

BARE Interviews: Nino Kirtadze

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The Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive hosted internationally renowned documentary filmmaker Nino Kirtadze for a weeklong residency from April 6-10.

Kirtadze's films focus on her homeland, Georgia – its people, their society, customs, traditions, culture, conditions, and attitudes; the physical topography of its rich landscape; and its national identity in an increasingly complicated international landscape.

Nino Kirtadze

“A few words on where I come from and how I ended up in Paris making documentaries: I was born in Soviet Georgia. It was [during the] Brezhnev era. My father is a biologist, and my mother never worked [after] we were born; this is a Georgian tradition. I did literary studies, mainly medieval literature. When the Soviet Union started to crack, we were sitting in our beautiful bureaus and reading fantastic medieval texts. It was really a surreal setting, because people outside were demonstrating and asking for freedom and independence, and we were still in the thirteenth, fourteenth century, reading these texts.

I started to write various articles at this time, and then there was the first bloody suppression [of a Georgian freedom protest] by Russian troops...It was the first time my generation came very close to death and war. After that, events went really quickly. The Soviet Union [dissolved], and many conflicts started to [break out] in post-Soviet space, especially in Georgia, then Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Chechnya. And then the Chechen war started...

There was an Agence France Press Bureau in Georgia, as well as an Associated Press, and they asked me whether I would accompany one of their main correspondents to Chechnya. And I said yes. I spent four years there, covering the first war...And that was something that shaped my personality and who I became afterwards. Something happens, I think, when we're very close to death and suffering. The world around us – around me anyway – repositioned...

When there was a ceasefire, I get a phone call from a very well-known female film director. She was putting on her very first French-Georgian co-production, and they wanted me to play the main role...

So I did this. And the film ended [up at the] Cannes Film Festival and then it was Oscar-nominated and I was asked to go to France to promote it for the festival. And I thought I would take some time to stay [in France] after that, and think about whether I could [pursue] my documentary dreams.

It was very funny because I had no idea how difficult it could possibly be. I would call somebody – some famous

producer – and the secretary would ask, “But who is speaking?”

I would say “Nino Kirtadze.”

“WHO?”

And then it was the same answer, “He’s outside,” or whatever.

It went on for a while like this, but in the end, I made my first film, and my second film, and one month in Paris became almost 15 years. I was very lucky in life...I do believe in miracles, and in my life miracles did indeed take place.”

Don’t Breathe (2014)

Levan and Irma are a middle-class Georgian couple in their forties. Their world is turned-upside down when Levan receives a terrifying medical diagnosis. Don’t Breathe follows them through Levan’s seemingly endless visits to doctors, specialists, and masseurs in an effort to cure his pain.

Levan, a quiet, introverted engineer, is torn between a demanding project at work and Irma’s insistence that he focus on his health. The doctors’ inability to reach a consensus about his mysterious illness forces Levan to consider his own mortality and the legacy he will leave behind.

“Thinking he was ill brought the idea of death, and in the face of death, the emptiness of what he would leave after him became much more important,” Kirtadze said in a post-screening lecture.

This is a film about “human fragilities,” in the filmmaker’s own words, “about how fragile and magnificent life can be.” The drama also examines the absurdity of the modern medical system, the close, dynamic relationships among friends and family that characterizes Georgian society, and the inevitable questioning of identity and values that comes with change.

“This is my country,” Kirtadze said. “Levan is Georgian. Not knowing what we are – are we Europe or not Europe? Are we staying with Russia, or are we against Russia? What is our identity? When you’re not sure what you want to be or who you want to listen to, then of course you’re going to listen to everybody.”

It is a credit to Kirtadze’s vision, aesthetic, and cinematography that if *Don’t Breathe* wasn’t billed as a documentary, it would be impossible to tell the characters weren’t characters at all, but real people who exist somewhere in the physical world. The lack of voice-overs, interviews, and alternating points of view combine to make the film feel like a fictional narrative.

Kirtadze’s style is clear in visual aspects of the film. Doors and windows are positioned to provide frames within the frame. Camera angles are planned out with foresight and a meticulous eye for detail. The use of mirrors in key shots, the stylized mise-en-scene, the careful studies of lighting – these qualities turn *Don’t Breathe* into a piece of art.

As a student of the cinema vérité tradition, it is in fact Kirtadze’s goal to blur the fine line between camera and subject, between documentary and art, between fiction

and reality. Kirtadze subtly influences the characters from behind the camera, a classic hallmark of cinema vérité. These largely unseen manipulations and deft maneuverings give rise to remarkable coincidences and breathtaking plot twists.

“That’s why I love documentary,” Kirtadze said. “There is always some deeper connection between the one who films and the one who lets himself be filmed. It’s always fascinated me, why someone would say, “Yes, you can film me,” because the cameras [always want to] be where you shouldn’t normally be. And there are rules to respect, of course, because otherwise we can easily use those whom we’re filming.”

The Pipeline Next Door (2005)

It is 2005, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline is being called the project of the century. The BTC pipeline will bring oil from the Caspian Sea to the European market, decreasing American and European dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

“For the region where I was born, the Caucasus, [the BTC Pipeline] was a safety belt,” Kirtadze said. “[Georgia was] getting the interests of big oil consortiums – French, American, British – everybody was there. This was a post-Soviet era with lots of conflict zones and wars, so [the pipeline] was a promise of peace. Even if the environment were to be violated, [the government] didn’t care, because [the pipeline] was the most important, vital project for them in terms of safety and the future...The interests of the entire world would be in that region. Everybody would

hurry to protect [Georgia] from another [Russian] invasion. That was [the Georgian government's] argument.”

