

## ORIENTI **Sergei Parajanov: Saving Beauty** OCCIDENTI

I believe in the idea that the artist's work comes first, before his personality. Thus, I do not think that we create our art language, but language makes the artist. The artist simply finds, always, the language of his work. Sergei Parajanov himself is a creation of cinematic language. The language of film exists by itself, and the creators of film works serve to it. Parajanov was a faithful and talented servant of that language, better than the others. In the temple of cinema there is image, light, and reality. Parajanov is a ruler and the owner of this temple.

Jean-Luc Godard in *Parajanov: The Last Collage* (Ruben Gevorgyants, 1995)

### ***As Autobiographical As Poetry***

Films of outstanding Armenian filmmaker Sergei Parajanov (1924-1990) are distinctly *auteur*, regardless of whether they are based on his original screenplays (*The Color of Pomegranates*, 1969) or a literary work (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, 1964; *The Legend of the Suram Fortress*, 1985; *Ashik Kerib*, 1988). Behind every shot his shadow is visible, his voice audible; in every object and every actor his pulse and his breath can be felt. Today it seems natural to read the title "author of the film" against Parajanov's name in the credits of *The Color of Pomegranates*, but at the time the film was produced it was unusual, if not surprising, to see this instead of the standard "director" or "filmmaker."

Confession and autobiography are typical modes for art-house films; consider Federico Fellini, Andrei Tarkovsky, Ingmar Bergman, François Truffaut. "All art is autobiographical. The pearl is the oyster's autobiography," said Fellini. In cinema, an *auteur* synchronizes the time of the story with his own, "personal" time. His life experience and philosophy are assimilated by the audience and become their property. Typically, after watching *The Mirror* (*Зеркало - Zerkalo*, 1975) a man asked Tarkovsky: "How did you know what happened in my childhood?" By picturing other people, an *auteur* tells his own story, not directly but metaphorically. Antonioni said:

Autobiographical as our films are, imagination is always there to break in: what we see is transformed into what we would like to see... We are the characters of our films inasmuch as we believe in them. But standing between us and our characters is always the film, i.e. a specific, obvious fact, some mental and physical action, indisputable evidence that we are we, something that makes us free of conventionalities and does not let us break ground.<sup>1</sup>

Parajanov also confessed that "as a matter of fact, *The Confession* is my autobiography, framed in metaphor and allegory. It is the story of my split fate."<sup>2</sup> In this light, Sayat-Nova must be seen as Parajanov's *alter ego*, especially since both of them saw "the life and soul tortured [...] in this world" (one of the leitmotifs of Parajanov's film are Sayat-Nova's words "I am the one whose life and soul are a suffering"). An "allegorical autobiography," as Thomas Mann would say.

Autobiography often comes from feelings and impulses alone. For example, when Parajanov pictures Sayat-Nova's childhood, his little Harutyun is neatly dressed and poses. This may well be a reflection of his childhood memories and feelings, especially as it is known that in reality the poet was born to a poor family and was forced to learn weaving so as to be able to earn his daily bread. In an interview given in *I Died in Childhood*, a documentary made by his nephew Georgi, Parajanov says about his Sayat-Nova: "It is the beauty of my childhood." When writing about the autobiographical nature of *The Color of Pomegranates*, Karen Kalantar pointed out the likeness between Melkon Alekryan, the boy performing the role of little Harutyun (Sayat-Nova), and Parajanov's childhood photos: "Parajanov's childhood

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complex,” concludes the author.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, it is helpful to quote Visconti: “Who or what we become and how we live [...] depend on our happy or unhappy childhood. In the way family relationships develop I try to find parallels with social phenomena.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, we trust our and others’ childhoods, search for answers there, with a child’s innocent glance becoming conventionality, a kind of a prism, through which we see things in a stronger, more intimate light. One of the inter-titles in *The Color of Pomegranates* reads: “From the world’s colors and odors my childhood created a poet’s lyre and gave it to me.”

Art-house cinema is as autobiographical as poetry. Just as a poet’s feelings become ours, i.e. he is reflected in the reader, the viewer abstracts himself from a filmmaker’s feelings, and recognizes himself in them, sometimes seeing, as Jung said, “the fate of all mankind.”

In Parajanov’s art one cannot distinguish ethnography from imagination, fact from legend. Great art is the unity of the spiritual and the material, the beautiful and the ordinary, myth and reality. His mythological characters and elements give us the feeling of boundlessness. Parajanov’s mentality was as mythological and ritual as it was material. From the olden times until the Middle Ages, man’s everyday life was reflected in rites. In Parajanov’s cinematic rites the most habitual story is “deflected” by the prism of the “epic tale-teller” (as cameraman and documentary filmmaker Mikael Vardanyan [Vartanov] called the great filmmaker) into a myth – something that is not only eternal, but also characteristic of the beliefs at the time of creation and explanatory of the events in the present days.

