

# Traces of War in Caucasian Cinema: *Tangerines* (2013) and *Nabat* (2014)

Gönül Cengiz<sup>1</sup>

Baskent University, Department of Film Design and Management, Turkey

## Abstract

*Caucasian countries, which lived under the Soviet Union for many years and whose cinema was shaped by the influence of Russia in this sense, have developed national cinema in order to build identity and belonging after independence. In this context, Georgia and Azerbaijan, which constitute the sample of the study, have produced films in which cultural values come to the fore.*

*The Georgian and Azerbaijani cinemas, which have continued the social realism movement inherited from the Soviets, have transferred the war processes in the country to the big screen in this context. The film *Tangerines* (2013), written and directed by Georgian director Zaza Urushadze, is inspired by a real-life event and tells the story of an Estonian village in Abkhazia during the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhazian War, where an elderly Estonian Ivo takes in two enemies, Chechen and Georgian, who were seriously wounded in the war. Drawing attention to the discriminatory side of war, the film also emphasises that the problems between people can unite around tolerance.*

*The Azerbaijani film *Nabat* (2014), directed by Elçin Musaoğlu, also focuses on the consequences of the Karabakh war. While the film shows the war to the audience by adhering to the local characteristics and cultural codes of the Karabakh region in the representation of a mother who is devoted to her home and homeland, it also draws attention to the cruelty of the war.*

*The study was analysed by descriptive analysis method. According to the results obtained from the study, while both films show the difficult sides of the war to the audience, they also include human emotions that change with the war, regardless of religion, language and nationality.*

**Keywords:** Georgia, Azerbaijan, *Tangerines*, *Nabat*, War

## Introduction

Only the dead have seen the end of war." As this quote—attributed to Plato and featured at the beginning of the film *Black Hawk Down*—suggests, wars will never cease as long as they continue to serve as instruments of political strategy. While one war may come to an end in one part of the world, another is likely to begin elsewhere. As Plato implies, only the dead are truly fortunate, for they alone are spared from experiencing war again. Thus, it can be argued that war and the violence it engenders have become intrinsic to human nature. As the renowned war theorist Carl von Clausewitz states in his seminal work *On War*, the essential elements of war—violence, hatred, and

passion—must exist within the people. Clausewitz also identifies these emotions as key motivating forces in warfare. However, due to the destructive consequences of war, it is not easy to cultivate such sentiments among the public or to convince them to support war or view violence as a legitimate means. Aware of this challenge, states seek to reshape public perception by aestheticizing war and mitigating the perceived brutality it entails. In pursuit of this goal, particularly following the invention of cinema, states have recognized the power of moving images and sound to influence human perception and have sought to harness this potential to serve their interests (Gök, Türker, 2024: 12).

War is not merely a concept defined by active armed conflict; rather, it represents a collective ceremony of violence enacted across multiple fronts. It has become a normalized component of a world in which visual violence is widely consumed and rarely questioned. Films that depict war are, in essence, visual texts conveyed to us through historical and political codes. The devastating consequences that follow modern wars often alter the destinies of those who live in the affected regions. In this context, both *Tangerines* and *Nabat* narrate the story of war through the lens of individuals who have suffered its consequences.

The film *Tangerines* is set in 1992 in Abkhazia. The Abkhazians want to separate from Georgia, there is a war going on, and a Chechen, Akhmed, fighting on the Abkhazian side, and a Georgian, Nika, who has been wounded, find themselves in the house of a local Estonian living in a deserted village. The mediator between the two wounded enemies becomes the owner of the house - Estonian Ivo, who has stayed only to harvest tangerines, and is ready to abandon his wealth and return to his historical homeland, following the example of his fellow villagers.

And the film *Nabat* represents a quiet endurance amidst the silence of war, conflict, and suffering: here, there is neither wailing, nor tears, nor cries, nor consolation. What you witness here is a solitary figure who has triumphed over everyone and everything, including herself.

Both films touch upon the background of the war and the events that took place due to the war instead of the hot conflicts on the front. Both in *Nabat* and in *Tangerines* emphasise that all wars are the same in terms of the destruction they create and what they cause. Therefore, the films focus on those who are affected by war instead of those who fight.

