

The Plea

TENGIZ ABULADZE

1967

Based on the epic poetry of Georgian literary hero Vazha-Pshavela (the pen-name of Luka Razikashvili), *The Plea* is a ghostly meditation on religious conflict and the cruelties and suffering it engenders. It has a filmic language and symbolism born from the transfigurative overcoming of human suffering, beyond which lies either chaos or salvation. It is the first film of Tengiz Abuladze's famous trilogy, preceding *The Wishing Tree* (1976) and *Repentance* (1987). If one thing binds these three films, it is Abuladze's enduring belief that one should say "only the truth, to say yes if your heart says yes, to say no if your heart says no.". Faithful to this philosophy, *The Plea* glances back upon the past with unwavering honesty and lyrical ambition. The dialogue, entirely made up of poetic verse, is mostly narrated over faces that should be speaking, but whose voiceless expressions and inward thoughts alone speak more faithfully to Vazha-Pshavela's vision and the spirit of Georgia as a nation scarred by religious enmity.

Aesthetically and musically, the influences are varied. The pilgrim at times resembles Bergman's *Antonius Block*, and there is a funeral procession towards the end of the film reminiscent of Theodor Dreyer. And of course, like Parajanov, Abuladze gives us a modernist take on a culturally specific literature and topography. However, Nodar Gabunia's score and Aleksandr Antipenko's cinematography make it feel like a unique vision in its own right, translating poetry to screen with a decisiveness and confidence unmatched by other filmmakers of the period.

"Don't let me just live and breed," the narrator pleads during the film's opening sequence. A pilgrim (who, we assume, is also the narrator) is wandering through a seemingly timeless wilderness with an insatiable thirst "to grow the sprouts of joy" before he meets his death. The story centres around two episodes of conflict in the mountains between the Muslim Kistins and the Christian Khevsurs. The pilgrim, Aluda (a Khevsur), is on the hunt for a Kistin horse thief named Mutsil, which results in a solemn shootout

framed by the cascading meltwater of the surrounding mountains. Mutsil is eventually shot dead, although Aluda's triumph is coupled with a sudden realisation of his enemy's innate human dignity. In light of such an epiphany, he renounces the Khevsur custom of cutting off his enemy's hand. To his fellow villagers' dismay, he responds with an even more radical renunciation of local custom: he also wants to make a sacrifice in honour of the murdered Kistin. As a result of his sacrilegious pronouncements, the villagers turn on him and his home is destroyed.

The pilgrim of the second story will go on to tell a farmer of how his home was sacked, suggesting that we are now following Aluda on his subsequent wanderings (though, mysteriously, he calls himself Nunua and is played by a different actor). The story has been now reversed, and it is a Kistin hunter named Dzhokola who finds in it his heart to help the lone Khevsur traveller. As with the previous story, the Kistin villagers are outraged that he should be so generous to someone who, as it turns out, is known recently to have killed two local Kistins. Unsurprisingly, they call for revenge, but their protestations fall on deaf ears. Dzhokola, unperturbed by their accusations, insists that his faith requires that he be hospitable to his guest, irrespective of his creed. As in the previous episode, his behaviour doesn't go unpunished, and, even more severely than before, he is made to watch the traveller perish and is then executed.

The two stories, then, involve men of enemy faiths who nonetheless recognise each other's innate humanity, revealing how the moral codes of individuals and communities intersect and often rupture. Theologically, it contends that good and evil, far from being two separate competing entities, are inextricably linked and thus experienced in degrees. Abuladze invokes and transcends the poetic vision of Vazha-Pshavela, transposing the latter's critical eye to the Soviet way of being as a powerful challenge to received notions of justice, oppression and social conformity.