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Cross-cultural insight in *The Return*

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Norwegian and Georgian culture intersect in documentary film



*In the documentary film *The Return*, Ingrid Berven tells the story of a Tbilisi family that sends their twin daughters to study abroad for a better future, with the hope that they will someday return home.*

Lori Ann Reinhall
Editor-in-chief
The Norwegian American

Lori Ann Reinhall interviews artist and videographer Ingrid Berven about her documentary [The Return](https://www.berven.no/_pages/Returnpage.html) [https://www.berven.no/_pages/Returnpage.html]. The film tells the story of Manana Gedevanishvili and her family in Tbilisi, Georgia, with many connections to the filmmaker's own life in Bergen, Norway.

The country of Georgia is often referred to as a “forgotten land,” and in the film’s opening, you mention that you knew very little about it before going there. What compelled you to make the journey, and why did you want to make the film?

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgians wanted to connect closer to the West and build up their country. For 70 years, it had been a closed communist country. Norwegian authorities had an aid project in Georgia for a few years after liberation. My friends were stationed there and worked on this for several years, and told vividly about this special country, about President Mikheil Sakashvili, who lived upstairs, awaiting the completion of his palace, about insanely beautiful mountain trips, and they wrote long travelogues with stories about Georgia’s history, population, peculiarities, economy, and so forth. When I was at Manana’s for the first time, I thought that a film crew should be here to document all these wonderful experiences I had.

The film opens with a shot of Dagny Juel’s gravestone. Can you talk about the strange circumstances surrounding her death?

Dagny Juel traveled to Tbilisi because the artistic bohemians around the turn of the last century thought that Georgia was an exotic travel destination. She was an attractive woman and married to a famous Polish novelist, the fascinating and charismatic Stanisław Przybyszewski. Another man, who became her killer, was in love with Dagny. He was unstable and probably insane at the time of the crime. In my childhood home, there were several copies of Edvard Munch’s graphics in which she is a model. I didn’t know this until I was an adult, and maybe that’s why I’m particularly fascinated by her.

Knut Hamsun was drawn to the Caucasus region and spent time there. Did this ignite your curiosity to travel there?

Before I came to Georgia, I was not particularly interested in the fact that Hamsun had been there. His most important novels are written about Norwegian people, especially in northern Norway where the northern lights are so famous. He received the Nobel Prize for the novel *Markens Grøde* (*Growth of the Soil*), which is about a Norwegian farmer and his family. I read the novel *In Wonderland* only after I had been to Georgia. The novel was written early in his career. It is about a train journey Hamsun made from St Petersburg, Russia, to Georgia. Right at the Georgian border, he comes to Stepantsminda, which is the name of the small village at the foot of the mountain Kazbegi, 16,404 feet above sea level. I was also there. It is then that he falls in love with this enchanted landscape in the mountains of Georgia. Hamsun also describes the dangerous dirt roads and the driver's breakneck speed on that journey.

Hamsun wrote that the "magical fairyland" of the Caucasus resembles Norway in many ways. Did you also experience that way?

I can certainly understand his description as a "magical fairyland." In Norway, we also have beautiful, wonderful, high dramatic mountains, and in the past, people believed that elves, trolls, and huldrefolk, creatures from our folk tales, lived there. I also think our mountains are "magical fairylands," even though the highest mountain in Norway is "only" about 8,000 feet above sea level. The mountains in Georgia, on the other hand, are much higher, and in many places, more inaccessible.

We hear Edvard Grieg's "Solveig's Song" from *Peer Gynt* when the film opens and closes. Is there a meaning behind this?

Solveig in *Peer Gynt* yearns and waits for Peer all her life, and she expresses it through this beautiful song. But he won't come back, because that's Peer Gynt's character, and you can't trust him. They finally meet, but by then, it's too late. They are both old. This is perhaps also Manana's hope; she is waiting for her grandchildren, who she wishes will return. But do they want to? Peer Gynt's poor character is not a parallel to the twins or others who go out to get work, but there is a fear among those who stay behind. Will our loved ones ever come back?

The director, Givi Odisharia, and his film team were responsible for the music and sound effects. Givi is also very interested in the Bergen-born Grieg's compositions and identified "Solveig's Song" as a good theme for the film. He realized that this would be key to the documentary.