## Caucasian Cinema: Georgia and Azerbaijan

When the Soviet Union collapsed in August 1991, the loss of central authority thrust the Caucasus into a period of inevitable transformation. Following this turning point, the societies of the Caucasus entered

nation-building processes that differed in pace and level of success. For Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, the dissolution of the USSR made independence attainable; at the same time, it necessitated the urgent construction of new institutions to replace those of the Soviet system.

The cinema of the Caucasus region has emerged as a distinct and dynamic cultural form shaped by the region's turbulent history, ethnic multiplicity, and shifting political contexts. Although Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia all share a Soviet cinematic legacy, each has cultivated its own stylistic and thematic identity in the post-Soviet era. Filmmakers in the region often explore themes such as national identity, historical trauma, conflict, and cultural dislocation. During the Soviet period, cinema primarily functioned as an instrument of ideological control; however, following independence, a new wave of films began to critically reflect on both Soviet history and the realities of building a modern nation. Many contemporary directors draw upon personal or localized experiences to express broader societal concerns. As such, cinema in the Caucasus today acts not only as a platform for artistic innovation but also as a powerful tool for examining the cultural and political transitions of the post-Soviet period (Norris, 2012).

### **Georgian Cinema**

Since its inception, Georgian cinema has often explored themes such as war and resistance, family honor, and community values. During the 1930s and 1940s, particularly under Stalinization, films were expected to 'testify' to the progress of Soviet ideology within societies formerly subjected to imperial colonialism. The 1960s, however, marked a cinematic renaissance in Georgia, allowing for the emergence of national authenticity and the expression of individual artistic visions (Radunović 2014: 20).

Georgian cinema has been prolific both during the Soviet era and in the post-Soviet period, particularly following the country's independence. In Georgian national cinema, films have been employed as a narrative medium and as an ideological apparatus. Especially during the Soviet period, when Georgia was a part of the USSR, cinema was predominantly used for ideological purposes. Films were produced to disseminate and instill communist ideology and to impose the notion of the "comrade" on society. Such ideological filmmaking was common across all countries under Soviet rule. However, due to Georgia's geographical distance from the center of the Soviet Union, Georgian cinema enjoyed relatively greater freedom compared to other Soviet republics. Despite the frequent production of ideologically charged films, it was still possible to produce works that featured a distinctive cinematic language and depicted Georgian society. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Georgia's attainment of independence, the national cinema experienced a temporary stagnation. Nevertheless, it soon recovered and succeeded in creating a unique cinematic language of its own (Dilek, 2023: 61).

### **Azerbaijani Cinema**

Azerbaijani cinema can be examined in three distinct periods. In the pre-Soviet era, Azerbaijani cinema showed limited activity, and there is insufficient evidence of substantial cinematic output. However, with the onset of the Soviet period, Azerbaijani cinema began to flourish. Although Russian directors initially dominated the filmmaking process, Azerbaijani cinema gradually began to return to its cultural roots. During the Soviet era, cinema operated entirely under the pressure of political authority, and filmmakers were compelled to produce works aligned with the perspectives of Lenin and Stalin. The influence of Lenin and Stalin was deeply felt in cinema. Soviet-era Azerbaijani cinema was not only political but also heavily censored. Directors were unable to freely express their personal emotions and thoughts. This situation remained unchanged until the 1990s. However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Azerbaijan's declaration of independence, significant transformations took place in the cinematic sphere. A movement emerged that could be described as national cinema, introducing new actors and filmmakers into the industry. Moreover, there was a growing emphasis on socially relevant themes. In this period, critical films targeting the former Soviet governance style were produced, thereby fostering a more liberated environment for cinema. The impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, which occurred during these years, was also reflected in cinematic works. Directors created films that addressed this conflict, imbuing them with national elements and featuring national heroes (Kırık, 2014: 369).

### **Looking at the Georgian-Abkhazian War through the *Tangerines* (2013)**

Georgians, a titular nationality, were considered, according to the Bolsheviks ideology of nations, as one of the advanced nations (*natsia*) in comparison to other often non-Indo European groups, which were recognised as *inorodtsy* (lower rank nations in the national hierarchy of nations), for example, the Abkhazians or the Chechens. The issues of belonging and ownership, but also of inherent perceptions of cultural hierarchy are central in the film (Sideri, 2016: 111).

However, *Tangerines* is a Caucasian myth, in the sense that it negotiates the myth of captivity not in order to restore the binary oppositions of insiders/outsiders, locals/foreigners, hosts/guests, guardians/prisoners. The central character of *Tangerines* Ivo is considered as an 'outsider' to the region, an ethnic Estonian (Sideri, 2016: 113).