*The Color of Pomegranates* combines three different times: the time of the hero, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Armenian poet; the time of the author; and eternity. The life of a real historical figure, the *ashugh* (minstrel) Sayat-Nova, is retold as a myth.

The popular legend about Sayat-Nova is a unity of facts masterfully interpreted by a poet. In Parajanov’s legend everything is part of a whole, every detail is a highlight. Here the facts are arranged not as they might have happened but as the author would like to see them happen. Aristotle said that the poet is the creator of the myth, for he creates the possibility rather than the reality. In any case, there is nothing in the film that is contrary to what the studies of Sayat-Nova assert.<sup>5</sup>

Parajanov’s Sayat-Nova is a concrete poet and an archetype, the symbol of a poet, i.e. he is both a specific and abstract character, a real incarnation of the eternal. The character of a poet, a man of art, someone who is free from the chains of the time, has long been one of the super-temporal mythemes of humankind and a protagonist for many authors. In art, truth cannot do without fiction. Here the goal of the author (be it a writer or a filmmaker) cannot just be a person’s biography, even if that person is a genius: recall Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev* (*Андрей Рублёв*, 1966), Fellini’s *Casanova* (*Il Casanova di Federico Fellini*, 1976), Miloš Forman’s *Amadeus* (1984).

Biographical facts are mostly suppositions, and for each author a poet’s or artist’s relationships with his surroundings are a chance to reveal the conflict between the two alphas of human existence – soul and matter. Such archetypes are the heroes of “personal” myths, of legends, in order to answer the eternal questions posed by their authors. In Parajanov’s case this is especially obvious.

*The Color of Pomegranates* is a soul diagram of both a poet-author and a poet-hero. “The world is a window” for the protagonist. Just as in *Ashik Kerib*, in *The Color of Pomegranates* the main character is a poet, and in both stories he is forced first to “sing” and then to “die.” In the titles of Hakob Hovnatanyan, the painter is also called “a poet.” “This is a film about a realist painter, who sang of his contemporaries as only a real poet could do.” As Parajanov said, “The story of Ivan is the story of a poet – frustrated and ruined.”<sup>6</sup>

In *The Color of Pomegranates* Sayat-Nova is a spiritual rather than material character. Parajanov pictures the “character” of a poet’s soul, its “plot,” its emotional fluctuations. By the way, Sayat-Nova is

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poet's pen-name and in translation from Persian it means "hunter of the song."

Speaking of Sayat-Nova, Parajanov said: "People were eager to enjoy their Sayat-Nova, hungry for his songs [...] I have shown the essence of his surroundings, everything that shaped or could shape his soul."<sup>7</sup>

In *The Color of Pomegranates* it is the look of the main character that shapes the screen space. The picture seems to be imbued with poetry, composed of poetic shots. It is a cinematic poem, where beauty is everywhere. "What he meant was a film about poetry rather than a poet. It was an attempt to revive Sayat-Nova's poetic world [...] to make each shot meaningful, just like a poet's word. That's what Parajanov was aiming for."<sup>8</sup>

Theater historian and film critic Razmik Madoyan, who was the chief manager of Hayfilm at the time *The Color of Pomegranates* was produced, remembers that the Polish art critic Kazimierz Koźniewski, who displayed a deep understanding of Parajanov's art, said that in this film "the picture and the word are poetically interwoven by Sayat-Nova's muse."<sup>9</sup>

The personal and the historical are mixed in such a way that biographical facts evolve into universal facts and characters. Like a real "epic tale-teller" and a great "mystifier," Parajanov is inspired by both his own life and legends. For him there is no border between life and art: one follows the other, reality comes from imagination. He "staged life, made a show of it, according to his own will and taste, his passion was perpetual improvisation."<sup>10</sup>

He kept playing a role in that film, now appearing in the frame and then going off the screen in a constant attempt to see himself from the other side of the camera. Interviews broadcast in recent years have shown that, though being documentary, those shots are also parts of Parajanov's art. Taken retrospectively, they cast a new light on his both mysterious and simple films, redefining them as elements of his general creative image.

### ***The Ruler of the Temple of Beauty***

Sergei Parajanov (Sargis Parajanyan) was born in Tbilisi (Georgia) to an Armenian family. His parents were antiquaries, so from the outset the future filmmaker found himself wrapped up in the beauty of things. It was to the charm of that beauty and folk tales as well that he owed his precociously developed taste, but it was also for the love of it that he would have to pay a high price later in life. No other filmmaker in the Soviet Union suffered so much persecution from the Communist regime as Parajanov, a point we will return to.

