

THE 5TH HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 18TH MARCH - SUNDAY 22ND MARCH 2015

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Saturday 21st March | 20:00

Salt for Svanetia

Dir: Mikhail Kalatozov | USSR | 1930 | 1h approx

Accompanied live by Moishe's Bagel

Please note: This film contains scenes depicting animal cruelty and slaughter which some viewers may find upsetting.

Soviet filmmaker Mikhail Kalatozov's modus operandi was to show the problems of life, whether it be the chaos of war ('The Nail in the Boot', 1931) or the debauchery of capitalism ('I Am Cuba', 1964). It's an approach which, in the era of Stalinism, got him accused of "negativism" and demoted to a desk job for years. His career is full of lengthy gaps, and showcases a slow evolution from the montage style to a long-take approach which saw his camera gliding up and down walls, across rooftops and rooms, and diving into swimming pools in impossibly unbroken, dreamlike voyages. His final film was 'The Red Tent' (1973), a Soviet-Italian co-production with an international star cast led by Sean Connery. Throughout this remarkable career, Kalatozov blended documentary and drama in striking and sometimes questionable ways...

Early documentary was a very different animal from what we see today. Modern factual films are often driven by strong stories and characters, explored through genuine *verité* footage. In the silent days, the difficulties of gathering real material with cumbersome equipment and slow film stock frequently led filmmakers to stage their action especially for the camera, and what distinguished the films from fiction work was often a rejection of traditional narratives and central characters. The films are more constructed than captured, more sociological than narrative.

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This is the case with Kalatazov's majestic 'Salt for Svanetia' (1930), made when cinema in the west had already converted to sound, but when Russian movies, still silent, had reached an incredible height of sophistication via the exploration of editing spearheaded by Eisenstein and his contemporaries. Kalatazov travelled to an incredibly isolated region of Georgia to film the lives of the peasants, and to make a propagandistic argument in favour of the progress brought by Bolshevism.

The power of this film lies not so much in the points it wants to score off primitive religion, though much of this material is strong, even grisly, but in its stunning visuals, including scenery you can't quite believe is real. Stone towers jut like splinted digits from fields curving impossibly up into the imprisoning mountains; Kalatazov's use of gauzy blurring at the frame's edge makes the countryside seem like a tiny tabletop model, too small to get completely in focus. The contrast between what we know we're looking at, and what it looks like, makes the mind reel. We can forgive the movie its artifice, since it seems to be bringing us glimpses of a whole other world, as alien as anything in 'Interstellar'.

Smacking into the scenic tableaux are Kalatazov's pin-sharp close-ups of weathered locals, which create gigantic landscapes out of creased faces, leathery hands, jagged teeth. A scalp with scissored tonsure looks like a hill tiered with paddy fields. In his attempts to present the life of the Svanetians in as brutal a manner as possible, Kalatazov serves up infant death and bizarre superstition. The slaughter of a bull and the running to death of a horse are also included in graphic detail.

As in so much Russian cinema, the shots are one thing (one incredible thing), but the ideas are fired at us via dynamic inter-cutting. Robert Graves said that poetry results when you put one idea together with another and get, not a third idea, but a star. Kalatazov's bold conjoining of images varies between the purely, crassly didactic, an ad-man's version of Soviet communism (but so forceful it impresses even if it sometimes repels), and a more abstract poetry, created via percussive juxtapositions: as a workman swings his pick into the dirt, dynamite blasts the earth apart. Repeat, and repeat, until a relentless vision of an implacable landscape redrawn by technology and labour is vividly projected into the viewer's mind.

By David Cairns. David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at [Shadowplay dcairns.wordpress.com](http://Shadowplay.dcairns.wordpress.com)