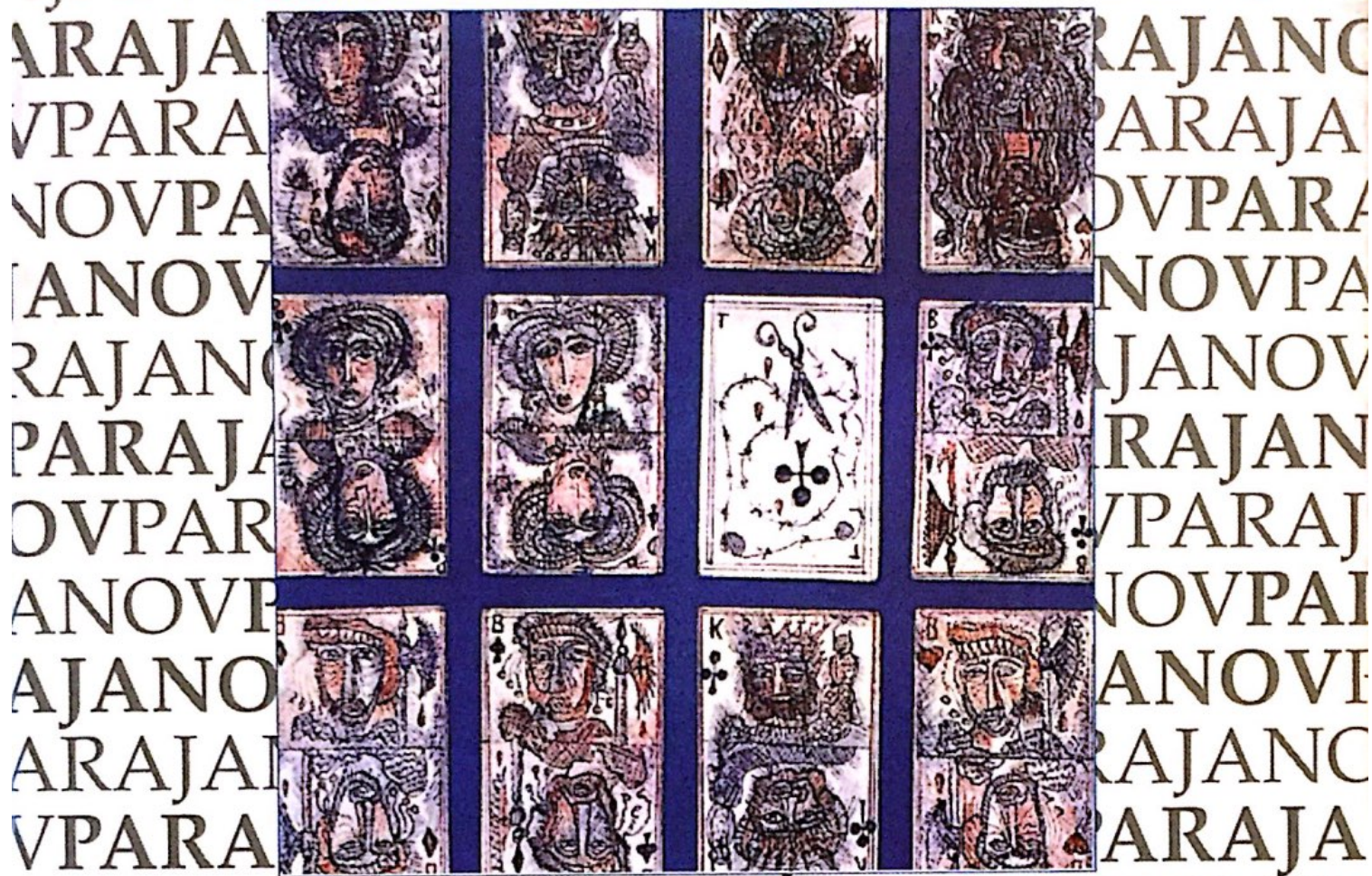


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Toward a Poetics of Parajanov's Cinema

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Sergei Parajanov is sometimes compared to the poet Sayat-Nova. Yet it was not Parajanov's decision to make a film on Sayat-Nova in Armenia that enabled the comparison; only much later, with the making of *The Legend of Suram Fortress* in Georgia and *Ashik Kerib* in Azerbaijan, did the analogy become truly possible. The poet Sayat-Nova had written verse in all the three major languages of Transcaucasia, and now there appeared a filmmaker directing three highly poetic films set in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Sayat-Nova knew three languages, while the language of cinema would appear to be singular. Nonetheless, one could say that Parajanov was also trilingual: born an Armenian and raised in Georgia, Parajanov dreamt of the East, carrying its culture, particularly that of Persia, in his heart. The fact that the third element of the triad does not coincide in the narrowly ethnic sense with Azerbaijan in no way undermines my comparison: after all, the Azerbaijanis willingly acknowledge the Persian legacy as a constitutive part of their own culture. The external resemblance between Parajanov and Sayat-Nova might end there, but when we examine the way Parajanov attempts to translate Sayat-Nova's poetry and its ambience into the language of the cinema, we realize that both artists bear a deeper intimacy.

Let us take as one example the shot in *The Color of Pomegranates* in which the two vaulted windows in the poet's room turn into birdcages. The shape of the window along with the grating on the outside already resembled a birdcage: to complete the illusion, all the director

had to do was place two peacocks on a perch above the windowsill. This shot appears in the chapter - the film, let us recall, is divided into sequences with chapter headings - whose title is taken from two lines of verse by Sayat-Nova: "I am a nightingale trapped in a foreign land/ And you are my golden cage."¹ All this in itself would not seem surprising: after all, Parajanov's films are littered with similar metamorphoses, which in fact constitute the figurative basis of his art. There is, however, something far more extraordinary at work here.

While the chapter headings break the film down into separate topics, one can also discern other internal thematic continuities that persist throughout the film. One of them is the topos of the window. "*Ashkhares me p'anjara e*" (the world is a window): this leitmotif resonates visually and aurally throughout the film. The window separates and unites the poet and his beloved in the scenes where they are shown engaged in a poetic dialogue. An ancient window with delicate stained glass (here functioning as an autonomous object rather than as part of the interior) is shown held up either by angels, or - in the scene where he encounters the angel of death and buries his love - by the poet himself. The entire section is accompanied by Sayat-Nova's famous song bearing the same title "The World is a Window." And finally, as if to remove any remaining doubt as to the significance of the window as a theme, the same formula is recited in a chorused repetition at the end of the chapter. The image of the birdcage appears, then, as one element of the omnipresent motif of the window.

