

# THE NATIONAL FILM TRANSITION PERIOD IN GEORGIA (1991–2000)

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**Abstract:** Georgian film has always been distinguished for its great cinematic traditions and achievements: since the turn of the twentieth century from the 1920s onwards, when the Soviet regime was established in this country. In the Soviet period, the best pictures of Georgian films were appreciated around the world for their true artistic merits. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet film industry system, development of local filmmaking faced many challenges.

Indeed, the situation resulted in radical changes in everything, including filmmaking. The traditional sources of financing were closed, old Soviet structures were destroyed, and new film companies and small studios sprang up. The works of young film directors dominated that period. These films were not commercial but problematic. Their authors wanted to touch upon the pressing questions, but frequently in vain because they tried to do that using profoundly innovative methods, what was incomprehensible to the audience.

This paper deals with the abovementioned problems of Georgian film and its first steps in the new era of national independent film industry, which had exceptional peculiarities and tendencies, in most cases very experimental, but unsuccessful.

**Keywords:** new era, transformation, collapse of old system, new film studios, young filmmakers, escapism, emigration, problems in distribution

Georgian film has always been distinguished for its great cinematic traditions and achievements: since the turn of the twentieth century from the 1920s onwards, when the Soviet regime was established in this country. In the Soviet period, the best pictures of Georgian films were appreciated around the world for their true artistic merits. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet film industry system, development of local filmmaking faced many challenges. This was common for the film industries of all former Soviet Union republics. The governments of these countries were stubbornly

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convinced that film studios should move towards self-financing. ‘*However, the increase in armed conflicts and the economic crisis have reinforced instability and it is to be feared that, in the republics, the blossoming of national cinema may shortly be no more than a memory*’, wrote film historian Jean Radvanyi in *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Radvanyi 1996).

The decline in the different fields, financial crisis, civil resistance and war actions in several regions of Georgia accompanied the independence. Some political, social and economic problems had a serious impact on everyday life and the future of the national film too. Since 1991, a transition period began with many difficulties.

Indeed, the situation resulted in radical changes in everything, including filmmaking. The traditional sources of financing were closed, old Soviet structures were destroyed, and new film companies and small studios sprang up. The main film studio, Kartuli Filmi (Georgian Film) was transformed into a film concern and three years later, into a joint-stock company but this change could not help to produce more interesting productions.

Unfortunately, historical films, the production of which needed a lot of money, the musical melodramas and comedies, which were very popular among the Georgian audience, have not been made. Some of the directors and actors were forced to go abroad and continue their career there, some went to TV companies, and others left the film industry forever. Only a small number of professionals stayed there and dedicated their talent to the development of the national film. Amateurs appeared too.

Naturally, most of such kind of people could not make sense of film business, which greatly prevented the further steps of the film industry towards new conditions, perfecting the generational changes, adapting the creative personnel to the new challenges. And so, Georgian film suffered a crisis that could not be overcome in a short time.

National film began the transition to the commercial model of financing, which helped to promote banal, cheap film projects. Such products were uninteresting and tasteless. They abounded in subjects, which had no artistic merits (Shubashvili 2005, part I: 19). This assessment accurately reflects the situation in the Georgian film industry of the early 1990s. Works of the young film directors dominated that period. Many of them had graduated from the local film school, Georgian Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film State University, a good alternative to the famous Moscow VGIK. These films were not commercial but problematic. Their authors wanted to touch upon the pressing questions, but frequently in vain because they tried to do that

using profoundly innovative methods, which were incomprehensible to the audience. They featured antiheroes, re-evaluation of values, pessimism. The border between reality and convention was erased. Many of these filmmakers wanted to present peculiar interpretations of contemporary life and in this way, they had forgotten that the greatness of the national film was in its simplicity, sincerity, and straightforwardness.

It is a fact that most of the fiction films made in the 1990s were fraught with worthless metaphors, subtexts, and search, which probably only their directors understood (maybe even they did not). It is amazing that all actors, cameramen, scriptwriters and so on desired to be film directors. For many subjective or objective reasons, they failed to succeed in most of the cases.

Similar topics appeared in student films too. It was a kind of competition among the future filmmakers. They centred their attention on various social and economic problems, such as unemployment, idleness, drug addiction, alcoholism, etc. They believed that only such films could show the everyday problems of the young generation and did not realise how they spoiled their starting positions of coming into the film industry. Only the works of two or three student filmmakers were reliable and memorable.

It turned out that in the country there were neither American studio system experience nor European film industry experience. Suddenly all film directors offered themselves as producers too. They were aware that the young independent state could not provide funds for their film projects and applied to private organizations, which were not interested in paying money for these projects.

