

# NEOREALISM AND GEORGIAN CINEMA

ZVIAD DOLIDZE\*

## Abstract

Italian neorealist films were first screened publicly in the Soviet Union in the early 1950s due to the fact that they had affinity with the tenets of socialist realism. On the other hand Italian neorealist filmmakers acknowledged the contribution of the Soviet avant-garde filmmakers (Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alexander Dovzhenko) to their cinematic vision. A significant example of the Italian neorealism impact on Georgian cinema may be found in *Magdana's Donkey* (1955), the debut film of Revaz (Rezo) Chkheidze and Tengiz Abuladze.

Although more subtle and with more original features, one can detect neorealist influence even in Chkheidze and Abuladze second films, *Our Yard* (1956), respectively *Someone Else's Children* (1958).

**Keywords:** Georgian cinema, neorealism and socialist realism, Rezo Chkheidze, Tengiz Abuladze.

Once Federico Fellini said to Georgian colleagues, in a private conversation, that cinema belongs to the Italians and Georgians. Maybe it is true because these two nations are almost similar by Southern European disposition and temperament, rich cultural and historical traditions, artistic talents, spiritual depths, etc. All of these had found the conformable transformation in literature and art and especially in one of the popular fields of art – in cinema.

Italian neorealist films were first screened publicly in the Soviet Union (one of the republics of which was Georgia) in the early 1950s. The ability of these films to engage a Soviet audience, including film-goers in Georgia, can be attributed to the aesthetic affinity of neorealism with the populist tenets of socialist realism: "... the Italian miracle can be explained simply – [neorealism] made art of the common man's life."<sup>1</sup> These films put the idiosyncratic psychological world of the common man into historical perspective and served as a social-political canvas of contemporary Italy, depicting universal post-war experiences like the search for truth or the struggle between hope and doubt. Neorealists eschewed sound stages [pavilions] and elaborate scenery, taking instead their cameras to the streets where they sought naturalistic images of impoverished Italians enduring their daily problems, escaping into fantasies, and confronting harsh realities. Cesare Zavattini, a leading proponent of Italian neorealism, has written about this populist tendency: "Neorealism is a movement rooted in the people. As long

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\* Dr. Zviad Dolidze is the Dean of the Faculty of Art Sciences, Media and Management and Full Professor at the Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film Georgia State University. E-mail address: dolzvi@gmail.com.

<sup>1</sup> R. Sobolev, *How Cinema Became an Art*, Kiev: Mistetstvo, 1975, p. 84 (in Russian).

as we have democracy in Italy, neorealism will continue to exist, but if democracy fails, so too will neorealism. Neorealism was born in a democracy and needs democracy to flourish.”<sup>2</sup>

Italian neorealism represented life in a democratic idiom of documentary authenticity and sincere spontaneity, creating an illusion of living truth on the screen. Georgian cinematic audiences have long expressed their enthusiasm for Italian neorealist filmmakers such as Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Alberto Lattuada, Giuseppe De Santis, Luchino Visconti, and Carlo Lizzani. In fact, Italian neorealist films played to full houses in Georgia and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. The Soviet government willingly distributed Italian neorealist films to popular audiences. The reason for this official enthusiasm may be explained in part by the fact that Italian neorealists acknowledged without hesitation the influence of the Soviet avant-garde filmmakers on their cinematic vision. They named acclaimed Soviet directors: Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Alexander Dovzhenko among their teachers.<sup>3</sup>

A significant example of the Italian neorealism impact on Georgian cinema may be found in the debut film of Revaz (Rezo) Chkheidze and Tengiz Abuladze *Magdana's Donkey* (1955). These directors were representative for the generation that most admired neorealism. They decided to adapt Ekaterine Gabashvili's novel *Magdana's Donkey* (1890) for the screen. The emotive impression created by this work of the nineteenth-century Georgian literature struck them as compatible with cinematic neorealism. Chkheidze and Abuladze's film expresses sympathy and deep regard for the ideas of the neorealist filmmakers. The film *Magdana's Donkey* belongs to a larger trend in Georgian cinema – the enduring fascination towards cinematic adaptations of the most significant works of national and world literature.