Therefore, while still a child, Parajanov was already an aesthete, enthused with music, dance and painting, and a lover of poetry and folklore, who finally evolved into an artist of truly epic scope. His infatuation with the legendary, his worship of the magical, fantastic and extraordinary can be seen in both his films and his unrealized projects (he dreamed of filming the Armenian epic of *David of Sasun*, the Armenian legend of *Ara the Fair and Shamiram*, Lermontov's *Demon*, *Henry Longfellow's The Song of Hiawatha* and Hans Christian Andersen's tales). Parajanov spent two years studying singing at Tbilisi Conservatoire, then from 1945–1951 he graduated in film directing at VGIK, the State Institute for Cinema in Moscow and alma mater of almost all Soviet film directors.

Parajanov's poetic imagination sparked in his very first film, *Andriesh* – a project he co-produced with Yakov Bazelyan (cinematography by Vadim Vereshchak and Suren Shahbazyan) for the Kiev Film Studio in 1954.<sup>11</sup> The Moldavian poet Emilian Radu Bucov's tale was a good opportunity for the novice filmmaker to try out his unique artistic imagery and poetic language to highlight a theme that would later become one of the keynotes of his cinematography: the eternal battle between good and evil.

International acclaim came to Parajanov with *Tini zabutykh predkiv / Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors*, a film he produced in 1964 from a story by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky (cinematography by Yuri Ilyenko). Watching the film, it seems that the events happened a millennium ago, while in reality there is just half

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a century separating the time when the film was released from the times described in the original story about the life of Hutsuls, Western Ukrainians living in the Carpathian Mountains. In this fantastic movie Parajanov sets a real feast of beauty, an unprecedented kaleidoscope of colors, where even death looks beautiful.

Such excessive aestheticism and nationalism meant a great deal in the times of “social realism and internationalism.” It came as a surprise to learn that the man who had so expertly reanimated the “forgotten” genetic roots of the Ukrainian people was not a Ukrainian. But it was even more surprising to realize that the only source this non-Ukrainian consulted in staging the rites and designing the costumes for his film was his own intuition and imagination, although he was still able to create a genuinely ethnographic story.

It is said that success is never forgiven. His next film *Kivski Freski / Kyiv Frescoes* (1966) was banned during pre-production, with just 13 minutes of auditions having survived. But this is enough to see the specificity of the author’s attitude towards both human and cinematographic traditions.

In 1966 Parajanov moved to Yerevan. Here, at the Documentary, Scientific and Educational Film Studio, he produced a short documentary, film portrait of Hakob Hovnatanyan, a Tbilisi-based painter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the most prominent figure of an old Armenian artistic dynasty. This eight-minute film is a vivid example of the specific Parajanov style: a fresh, wordless vision of Hovnatanyan’s works, artfully “repainted” through the harmony of images, sounds and music (composed by Stepan Shakaryan) and a conventional replication of old Tbilisi and its specific atmosphere. Ten years later, in 1986, Parajanov would relive that experience by “repainting” the works of another famous artist from Georgia, Pirosmiani, at the Georgian film studio (*Arabesques on Themes by Pirosmiani*).

Thus, at Hayfilm (Armenian Film Studio) Parajanov produced a film about Sayat-Nova, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Armenian poet, who wrote his poems in three languages – Armenian, Georgian and Turkish. Today the world applauds this masterpiece, but at the time, in 1968, it caused its author a great deal of trouble. The authorities argued whether the film was actually about Sayat-Nova. Of course, their limited perception could not conceive the limitless figuration of the film. Something had to be done to save this extraordinary work and make it known to ordinary people. The film needed a neutral title – *The Color of Pomegranates* –, which certainly reflects both the form and the content of the film.

According to film historian and critic Suren Hasmikyan, Parajanov was initially planning to call his film *Ashkharums (In My World)*. Occupying a special place in Sayat-Nova’s poetry, this phrasal word is the leitmotif of Parajanov’s film: “I know Armenian poetry... This amazing word “ashkharums” that crowns *The Color of Pomegranates* has become my motto. Ashkharums... this word signifies my attitude towards the Armenian, his stones and his land...” Parajanov said in an interview to Armenian radio reporter Varuzhan Voskanyan at his Tbilisi home in 1978 upon his release from jail.<sup>12</sup>

The fate of *The Color of Pomegranates* was no less dramatic. Goskino, the Soviet State Committee for Cinema, allocated the film a low (third) category, which meant no access to international festivals, while the key precondition for a public release was its re-editing by Sergei Yutkevich, a filmmaker who enjoyed a far better reputation in the system of Soviet cinema. Of course, Yutkevich meant to help, but after his revision the film had lost its dramaturgic originality and much of the author’s touch: the shots were rearranged (some even removed) to make the film chronologically coherent (the Poet as a child, the Poet as a youth, the Poet in the palace, the Poet in the cloister, the Poet’s death) and “strictly comprehensible,” as Parajanov would say later. Fortunately, the original Armenian version (with inter-titles, a poetic comment by Hrant Matevosyan) has survived and is available at Hayfilm, but sadly the Russian cut is much better known.<sup>[13]</sup>

