

# Repentance

TENGIZ ABULADZE

1987

Tengiz Abuladze's most highly acclaimed and contentious work is a complex and multi-layered parable about official evil and its heirs. It combines moments of stark realism and grotesque hallucination to allegorise the psychological, social and spiritual consequences of totalitarian rule. To those outside the Soviet Union the message is a universal one, though at home the film is considered a cultural and political milestone for its long-suppressed portrayal of Josef Stalin in the character of Varlam Aviradze. Varlam (whose surname means 'no one') resembles not only Stalin and his secret police chief Lavrenti Beria, but also various spectres of twentieth-century European history: his Hitler moustache and bombastic Mussoliniesque gesticulations may well imply an attempt to avoid too direct a satire of the Georgia-born leader, opting instead for what Abuladze has termed a 'generalised mask of evil.' In this sense, Varlam is both 'no one' and 'everyone'. Nevertheless, the film was banned for two years, and it wasn't until after Gorbachev had been in power for 15 months that the film was reaccepted by the Union of Cinematographers (of which Elem Klimov, a good friend of Abuladze, had recently taken charge). "You know about wine, don't you?" Abuladze asked one interviewer with a wry smile. "Good wine needs time to mature."

The story takes place in a small, unnamed Georgian town. As a baker prepares cakes adorned with decorative churches, we learn that the town mayor (Varlam) is dead. Following his ceremonial burial, at which he is lauded as a hero, his corpse is repeatedly disinterred and placed upright against a tree in the family estate. The aforementioned baker, Ketevan Barateli, is eventually caught in the act of exhuming the body and shot in the arm by Varlam's grandson. She confesses in police custody, though admits no guilt. "I will do it again," she insists. "To bury him is to bury what he did." Her testimony in court, told in flashbacks, forms the body of the proceeding narrative, in which we are told of the personal horrors she and her family have had to face at the hands of Varlam's bullying regime. The heirs to this regime, particularly son and grandson, now face a moral choice. As the film's title suggests, it's the search for repentance that will ultimately shape the destiny of the town and

the inner lives of its inhabitants.

On first viewing you'll be forgiven for not recognising that both Varlam and his son, Abel, are played by the same actor (Avtandil Makharadze). It is testament to Makharadze's supreme talent that father and son seem so fundamentally different (even physically) yet still somehow share an ineffably sinister commonality. Having inherited his father sins, he is fated to keep up the same lies. The difference is that, though Varlam relished his evil doings, Abel is consumed by fear. There is a scene towards the end of the film reminiscent of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, where Abel descends into a nightmarish underworld and tries confessing to a faceless priest eating a fish. The latter accuses him of preaching atheism while wearing a cross: "A lonely unbeliever thinks only of death... you're not repenting, you're coming here out of fear." The priest turns out to be Varlam, and suddenly Abel is back in court holding the fish carcass, which his wife snatches away and throws to the ground. It is the grandson, Tornike, whose guilt we truly believe to be genuine, yet the film's final scenes suggest his repentance alone is not sufficient for the kind of collective renewal Abuladze is hinting at.

The theme of repentance and the film's endless religious imagery clearly denote a mentality inimical to that of Soviet ideology, but Abuladze's vision stretches far beyond the tradition/progress dichotomy. Perhaps the film's most enduring image is the destruction of the local church, one of the few remaining monuments linking past and present, which had recently been used as a monstrous scientific laboratory. The church here represents the human spirit and folk morality, memory and wisdom, a point Boris Vasilyev was at pains to emphasise upon the film's initial release. Varlam has not just destroyed a church, but the very faith of the people, not only their faith in truth but in each other. The film's final line, spoken by the great Georgian actress Veriko Anjaparidze, asks a question on the lips of an entire people: "What use is a road if it doesn't lead to a church?"