1970) that showed a continuing financial crisis leading to restrictions on film production.

In the 1990s, with independence, Soviet censorship was abolished and a new generation of filmmakers created realistic documentaries depicting the political turmoil in Azerbaijan as in the film *Broken Bridges* (1999) by director Rafiqh Pooya.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: During Soviet rule, the film industry was controlled by the business of the State Committee of the USSR for Cinematography. This Committee discouraged any initiative and private projects, and the artists became puppets in the hands of the powerful bureaucrats.

There were film studios built in towns and many villages of Chechen Ingushetia. Early actors were Dikalu Muzukaev and Dagun Omaev. Omaev was an actor played in *Gorets* directed by Murat Dzhusoyty who also directed *Kuryer na Vostok* in 1991.

Film directors, writers and crew of the industry had to be the members of the *Union of Soviet Film-Makers* and the *Union of Soviet Cinema Workers*.

The first national films were created under Soviet rule, and Iles Tataev was Chechnya's first film director, who directed *Gorskaya Novella* in 1979. He was one of the founders of the Chechen-Ingush film studio (1995) and served as a director. Tataev authored over 30 musical, folklore, feature films and documentaries.



Film director, screenwriter Sulambek Mamilov worked at the Gorky Studio in Moscow in the late 1960s, and produced Russian-language documentary, musical and feature films like *Extremely Dangerous People* (1979), *Ladies' Tango* (1983), *Day of Wrath (Dies Irae)* (1985), based on S. Gansovsky's short story, *A Golden Cloud Spent the Night* (1989) based on a tragic story of deportation, *Murder on Zhdanovskaya Street* (1992), and *Good Luck Gentlemen!* (1992).

Sulambek Mamilov

Questions:

1- Why did the film industry enter its most severe quantitative and qualitative crisis in the 1950s?

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- 2- Mikaberidze, A., *Historical Dictionary of Georgia*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group Ltd., 2015.
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- 6- Efim Dzigan Pict. <https://www.themoviedb.org/person/557268-efim-dzigan>