The project is not without its complications. Activists decry the environmental impact of the pipeline on natural ecosystems. “Lots of films were made at the time about how horrible [the pipeline] was for the environment. And of course it’s partly true, but it’s not the whole truth. I wanted something a little bit more complicated,” Kirtadze said of her 2005 film *The Pipeline Next Door*.

The film instead examines the relationship between a village of Georgian farmers and international oil corporation British Petroleum.

“I thought I would play it as a cultural clash...something almost like a fable: how two different worlds could meet, and how an old-fashioned village somewhere high up in the mountains in Georgia could have a new neighbor full of modern technology,” Kirtadze explained.

The community feels threatened by BP’s presence. They worry that their drinking water will be contaminated; that earthquakes will decimate the village; that radiation will kill them (never mind that there is no radiation involved in the making or operation of the BTC Pipeline).

The central question, however, is that of money: the villagers feel cheated out of their land. BP offers below-market prices and refuses to negotiate.

“The promise of the money,” Kirtadze said, “distorted all relationships in the community. Suddenly nobody believed anybody. Everybody was suspicious of everybody [else],

and there were other tensions that were stirred up in the community. [The villagers] didn't trust the government either, thinking somebody was making money out of their situation. I wanted all this to be in the film.

The Pipeline Next Door is less cinema verité and more what modern audiences would consider documentary. The intimate view Kirtadze provides of the villagers is matched only by her fair treatment of British Petroleum: Kirtadze closely follows BP executives as they present their side of the story. The Pipeline Next Door is also remarkable for its visual appeal, featuring breathtaking long shots of the Caucasus Mountain Range and the Georgian countryside.

Tell My Friends That I'm Dead (2003)

Original title: "Dites a mes amis que je suis mort"
One of Kirtadze's earlier works, this documentary examines the elaborate West Georgian traditions surrounding death, mourning, and burial. "The dead are not separated from the living," Kirtadze wrote in a blurb for the film "People involve them in their family life, talk to them, seek their advice."

Durakova: Village of Fools (2008)

Kirtadze won the World Cinema Directing Award at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival for Durakova, which details the practices of Mikhail Fyodorovich Morosov, the "autocratic" leader of a mental rehabilitation center outside of Moscow. "In this microcosm," writes Susan Oxtoby of the PFA "we see a frightening locus for oppressive behavior and Russian nationalism. Kirtadze's

portrait of life at Durakovo is a metaphor for where Russian leadership is heading today.”

Something About Georgia (2010)

As the first European war of the 21st century, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 took the world largely by surprise. Caused by tensions over the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia, the war displaced thousands of civilians. Kirtadze’s documentary follows the re-election campaign of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili as he navigates the world of international politics.

Kirtadze’s Philosophy

[What is] your general style, your aesthetic? Your ideas about film? What you want to accomplish with your films?

The composition of the frame and the movement of the camera and the light and what’s in the foreground, what’s behind, what are the layers—I think these [questions] are very, very important if we’re talking about the cinema. This is what cinema is. And another thing is energy. What is the energy of the sequence, and how you get this when you’re filming something? It doesn’t matter whether it’s documentary or fiction. The sequence [must] have the incredible energy of life, because otherwise it’s just a beautiful image. In order for the film to become a living thing, it needs breath.

What’s the best film you’ve made? How do you feel about the films you’ve made?

Well, in France there was this painter. His name was Bonnard, and when his paintings were bought and exposed in the Louvre, he would go to the Louvre, take his paint, and try to correct things in his paintings. I think something like this [happens to] a director who's watching his old movies. You always want to go on. There's always something to do. Always. But at some stage you have to stop. When I watch something [I've made], I say, "Mmm, probably this I would change," but you can't help it; it's over. The best film is the one I'm always about to make, in future somewhere.

Which one was the easiest to shoot, or the one [that felt] most natural to you?

None of them. None of them were easy. Each of them has its own history, because of the crew, because of the people we met, because of the challenges we faced. Each challenge is always different. I equally love and hate [my films].

What's the relationship between your films and the truth? Do you think your films search for authenticity?

I think the truth is very important, but truth and reality are different matters. I think that what people call reality is a very blurred notion. Let's say that there is a camera here. What's the reality of the camera? The reality of the camera is the one that you choose to be your reality...And this is the very interesting thing about directing documentary. As a director, you choose the part of this chaos that people call reality. What is going to be the reality of your frame? On what do you want to be focused? From the moment I'm focused on a door, it's already a choice. It's all about choices. The moment you decide this is going to be the lead [character] in your documentary, and then when you're

editing, and then when you do sound edits—it's always about choices.

Last question: what do you think is the future of cinema, maybe for you personally, or cinema in general? I know it's very broad, but what do you think will happen next?

Well, I think that there will be a reinvention. There is a big debate at the moment in France, about what is allowed and what is not allowed in documentary. You have documentaries with actors; you have documentaries with [reenactments]. It's like a child that is born, and starts to grow and grow and grow. You cannot just put him in a box and say, "Now you stop growing." It's a living thing. So I think that many things are going to change. What is documentary and what is fiction? If you look at the cinema broadly, documentary and fiction all together—if you take something like *A Road to Guantanamo*, it's deliberately shot like a documentary. If you look at a documentary, you see that the style [is] very close to fiction film.

Like *Don't Breathe*.

Yes, like *Don't Breathe*. I think in the end, fiction and documentary are both after truth. Godard said, "Cinema is a series of lies, in order to capture the truth," and I agree with that. [When you're] trying to put elements together [to] see if something comes out of it, something shines as truth. You're [thinking about how] you can get under the surface, where the truth lies. It's like when people look for diamonds. You know there are diamonds in the earth, and you have to dig for them. This is something similar. And I think this search will continue.