But this was not the end of Parajanov’s artistic suffering: the worst was yet to come. In 1974 Parajanov began preparing a film about the great storyteller Hans Christian Andersen, to be titled *Miracle in Odense*. At this time, the court of Kiev (Ukraine) sentenced him to five years in jail. The world community, who

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were still under the spell of Parajanov's *Shadows*, began searching for ways to help him – succeeding only four years later, when the French writer Louis Aragon personally asked Leonid Brezhnev to set Parajanov free. The name meant nothing to the Soviet leader: he did not even know who Parajanov was. When asked later if it was true that he was jailed for homosexuality, Parajanov said: "Officially, yes. But not only. For a theft: they alleged I was engaged in speculation, traded in diamonds... And also for not soft-soaping the regime."<sup>14</sup>

The regime did not forgive Parajanov for his love of freedom, expressed in both his work and his life. In a totalitarian regime ruled by socialist realism and accepting just one opinion, one "truth," one philosophy, a free-thinker had to be persecuted. In such a system his allegorical thinking would be taken as "freedom of speech" and an attempt to express his free will. That alone was already a sign of unwillingness to comply with general stereotypes, of impudence, not to say dissidence. In the Soviet Union allegory, metaphors and symbols were not encouraged and even punished as a form of free-thinking, although not everyone was punished.

But Parajanov, a man who never missed a chance to display and defend his free-thinking, could not escape punishment. Tarkovsky once said: "A person can be free only when in jail." Parajanov confirmed this harsh truth at the expense of his own life. That was the price he paid for his art, his "kingdom of beauty" – for, as Joseph Brodsky put it, "unlike Dostoyevsky, who believed that beauty would save the world, Parajanov decided to save beauty." – "Of all prayers I most like the Greek prayer, 'May all that is beautiful double and triple,'" Parajanov would say.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it was his own prayer.

### ***Stopping the Image***

Parajanov's first Armenian film – documentary *Hakob Hovnatanyan* was a kind of prologue to *The Color of Pomegranates*, a short sketch of that great masterpiece, a sketch of Parajanov's "static" flight and a sign of the stylistic changes that would bring to perfection the revelations he experienced when creating *Shadows*. It is worth noting that even *Shadows*, the most dynamic film Parajanov ever produced, was labeled as "static." One only has to recall the magical flights of the camera soaring in every possible and impossible direction in the magical film space. In his article "Perpetual Motion" in the journal *Iskusstvo kino (The Art of Cinema)*, Parajanov disproved the opinion that *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* was "as motionless as a souvenir" by saying that "being intensely expressive, it was, at the same time, statically void of tragedy."<sup>16</sup>

When speaking of Parajanov's static style, the association to Alexander Dovzhenko, is obvious: his films were emphatically static in their motion, and he was indeed mentioned as a role model by both Sergei Parajanov and Andrei Tarkovsky.<sup>17</sup> So different in style, those two filmmakers had one source of inspiration in their work and were close friends in life.

As an aesthetic principle, statics was fundamentally expressed in *The Color of Pomegranates*. Here Dovzhenko's static style was thoroughly reconceived to yield new, yet unseen fruits. In the world of poetic imagery, encoded in the seemingly "illogical," musical sequence of externally static pictures is the internal, almost indiscernible motion of thoughts and feelings, the inner music of an image. As Parajanov explained: "It is not fatigue but passion to make dynamics inside a static shot."<sup>18</sup>

By stopping the image Parajanov discovered the reverse side of motion. Parajanov's method is maybe best analyzed through the example of his *Color of Pomegranates*. All that Parajanov created – his films and collages – confirm the well-known thesis that things are just part of what they mean. There was nothing more boring for Parajanov than to use things according to their meaning. He used to say, "A soldier's helmet meant something to me only when I saw flowers growing in it..."<sup>19</sup> When a sea-shell – an object he so often uses in his cinematic compositions – is suddenly given the "role" of a human heart (in *Color of Pomegranates*) or a trumpet (when the young hero brings one close to his lips and begins to "play" it in *Ashik Kerib*), it becomes one of the most plastic visual examples of the metaphysical

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transfiguration of an object's function in cinema. In his monograph about Parajanov, the distinguished Armenian film critic Karen Kalantar noted: "A symbol, a metaphor is born when what is left of a thing is just a sign indicating what it signifies, while its functions are changed, when that sign and those functions contradict and deny each other."<sup>20</sup> In this contradiction the image is born.