It brought in a new practice: new-made directors/producers usually sold their own apartments, houses, villas, lands to get the money for their new film project, and then they shot some nasty films, showing them to their friends, relatives, neighbours and few colleagues, who called them 'genius', and satisfied with their 'masterpieces' accurately kept them at home, thinking not about distribution. It is clear, that Georgian film market did not exist in those years, because two or three movie theatres could were not enough for that, but these directors/producers even never tried to enter neighbouring or other countries' film markets, they did not establish any connections with foreign film distribution companies.

German film historian Thomas Elsaesser perfectly illustrated the situation in the film industry of post-Soviet space and emphasised that *'the newly independent states emerging from the former Soviet Union (Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine) have had more or less catastrophic consequences for these countries' respective film cultures.*

*All of them used to have an official film industry centrally administered. The filmmaker was, in certain crucial respects an employee of the state, and thus did not have to pursue his or her production funds either through commercial production companies or via the box office. Since the end of Communist rule, however, this central funding has fallen away, and the profession has been struggling to reorganize itself along market lines' (Elsaesser 2004: 70).*

A film is a product of the film industry and needs to be sold. This simple truth has been forgotten at that time in Georgia. Everyone wanted to present their films at the international film festivals, where he or she could win a prestigious award (or awards) so that a foreign producer could take interest and invite him or her to a film project. Of course, in rare cases, it really happened, but not for everyone.

The shooting processes of some films were prolonged for years and during such a period the subject of the film plot had lost its actuality and sensitivity. In such situations, the crewmembers frequently left the group and the director was forced to find new members to continue working on the film.

All of this was accompanied by a variety of technical problems, which resulted in the disruption of the material-technical base and the failure of the film industry. For this reason, filmmakers switched to video, then to the digital technology. Certainly, such rebuilding required new education and qualification, which Georgian film workers had not. The film laboratory of the Georgian Film Studio could not function properly (and finally, it was closed), so local filmmakers and producers had to travel to Russia, Ukraine, Czech Republic or Turkey for film processing and postproduction. Everything needed additional financial resources.

It should be noted that at that time the attitudes towards film criticism were strained. It is true that never before has there been much love for film critics and especially on the directors' side, but in the 1990s this tendency gained a very vicious character in Georgia. If some critic had written any notes about a film, the director of this film, the producer and even the scriptwriter—they all deemed such a critic to be their archenemy.

In 1992, the International Film Festival Golden Eagle was founded, which was supposed to be biennial. Unfortunately, due to financial difficulties and organizational problems, this film festival did not last long.

The National Television Film Studio worked more actively and was renamed Georgian TV Film Company. This studio made some interesting musical, documentary and feature films. Considerable contribution to the promotion of this company's production was made by young directors. Unlike

them, the production of the Film Studio of Documentary and Science Films deteriorated year by year and by the end of this decade, this studio produced only one or two short films. Its management team was unable to find suitable investments, failed to get in touch with foreign colleagues, organise coproductions and so on.

Unprepared and inexperienced Georgian filmmakers faced many new challenges, which led to various problems. The national film faced new products and creative tasks and had to solve everything in a short time.

Georgian film of the 1990s gradually moved away from the poetic and fable forms, the place of the romantic heroes was occupied by representatives of a particular society, in most cases, the representatives of the bottom and all film production was characterised by a sense of despair, confusion, fear and complete chaos. New Georgian film only then began an independent life, and therefore a new era set its imprint on its development.

From the second half of the 1990s onwards, it was often said that Georgian film and film culture have died. Within the few years of independence, it was impossible to use everything to adapt to the contemporary foreign cinematic standards, to rebuild the thematics at once. The real leaders of the Georgian film had studied and analysed the novelties and challenges in order to meet the next century with new expectations.

Despite the abovementioned problems, there have been achievements at the international level. Some Georgian films received top awards at the international film festivals in Thessaloniki (Greece), Berlin (Germany), Locarno (Switzerland), Pesaro (Italy), Avignon (France), Varna (Bulgaria), etc., yet, the greatest achievement of Georgian national film was the Georgian-French-Russian-Belgian-Ukrainian-German coproduction by Nana Djordjadze, *A Chef in Love* (1996), nominated for Oscar in 1997.

By the end of the 1990s, the establishing of Georgian National Film Centre was launched. This organisation, with the financial assistance of the government, was supposed to take charge of the processes in film industry and its further development, to protect copyright, guarantee the independence and freedom of creative activity, to improve technological, informational, production and educational bases, and so on. For this purpose, a legislative initiative was developed, which was introduced into a law in December 2000 and soon the Georgian National Film Centre began its work. After that, new horizons emerged and many things had changed for the better.

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