The heroine of the novel, the poor widow Magdana lives with her three children in a small village and goes to the city every day to sell homemade yogurt. Once her son finds a tired donkey fallen on the roadside; the boy drags the animal home where it regains consciousness. The donkey, named “Lurdzha” (“The blue”), becomes a sort of divine gift, helping Madgana with the transport of her yogurt jars. Soon the coal seller Mitua claims the donkey as his own, taking Madgana to civil court, but the court does not decide in favour of the petitioner. Thus, Magdana gets to keep Lurdzha. While remaining faithful to the historical essence of the novel, Chkheidze and Abuladze created a cinematic adaptation in a completely different tonality: they replaced the stereotyped characters and clichéd conventions of the literary original with masterful artistry in direction, acting, and cinematography (landscapes, picturesque views of a Georgian village and town, the use of close-ups). The plot itself is modified; for instance, the film completely reverses the ending as it occurs in the novel: the court takes the donkey away from Magdana and returns it to Mitua. Naturally, such departures from the literary plot often take place in cinematic adaptations. To their credit, the young directors created a brilliantly exciting finale for *Magdana's Donkey*. Karlo Gogodze, the film's scriptwriter, should also be mentioned; he was a well-known film critic, dramatist, and admirer of Italian neorealism. When comparing *Magdana's Donkey* to neorealist films, many characteristic parallels and general details immediately draw one's attention. For example, the donkey holds the same meaning for Magdana as the bicycle does for Antonio Ricci in Vittorio De Sica's film *Bicycle Thieves*. Both the donkey and the bicycle are the meaning of survival and represent hope for the future well-being of the family in each film. The loss of the bicycle or the donkey, however, spells certain tragedy for each family.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in the collection *Italy. Cinema, Theater, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970, p. 67 (in Russian).

<sup>3</sup> See *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 6, 1958, p. 154.

Here, it is possible to draw yet another parallel: the neorealists found an inspirational source in verism, an artistic movement in Italian literature and art. The proponents of this movement, including the well-known writer Giovanni Verga, often depicted poverty, famine, illiteracy and other problems of the common people in naturalist coloration. They attempted to draw attention to these miserable lives. The characters of verist literature could be called the humiliated and the offended, but they are resilient and dignified people. As Carlo Lizanni mentioned, verism fulfilled his country's need for an authentic new culture, realist literature, and realistic folk art.<sup>4</sup>

The author of *Magdana's Donkey*, the Georgian writer Ekaterine Gabashvili was a leading representative of the Georgian populist movement. Populism arose in the 1870s in the Russian Empire (and spread to its colonies like Georgia). The practitioners of this movement in literature, called populist realists, were very similar to the Italian verists. Both relied on the realist representation of the common man's life, often gravitating toward naturalism. As one historian had written about the Georgian populists: "In addition to the question of national independence, they devoted equal attention to the social problems, the lives of the village peasant and the urban proletariat. The populists often bemoaned their own fate and misfortune."<sup>5</sup> With photographic accuracy Ekaterine Gabashvili depicted not only the real face of the Georgian village, the peasant mentality and folk customs, but also the woman's question, the problem of urban morality, and the need to eradicate inequities in property ownership. In this way, Georgian populist realists and Italian verists shared similar principles.



Fig. 1 – Still frame from the movie *Magdana's Donkey* (1955, directed by Rezo Chkheidze and Tengiz Abuladze).

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<sup>4</sup> See collection: "Italian Cinema. Neorealism". Moscow, "Iskusstvo", 1989, p. 11 (in Russian).

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Gaprindashvili, *Essays on the History of Georgian Public Mentality*, Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1988, p. 366 (in Georgian).

According to one critic, Chkheidze and Abuladze's film *Magdana's Donkey* can be thought of as a kind of populist film, "acquainting the Georgian viewer with the history of his people. The film offered an approach to the past rooted in specific concerns of the present."<sup>6</sup> In Georgian cinema this film's plot was highly unusual and innovative for its time. For one, there were very few films produced in Georgia at the time (9 films of the decade spanning 1945–1955). Another important point to keep in mind has been expressed by a Georgian film critic as follows: "Not only there were few films produced in Georgia at this time, but those made were not of the highest artistic quality. One can point to an ideological reason inhibiting aesthetic quality: the official theory of 'non-conflict' dictated that a work of Soviet art may not represent the negative side of mankind – all characters must be beautiful and good. It was forbidden to pit good against evil in films devoted to a portrayal of contemporary life; instead, only the relations between good and very good characters could be explored. This convention led to rather congenial if purely ornamental plot 'conflicts'.<sup>7</sup>"

The film directors employed various techniques to underscore the extreme conditions and deprivations of human rights endured by peasants and other members of Georgian society during the period of Russian colonisation. This theme reflected the tradition of socially engaged art depicting the struggle of the unfortunate against their exploiters. For this reason, *Magdana's Donkey* pleased Soviet censors as it confirmed a paramount ideological maxim of the regime: in pre-Revolutionary Russia (including imperial colonies like Georgia) the people experienced all manner of oppression until the Bolsheviks implemented new socialist conditions of life following the October Revolution of 1917. The film *Magdana's Donkey* confirmed this Soviet ideological premise.



