

**THE UNKNOWN MASTERPIECE
OF GEORGIAN SILENT CINEMA
(In Connection with 90th Anniversary
of the Film “My Grandmother”)**

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Summary

**The Unknown Masterpiece of Georgian Silent Cinema
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The article is dedicated to the Georgian film *My Grandmother* unknown to the general public because it has been on the index for almost forty years.

The film was created in 1928 by director Constantin (Cote) Mikaberidze and immediately banned, being classified as an anti-Soviet work. Later, after being restored and released on screens, it is considered as a true masterpiece, in which bureaucracy and protectionism are ironized. It has enjoyed success at several international festivals.

It is important that this satirical comedy, launched by a debutant director, who successfully introduced elements of documentary film and animation, is still current today. It retains its caustic spirit and shapes the genius conditions of a cinematic caricature – a genre rarely encountered in the history of film art.

Key words: Constantin Mikaberidze, satirical comedy, cinematographic caricature, genial conditions, cinematic language.

Rezumat

O capodoperă a filmului mut georgian

Articolul se dedică filmului georgian *Bunica mea* necunoscut publicului larg din cauza că s-a aflat la index aproape patruzeci de ani.

Filmul a fost creat în 1928 de către regizorul Constantin (Cote) Mikaberidze și imediat interzis, fiind clasat ca o lucrare antisovietică. Mai târziu, după ce a fost restaurat și lansat pe ecrane, este considerat drept o veritabilă capodoperă, în care se ironizează birocratismul și protecționismul, bucurându-se de succes la mai multe festivaluri internaționale.

E important că această comedie satirică, lansată de un regizor debutant, care a reușit să introducă cu succes și elemente de film documentar și de animație, e actuală și astăzi, păstrându-și spiritul său caustic și configurând condițiile genuistice ale unei caricaturi cinematografice – gen mai rar întâlnit în istoria artei filmului.

Cuvinte-cheie: Constantin Mikaberidze, comedie satirică, caricatură cinematografică, condiții genuistice, limbaj cinematic.

Georgia is a small country, but the local filmmakers are famous for their flawless films. In the '70s of the last century, this circumstance gave grounds to the critics in the Soviet Union and in the rest of the world to bring into circulation the definition - “The Phenomenon of the Georgian Cinema” [6, p. 325].

The Lumiere brothers' camera was brought in Georgia in November of 1896 and was presented to the audience, but unfortunately, nobody had started the national film production. This was

prevented for many reasons. The policy of film distribution and demonstration was arranged much better. In 1904, the first movie theaters appeared in the capital of the country – Tbilisi. Since 1908 the Georgians had begun to shoot the short documentary films.

The significant event was the full-length documentary film “The Travel of Akaki Tsereteli in Racha and Lechkhumi”, which was shot in 1912. The author of this film was the first Georgian director and cameraman Vasil Amashukeli. This

film, which is preserved incompletely, was one of the first full-length documentary films not only in Georgia but in the entire world.

The first Georgian full-length feature film "Kristine" (director Aleksandr Tsutsunava) was shot in 1916, but despite this, the persons who really wanted to organize national film production could not do that. After two years Georgia received the independence, which had lasted three years only (and naturally nobody cared about the cinema in this period), and in 1921 the Soviet power was established in Georgia. In the same year in the People's Commissariat (the Ministry) of Education of Georgia was founded the Film Section. In 1923 this Section was transformed into a joint-stock company Sakhkinmretsvi (State Film Industry) where the new feature films – the historical-revolutionary films and the adaptations of the classical Georgian literature were shot.

"My Grandmother" ("Chemi Bebia") was filmed in 1928 and the demonstration of it was scheduled for January of the next, 1929 year. It was the directorial debut of a young filmmaker - Konstantine (aka Kote) Miqaberidze who had enough experience of work in the theater and film. In 1921, he was shot in a role in the first Georgian Soviet film "Arsena Georgiashvili". After this, he was invited in other films for main roles, where he created fully dramatic cinematic images. In some of them, he played in partnership with the Georgian film star woman – Nato Vachnadze. The film-goers liked their duet very much.