Where did you obtain the old photos from Hamsun's era in the film? Was it difficult to select which ones to use?

There are many photos of Hamsun and Munch in open Norwegian archives online. The historical photos have been found in Georgian archives and many photos hang on Manana's walls. All the other photos from Georgia have been selected by the director. I have found photos from Norway, and I have also done all the film footage from Bergen.

Were there special challenges working with interpreters and a foreign crew in Georgia?

Yes, it was difficult at first. Givi understood some English but had no training and experience in communicating in English, but after a while, it got better. He wrote short emails and gave short instructions. It worked. Sometimes he had to have the help of a good translator who translated many questions from Georgian into English. I wrote answers and read them aloud in my own language at a sound studio in Bergen.

Hamsun describes Tbilisi as a very different world, that he felt a certain peacefulness there, which contrasts to Dagny Juel's experience. As you walked the streets they once walked, what feelings did you have?

First of all, in 2005, I had never seen such a dilapidated city, with poverty and decay. Seventy years of communism, civil war, and earthquakes had destroyed the city, but when I returned after five years, an incredibly quick change had taken place. The roads had been paved, the car park had been renewed, the houses had been largely rehabilitated, new modern public buildings were under construction, and tourism was significant. This was initiated by Sakashvili.

How did you meet Manana Gedevanishvili? Why did you decide to go and visit her?

Our friend Walter Wangberg was stationed in Tbilisi to help build up the Georgian judiciary. He introduced us to the Norwegian consul, Liana Haerum, who, in turn, introduced us to Manana. She put on a grand party for us and told us about her family history and her life. That was the beginning.



Manana Gedevanishvili, a retired professor of medicine, met with Norwegian artist and videographer Ingrid Berven to talk about her family's history in her home in Tbilisi, Georgia.

You describe Manana's apartment as a "magical world." In the film, the camera zooms in on many of the objects in it. What fascinated you in particular, and what makes this apartment different from one in Norway?

Although her home was similar in many ways to the one I grew up in, the most striking difference was that she had kept several medical devices that her father and grandfather had used for their patients. An X-ray machine and a large light box for use in psychiatry stood in the middle of the living room. I was also fascinated by Manana's mother, who was a movie star during the communist regime. An entire wall was covered with photos of her. Stalin was a great admirer of her films. Her apartment was a mixture of residence and museum, "Manana's museum."

You and Manana talk about author Henrik Ibsen and the music of Grieg. Was this a surprise to you? She also read Hamsun as a young girl. Do you see any trace of Norwegian influence in Manana?

Yes, it was a big surprise. As for Grieg's music, it was played on the grand piano in her home. Music is an international language that needs no explanation. She told me about Hamsun the very first evening we were there. As for Ibsen, an answer materialized several years later when it turned out that her grandmother had translated Ibsen into Georgian.

She doesn't necessarily seem to be directly influenced by Norwegian culture, but her knowledge of great Norwegian artists surprised me. I did not fully understand the depth of her first presentation about Hamsun until the director's interview with her in Georgian. It was later translated into English. There she describes Hamsun and his literature in a very personal and insightful way. Manana is strong and rational but also has a sensitive and intuitive nature. Perhaps Hamsun has influenced her; it's impossible to say.

It took you several years to bring the crew back to Tbilisi to film *The Return*. What were some of the obstacles that you faced?

It's difficult to get money to make a professional film in Norway and certainly in the United States. The competition is fierce for documentaries as well as feature films. I managed to convey the idea well enough that the Norwegian film company Panora Film found it interesting. They started by developing the film concept, which took three years. Later, the Documentary Studio of Georgian Public Broadcasting took over with script, directing, camera, and editing. Surprisingly, they invited me along as an interviewee, and they did the main work on the film.

Manana has devotedly archived her heritage in her home. Do Norwegians look upon and guard their family history in the same way? Should they?

Manana's grand and famous family has contributed with important community-building tasks and deeds. The communists confiscated what the family owned; eventually they lived in one room. She has slowly bought back furniture and things to recreate the family history. It is sad to see that the glory days are over, but she still wants her grandchildren to know about this legacy, which they may have to face later in life. There is high unemployment in Georgia, and young people go abroad to find work, and many may not return.