Sayat-Nova does not compare the window to a birdcage in any direct way in his poetry; the comparison is more implicit than spoken. The poet says he is tired of the vaulted arches of the world-as-window ("*t'agherumen bezaril im*") through which it is painful to look out. He also uses the image of the nightingale that longs to fly away but apparently cannot ("*guzim t'richi blbuli pes*"). Both Sayat-Nova and Parajanov, then, intuited the link between the window and the cage, which they strove to express in an original fashion. The most surprising thing is that they came to this intuition without realizing that the link is present in the word *p'anjara*. Sayat-Nova uses this word to mean "window," the meaning with which it entered the Armenian language from the Persian. *Panjara* in Persian in fact does not signify just "window" but more specifically a lattice window; in other words, it already contains the origins of the image of the poet-as-bird trapped in a room that is also a cage. Incidentally, the related Sanskrit word *pañjara* means precisely "cage." Sayat-Nova either knew of this original meaning of the word, or was at the very least reproducing the image of the then common lattice window. Parajanov, however, was clearly unaware of any of this: this is evident from his deployment of the symbol in a way that is figuratively

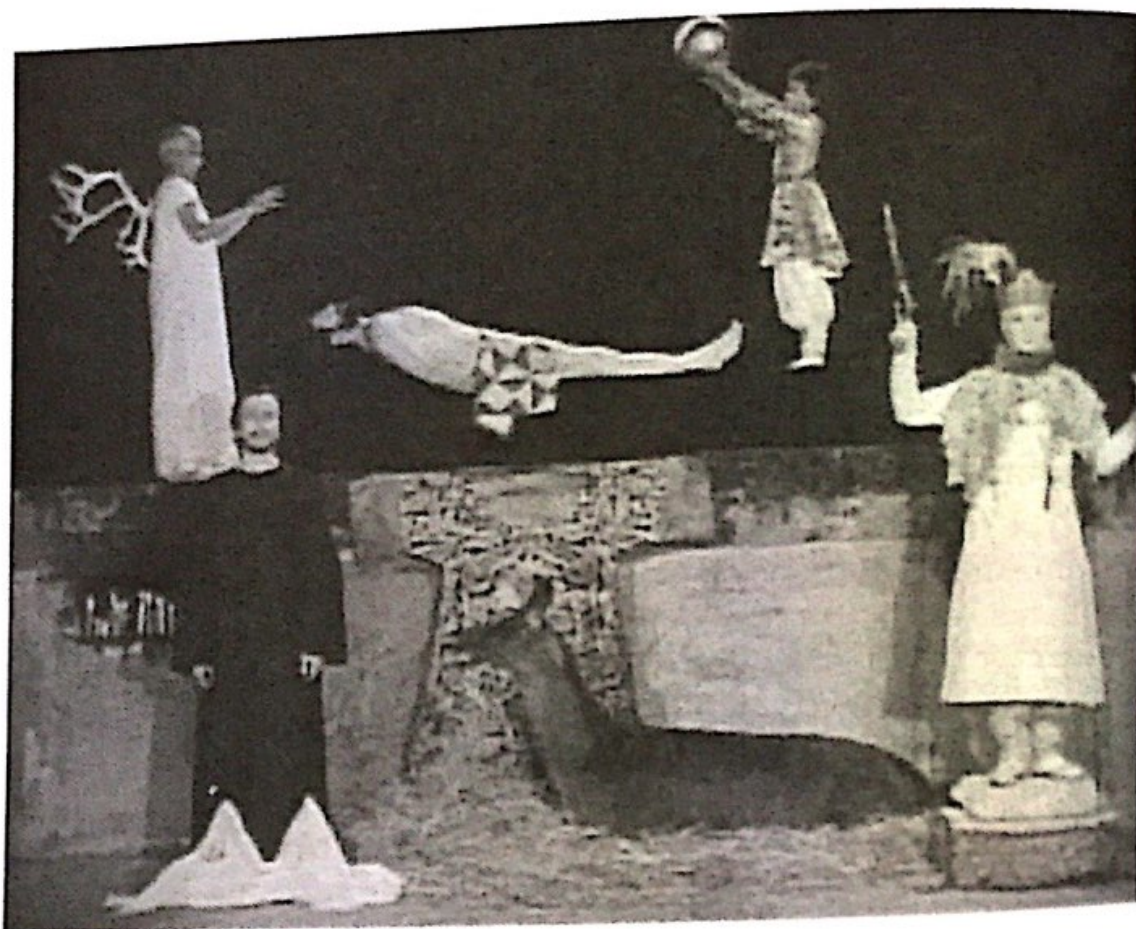
oriented towards the window as such (as well as one other meaning to which I will return later). We can say that Parajanov's linkage of the window to the birdcage was intuitively inspired, one among many profoundly intuitive links through which a medieval poet and a contemporary filmmaker were able to find a common language. Whatever external liberties Parajanov took in interpreting the figure of Sayat-Nova, *The Color of Pomegranates* as a film derives its inner integrity from this deep intimacy that arose between the two artists.

Among the many liberties that Parajanov took we might mention the presence of llamas in the monastery where Sayat-Nova lives. The llama is of course hardly native to the mountains of Armenia. Perhaps in order to naturalize the unexpected presence of this animal in the Haghbat Monastery, Parajanov shot a scene in which the monks are shown to be milking a llama (although such an apparently mundane rationalization could only satisfy a viewer who knows nothing of areal zoology). This scene was in fact deleted from the final version. Incidentally, even here one might conclude that Parajanov was indulging in one of his typical mystifications: the llama was in fact male, which gave rise to predictable jokes among the film crew during the "milking" scene. In fact there was no hidden intent on Parajanov's part: the female llama from the local zoo in Yerevan was said to be somewhat obstreperous, and was in any case not as physically striking as the male.

The true significance of the llama's presence in the monastery is of a different and somewhat earthier nature. Parajanov was hinting that the llama was not only a source of milk but also served as a sexual partner for the monks. While the scenes in the monastery were being filmed Parajanov decorated the wall of the hotel room where he was staying with a drawing that he had himself sketched. A great shock to the women - journalists and admirers - who visited his room, the drawing graphically illustrated what shepherds did to llamas in the Andean mountains where they are typically found. The scabrous drawing was accompanied by the following caption: "And the shepherds tenderly kissed the llama on the lips."²

It would be a mistake, I believe, to suppress such details, all the more so because we are interested in the poetics of Parajanov's work and not the scandalous vicissitudes of his personal life. In a similar way, the stark truth about Gauguin's life on the Pacific islands throws more light on his work than the romantic sighs of art critics³. The llama episode in fact brings us to one of the more interesting aspects of Parajanov's poetics. Parajanov often began by basing a scene on something unusual, even absurd, and often provocatively indecent, only to allow this hidden kernel to expand, acquiring further details that would

eventually obscure it, leaving only the director and those close to him with a knowledge of the episode's origins. In the meantime the scene itself had been characteristically transformed, acquiring a lofty spiritual resonance that no longer had anything in common with the earlier, more earthy layer of meaning. To be sure, a discerning critic might still be able to reconstruct the way the hidden kernel has grown and been transformed, thereby reestablishing the connections that obtain between the various shots, or even between characters appearing in the same scene. Since there is almost no camera movement in *The Color of Pomegranates*, these connections are established chiefly through the secret transformative shifts that are typical of Parajanov's work.