Kote Miqaberidze perfectly performed the tricks, did his makeup himself, worked as an assistant of director, was an excellent painter, studied the principles of film dramaturgy and often was a guest of film laboratory for clearing up of the process of treatment of the film. He thought that if the film artist is not close to his people, he will never be able to create a realistic work which must respond to the contemporary challenges, if this artist cools at one point and lags behind the contemporary life, the people may forget him and will include him in a list of powerless human beings. He liked to say, that "the main thing is morality. When morality deteriorates, everything deteriorates - the house is not built, the land does not produce crops, the fruits do not grow" [4, p. 114].

In the second half of the '20s, a part of Georgian actors was invited to test their forces in film directing. They had some practice in assisting the director and that's why were assigned to the posi-

tion of a filmmaker. Moreover, at that time there was no film school in Georgia for teaching the professional skills of film directing. Among them was Kote Miqaberidze and of course, he was more than happy for such an appointment. In his memoirs he wrote:

"I was directing a satirical film, the aim of which was to denounce and deride bureaucracy, petty bourgeoisie, and protectionism. With these aims in mind, I was trying to discover new and sharp ways of cinematographic expression because a simple "slavish illustration" of the script was not satisfying for me as a creative person.

With the writer Giorgi Mdivani, we wrote a script entitled "my Grandmother". I later made a satirical film based upon this script in 1928.

"Bebia" (aka "Grandmother") – generally-speaking – has no gender. This grandmother would be either a woman or a man, it is a "Protector".

"If you have a grandmother, you will succeed", says one of the characters in this film.

During the directing of this complicated film, I tried to distance myself from literature and stage adaptation. I was trying to be faithful to the principle of using the infinite possibilities of Cinema to bring to life the director's and the scriptwriter's ideas.

These technical possibilities gave me – as a director – the opportunity to express the satirical content of this film, and to make the social comedy which "My Grandmother" later become" [3, p. 141].

The word "Grandmother" ("Bebia") was used figuratively, meaning a person who pulled strings for someone. The main character of the film is dismissed and tries to find a "Grandmother", who promises to assist him in finding a new job, but in fact, makes things worse. This satirical comedy mocked the bureaucratic system. The authors reflected their contemporary life, laziness, and neglect of duties in an original manner [7, p. 71].

The cast of the film was international. It included Georgians, Russians, Armenians and, what is most interesting, Poles as well. Both film cameramen – Anton Polikevich and Vladislav (according to the other source – Vladimir) Poznan were Poles. The first was born in Lithuania, and the second - in Poland. Polikevich lived in Tbilisi from 1913. He worked in a photo studio, and then in Pavel Pirone film company. Since 1924, he becomes a cameraman of feature and documentary films. He made many Georgian films and was awarded by the rank of the honored art worker of

Georgia. Poznan worked at Pavel Pirone company too and like Polikevich joined the film industry as a cameraman since 1924. He shot many Georgian films too.

In the preparation period, Miqaberidze had worked vigorously and sometimes, in the evenings he was inviting his staff members to his house for working on the script and the budget. They wanted to write everything clearly and detailed. The new filmmaker desired to present his debut film suitably and worked energetically. He had painted one of the posters of the film, had selected the sets for a long time, neatly prepared the interiors. In this film, Miqaberidze was the first who used animation in the Georgian cinema in order to give the most important loading to the satirical character of the film. He invited Irakli Gamrekeli in the position of production designer, who was an eminent stage designer, one of the founders of the Georgian theatrical design. Gamrekeli had no connection to the cinema before [1, p. 144].

When "My Grandmother" was screened it attracted a lot of people but after a few days it was removed from the movie theaters and was banned by the order of the government. The film was accused of formalism as an "Anti-Soviet work" [5, p. 162]. In an anonymous letter, that was sent to the State Security Department, someone wrote that this film was filled by Trotsky aspiration because the whole system of state management is shown as an absurdity and such an attitude had a negative impact on the political life of the Soviet citizens. Also, there was noted that the film authors had encouraged to establish the worker's control on the state system which was one of the key provisions of Trotsky's political program. That was the period of a broader campaign against Lev Trotsky what had ended with his exile from the Soviet Union. So "My Grandmother" was sacrificed to this campaign.