Parajanov's biggest cinematographic achievement is his ability to reconcile incompatible and incomparable objects and connect them through a visible language of communication. Tarkovsky said of Parajanov: "He makes art out of everything. And the charm of that art is its spontaneity. When he conceives something, he does not plan, construct, calculate it; there is no difference between the conception and its realization. Emotionality, the way it was conceived remains pure till the end. This is how *The Color of Pomegranates* works. We can't do the same."<sup>21</sup>

The most incredible configurations of objects in Parajanov's films create, through visual dramaturgy and specific plasticity, a harmony of primeval nature. As if reunited after a long separation, there are a nude female breast and a sea-shell, a dry bunch of thorns and a rose, an Armenian bread *lavash* and soil, jugs and pitchers with red and blue silky ribbons spurting out of them, mowers and grass on the dome of a church, a flock of sheep having lost their shepherd, and the walls of a monastery.

As Vasili Katanian said: "His life and his films were full of things."<sup>22</sup> In Parajanov's compositions (be it a collage or a film shot) even unpleasant, appalling objects look beautiful. The key substance of his cinematic world is the object, but life is given to that substance by man, by an actor, who in turn is enlivened by the author, who holds everything and everybody in his hands. In Parajanov's films the actor is also different. Here a "living" man is transformed into a mime and a puppet through generalized "contemplative" acting. The actors tell the audience the unspoken, as mimes do. But, as everywhere else, here, too, Parajanov invents his own rules.

Kalantar is right when he associates Parajanov's cinematic style with his childhood memories of Tbilisi and its people, sounds, colors and odors, workshops and studios, and points to a direct link between their frontal position, without a fourth wall in front, on the one hand, and their static composition with dynamic human plasticity inside on the other. "Parajanov did not submerge in an object, but kept it right in front of himself so as to see all its colors and shapes, its real picture."<sup>23</sup> As if wishing to bring their unique beauty closer to us, objects in Parajanov's "still" pictures shed their everyday exterior to blend with rampant colors into a fantastic masquerade.

His art confirms that "handmade" reality can exist and raises cinema to a new level of conventionality. Paradoxically, Parajanov hated scenery and a decorative set, preferring outdoor shooting in natural surroundings instead. But for all that, the reality he shot was still conventionally decorative. For example, when the hero of *The Color of Pomegranates*, little Harutyun, drags the carpet around and then approaches the window of the bath-house, this is filmed from above and looks more like puppet animation. The same can be said about the rampart, looking as if made of plasticine, with the horseman riding in front of it; or the church that is set against the night sky background by special lighting so it looks like a scenery or a painting, and at times even an appliqué: it seems that Parajanov has simply cut out the picture of a church and pasted it on a black backdrop. In his films physical reality is reproduced into his own: "Almost all objects appearing in Parajanov's shots have been literally made by his hands. In his films the concepts of 'synthesis of arts' and 'synthetic art' coincide."<sup>24</sup> He turns a real picture into handmade scenery, and then again he makes that handmade scenery cinematographically authentic. In other words, he makes them equal.

### ***The Space of The Color of Pomegranates***

In fact, Parajanov has invented the language of poetic cinema, because he was also a poet, a poet of art. Art-house cinema bears another important similarity to poetry: the films of an *auteur* constitute a single world, just as a poet's poems constitute his poetry. Parajanov's films are not, as many believe, void of

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narrative or plot, but they cannot be retold or sequentially reproduced in memory. They unwind like a ball of thread, coil by coil, and come back to the mind as a poem does – line by line. Even more, the episodic nature of the story allows feeling and seeing the beginning and the end of each “optical line.” As in poetry with each word, in Parajanov’s cinema each shot has its own identity, exists in itself and on its own, but, at the same time, each of those “shot-lines” is part of a whole. The original montage by the author reveals their emotional and dramaturgical correlation.

Here is one of the episodes of *The Color of Pomegranates*: open books and illustrated manuscripts are lying on the roof of a church with the wind flipping through their pages. This and many other episodes of the film gain an emotional density because of some special beauty they contain. There are no comments or explanations that could expound their meaning. Meanwhile, the preceding episode – the washing of “pressed” books – has a distinctly narrative function and helps us to see logic in the way the shots are arranged: the washed books have been placed on the roof to dry in the sun. But then we see little Harutyun ascending the roof, lying down and spreading his arms in the form of a cross. It seems he has found his worthy place among the books.

“Books are life and soul,” says the voice-over at the beginning of the film when we see the hands of the little boy and a monk placed between books. We see book pages turned first on the church roof, then on the chests of the poet and his love, and finally flapping behind them in the background. Taking the composition of the Armenian miniature as the core of his picture, Parajanov adds to it his own imagination and perspective. In some episodes, like the sacrifice or the grape pressing, the vaults of the church are pictured in such a way as if the floral, vault-shaped design of old Armenian manuscripts, particularly the Bible, were reproduced in actual size.