*Underlying sexual symbolism of the llama: Sayat-Nova's dream in The Color of Pomegranates (1969).
Frame enlargement.*

In the chapter of the film devoted to the poet's dreams, for example, we see a llama lying prostrate between Sayat-Nova as a monk and the Princess Anna, both of whom are standing. Above them we see yet another triadic composition: the King Irakli is lying between an angel (with a Caucasian stag's horns instead of wings) and the poet, here shown as a child. The angel and the boy toss back and forth a

golden ball that is suspended on an invisible thread. The princess shoots into the air, the boy hovering above her falls, and the angel continues to toss the ball about by himself. This is repeated twice. After the young Sayat-Nova falls for the second time, the monk's robes, formerly black, turn white: a white garment rises above his black cassock. One doesn't need to be a trained psychoanalyst to read the underlying sexual content of this scene: the symbolism of the shot, the moving ball, the boy himself (who is shot, we can assume, in the heart), the monk's garment that changes color to white during the dream, and finally the llama itself, which we know to be an erotic object in Parajanov's fantasy of monastery life.

What is the outcome of this erotic encounter? It is the scene in which the Princess Anna gives birth, a scene heavily invested with the symbolism of Christ's Nativity. Admittedly, the manger is here present only in the figure of the ass. A buffalo had also been brought in from the local zoo, but in the end Parajanov was forced to let go of it: the buffalo started to tear with its hooves at the gold foil that had been spread along the floor, urinating out of fear and terrifying the actress Sofiko Chiaureli, who was playing the part of the Princess Anna. In the background one can discern a camel as well as the magi, and above them all on a raised platform we see the entire populace gathered to celebrate the miracle of the Nativity.

I have described these two scenes in such detail in order to show how the llama motif enters the wider canvas of these two episodes, thereby losing its initial significance, a significance that it never even acquired in the first place for most of the film's viewers, for whom the llama remains one of many bizarre animals that appear in the film from time to time.

Yet another example of aesthetic transformation is the theme of whitening (of which we have already noted one example in the scene just discussed). There was yet another lovely and very effective scene shot in the Haghat Monastery that was eventually edited out of the film. In this scene the Princess Anna is seen standing in one of the rooms in front of a right-angled archway through which the neighboring room can be seen. She is wearing black tights, with a picturesque garment made of black sheepskin attached to her breast. We then see the poet appear beyond the archway dressed in a black cassock and carrying a large silver goblet in both hands. He moves hesitantly, as if in a dream - this is in fact one in a series of dreams the poet has. He walks towards the archway and with a jerky movement of his hands spills the contents of the goblet in the direction of his beloved. The entire scene then suddenly turns white: the goblet had contained milk which, after being spilt, splashes against the glass pane that we now

realize has been fitted into the archway. The entire scene thus turns white from within, all the more so since Sayat-Nova then begins to smear the milk along the glass pane that is now clearly visible, while peering through the patches of glass that are still clear. His beloved meanwhile languidly tears the black sheepskin from her breast, revealing yet another black sheepskin underneath, this time with white flecks. As the scene continues to whiten, the viewer, gripped by its astonishing beauty, can even dispense with the question of the director's underlying intent. In fact, as in the case of the llamas, the intention was quite crudely earthy: during the shooting Parajanov had given the scene a working title that could be rendered politely as "Sayat-Nova's Nocturnal Emissions." Let us also remember that the poet's black cassock had also "turned white" in the preceding scene with the princess and the llama, when the angel began to toss the ball from side to side by himself.

Happily, the contrast between black and white is universal enough for the private "physiological" meaning to be lost in an array of symbolic oppositions based on color: from the sinful nun whose black cassock is miraculously transformed into a white ceremonial veil to the black donkey that also turns white, or the white *lavash* bread that is served with black soil instead of the customary white cheese. In another chapter of the film Parajanov plays with yet another color-based opposition, this time between black and red. "*Dun krak, hak'atzt sev*" ("You are fire, but you are clothed in black"). If we recall the film's title, *The Color of Pomegranates* (which appealed to Parajanov although he himself did not come up with it), then it seems clear that we are dealing with an established color combination of three - black, red and white. This triad seems finally to function independently of the director's rather artful manipulations of color: clearly, Parajanov did not realize that he was dealing with chromatic universals.

The film contains other color schemes as well, some of which seem occasionally to arrange themselves into pseudo-combinations. One example is the scene in which the hero is watching three artisans working with dyes. Three skeins of thread are spread out to form the three colors of the Armenian national flag,⁴ - something that future critics might well perceive as a coded display of nationalist sentiment on Parajanov's part, whereas it is in fact highly unlikely that he knew the colors of the Armenian flag when the film was being made.⁵

So in both the above scenes that use the theme of whitening, the earthly physiological meaning which had been so artfully encoded by Parajanov seems to get lost in a rich array of color-combinations, some deliberate, some unconscious, others universal and still others entirely random.

Still more complex is the way rituals are structurally integrated into the film. Parajanov had always paid careful attention to ritual, so much so that his films, particularly *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and *The Color of Pomegranates*, are often viewed as practically ethnographic in character. I have heard people who have otherwise been indifferent or uncomprehending of Parajanov's art praise his masterful representation of the everyday life and festivities of the people. "I can't say if it's great art, but as ethnography it's all quite accurate," declared a venerable Armenian historian after one of the first screenings of *The Color of Pomegranates*. The Hutsuls of Ukraine were equally fulsome in praising Parajanov's depiction of their rites and festivals: since much of what was shown in the film was quite new to them, however, they concluded that Parajanov had simply resurrected the forgotten rites of their ancestors on the screen - not for nothing was the film titled *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*.

In fact Parajanov often invented ethnographic realia in the course of making both of the above films. Such was Parajanov's sense of mastery that the Hutsuls themselves did not call their authenticity into question, attributing them to some lost period of their history. Even the scholar from Armenia fell for the ruse, although it must also be admitted that Parajanov's ruses were not so massive: he would simply permit himself occasionally to elaborate this or that ritual in a rather colorful way. For example, the distribution of the flesh of a sacrificed animal would never involve the organizers of the sacrifice (still less the old women shown in the film!) competing with each other as if they were at a bazaar, beseeching onlookers to taste their offering. Furthermore, seldom do we see shorn rams with horns entwined with pink ribbons chosen as animals for ritual slaughter. Still, only a painstaking ethnographer would be puzzled by these details.