Fig. 2 – Still frame from *Magdana's Donkey*.

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<sup>6</sup> Rusudan Tikanadze, *The Georgian Cinema... Problems, Researches*. Tbilisi: Khelovneba, 1978, p. 48 (in Russian).

<sup>7</sup> Natia Amiredjibi, *From Cinematograph to Film Art*, Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1990, p. 157 (in Georgian).

In *Magdana's Donkey* Chkheidze and Abuladze pay special attention to the subtle details of daily life in a Georgian village and the neighbouring town. The filmmaker Alexander Dovzhenko has noted the poetic nature of the film's attention to detail, commenting that the film brilliantly combines the quotidian and the poetic, documentary specificity and universal generalization.<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that the directors did not purposely shoot an art film centering on poetic devices and symbols. Their method consisted of concentrating on the plot and thereby examining the human character more profoundly. This method is responsible in part for the expressiveness rather than sentimentality in *Magdana's Donkey* and can be credited with generating popular interest and critical approval for the film.

Special mention should be made of the child actors: Mikho Borashvili and Nani Chikvinidze who played the roles of Magdana's children – Mikho and Kato. Chkheidze and Abuladze, however, made quite different use of children's roles: they gave them emotional depth and entrusted them to be the main catalysts for the plot development. Their experiment with children's roles can be deemed a success: Mikho and Kato became more significant characters in the film than they had been in the original literary source.

The film *Magdana's Donkey* demonstrated an aesthetic principle – using film to endow life experience with poetic meaning. The two film directors occupied a central place in the history of Georgian cinema; in fact, most Georgian directors, especially members of the younger generation, have attempted to achieve the artistic mastery that Chkheidze and Abuladze attained as young creators making their first film. Within a year of its release, *Magdana's Donkey* received several distinctions at international film festivals: it was awarded the prize 'Best Fiction Film – Short' at Cannes, and received the special prize at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. No other movie in the previous fifty years of Georgian cinema history had gained such international success as *Magdana's Donkey*. The Polish film critic Jerzy Plazewski reported the event: "This was a tremendous surprise. At the latest Cannes festival in May 1956, the Georgian film *Magdana's Donkey* was shown and awarded the Palme d'Or following the famous *Red Balloon*. As the film's first scenes flashed on the screen, viewers from around the globe of Italian neorealism, however, had not been limited to their collaborative film *Magdana's Donkey*, [they] immediately understood that Soviet cinema had undergone profound changes."<sup>9</sup> After this success Chkheidze and Abuladze pursued independent projects and soon became leaders of Georgian cinema.

The next film of Chkheidze *Our Yard*<sup>10</sup> (1956) depicts life in a large house in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. One critic has considered this film to be a kind of encyclopedia which includes all of the fundamental plot structures, situational conflicts, and ethical dilemmas characterizing cinema of the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> The screenplay focuses the film's action on daily life as it is experienced during a limited period of time.

The film's pathos of the ordinary may be described as follows: "Here is our city; here is one of its houses, the house of the film's main characters; here is the house's yard where they meet each other, make friends, and play – this is where life flows day by day." The filmmaker used a voice-over narrator to introduce and provide commentaries on the city, the house, the yard, and the characters. The methods used in the opening sequences of *Our Yard* were considered innovative in the Georgian cinema of the time: they used the techniques traditionally reserved for documentary filmmakers to create an impression of real life, and in this, Georgian

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<sup>8</sup> Collection: "Young Filmmakers of the Soviet Cinema", Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1962, p. 164 (in Russian).

<sup>9</sup> *Przegląd Kulturalny*, no. 5, 1957, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Also translated *In Our Courtyard*.