Another important element of the film’s physical and spiritual space is the carpet as a form of oriental mentality and philosophy, a conventional cosmic model of reality, a limited space woven from countless “dramatic” knots, the field of an allegorical battle between colors and ornaments, between two symbols of the real world. The carpet is a two-dimensional space, just like the movie screen. The static nature of movement in *The Color of Pomegranates* resembles the mysterious dynamics encoded in the rhythms of the carpet’s ornaments, while the “dramatic” allegorical relations between its colors and lines are materialized into objects and humans. Thus, the carpet is a dual metaphor: on the one hand, it is a material metaphor; on the other, it is a metaphor of static movement and an independent ornament-like shot. Not without purpose Parajanov said: “My film is a carpet on the wall, with a melody sewn on it with a golden thread.”<sup>25</sup>

Parajanov’s unique frame compositions (set design by Stepan Andranikyan, cinematography by Suren Shakhbazyan) are colored mostly in red, black and white, with a special role given to blue, the color of medieval Armenian manuscripts and miniatures. The symbolism of the medieval Armenian colors helps the filmmaker reveal the inner world of his protagonist. Red is the symbol of life, the color of the bleeding world – the pomegranate. In this film red is not just a color, but some physical substance, a reality, a depth that helps the author to embrace infinity, to feel the extremities of human existence – life and death. The keynote of Parajanov’s “cinematographic carpet,” this is the color of an Armenian’s metaphysical existence rather than everyday life – the so-called *vordan karmir*<sup>26</sup> a sacred, visible substance extracted from eternity as life’s formula and precondition. *Vordan karmir* is the climax of the color “drama” of the ancient Armenian manuscripts, miniatures and carpets.

*The Color of Pomegranates* is a screen-parchment, a screen-carpet, a screen-miniature and a fresco at one and the same time; even more, its architectonics, its frame composition and structure make it similar to the Armenian Church. Created by Armenians over centuries, these spiritual values are “cinematographically revived” in Parajanov’s conventionality; they are not just quotations or a background, but means for building the story, active elements, parts of the protagonist’s inner and outer life rather than just the environment where he is born, grows up, lives and dies. It seems that the poetry created by the poet’s lyre exists in a three-dimensional reality: the realities of books, colorful carpets and the church

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– the latter being the place where the poet was killed by Persian invaders. This is what embodies the spirit that is breathed into the poet to create his world. *The Color of Pomegranates* is narrated in the way one writes a book, weaves a carpet, or builds a church. The open book with flapping pages, the book written and read, “the life and soul,” as the film says, becomes the story of the hero’s life, the source of his inspiration. This is a story of a poet’s soul, a plot with several sub-plots that merge in the end.

The film’s aesthetics makes the action look specific and conventional, metaphorical. This abstraction comes from the conventionality of church rites and the symbolism of the poetry, but not in a traditional way. This can be seen in the episodes depicting the daily doings of the monks and the protagonist in the cloister. Besides performing their spiritual duties, they do physical work, but that also looks like a ritual. In *The Color of Pomegranates* Parajanov turns into a rite the dyeing of wool yarn, the washing of books or carpets, the eating of pomegranates by a group of monks arranged like a chorus. Indeed, in some episodes *The Color of Pomegranates* are like a liturgy, as if a service was being held throughout the film. Thus, deep in the natural and the real, there is a cache of symbols and metaphors, a whole system of allegories entwined into the action. To divide it just in order to explain or interpret would not be wise, especially as Parajanov was always free with symbols and there to invent his own. But when dealing with a poetic creation, we should trust the “symbol’s ability to be perceived in the whole diversity of its meanings.” In existentialist philosophy, Martin Heidegger rejects the need to analyze symbols in poetry and promulgates “the pure presence of the poem,” suggesting: “We never know a mystery by unveiling or analyzing it to death, but only in such a way that we preserve the mystery as mystery.”<sup>27</sup>

Another *Pomegranate’s* inter-title reads: “We Search Ourselves in Each Other.” When in Sayat-Nova’s love story Parajanov cast Sofiko Chiaureli as both the poet and his love, princess Anna, he materializes and visualizes one of the prerogatives of poetry: in love, the author’s world is reflected in the world of the one he loves, and this is how the two halves (and halves must be alike) come together into a whole. In *The Color of Pomegranates* in their search for each other’s reflections the heroes never appear in one shot, but only in consecutive shots. This sequential imagery implies the impossibility of their being together.

