

# Salt for Svanetia (Jim Shvante)

USSR | 1930 | 53 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Mikhail Kalatozov
<b>Screenplay</b>	Mikhail Kalatozov, Sergei Tretyakov
<b>Photography</b>	Mikhail Kalatozov, Shalva Gegelashvili
<b>Music</b>	Zoran Borisavljević

## In Brief

Salt for Svanetia (Jim Shvante Marili Svanets) is an ethnographic treasure that documents with visual bravado the harsh conditions of life in the isolated mountain village of Ushgul. Often compared to Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*, Salt begins as a starkly rendered homage to the resourcefulness and determination of the Svan. But as the focus shifts to the tribe's barbaric religious customs (more haunting and otherworldly than any surrealist could have envisioned), Mikhail Kalatozov's film transforms itself into a work of remarkably powerful Communist propaganda, holding up these grotesque, near-pagan ceremonies (which many Svanetians later denied the authenticity of) as an example of religion's corruptive influence.

The setting for ... Kalatozov's *Salt for Svanetia* (1930) is an isolated village high in the Caucasus Mountains of Georgia. Made by the Georgian state studio with Kalatozov as cameraman, it bears an introductory quotation from Lenin: "The Soviet Union is a country so big and diverse that every kind of social and economic way of life is to be found within it." So Kalatozov (who was himself of Georgian origin) spends most of his time showing the bizarre, vivid world of the Svan community, living a highly ritualized and brutal existence to which the cinematography lends a mythological dimension. The village's problem is that it has no salt with which to support life for both humans and animals. Graphic images of death and suffering abound. Only the arrival of a Bolshevik brigade in the film's final moments promises relief.

Several decades later, Kalatozov would become world famous for his searing antiwar film, *The Cranes Are Flying*, and for his sumptuous portrait of the Cuban Revolution, *I Am Cuba*. *Salt for Svanetia* prefigures both of them in its unorthodox and arresting visual imagery. Pozdorovkin calls it "the most visually liberated film of the silent Soviet era," with its preponderance of crazy angled shots and exaggerated naturalism. The evocative new score by Zoran Borisavljević, which draws on traditional Georgian music, only heightens the emotional impact.



*From Cineaste magazine, Landmarks of Early Soviet Cinema*

*Salt For Svanetia* is ostensibly about man's triumph over nature and the emancipation of a backward corner of the world by the Soviet government. Trapped by glaciers and mountain ranges, Svanetia was an underdeveloped and isolated region that was modernized during Stalin's first Five Year Plan. The film begins diligently enough with Lenin's pronouncement that "the Soviet Union is a country so big and diverse that every kind of social and economic way of life can be found within it." *Salt For Svanetia* is arguably the most visually liberated film of the silent Soviet era, introducing many of the camera techniques that would win director Mikhail Kalatozov acclaim in his *Palme d'Or* winner *The Cranes Are Flying*. *Salt For Svanetia* stands as the last great documentary of the silent era.

*From fandor.com*



Kalatozov built the film out of a dramatic fiction he shot but was unable to get approved by the authorities, combined with an ethnographic documentary about the isolated Caucasus mountain region where Svanetia is located. Intended as a propaganda piece about the Soviet state bringing the modern world to primitive lands with medieval sensibilities and crippling poverty, it becomes a mix of cultural documentary and expressionist historical study. This film doesn't simply record the lives of an alien culture, it dramatizes it with imagery and recreations that turns documentary into drama with a passion. It was, however, accused of excessive formalism as was his follow-up film, *A Nail in the Boot*. His career was set back for decades. Yet he rose from the

ashes of political disfavor to create three masterpieces of Soviet cinema in the fifties and sixties: *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957), *A Letter That Was Never Sent* (1960) and *I Am Cuba* (1964). The roots of those films can be seen in *Salt for Svanetia*.

*From TCM.com*

Once the USSR's silent era ended belatedly in the early-mid 1930s, many of these filmmakers found themselves out of favor with an increasingly censorious regime. One of very few who survived (professionally and otherwise) well into the post-Stalinist sound period was Mikhail Kalatozov, who today is best known for the incredible flights of camera mobility in *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957), *Letter Never Sent* (1960), and *I Am Cuba* (1964), flowers of the liberalizing Khrushchev period. (He even made an English-language international co-production, 1969's *The Red Tent* with Sean Connery.)



But the Georgia native's sumptuous command of cinematic language was apparent many years earlier. *Salt for Svanetia* (1930) is a 53-minute "documentary" with huge streaks of narrative myth-making and lyrical style. This poetic peek at life in a village high in the Caucasus Mountains chronicles its citizens' connectivity to the outer world after isolated centuries of tribal superstition and feudal economics. Yet despite this progressive tilt — capped by a paved road's completion — it's the unchanging customs and spectacular landscapes that catch Kalatozov's eye. Like his more famous films decades hence, *Salt* experiences man and nature in a heightened state of visual rapture.

*From Early Soviet Cinema and the Revolutionary Imperative, on fandor.com*

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Silent Soviet Cinema