The ordinary viewer finds little to object to in the scenes of monastic life in *The Color of Pomegranates*, but I recall one enlightened priest telling me with some irritation that the monastic scenes seriously compromised the film's value by introducing inaccurate or invented details and simplistic allegories for cheap effect. He had in mind the sheep that fill the church at one point to form the "flock" (luckily he did not know the whole story of the llama!). The same priest however had only praise for the remainder of the film, which he viewed as ethnography. In all likelihood it was similar details in the film that scared off the priests higher up in the church hierarchy, who finally - and to their own detriment - denied Parajanov the chance to make a film about the treasures of the Echmiadzin Museum.⁶

In other instances Parajanov did not simply embellish a ritual but simply invented one. For example, Parajanov was meant to shoot a rite of throwing water in *Ashik Kerib* but in view of the cold weather he told the characters in the film to throw rice on each other instead. Since this is a fertility rite common to many parts of world, Parajanov's improvised substitution had all the appearance of authenticity.

The purpose of this paper is not to expose Parajanov by pointing out his distortions or his downright inventions. My desire is to show that Parajanov viewed ritual, like color, as a kind of material - the clay with which he molded his films, no longer concerned as to whether this or that aspect of his representations corresponded to historical reality. Even when he chose to construct a scene on the basis of some risqué detail, such as Sayat-Nova's nocturnal emissions, his choices would successfully merge into the general canvas of the ritual being "authentically" enacted. It should be noted that Parajanov himself omitted some wonderful shots during the first editing of the film: he probably thought that he had not been able to mask his devious intent. For example, there had been a scene marking Sayat-Nova's transition from secular to monastic life - a rite of ablution, constructed according to the canonical representations of the Baptism found in early Armenian miniatures. Parajanov finally omitted it, since it involved a peeping-tom priest observing the bath from the roof of the bathhouse.⁷

Another curious aspect of Parajanov's poetics is his attention to objects: while content to distort ethnographic reality, Parajanov was generally meticulous in his use of historical artifacts as accoutrements in his films. The silver goblet from which Sayat-Nova spilt milk was taken from the museum attached to Echmiadzin Cathedral. The patriarch's staff and the ritual implements were all authentic and taken from the window displays of the museum. In one scene I myself played the catholicos. All my garments, many of which were priceless, had been taken from the museum, and before and after each shoot the number of pearls adorning the patriarch's mitre would be painstakingly counted.

Curiously, the "authenticity" which Parajanov always sought in his films occasionally led to situations which seem to vindicate his aspirations. For example, during the shooting of the scene I just mentioned, I was approached by an old woman from a remote mountain village and asked to sanctify her sacrificial offering. We tried to explain to her that we were filming a scene and that I was not a real catholicos, but the woman could not follow what she was being told. Apparently she had no idea what a shoot was, and furthermore, before her was a

catholicos dressed in his ceremonial costume. At that point Parajanov told me to go ahead and bless her offering. Luckily I had some sense of what to do, heard the woman out and pronounced the words she was expecting to hear from me. What was extraordinary about this spectacle was that it did not involve any deception - I was not playing a role or fooling the old woman; on the contrary, it was her faith, and the authenticity of my clothing, that had brought the situation about. In a similar fashion, Parajanov was able to create entirely unreal and whimsically fashioned situations on the screen which the viewer nonetheless found entirely credible.

The viewer's faith was sometimes such as to ascribe to Parajanov's art chance objects that had simply fallen into the field of his creative energy. For example, during the Parajanov exhibition held in Yerevan in 1988, visitors might have noticed a woman in a long yellow dress who was languidly weaving a carpet to the sound of Mozart's Requiem. Many visitors who were visiting the Museum of Folk Art for the first time assumed that she was some kind of Parajanovian persona who had been introduced to enhance the visual power of the spectacle. In fact she was just a museum employee doing what she did every day. The power of Parajanov's metamorphoses was such as to transform characters and details that had by chance fallen into his angle of vision: thus transformed, these elements would find their own place on the screen, as if it had been specially selected for them. Those participating in the filming of a shoot would sometimes observe how a certain something or someone that was by chance found to be present on the set would suddenly become that extra detail without which the scene would not have had its uniquely Parajanovian flavor.

Parajanov's astonishing capacity to transform fortuitous elements into necessary detail nonetheless had its dangerous side. It led, in my opinion, to a sense that all was permitted, a kind of excessive inner freedom which could neglect the value of what was being represented for the sake of some transient expressive effect. Thus, in *The Passion of Shushanik* we see a Christian saint performing an unchristian act. When she learns that the young man she has healed is in fact her son from her pagan husband whom she despises, she races to catch up with the horsemen carrying him and "replace[s] the infected cabbage leaf on the face of the sleeping prince." The whole episode rashly annuls the story's pathos without actually deepening our psychological understanding of the saint (as one might have assumed at first glance).

One could have even suspected Parajanov of anti-Christian sentiment if the director had not been absolutely devoid of any religious

piety (or indeed piety of any other kind). Indeed, Paradjanov's irreverence did not concern Christianity alone - we have already seen what other surprises monastic life had in store for Sayat Nova and his fellow monks. While shooting *Ashik Kerib* in an Azerbaijani village Parajanov ignored the religious sentiments of the Muslim villagers. Hearing that Parajanov intended to film a scene in the village cemetery, the locals sent a group of elders in order to convince him not to violate the graves of their ancestors. Instead Parajanov proceeded to offend them further by trying to disabuse them of their prejudices with an aesthetic argument. He told the actors to show them how pretty the scene would be: a handsome youth lifts a lovely maiden in his arms and carries her through the graves towards a table where a feast is laid out. "They spat, turned around and went away," Parajanov related in complete bewilderment, as if recounting a curious fact about some backward tribe.

I began this article by juxtaposing two artists - Sayat-Nova and Parajanov - and showing the many ways in which they resemble each other, both inwardly and outwardly. Now I should say something about how they differ. For all his originality, Sayat-Nova created within a canon: even his "non-canonical" love for the Princess Anna was in its own way a canonical twist of fate in a poet's life. By contrast Parajanov violated the canon at every turn, but with such mastery that the viewer does not always realize what is happening: what established stereotype Parajanov has just shattered and deftly replaced with his own vision. By this I am not referring to an undermining of stereotypes that allows us to see the world in a new way, but a strategy that, in its destructive and creative pathos, simply "forgets" those norms of signification that have become embedded in culture and which are the very basis of the artistic canon, through which we can dialogue with the past and hope to be understood by those to come.

Let me provide one example. Parajanov created a series of ceramic pieces on themes from the New Testament, which he reinterpreted with his typical flair for the original. Among these works is a representation of the Last Supper, with only nine participants instead of the canonical thirteen. Before being installed in the Parajanov Museum, this series was kept in the office of the director of the Museum of Folk Art (who was later to become the director of the Parajanov Museum). Alongside the ceramic pieces there hung a printed altar cloth from the middle of the nineteenth century which also contained a vignette of the Last Supper. The artist in this instance had also been unable to situate all twelve apostles, but had nonetheless in each case marked their presence, even if only figuratively, with the arc of a head or a nimbus, thereby ensuring that the representation was specifically of the Last Supper.