In *Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors* the tragic impossibility of two hearts being together is pictured in the following way: during the Christmas dinner only Ivan sees the ghost of the drowned Marichka, while his wife Palagna, who is a stranger to her husband’s inner thoughts and feelings, is unable or unwilling to see the ghost of Ivan’s lost love. The film historian Mark Cousins describes the episode thus in *The Story of Film*:

Eleven minutes into the film, a shot is photographed from underneath a daisy looking up; Parajanov’s camera is seldom at eye level and no filmmaker since Welles uses foreground more. Images of deer, scarves and forests recur. After the girl dies we see her and her lover touch in a dream. Not since Fellini or perhaps even Jean Cocteau has such a magical and personal visual world been created in cinema.<sup>28</sup>

The distinguished film critic concludes: “Parajanov’s *The Color of Pomegranates* was even more arresting than *Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors*.”<sup>29</sup> The repetitiveness of elements, shots and plots in poetic art film is especially typical of Parajanov’s style: “The love of a poor or plebeian boy for a rich or noble girl appears to be Parajanov’s favorite plot,” and almost all of his heroes are doomed to “separation, vagrancy, return” and inevitable death.<sup>30</sup>

As far as recurring elements as concerned, Parajanov’s taste and preferences, as well as his special attitude towards objects, constitute a system of images, highlighting carpets, ribbons and laces, jugs and trays, water, fish, sea-shells, horses, pomegranates (red, black and white).

The pomegranate can be often seen in old Armenian ornaments, book illustrations and miniatures, where the Tree of Life is pictured mostly as a pomegranate tree. Parajanov really worshipped this fruit,

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feeling a supernatural, mystical attraction towards it.<sup>31</sup>

Returning to Parajanov's recurrent elements, the horses inhabiting his and Tarkovsky's cinematic worlds can be used for comparison: for both filmmakers the horse is something of beauty and soul, but they represent one and the same thing quite differently. For Tarkovsky, the horse is a physical incarnation of a spiritual reality and a poetic projection of physical reality – a symbol of “life stream.” For Parajanov, it is a fiery creature, something from a legend, an allegory of both beauty and death (by the way, in Europe *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is better known as *Wild Horses of Fire*). In the *Color of Pomegranates*, *The Legend of the Suram Fortress* and *Ashik Kerib*, the horses are “made up” to look like some handmade, theatrical, unreal creatures as if revived from ancient rites or medieval folk games. Bearing much resemblance to the photograph since its invention, the motion picture found itself in front of a “material barrier,” bordering on naturalism. But great filmmakers like Parajanov, Fellini and Tarkovsky have freed it from physical dependence by making it stylized, or conventional. Just like a poet, freeing the words from their everyday meaning, they relieved the object of its hierarchic ties to see what is inside. This poetic attitude has become a characteristic manner for filmmakers with their own cinematic worlds. Tarkovsky says that “you can not photograph reality, you can just create its image [...] Nature is much harder to prepare than a studio.”<sup>32</sup> Antonioni continues this by saying: “I make nature up.” Visconti's films were no less “material.” In some films, the material world with its velvet and tulle, china and furniture is so much in focus that looks as if hand-made. Visconti was even forced to retort to critics: “My films are about humans living amid things, and not about things. It is their gestures and actions, pace, emotions, instincts that impart poetry and trembling to the things around.”<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, in these films objects are not photographed (even if in no way we deny photography its status as art), but they live their unique screen lives, helping the viewer to see the unseen, the soul. Parajanov did this by means of objects that he “created,” symbols that he “invented” and even rituals that he “staged.”

### Conclusion

Parajanov explored new cultural terrain in cinema, though each of his films – the Ukrainian masterpiece *Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors*, the Armenian masterpiece *Sayat Nova / Color of Pomegranates*, the Georgian *Legend of the Suram Fortress*, the Turkish tale of *Ashik Kerib*, retold by the Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov, along with numerous unrealized screenplays – belongs to a singular world unique in its craftsmanship.

Summarizing the peculiarities of Parajanov's artistic method, he has imparted cinematographic authenticity to handmade reality; he has stopped the shot in motion; he has revolutionized the way the actor is used, and the concepts of frame composition and montage. In a word, he “forgot” everything he knew about cinema and created it anew, following his primeval inspiration. Proclaimed as “the filmmaker of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” alongside a few others, Parajanov cast away generally accepted forms and methods, breaking the rules of the game to turn around our perception of cinema and to turn about its history.

Siranush Galstyan

### Notes

1. *Antonioni ob Antonioni. Stat'i. Esse. Interv'iu* [Antonioni on Antonioni], Moscow, 1986, p. 119.
2. Though the screenplay was published in 1970, production only started as late as 1989, when Parajanov was already ill and he shot only one episode, Vera's Funeral (200 meters of film). Two years earlier, in 1987, he said, “Together with the cinematographer Albert Yavuryan, I will try to revive my childhood and youth in Tbilisi. I have a letter from Fellini, who says, ‘It was Tonino Guerra who told