Zaza Urushadze redefined the conventions of the war film by offering a perspective that diverged from traditional portrayals of conflict. From the very outset, the film's soundtrack introduces an atmosphere of serenity and cultural depth, signaling an introspective, ethnically grounded narrative rather than one driven by violence or chaos.

The events unfold in 1992 in Abkhazia. At the height of the Georgian-Abkhazian war, the village of Estonian

immigrants is deserted. Only old man Ivo, his neighbour Margus and doctor Johan, who is about to leave, are left in the village. Margus does not want to leave until he has harvested the tangerines, and Ivo is preparing containers for them. The hostilities come close to the village. After the battle Ivo and Margus find a survivor, a Chechen mercenary named Akhmed, and a young Georgian boy. They take them to Ivo's house. This is how two enemies find themselves under the same roof.

The Georgian is badly wounded and unconscious. Before leaving, Johan examines him and says that he may well survive. Akhmed keeps trying to kill the Georgian, but Ivo first locks their rooms and then takes a promise from the Chechen that no one will kill anyone in his house. Reluctantly, the Chechen agrees.

"Kill, kill, I will kill. What else do you know?" This accusatory line belongs to Ivo. It is both a cry of human resistance and a moral question posed in response to Ahmed's obsessive insistence on killing Nika. However, this question extends beyond the boundaries of the film's narrative—it is directed not only at a single character, but also at the audience, at states and political leaders, at nature, and indeed at the entire world. Ivo's unwavering position in the film symbolizes a rebellious stance against a world engulfed in war.

In later scenes of the film the Georgian slowly comes to his senses and begins to leave the room. At the dinner table a quarrel arises between them, but it is interrupted by Abkhazians who have arrived at Ivo's house. In order to save Nika, Ahmed advises him to keep quiet and introduces him to Abkhazians as his dead Chechen friend Ibrahim. The commander of the squad Aslan thanks Ahmed and 'Ibrahim' for their valiant deed. Ivo and Margus agree with Aslan that the next day he will send his fighters to them for harvesting.

In the evening, at dinner, Nika tells me that before the war he was an actor in the theatre and made films. He went to war 'because he had to defend his homeland'. Ivo promises to come to Tbilisi for a performance after the war. At that time Georgian artillery starts shelling Aslan's detachment, one of the shells hits Margus' house. Margus was at Ivo's house at the time, but his house burns to the ground.

The next morning a Russian patrol arrives. Akhmed is fighting on their side, so he goes out to meet them. The captain takes Akhmed for a Georgian, does not believe that he is a Chechen and orders him to be shot. Nika opens fire from the house, a shootout begins, in which Margus, who did not have time to hide, is killed. The patrol is destroyed, Nika leaves the house, where he is killed with a pistol by the wounded captain, Akhmed finishes off the captain.

Ivo and Akhmed bury Margus in his tangerine garden, and Nika on a cliff next to the grave of Ivo's son. Ivo says that as soon as the war began, his son went off to "defend the homeland" and was killed almost immediately. Akhmed wonders why he is burying a Georgian next to his son, who was killed by Georgians. Ivo asks: "What does it matter?" Akhmed understands that it doesn't, says goodbye to Ivo, gets into the car, inserts Nika's cassette into the radio, and drives away to the sound of Irakli Charkviani's "Paper Boat".

Given that war constitutes the central theme in the film *Tangerines*, the notion of masculinities emerges as a significant and recurring element. Masculinity and the so-called macho culture were identified with the Caucasian region (Layton 1995). Often these representations were connected to the image of the male Caucasian fighter due to all those years of conflict. Social etiquette and cultural canon based on the dominant axis of honor and pride were significant for the management of social and economic issues in the Caucasus through, for example, the exchange of bodies in circuits of kinship alliances or even slavery (Shami 2000). Although *Tangerines* as a war film is marked by a noticeable absence of female characters, the admiration Ahmed and Nika express for Ivo's granddaughter—seen only in a photograph atop an old chest of drawers—associates femininity with ideals of beauty, domesticity, and peace. Yet these ideals remain overshadowed by the protection or potential threat posed by (foreign) male presence. Nika's evident admiration for the photograph of Ivo's granddaughter during her stay at his home does not signify a fascination with the masculinized sexuality of wartime soldiers, but rather gestures toward the girl's angelic appearance—embodied by her pristine white dress—and her purity, which seems almost otherworldly, perhaps even evocative of the Virgin Mary. In this context, Ivo's granddaughter comes to symbolize, for Nika, the life she aspires to attain beyond the confines of war, representing a vision of innocence and hope that starkly contrasts with the brutality of her current reality (Kuş, 2024).