This is what the canon is all about: that minimal obligation which encodes the Biblical theme and ensures that it will be recognized and understood. The fact of this minimal demand does not limit the artist; on the contrary, it creates the necessary conditions for the artist's almost complete freedom. The canonical number thirteen is that Ariadne's thread that allows the artist to retain his connection with a broader culture while pursuing his journey through the labyrinth of creation. In this way a traditional Indian musician or a jazz player retains in his or her memory an initial theme even during the most vertiginous improvisations.

In the present case Parajanov's piece was perhaps redeemed by the extraordinary inertia of the prototypes (which in any case were arranged in a thoroughly canonical way). Interestingly, in another work, *The Wall of the 26 Baku Commissars*, Parajanov adhered to the exact number and used twenty-six mirrors in the installation that was shown in Tbilisi and at the first of the exhibitions in Yerevan. (The piece consisted of a board with twenty-six cartridge-cases and twenty-six tiny mirrors nailed onto either side.) Admittedly, the number of mirrors no longer corresponds to the number of commissars shot: some of the mirrors were lost in being transported to the museum, but perhaps that is no great loss, since for several years now various parties have been engaging in an ethnic cleansing of the commissars' ranks, and in any case the Bolshevik commissars themselves are now far from popular.

I would not have mentioned this aspect of Parajanov's work if not for the eternal problem of the master and his or her disciples. Thanks to a brilliant intuition or some other lucky trait a master can often reach some dangerous boundary or even cross it successfully; yet in this he or she is inevitably followed by disciples, for whom the master's path appears to have already been trodden. In pursuing this path, these disciples often find themselves at a dead end, and do not know the way back. Thus the followers of Titian decisively abandoned the Flemish practice of preparing a careful sketch before retouching the piece with paint, unaware that Titian himself had no need of the sketch only because it was always in his mind and at his fingertips.

We have already spoken of Parajanov's ability to use ethnographic material in his films and to create the illusion of ethnographic verisimilitude. Indeed, it may well be that Parajanov is destined to occupy a unique place in the history of visual anthropology, at least for the reason that his pseudoethnographic films contain a unique vision of myth and ritual. It is important at this point to note yet another feature of these mythic and ritual constructs. In interpreting the poetic world of

a medieval poet, Parajanov creates a new poetic world that is in harmony with the original while at the same time possessing its own unique mythemes that can at times (as in the case of the window motif) be as profound as anything found in the middle ages. The characters perform rites that are uniquely Parajanovian, and these rites, despite all the director's ruses and provocations, begin to live their own life, often in competition with their ritual prototypes. All of this works thanks to Parajanov's intuition, and - above all - because Parajanov himself was a true poet. The poetics of his works were internally consonant with the poetics of the myths, rituals and poetry which drew him to Sayat-Nova.

Yet there are some areas in any ritual or mythic system where intuition alone is not enough: some knowledge, even a little, is needed in order to enhance the director's immensely subtle intuitive capacities. This is what happened in *The Legend of Suram Fortress*, which contains a classic case of a sacrificial immurement performed to ensure the success of a building. Well aware of the traditions surrounding such sacrifices, Parajanov nonetheless chose to alter the age of the sacrificial victim. The story by Chonkadze on which the film was based depicts the victim as a boy unaware of his impending fate, while the film transforms him into a handsome youth who voluntarily surrenders his life. One cannot help thinking that Parajanov's intuition betrayed him here, reducing the archaic mytheme of the sacrificial victim to a banally patriotic affirmation of Georgian heroism, self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation. In seeking to avoid one kind of banal sentimentalism - the slaughter of an innocent child - Parajanov lapsed into another, showing that he had not really understood the deeper meaning of the sacrifice. Significantly, the corresponding scenes ended up being relatively unsuccessful.

Nevertheless Parajanov's intuition as a whole led him in the right direction. The theme of sacrifice became a leitmotif of the entire film (let us recall the sacrifice of animals performed repeatedly by the character named Vardo). What Parajanov lacked was an understanding of the real meaning of the building sacrifice and its link to the Primordial Sacrifice from which, at the beginning of time, the Cosmos was said to grow. Just like this originary precedent, the body of the sacrificial victim generates an analogue to the Cosmic Tree, such as a temple, any kind of domestic space, and finally a fortress like the one in *The Legend of Suram Fortress*. By failing to understand this, Parajanov deprived his film of its central axis, the nerve that would have transfused it with its unique latent energy.

Still, Parajanov was not alone in occasionally missing the point. In Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* (1967) the figure of the Sphinx is shown in a

stylized costume made of cowrie shells, even as Oedipus, while wandering into an abandoned city, has just encountered a mysterious, nearly naked young woman who resembles the Sphinx far more than the creature in the masquerade costume whom he then pushes off a precipice.

Let me repeat that what I just said applies only to those specific instances in which the director's intuition, subtle as it was, might have benefited from some additional knowledge. In these instances the real content of the myth or ritual was in fact infinitely richer than the director's invention. Parajanov's ignorance of the deeper laws of ethnology here backfired against his own film, despite the fact that his work was based externally on ethnographic detail.

In most cases, however, Parajanov's images are profoundly archetypal, sometimes despite the director's own devious intentions. I have already spoken of the all-pervasive motif of the window in *The Color of Pomegranates*. At that point I had focused chiefly on the relationship between the window and the birdcage. But in fact the window motif is also - and more clearly - connected to the parallel motif of the mirror. In the intermittent scenes in which the poet appears alongside his beloved, a strange object is also shown hanging behind them - perhaps a window, a framed picture, or a mirror. In some ways it is a window, since through the glass we can see the figurine of an angel dangling on an invisible thread. Yet at the same time the structure of the entire episode suggests that the window/picture is also a kind of mirror. Each frame seems a reflection of the preceding one, and only the characters change (in fact even the characters don't really change since the same actress, Sofiko Chiaureli, plays both the poet and his beloved).

Thus Parajanov provides an original solution for the deeply archaic theme of androgyny and twinship. In certain mythologies the first ideal and finally tragic marriage is constituted by the union of two identical twins, a brother and a sister. This notion survives to this day, in the unconscious tendency of many men to seek wives who resemble them physically or who have a name similar to their own.

The consistent intermittent appearance of the poet and his beloved in this "reflected" mode is confirmed by another episode in which a real mirror serves to create the reflected image. A female dancer is seen to gaze into a hand mirror, to then disappear suddenly in the very next frame. To the left of where she had been a young man, her lover, appears. Here too the same actress plays both parts. The link between the two dancers in love is even more profound: he is shown pouring wine into a bowl, and in the next frame she is shown drinking the wine. Moreover each in turn places the emptied bowl to his or her breast or heart, once even with some kind of imaginary wine. This gesture occurs several times in the film, and at the very end the blind angel of

death feels the breasts of two girls with his hand in search of the bowls that have been placed there.