In Norway, you don't have aristocracy in the same way, and there are not many families that have as many important people in their background as the Gedevanishvili

family. Norwegians mostly come from limited backgrounds and have respect for their family history. In Norway, each person must create their own life and identity. Norwegians are proud of hard work. In contrast to Georgia, unemployment is low in Norway. I think it can be good to hear about relatives who have managed to get ahead in life, and it can influence many people to think, "If my ancestors managed this, I can also manage it."

In what way does the history of this one family tell the history of Georgia?

It is quite similar to what's happened in Norway: women's rights, the rise of democracy, (which was put on hold in Georgia during communism for 70 years), and improvements in medical technology. Finally, I would like to mention the flourishing film industry, which, despite Soviet rule, was significant in Georgia during the interwar period.

The relationship between Georgia and France is strong in the Gedevanishvili family. Did travel change them somehow?

The influence from France must have been great. But in all countries, there is cultural influence from other countries, and it is mostly positive, Georgia is located in the middle of the upper Silk Road and was accustomed to cultural influences, although one could say that the core is Georgian. An example of French influence is Manana's uncle, who studied medicine in Paris and returned with film enthusiasm and new technical film ideas. Manana's grandmother studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and came home with new ideas about women's rights.

You point out that Manana's family and your family had much in common. Did your visit to Georgia give you a deeper appreciation for your own background?

Yes, absolutely. At first, I didn't think much about why I was so interested in Manana and her family. But when we started working on the script, and especially when the Georgian studio invited me to participate in the film, I dug deeper and found connections that I didn't see at first. Somehow she reminded me a little of my own mother, who was eccentric, sensitive, fond of art, quick, and intelligent. My childhood home was a bourgeois cultural environment, filled with objects and antiques and reminded me a lot of what I saw at the Gedevanishvili family.

In the film, three generations of strong women live together under one roof. How does this family configuration differ from a typical Norwegian family? Is it a workable family model for our Western societies?

Georgians have strong women, and in the film, it is Manana's daughter, Ketil, who has a job and supports the family. Both Manana and Ketil are divorced. In Norway, the divorce rate is high. Women and men support themselves and their families whether they are divorced or not. There are many family models in the modern Western world, but I don't think this matriarchal Georgian model is necessarily the ideal one.

Do the differences between the generations in the Gedevanishvili family parallel the Norwegian historical narrative, for example, the struggle of the older generations and the easier life of the young? Is there something to be learned from this?

Yes, it is the same here in Norway as in Georgia. It is a general phenomenon, all parents work for their children's welfare and it takes a lot of work to build up a family and a society. I think it's easy for us to forget that it was the generations before us who built up the country. In Norway, we have welfare programs that shift responsibility to the state. In Norway, we have something to learn from the Georgians, such as taking care of the elderly. In Georgia, families are more concerned about this, and Ketil is a good example.

What was the significance of the family's selling of the painting "Roe drinking from a stream" by Niko Pirosmiani?

There is no symbolism in the fact that it was a painting of a deer, but Manana had to sell the painting to be able to afford her grandchildren's education. In Norway, we have the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund, a program that enables young people to borrow money for their education, so parents don't have to provide capital. Everyone gets a chance, regardless of family background.

Throughout the film you often juxtapose scenes from life in Bergen with scenes of life in Tbilisi, showing similarities and contrasts. Could you call out some examples?

Norway is a maritime nation and has lived off of fish, oil, and shipping. Bergen represents all three of these industries and is an old Hanseatic trading port with an old German influence. Bergen is located by the lake and the sea. Tbilisi is located on the great river Mtkvari, which has also had its trade traffic. At the same time, I recognized

bourgeois European urban society with theaters, concert halls, and art museums. The people also brought with them leisure activities, such as mountain hiking with a cable car/gondola from the center of the city up the surrounding mountainsides. Both cities have this in common. But in contrast to Norway, which is a geographical extremity of Europe, Georgia is centrally located along the upper Silk Road, where Asian influence and uniqueness with trade goods and migration has left its mark.

Does *The Return* carry a special message for you and other Norwegians?

I think we are in a time when families are being split up to a greater extent than before. Young people want to experience the world; they study and take jobs abroad. There is something called "out of sight, out of mind." The state cannot take care of the elderly's sense of loneliness. The family dynamic must change and we must take more care of the elderly. It is a problem that needs to be solved, both politically and individually.

How was the film received, both in Norway and in Georgia?