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- me about *The Confession*, and I am grateful to you for having been inspired to make my *Amarcord*" (Sergei Parajanov, "Hayfilmn im apagan e" [Hayfilm is My Future], *Garun*, n. 5 (1987), p. 67). He said the same in another interview to Ruzan Zakaryan, "Pshe psakov marde" [The Man with the Crown of Thorns], *Audio-Visual Courier* 1 (1999), pp. 10-11. For the contacts between Parajanov and Fellini, see also Artsvi Bakhchinyan, "Serguei Paradjanov et Federico Fellini. Des confrères qui ne se sont jamais rencontrés," in Jean-Max Mejean (edited by), *Fellinicità*, Éditions de la Transparence, Paris 2009, pp. 234-237.
3. Karen Kalantar, *Ocherki o Paradzhanove* [Essay on Parajanov], Gitutiun NAN RA, Yerevan 1998, p. 109.
  4. Emi Fain Kollins [Amy Fine Collins], "Obaianie Viskonti" [The Charm of Visconti], *Kinostsenarii*, n. 1 (2002), pp. 139-145; p. 142.
  5. Karen Kalantar, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
  6. *Ivi*, p. 86.
  7. Razmik Madoyan, *Nran guyne yev Parajanovi legende* [The Color of Pomegranates and Parajanov's Legend], Los Angeles 2001, p. 166.
  8. Grigor Chakhiryan, *Bol'shoi ekran Armenii* [Armenia's Big Screen], Moscow 1971, p. 87.
  9. Razmik Madoyan, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
  10. Karen Kalantar, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
  11. In Soviet cinema, very few "novice" filmmakers were given the chance to start with a full-length film. Usually, they had first to make a short film or a co-production.
  12. Varuzhan Voskanyan, "Dlia budushchikh pokolenii" [For Generations to Come], *Literaturnaia Armeniia*, n. 6 (2004), pp. 81-91; p. 89.
  13. The original Armenian version of *The Color of Pomegranates* was restored by Martin Scorsese Fund in Bologna and screened in Cannes this year (2014); also it was shown at opening day of the Yerevan XI Golden Apricot IFF.
  14. Garri Kuntsev, "Zhil-byi Paradzhanov" [Once upon a time there was Parajanov], *Literaturnaia Armeniia*, n. 6 (2004), pp. 8-80; p. 44.
  15. *Ivi*, p. 68.
  16. Karen Kalantar, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
  17. Parajanov's last film, *Ashik Kerib*, was dedicated to the memory of Tarkovsky.
  18. Quoted from an interview with Parajanov by the Russian actor Alexander Kaidanovsky, later presented in his documentary film *Maestro: Sergei Parajanov*.
  19. Karen Kalantar, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
  20. *Ibidem*.
  21. Vasilii Katanian, *Paradzhanov. Tsena vechnogo prazdnika*. [Parajanov: the Price of the Eternal Holiday], Dekom, Nizhnii Novgorod 2001.
  22. *Ivi*, p. 89.
  23. Karen Kalantar, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
  24. Semen Freilikh, *Teoriia kino: ot Eizenshteina do Tarkovskogo* [The Theory of Cinema: From Eisenstein to Tarkovsky], TPO Istoki, Moscow 2002, p. 385.
  25. *Ivi*, p. 385.
  26. Vordan karmir (Ararat Cochineal) is a natural color produced by Armenians long before the Christian Era from a worm living in the salt marshes of the Ararat Valley. In the Middle Ages the color was used in miniature painting, manuscript writing and medicine. It was also used for dyeing carpets, giving a deep red tint to the ornament and never fading due to high fastness.
  27. Alekseï Fedorovich Losev, *Problema simvola i realisticheskoe iskusstvo* [Problems of the Symbol and Realistic Art], Iskusstvo, Moscow 1976, p. 11.

- ORIENTI** 28. Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film. A Worldwide History*, Da Capo Press, New York 2004, p. 308.
- OCCIDENTI** 29. *Ivi*, p. 309.
30. Karen Kalantar, *op. cit.*, p. 100; 91.
31. In Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* (2003), Charles Aznavour's character Edward Saroyan, a man who is making a film about the Armenian Genocide, says that during the deportation one seed of pomegranate a day saved his mother's life, and there are as many seeds in a pomegranate, they say, as there are days in a year. In order to show what the pomegranate means to Armenians, no matter where they were born, it is helpful to recall William Saroyan. In his "Pomegranate Trees," a short story from *My Name is Aram* (1940), the hero, the writer's uncle, who lives in a Californian desert, sweats blood to grow pomegranate trees there from the seeds he has brought from his lost homeland and then to sell the fruit. He tells people that there is no better fruit in the world than pomegranates, but they answer that they do not know what it is.
32. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Nachalo... i puti. Vospominaniia, interv'iu, lektsii, stat'i* [The Beginning ... and Roads: Memoirs, Interviews, Lectures, Articles], VGIK, Moscow 1994, pp. 118, 128.
33. Emi Fain Kollins [Amy Fine Collins], *op. cit.*, p 145.