We might pause here to note the related theme of the fully or partially drained bowl: in the scenes before the invasion the poet finds an empty baptismal font and is unable to slake his thirst.⁸ Similarly, at the very end of the film just before the poet's death, his Muse starts pouring wine from a large pitcher. The wine, however, spills onto his breast and cannot satisfy his thirst for life.

The bowl overturned onto the breast echoes the mother-of-pearl shell lodged on the breast of the woman whom the hero, then still a boy, once spied bathing in the nude through the window of a bathhouse. Later in the film, we see the hero, now a poet, fondling his *kamancha*, which bears a striking resemblance to the female breast. Just as milk had been poured onto the shell and the breast of the woman bathing, now pieces of mother-of-pearl are poured onto the "breast" of the musical instrument. There is another more remote association also at work here: in his dream the poet is seen pouring milk from a goblet, after which the breast of his lover turns white.

In general Parajanov was fond of distant associations. For example, the film's first scenes depicting the poet's childhood show Sayat-Nova lying on the roof of the Sanahin monastery with his arms spread in the shape of a cross. Around him books that have got drenched have been laid open to dry, with their pages fluttering in the breeze. In the final scene the poet, now dying, is seen lying in the same pose, while around him a flock of white hens that have just been beheaded are shown flapping their wings. Yet another association is palpable here: Sayat-Nova's father had once anointed him as a child with the blood of a sacrificed rooster, marking his forehead with the sign of the cross, which the boy had rubbed off with a sharp movement of his hand. The same gesture is repeated by the dying poet just before we see the fluttering hens who have been sacrificed, we assume, to art.

The Color of Pomegranates contains several repeated moves that can only be understood in the light of Parajanov's other films. For example, we are struck in that film by the frequency of pendulum-like movements. One might assume that we are dealing with a real pendulum, an obvious symbol of passing time: this assumption seems all the more reasonable if we recall that Sayat-Nova sees himself in a dream rocking like a pendulum along with his midget-tutor who has in fact already died. But the motif of the pendulum/metronome was already clearly present in *The Legend of Suram Fortress*, in a scene in which the young girl Vardo, shown swaying like a pendulum, turns into a fully-

grown woman, also swaying rhythmically. And in Parajanov's film *Hakob Hovnatanyan*⁹ we finally come across the original image, the metronome itself, that marks the passing of time.

One of the most astonishing aspects of Parajanov's art is its inimitability. To be sure, Parajanov has certainly inspired imitators by the score - from amateur collagists to professional film directors - all of whom seem to be doing what he did. Yet in most cases the fake can be readily distinguished from the real thing: Parajanov's imitators would be unable to produce something like Parajanov's "Coq gaulois," a rooster whose crest is composed of little combs, in a pun on the double-meaning of the word "comb" (*greben* in the original Russian) that is inscribed into the actual structure of the piece. It is equally impossible to imitate a great physician or a chef, even if the necessary ingredients are present and mixed together in the right proportions.

Of course happy exceptions can be found, in cases where Parajanov's language has helped his followers to discover their own vision of the world. One example is the Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, whose film *Gabbeh* (1996) not only makes use of Parajanov's poetics but even borrows certain shots directly from his work. That is why this film aroused mixed feelings in me. If Makhmalbaf is quoting Parajanov consciously - as in the scene in which the heroine's younger sister dies - then the absence of any direct reference to the original appears baffling. Perhaps Makhmalbaf is resurrecting the tradition of imitation found in classical Persian poetry. Certainly, Parajanov's language is "classical" enough to be used as a quoted source. The only problem is that few are aware of the source itself. The Iranian film enjoyed a successful American release in 1997; yet in the highly positive reviews that greeted the film I did not notice a single reference to Parajanov's poetics, with which Makhmalbaf has a deep affinity. For this reason the traditional Eastern method of constructing a text as a mosaic of quotations and poetic echoes here resonates almost like a kind of plagiarism. Perhaps a titled dedication to Parajanov or some other hint at the origin of the images involved might have allowed me to enjoy the film fully, and without any unpleasant aftertaste.

An important aspect of Parajanov's work was his constant fascination with the possibilities of metamorphosis. When Parajanov had finished arranging the artwork at his first exhibition in Yerevan, he dictated to me the titles he had chosen for each piece, so that labels could be ordered. I remembered the titles of many of them from his exhibition in Tbilisi, and I was intrigued to note how some of them

were altered even as we spoke. The piece entitled "Suitcase from my childhood, transformed into an elephant" had had a different title in Tbilisi. As I took down the new title, I suggested to Parajanov that "Suitcase from my childhood that became an elephant" might be more effective. After thinking for a minute, Parajanov insisted on the word "transformed." It was only a few days later, when I heard an interview with Parajanov on Yerevan television, did I understand the meaning of his correction. Commenting on how the works being shown were put together, he said: "Suitcases are transformed into elephants, elephants are transformed into suitcases...." In other words, he was pointing to the principle of transformation, of eternal metamorphosis, that was the basis of his work. Many of Parajanov's pieces did in fact undergo some kind of transformation. While I was writing down the title "Charents," referring to Parajanov's mosaic portrait of the modern Armenian poet Yeghishe Charents, Parajanov asked me: "Do you think there's a resemblance?" The portrait was indeed one of the closest - physically and in spirit - to the original; yet the other side of the painting still contained the old label "Skovoroda." The piece had originally been intended as a portrait of the eighteenth-century Ukrainian philosopher!

What follows are some more examples of Parajanovian metamorphoses. The room entitled "To the memory of Tarkovsky" contained a central composition called "Pietà." In it a life-sized mannequin representing Parajanov himself was seen holding in its arms the mannequin of a young man in a gauzy veil not unlike those worn by brides at weddings. Mozart's Requiem was playing constantly in the background, and the room was suffused with a sense of grief at what had been lost with the death of Tarkovsky. Large anthropomorphic salt vessels, permanently on display in the room, had been filled with Parajanov's beloved pomegranates, to become a series of grieving women, standing in a row along the wall. Many took the figure being mourned to be Tarkovsky; all the more so since the figure of the mourner was obviously Parajanov himself, although his beard consisted of a brush for scrubbing dishes. Yet several years later the same figures, alongside another that had been positioned astride the suitcase-elephant, were placed in Parajanov's room and jokingly termed his "family."