Fortunately, the film authors had survived the repression. The Soviet government resorted only to the above-mentioned act. Soon Giorgi Mdivani moved to Moscow and become one of the successful scriptwriters of the Soviet Cinema. Kote Miqaberidze continued his work as a film director – he had made a couple of documentaries and feature films. Later he was also interested in animation. In 1956, because of the political developments in the Soviet Union he had sent a protest letter to Nikita Khrushchev. This was considered as an anti-state one and Miqaberidze was arrest-

ed. After three years he was released and restored to the old workplace. Until his death, he worked at the Film Studio "Qartuli Filmi" ("Georgian Film") as a director of the Dubbing Department. He died abruptly in 1973 when he hosted the memorial event dedicated to his friend and colleague (who committed suicide) at Tbilisi Film House. Kote Miqaberidze made a speech, called other colleagues for more support and kindness toward each other, arrived back from the stage, sat in the chair and...

"My Grandmother" was banned for 39 years. In 1968, its premiere was held at Moscow movie theater "Illusion". The film-goers admired it. The press wrote: "Kote Miqaberidze revealed a rich fantasy, creative courage and bravery, fighting spirit and disposition to the comedy genre" [8, p. 15]. The film was announced as a masterpiece of Soviet cinema.

In 1976 "My Grandmother" was restored. That gave an opportunity to demonstrate it at the movie theaters and international film festivals. Foreign film critics were amazed by this film. They did not expect such original cinematic thinking from the representatives of the Soviet cinema of the '20s.

In the same year, London hosted the Georgian Film Festival. It was the first big retrospective of Georgian cinema abroad. The organizers of this event were the British Film Institute and its scientific worker John Gillett who was named as a walking encyclopedia of film knowledge. Gillett arrived in Tbilisi himself for selecting the films. He included "My Grandmother" into the program. Later he wrote in the British press: "For the most people Georgia is a little wonderful touristic area somewhere in Russia, famous by its wine and by the birthplace of Stalin. The Georgian films always remained in the shadow of the works of Moscow and Leningrad film studios but after my visit to Georgia I understood that Georgian cinema has absolutely different traditions and history" [9, p. 4].

Gillett highly appreciated the film of Miqaberidze and indicated that it was a discovery for him by its anti-bureaucratic satire and expressionistic décor, and declared, that the several episodes were staged by the characteristic sharp style of the comedies of Mack Sennett.

"My Grandmother" was included in the all programs of the Georgian films which were presented in the United States, Germany, France, Great Britain, etc. In 2004, it was screened in

Prague (Czech Republic), in the one non-commercial movie theater where the original musical score was played by an American band magnificently. Two years ago when this film was presented at the Georgian Film Festival in St. Petersburg (Russia), a state functionary woman announced after the screening that over the last decades' nothing has changed in her country and everything is the same like in this film.

There are two opinions about this film in the Georgian film criticism. Some argue that Miqaberidze was influenced by German expressionism. They explain that fact by the popularity of this trend of art in Georgia in the '20s. There were translated and published articles, poems, short stories of German expressionists, the expressionistic performances were staged in the Georgian theaters, the local artists had drawn expressionistic canvases, etc. [2, p. 145-146]. Thus the filmmaker had used the conventional scenery, contrasting lights, extraordinary perspective. The other part of the critics thinks that the main pathos of the film, the monumental forms of the heroes, the straightforwardness of the narration, and the general visual structure was created by the influence of Futurism and Constructivism because the production designer of this film was basically the constructivist and the futurist than the expressionist [10, p. 169].

Of course, both positions are acceptable but "My Grandmother" has no reflection of those above-mentioned trends only – it is also an expression of all modes of Avant-garde cinema of those years. For example, in certain episodes of the film, there are several surrealistic passages and it was a period when the film of Luis Buñuel "Un Chien Andalou" did not exist yet. Miqaberidze shot the tricks masterfully, had kept the rhythm from the beginning to the end, what is so organic for comedies like that. Because of his rich imagination, he obviously could not fit within the framework of this film, and that's why he referred to documentary and animation elements too.

The debut film of Kote Miqaberidze was "a scathingly witty and aesthetically adventurous attack on the Georgian variant of the bureaucratic deviation known as "protectionism," which dropped into the bottomless pit of forgotten films" [11, p. 42].

"My Grandmother" is one of the best examples of experimental cinema. It was called as "Sa-

tirical Phantasmagoria", "Shadowed Grotesque", and sometimes as "Celebration of Black Humor". In sum, if we take into consideration the fact that Kote Miqaberidze was a quite good caricaturist, we can name this work as a sensible and splendidly revival cinematic caricature against bureaucracy, which is very easy to perceive and understand for representatives of every nation.

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