In Norway, the film was well received, but it has not reached a large audience. I am working on that now. It was shown at the Bergen International Film Festival, which is the biggest festival in Norway, and I got nothing but good feedback.

It was a success in Tbilisi and was shown several times on TV there. Many people know the famous Gedevanishvili family, and a strict Georgian film critic was positive. Critics and viewers loved the historical and reflective mood. The target audience are adults, but the film is also suitable for younger people. The film was professionally made, and it had several layers of meaning.



Like so many Norwegians before her, filmmaker Ingrid Berven was met by a magical world of culture and art in Tbilisi, Georgia, where she followed the footsteps of authors Knut Hamsun and Dagny Juel.

Does the film carry a universal message for all travelers and citizens of the world?

Yes absolutely. The film shows that Georgia is a good and interesting country for tourists. But as I have previously mentioned, the globalization and capitalist way of life of our time has a problem with the old people feeling abandoned and somewhat forgotten. Although the younger ones are happy in their family, they still have a natural urge to travel. They travel into the cities and abroad to study or find work; this is more universal than ever.

But some countries and cultures are particularly family-friendly, the Italians, for example. They think Norwegians, who put their elderly in nursing homes are barbaric. I think this is the case for many cultures. Norway has a good economy and has developed a welfare state, as previously mentioned, where a public system takes care of the elderly.

Were you influenced by any other filmmakers when you set out to create *The Return*?

Yes, I got thoroughly into documentary filmmaking when I got the idea to make this film. I picked apart several documentaries and learned from them. Among other things, I became thoroughly familiar with Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* and Lars von Trier's *Dogville*. It was particularly instructive to work with two professional film companies, one in Norway and one in Georgia.

In recent years, I have been particularly interested in documentaries. Before, I was more concerned with art that is more introverted and a little inaccessible and perhaps not understandable to the public, but now I am more concerned with history, politics, and the contemporary world and have a more realistic approach to my own art production. I like art that relates to the present.

How did the various media you have worked with shape the form of the film?

The freedom you have as an artist and visual artist is formidable if you are not afraid of criticism or the judgment of colleagues. Becoming an adult and confident as a visual artist is great. Still, I know that a part of me is cowardly and afraid. It is a part of my baggage that I often have to challenge, and sometimes it is my strength.

Visual art is a language of its own. Music and sound is another. It took me a long time to understand that I am not a woman of my word. In addition to an education in the visual arts, I have a thorough education in music. I was therefore particularly happy when I received a major assignment during the National Norwegian Centenary in 2005; I made large video projections for a party performance with music by the great Norwegian composers. The music was already under my skin, I had played a lot of it myself.

I have always enjoyed trying new expressions, materials and ideas. I like to take chances and sometimes I succeed. Each material expresses something that I can use. The sensibility for what any material expresses is stored and used in art. So eventually the pieces fall into place when you work in the workshop. After a few years of training, you understand the material and the uniqueness of the medium, and I make use of that.

In *The Return*, I have helped make a documentary from a 100-year perspective. This was a new experience for me; to relinquish total control and place my trust in the director, Givi Odisharia.

Will *The Return* have a lasting impact on your work?

I have decided to continue with film. I think documentary and film are the most exciting media of all forms of expression. But I'm beginning to understand how difficult it is to make a professional documentary film, how expensive it is, and how many people and elements must be in place: script, photographer, director, cut, sound, etc. But I've started to get a certain insight into it.

Still, you can make a simple documentary, without complicating the process. And there I am. For years I have used various expressions ranging from sculpture, painting, objects, animation, video, and more. I have been fascinated by video as a kind of living image drawn out in time. Then it is obvious to proceed with the "narrative." I think there is a lot of exciting stuff out there waiting for me. One just has to start working.

Photos courtesy of Ingrid Berven

Also see [Tbilisi's Norwegian greats \[https://www.norwegianamerican.com/hamsun-and-juel/\]](https://www.norwegianamerican.com/hamsun-and-juel/) in the April 2023 issue of *The Norwegian American*.

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Lori Ann Reinhall

Lori Ann Reinhall, editor-in-chief of *The Norwegian American*, is a multilingual journalist and cultural ambassador based in Seattle. She is the president of the Seattle-Bergen Sister City Association, and she serves on the boards of several Nordic organizations.



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