Another example of Parajanovian metamorphosis is an artwork entitled "Tarkovsky's Night Bird." In the foreground we see an unidentifiable wooden bird that has alighted onto a lit kerosene lamp; in the background we see a photograph of Parajanov and Tarkovsky also vis-

ited by two mysterious birds. In addition, Parajanov had glued a naked figure taken from some painting onto the glass frame. Yet I vividly remember that the photocollage had looked quite different before. Even then there had been two birds in the background, but then one had alighted on Tarkovsky's head, and the other had landed on Parajanov's hands, which were bound together with a gold chain. In the new version the chain was broken (I do not recall if the chain was already broken before). Another gold chain adorned Tarkovsky's chest, with a gold medal suspended from it. It is obvious that the birds served as harbingers of fate: in fairy tales, such birds always seek out and find the select few fated to be born under a lucky star. The wooden bird of the night had now become an ill omen that, in abandoning Tarkovsky's head, has deprived him of his earlier good fortune. We can see clearly how one composition becomes something else quite different: although the motif of the flying birds remains in both compositions, only the golden chain that bound Parajanov's hands, and the symbolism of the bird as a harbinger of fate, recalled the original composition, now displaced by a new version. The version now hanging in the Parajanov Museum is actually closer to the original. The mysterious wooden bird is gone; and the prior composition has thus been lost forever. Perhaps the bird has fulfilled its sinister function: in foretelling yet another death - Parajanov's own - it has now become superfluous. What remains is a representation of the fate of two film directors, both of whom have died untimely deaths, as Parajanov saw it in the days when the photograph was taken.



Dodo steals a cigarette. Collage, 1984.
 Courtesy of Sergei Parajanov Museum, Yerevan.

All these shifts and mutations in representation were made possible thanks to the principle of collage, which was something fundamental to Parajanov's art. Without the transformative possibilities of collage, the metamorphoses we have mentioned, both the plausible and the somewhat fantastic, would have hardly been conceivable. One vivid example of this is the collage entitled "Dodo steals cigarettes." Here the cigarettes are actually the columns of a building whose cupola has been turned upside down and cut in half, so that, at a certain angle, it suddenly becomes the wings of Dodo Abashidze, who seems to be swooping down to steal the gigantic cigarettes.

One of Parajanov's favorite motifs was a pair of scissors that are seen cutting a stretch of barbed wire and so setting the artist free. Significantly, the instrument of his freedom was also his tool in creating the metamorphoses that were at the basis of his collages. If Parajanov had ever invented a heraldic insignia, one could well imagine that a pair of scissors would feature in it prominently. Still, Parajanov's collages were not just a matter of cutting and pasting. The principle of unlimited juxtaposition, which brought together things that often appear utterly irreconcilable, was the very basis of Parajanov's vision of the world. Parajanov's friend Vasilii Katanyan observed of him: "He would be walking down the street, say, and would stop by a shop window. He would look it over and then walk in and suggest to the attendant that the display be completely redone. If he came to your house for dinner, he would want to serve the dishes differently, and would even add spices and herbs to each item. (We would be grateful if he didn't ask to rearrange the furniture)." Katanyan's observation captures very accurately Parajanov's powerful obsession with displacing and reorganizing objects in space. As anyone close to him would testify, collage was his strategy even in relation to the most banal aspects of every day life. If he liked the monument to Vardan Mamikonyan, then he would still insist that it should ideally be wedged in between two tall buildings; similarly he would say that he could only approve of the buildings he saw in Yerevan on condition that they all be turned around to face Mount Ararat. Returning from Rotterdam, Parajanov gave us a vivid account of the city, saying that the latest modern architecture had been successfully blended into the old city, harmoniously coexisting with the old town hall and the cathedral. "You find yourself in a collage," he observed, summarizing his account.

One could say that Parajanov's cinematic oeuvre is also based on the principle of collage. This is particularly the case with *The Color of Pomegranates*. Here the camera generally does not move, and the viewer becomes witness instead to a series of distinct pictures, each of which could be seen as a kind of painting, with only the frame missing to make it complete. In fact on occasion the director himself actually does this: several shots are partly or entirely framed by curved, gilded edges. Independently of Parajanov's broader aesthetic goals, these frames become a sign or reminder of the general presence of framing as a device, and hence of the autonomy of each shot, that gets woven, as it were, into a general collage. We might recall the frame that swings like a pendulum in the scenes analyzed in connection to the window and mirror motifs. In fact the frame might be said to complement the window and the mirror, creating a triad: all three motifs in fact contribute to the principle of collage in Parajanov's cinema.



Variation on Raphael and Pinturicchio with Seashell / I.
Assemblage, 1988.

Courtesy of Sergei Parajanov Museum, Yerevan.

Cinematic collage in fact requires large pieces or fragments of completed information, and demands that each piece remain static or stationary for a moment, instead of the customary flow of successive shots. This is exactly what happens in Parajanov's films. Parajanov's cinematic text is made up not of words or signs but of distinct sentences or even pieces of text (composed or imitated by Parajanov himself): its constitutive parts, in other words, are large and readily recognized elements, and not the smallest units of signification. This is what happens in a real collage too: the viewer is meant to recognize, through more careful study, the individual components of the piece. We are required to recognize the splendid face of Pinturicchio's boy, and not remain content with an obscure detail such as his eye. This is what allows the wondrous metamorphosis of collage to take place, by which the boy lives a new life created by the artist's scissors. In other words

the collage gives birth to fantastic chimeras, splendid mermaids and centaurs: it does not synthesize homunculi.

The constant shifts and displacements that were the very stuff of Parajanov's life can be compared to a kind of wondrous kaleidoscope, which the director holds before our eyes, revealing with each turn of his hand an astonishing new picture. It is no coincidence that many of his pictorial collages were composed of pieces of glass and mirror, just like a kaleidoscope.

In fact all of Parajanov's exhibitions were large, masterfully composed collages. The very fact that the walls of the gallery were so densely covered, forcing each work to be in close physical contact with its neighbors, created a kind of wider collage. On completing the mounting of his first exhibition in Yerevan, Parajanov observed: "Every time I start out intending to create an austere composition, but it comes out as a patchwork quilt." But that patchwork quilt was precisely the inimitable collage that drew so many people to his show. Some connoisseurs and aesthetes visiting the show preferred to pick and choose among Parajanov's works, but there were others who - correctly, in my opinion - perceived the exhibition as a kind of totality, in which, as in a true collage, the most diverse things could coexist, and to which terms like "good and bad" or "highbrow/lowbrow" hardly applied, since their juxtaposition served to create some new quality or value. By this I do not mean that Parajanov's work does not contain both undisputable masterpieces and more ordinary pieces. I just wanted to point out that his exhibition as a whole was a collage of a higher order, which was in turn made up of smaller collages.

The Parajanov Museum in Yerevan is in this sense somewhat different from Parajanov's preceding exhibitions. It is not hard to know why: the arrangement of the work is not his. When his condition worsened after his operation, we visited him in his Moscow hospital where he told us: "If I could just manage to do two things: shoot *Confession* and put the museum together." He was not destined to do either.