Within the home he refuses to abandon—a symbol of steadfastness and inner peace—Ivo nurtures a dream: that the boundless peace which still lingers in that small, personal space may one day spread across the globe, carried symbolically through the tangerine trees he has cultivated with Margus.

Ivo's humble dwelling and his orchard of tangerines evolve into a profound metaphor—not only for the fractured yet resilient history of the Caucasus, but for the human condition itself. In the end, are we not all bound by the same inescapable destiny of mortality?

## Looking at the Karabakh War through *Nabat*

*Nabat* tells the story of a woman who refuses to leave her empty village in order not to leave her son's grave. In *Nabat* (2014, Elchin Musaoglu), as the threat of an enemy assault looms, the entire village flees, leaving only an old woman called Nabat behind. The film can be considered as a universal story that tells not only about an Azerbaijani mother, but also about all mothers who lost the joy of life in the war.

In addition to addressing the themes of war and individual strife, the director depicts the woman safeguarding home and family, illuminating lamps in the vacant homes to ensure the village's survival.

The film *Nabat* actually tells us about peace, not war. It conveys the experiences of the mother who lost her child. In the film, we don't even understand which sides the war is between.

The conversations, which were given very little space at the beginning of the film, turned into complete silence after half of the film, and the action carried out with a single person was continued with images without dialogue. War and its destructive effects are reflected in the film with a remarkable silence. It is aimed that the sound of silence touches the audience's heart in an effective way. In this way, the fact that Nabat meets everything arising from the war with great silence has ensured that the reactions expected from the character are felt and experienced by the audience (Zor, 2018: 64).

The sense of danger and panic brought on by the war abruptly transforms the overall atmosphere of the film. A few days after her last departure, when Nabat returns to the village, she realizes—quite literally—that it has been abandoned overnight (Andrew, 2016). The clothes hanging on the laundry lines, unfinished meals on the tables, pitchers full of milk, open doors, toys, garments, and all the objects of daily life left exactly where they were, vividly illustrate how sudden, swift, and fear-driven this departure was (Zor, 2018: 65).

In Elchin Musaoglu's film, pain becomes iconic; loneliness, fear, death, martyrdom are all alluded to through colors and forms on the visual level. Objects like a lamp, clothing, a sieve, a door, a cart, or a blurry frame suddenly transform within the cinematic structure, becoming aestheticized to the level of sacred icons.

One of the striking symbols in the film is the wolf. The wolf is Nabat's 'other self' in nature. The wolf, like Nabat, can't leave her village for her cubs. Mankind also destroys nature with wars. The wolf is initially a source of fear for Nabat, but then that fear turns into friendship.

In the film, first the villagers leaving the village, then the death of Iskender and the disappearance of the cow Agca are symbolic expressions of the situation caused by the war in Karabakh and thus the problem of displaced people. The war has taken away everything related to life in Karabakh one after another, leaving behind a huge loneliness and emptiness.

By the end of the film, even the oil used to light the lamps runs out. Nabat understands that by tomorrow, it will no longer be possible to illuminate the lamps. She returns home and, in the dim glow of the remaining light, immerses her bare feet into a copper basin of water. The viewer sees only the shadow of a woman on the wall, pouring water over herself. Nabat performs ritual ablution. Nabat is preparing for her death. Nabat buried her martyred son, and later, amid the cursed stillness of the air, she single-handedly laid her husband to rest. Now, in the deserted village, there is no one left to bury her. Nabat becomes an unburied dead — a presence suspended between life and death.

In a way, *Nabat* is a film of women and mothers who experience the pains of war most deeply, the only losers of all wars. Even if women do not encounter weapons and blood in war and do not experience the conflict, they can lose their fathers, brothers, husbands and children. Therefore, war takes away more from women than it takes away and destroys from anyone

else. In *Nabat*, it is also possible to find what the war, which takes away her most valuable asset, her only son, makes a woman and a mother go through (Zor, 2018: 67).