<sup>11</sup> Rusudan Tikanadze, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

cinema has a stylistic debt to Italian neorealism. The plot of the film unfolds as follows: a group of young people living in the house graduate from high school, and they pursue various life paths. Dato and Shalva, two young men, find work in an automobile factory, while the young woman Tsitsino enrolls in the university. Only Vazha, the son of a famous singer, decides to rest for a year. Both Vazha and Dato are in love with the merry buffoon Tsitsino. Vazha won't leave her alone, while Dato can't tell her the way he feels about her. After a time, Kote, a young male worker living in the house marries the elevator operator Manana. The frivolity of Vazha causes his father's death. In the end, Dato admits his love for Tsitsino and finds out that she also loves him. As the careless years of youth pass by, the characters find their place in life. In the yard where Vazha, Dato, Tsitsino, and Shalva had once played as children, a new generation reaches adulthood.



Fig. 3 – Still frame from the movie *Our Yard* (1956, directed by Rezo Chkheidze).

The film depicts many concerns of contemporary youth entering adulthood – first jobs, relationships with friends, parents and neighbours, marriage, and the search for one's place in society. The film contains various dramatic elements, including a love triangle, melodramatic plotlines, comic episodes, as well as moments of high tragedy. In sum, *Our Yard* attempts to create a portrayal of life as an open and unpredictable experience full of anxieties, joys, obstacles, and emotional exaltations. Chkheidze conveyed this experience by making use of neorealist cinematic techniques. The social and aesthetic aspects of his innovative film have secured a significant place for Chkheidze in the history of Georgian film production. He grasped

a central tenet of Italian neorealism – the direct and unadorned approach to reality – and brought this to a portrayal of contemporary Georgian experience; in doing so, he created a timeless classic of Georgian cinema of the 1950s. Chkheidze surpassed the neorealists in his search for actors who could bring their personal experience for playing the roles in the movie. He invited both professional and amateur actors to participate in this film. Critics and viewers warmly embraced Chkheidze’s movie.



Fig. 4 – Still frame from the movie *Our Yard*.

The second film of Tengiz Abuladze – *Someone Else’s Children* (1958) – is inspired by the article of the same title by N. Aleksandrova published in the newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda* in 1955. The article recounts how a young Russian woman met two motherless children on the street. She grew fond of the children and decided to become their stepmother. Even after the children’s father left her to live with another woman, she remained with the children. This was precisely the kind of plot Abuladze had been searching for: a real event with a track of poetry; an actual experience of the life of a human being in which lyrical ecstasy and actual truth had been naturally conjoined; an unadulterated contemporary reality that contained an admixture of nineteenth-century Romanticism. One must keep in mind that in adapting a story reported in the press, Abuladze was following in the footsteps of the Italian neorealists whose films were often inspired by accounts published in newspapers. The place where the events reported by Aleksandrova occurred was changed from a Russian city to Tbilisi, and the main characters, of course, were Georgians. Abuladze casted Mikho Borashvili and Nani Chikvinidze (the same child actors from *Magdana’s Donkey*) in *Someone Else’s Children*.

The film provoked a polemical debate: one critic affirmed that *Someone Else’s Children* was just a servile importation of Italian neorealism into the Georgian film, while another,

conversely, found no hints of neorealism in Abuladze's film at all.<sup>12</sup> Abuladze joined the public debate defending his film with these remarks: "Some have characterized my film has been enormously influenced by progressive Italian cinema. Is this true? If we understand influence as the desire and aspiration to attain the truthfulness and authenticity that are absolutely necessary to the cinema, then such influence must be acknowledged. But if we recall the films of the best Georgian directors, we can assure ourselves that they were made in the same spirit as my film."<sup>13</sup> The director made an original synthesis of the Georgian and Italian cinematic traditions in order to render the complex psychology of its true-to-life melodrama.

The film narrative of *Someone Else's Children* invites the viewer to judge difficult questions about human relationships, moral and civic duties, and the individual's attempt to resolve life problems, and so forth. By probing the ethical dimensions of human experience in this way, Abuladze departed from the clichéd conventions of Soviet film narrative and designed a plot that takes an entirely new direction.

The father in *Someone Else's Children* works as a machinist overwhelmed by the task of raising his children after his wife's death. He falls in love with a woman, but they divorce when it becomes clear that she will never be a mother to his children. At the very beginning of the film, the dramatic conflict has already been prepared. Soon another woman appears in the life of this man and his two kids; she becomes the protector of the family, a mother to the children, and the man's wife. However, he only needs to encounter his former lover once in a public bus, and he abandons his family. The dramatic conflict now intensifies: the offended stepmother initially decides to leave the house, the children, and the city. She makes her way to the train station, boards a train, but changes her mind when she sees the children running after her. She decides to return home, to her adopted kids.

The film narrative promotes a sentimental appreciation to those who have fallen to the unimpeachable logic of feelings, but in doing so Abuladze tries to penetrate into the inner psychological and emotional world of his characters. Naturally, this is a difficult task requiring immense subtlety. The drama of personalities and events unfolded in the film is further complicated by the highly individuated character types that require the director to employ an idiosyncratic approach in the film. This film cannot entirely be considered an expression of indigenous Georgian neorealism. As a film that asserts its independence in concept and style, however, *Someone Else's Children* is only superficially beholden to the influence of Italian neorealism. It is true, though, that certain scenes in the film take the form of direct quotations from neorealist films transplanted into Georgian soil. For example, the Georgian machinist in appearance, clothing, and behaviour may convincingly be compared to the characters of Raf Vallone in neorealist films. And still further on the question of influence, the Polish film critic Jerzy Giżycki has written: "To a certain extent one can discern the influence of Italian neorealism [in *Someone Else's Children*], but this is neither imitation nor posing. Rather, it can be attributed to a similarity in their artistic vision – a meeting along the common road of contemporary cinematic art."<sup>14</sup>

As in *Magdana's Donkey*, Abuladze made the children's roles the main catalysts of plot development in *Someone Else's Children* too. In the case of the latter film, however, the children function in a contemporary setting and are thus endowed with personalities highly developed from leading almost independent lives. Once again such child characters suggest an immediate parallel with those found in Italian neorealist films.

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<sup>12</sup> See *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 12, 1958, and *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 5, 1960.

<sup>13</sup> *Molodiozh Gruzii*, 29 March 1956.

<sup>14</sup> *Przjaźń*, 31 May 1959.

*Someone Else's Children* sharply differs from the typical features produced by the Soviet film industry in the 1950s. The problems it raises, the style it employs suggest an entirely different kind of cinematic vision than was typical of Soviet film of that decade. Abuladze actively voiced his dismay towards the didactic, petty bourgeois morality that is widely associated with that time. In its representation of the family drama, his film opens a discussion of profoundly personal questions. The Russian film director Jacob Segel evaluated *Someone Else's Children* and the civic contribution of its director as follows: "This work is of the utmost importance for our movement and development and as a record of our times in art. It is a film that enters the struggle for human destiny. I have never seen such an intent to look into human psychology."<sup>15</sup> Abuladze championed a method typical not only of the neorealists but generally of world cinema: he entrusted the viewer to reach the final conclusion about the film's ending. His use of this technique in *Someone Else's Children* distinguishes it as a significant work which has not lost its urgency even today. The movie received several awards at international film festivals. These distinctions testify to the success of *Someone Else's Children* even outside the Soviet Union.



Fig. 5 – Still frame from the movie *Someone Else's Children* (1958, directed by Tengiz Abuladze).

Certainly, the Italian neorealist film exerted an influence on other Georgian films of the 1950s and beyond. In their public speeches, media interviews, and writings, Rezo Chkheidze and Tengiz Abuladze often made mention of the profound impression on their outlook that neorealism had made. One of the Georgian film critics has stated in this regard: "The fact of this

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in the collection *Tengiz Abuladze*, Tbilisi: Okros Artsivi, 1994, p. 8 (in Georgian).

influence is an example of the mutual ties and influence that progressive art has had on the peoples of the world.”<sup>16</sup>

Italian neorealism is a particular phenomenon which did not lock in its home but went out to other countries and contributed significantly to the development of their film industries. One of the teachers of Chkheidze and Abuladze, the famous Soviet film director Mikhail Romm, declared that neorealism “is a fascinating art, before which it is necessary to take off your hat, in honor to those people which have created it.”<sup>17</sup> The Georgian cinema masters did not lag behind the epoch pulsation, used the main distinctive aesthetic principles of neorealism, adjusted them to Georgian reality, soul, and character; this imprinted their civilian convictions, as well as their creativity. When Maestro Fellini put Italian and Georgian films on the same level he probably meant it.

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<sup>16</sup> Levan Rondeli, *Tradition and Screen*, Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1978, p. 22 (in Russian).

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Romm, *Selected Works in 3 volumes*, vol. 1, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980, p. 527 (in Russian).