## Conclusion

The film *Tangerines*, which shows that even an enemy can become a friend over time, actually tells us that wars are something desired by those in power and that they cause destruction among civilians. This film shows that there is no division into good and bad on the national principle. And the land can belong to everyone, there is no need to fight for it. There is no need to kill for it. There are no Georgians, Abkhazians, Estonians, Russians and Chechens. There is, first of all, a human.

The prejudice against the other decreases after making a common enemy. In this context, the *Tangerines* movie conveyed to its audience that there are no winners in war.

- Did you bury a Georgian next to your son?
- Does it matter, Ahmed?
- No, it doesn't matter anymore.

In both *Nabat* and *Tangerines*, there is an element that is almost never explicitly named by the characters, yet it remains ever-present for the audience: the land. This silent but central presence is not only the setting in which the stories unfold, but also a powerful symbol of identity, conflict, and continuity. Despite the different contexts —*Nabat* focusing on a woman's solitary resistance amid war, and *Tangerines* centering around an unlikely coexistence between enemies—the land emerges as a common ground, both literally and metaphorically. It bears the scars of war, holds the roots of belonging, and quietly witnesses the human dramas playing out upon it. The land, though unnamed, becomes the true protagonist— one that endures even as people leave, fight, or perish.

The films *Nabat* and *Tangerines*, which have a sad and melancholic atmosphere in general, exhibit a determined approach to love and life with the symbolic narrative it contains, especially in the context of war, forced migration and the sense of belonging.

## Final Notes

<sup>1</sup> Assoc. Prof. Dr. Gönül Cengiz, Baskent University, Department of Film Design and Management, gonulcengiz88@gmail.com, <https://Orcid.Org/0000-0001-6685-5376>

## References

- Andrew, J. (2016). *Elchin Musaoglu: Nabat*. KinoKultura, (52). Retrieved from <http://www.kinokultura.com/2016/52r-nabat.shtml>
- Dilek, A. B. (2023). Gürcistan sinemasında Sovyet ve Sovyet sonrası dönemde kadının temsili (The representation of women in Georgian cinema during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods). *Karadeniz Araştırmaları*

*Enstitüsü Dergisi (Black Sea Research Institute Journal)*, 9(17), 45-64. <https://doi.org/10.31765/karen.1194944>

Gök, A., & Türker, G. (2024). Eğlence olarak savaş ve savaşın estetize edilmesi: Savaş temalı filmlerin etkisi (War as entertainment and the aestheticization of war: The impact of war-themed films). *İstanbul Nişantaşı Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi (Istanbul Nisantasi University Social Sciences Journal)*, 12(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.52122/nisantasisbd.1345854>

Kırık, A. M. (2014). Toplum ve siyaset ilişkisi bağlamında Azerbaycan sinema tarihi (Azerbaijan cinema history in the context of society and politics). *Marmara Üniversitesi Öneri Dergisi (Marmara University Suggestion Journal)*, 11(41), 357-370. <https://doi.org/10.14783/ONERI.20144132>

Kuş, D. (2024). Savaşların getirip götürdükleri ve değiştirdikleri üzerine bir manifesto: *Tangerines (A manifesto on what wars bring, take, and change: Tangerines)*. Unpublished manuscript.

Layton, S. (1995). *Russian literature and empire: The conquest of the Caucasus, from Pushkin to Tolstoy*. London, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Norris, S. M. (2012). *Blockbuster history in the new Russia: Movies, memory, and patriotism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Radunović, D. (2014). Incommensurable distance: Georgian cinema as a (trans)national cinema. In S. Bahun & J. Haynes (Eds.), *Cinema, state socialism and society in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1917-1989: Revisions* (pp. 49-73). London, UK: Routledge.

Shami, S. K. (2000). Prehistories of globalization: Circassian identity in motion. *Public Culture*, 12(1), 177-204.

Sideri, E. (2016). Prisoner (once again) of the Caucasus: An ethnography of film. *Punctum International Journal of Semiotics*, 106-119. <https://doi.org/10.18680/hss.2016.0016>

Zor, L. (2018). Karabağ Savaşı'nın Azerbaycan sinemasındaki sunumu: Nabat filmi örneği (The representation of the Karabakh War in Azerbaijani cinema: The example of the film *Nabat*). *Atatürk Üniversitesi Güzel Sanatlar Enstitüsü Dergisi (Ataturk University Fine Arts Institute Journal)*, 40, 56-70. (ISSN 1300-9206)