If I here listed all the problems faced by the organizers of the first exhibition at the Parajanov Museum (namely Zaven Sargsyan, Karen Mikaelyan and myself - in fact I took part in the preceding exhibitions also), it would constitute a pretty exhaustive introduction to museum curatorship in general! I want only to say that we could not - and indeed had no right to - imitate Parajanov. I have already spoken of Parajanov's style as inimitable: had he put together the museum himself, what we see today would be the result of the most improbable decisions, incongruous juxtapositions reconciled only by the power of Parajanov's improvisations. Still, a museum has its own rules of arrangement. It requires a certain reliability, an orientation towards the future rather than

towards immediate effect. The majority of works housed in the museum urgently require immediate restoration; some pieces are literally falling apart. Parajanov the director always took precedence over Parajanov the artist. The director arranges the shots, puts together the decor, constructs his own imaginary world within the camera's view-frame (again the framing motif!), and then demolishes it in an instant in order to create a new world for the next shot. For this reason, Parajanov never thought about eternity when creating his other works of art: they were kaleidoscopic projections, destined to last an instant.

It is curious to note that the curators of the museum, seemingly infected by Parajanov's itch for constant metamorphoses, are constantly rearranging things in the permanent exhibition, convinced (often justifiably) that they are motivated by rational impulses.

This talent for kaleidoscopic displacements and transformations touch on yet another typical Parajanovian trait: his passion for gifts and exchanges. He was quite capable of spontaneously giving away a unique object, a real collector's item, to a visitor who had chanced to drop by his house, and receiving in exchange a gift that would hardly be of equivalent worth. Parajanov's involvement in the dynamic of giving and exchanging granted him access to a vast array of objects, which he could manipulate in art as in life. As a collage artist, he needed a rich store of material, a constant stream of new things. This world of objects would *pass through* him, nourishing him with its energy, without affixing itself to the walls of his house or gathering dust in vaults and safes, as often happens with greedy collectors or those who like to accumulate precious objects. Significantly, many people easily dazzled by the glamour of objects took Parajanov to be one of their own, not realizing that their erstwhile ally, while certainly capable of grasping the value of precious objects, was in fact far less attached to them than people thought. We might say that Parajanov's attraction to gift-giving and taking was somehow linked to the ancient law that regulated the life of archaic societies through a system of reciprocal gifts. This law required a series of mythic heroes to exchange gifts, even parts of their own bodies, at a frenetic pace. Parajanov, one might say, gave all of himself to the world, in accordance with this law.

Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Parajanov's character was his ability to organize around himself in some quite unfathomable way some kind of festive activity. His exhibitions would always become some kind of Parajanovian carnival which, despite their exuberantly improvised nature, were in fact in their own way carefully choreo-

graphed. His Tbilisi exhibition was openly labeled as such: "A Ball in the Director's Workshop." The Yerevan exhibition, entitled "A Visit to the Director's Workshop," also turned into a masquerade ball, appropriately enhanced by the director's red cape, and by costumes which had been brought in for the opening from the set of *Ashik Kerib*.

In fact Parajanov just had to show up for an incomparably joyful atmosphere to be created: as soon as you began to expect the unexpected, you knew you were already in the grip of Parajanov's metamorphoses, and that a small portion of his creative energy would also become yours. Parajanov was eternally surrounded by the most diverse people, all of whom would be constantly transformed once they entered his orbit. Even I could not hold back: whenever I saw some unusual piece of clothing in his house, I would immediately try it on. But of course, it is the inner transformations that I am primarily thinking of.

As we were putting together the first posthumous exhibition of Parajanov's works in the museum, I recall being struck by how powerfully Parajanov's festive spirit took hold of us as we began to open the crates containing the exhibit items. But this sudden manifestation of Parajanov's spirit was not only due to the unearthing of his dolls, collages and personal belongings. A young woman who had heard about the imminent opening of the exhibition unexpectedly showed up from one of the places where Parajanov had been forced to live while serving time. Although they had never met, they had corresponded during that time for several years. It turns out that Parajanov sent her many letters containing drawings - for example a sketch of an old chandelier from his house in Tbilisi. To her delight, that very chandelier emerged from one of the crates that we opened. Similarly, when we had to move the furniture around, an ensemble of violinists turned up, seemingly out of nowhere, but quite in the spirit of Parajanov's art. The violinists put down their violin cases, took off their shirts to reveal a range of powerfully developed hairy chests, and busied themselves with shifting the antique furniture. There were many similar episodes, equally Parajanovian, which were fondly recalled on later occasions. In all cases, the spirit of the artist would put into motion the hidden mechanism of the Parajanovian festival. All that was left was to record it on film, but alas, just like during Parajanov's life, there was no cameraman devoted enough to his work to shoot this scene.

Parajanov was suspicious, and finally unenthusiastic, about the political "festivities" that took place in Yerevan at the same time as his exhibition: he was used to creating his own festivities, and not to par-

ticipating in those imposed from outside.¹⁰ He managed to transmute his grief into a festive occasion for others. His death was also marked by the end of traditional festive life in Tbilisi, a town that has always lived in accordance with the laws of carnival, or at least in anticipation of a carnivalesque occasion. Now the Italian director Fellini is also no more, and we have lost another great creator of festive occasions. The stage of history is now making way for a more sinister kind of carnivalesque character.

Sayat-Nova wrote in three languages. The three languages in which Parajanov created moved apart with the collapse of that fragile Tower of Babel called Transcaucasia. Now the director, like his prototype before him, is receding from our lives, just as we have abandoned that festival of the human spirit which was his generous gift to all of us.

Translated by Harsha Ram

NOTES

1. There are in fact two versions of the film, the Armenian release version and the one submitted to the Soviet censor. They differ both in the way they are edited and put together and in terms of the chapter titles. The title quoted above is from the censored Russian version. It is interesting to note that the original Armenian release version lacks chapter titles, for which it substitutes lengthy literary quotations that acquire a kind of autonomous artistic value, even though they are in fact quite uncharacteristic of Parajanov himself, who in any case had a rather poor command of Armenian. However paradoxical it may seem, the laconic chapter headings are in fact closer to the spirit of Parajanov, a fact confirmed by the use of similar chapter titles in the later film *The Legend of Suram Fortress*. In this article I am referring to the film as a whole, including scenes that Parajanov was finally to omit from his version. For this reason I will not be making references in this article to either of the two existing versions of the film. For a comparison and an analysis of both versions see the article by James Steffen, "Parajanov's playful poetics: On the 'Director's Cut' of *The Color of Pomegranates*," *Journal of Film and Video* 47, no. 3 (Winter 1995-6), pp. 17-32.
2. Incidentally, it has been hypothesized that syphilis originated from llamas, who are natural carriers of the disease, which passed from the Andean shepherds who tended them to the local women, who in turn passed it on to the early European explorers of America through whom it reached Europe.
3. Cf. Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin söderhavssår* (Stockholm: Forum, 1964).
4. This coincidence was first pointed out to me by Karen Mikaelyan.
5. Many Armenians learned of the colors of the national flag only in 1988, when day after day of stormy nationalist demonstrations finally led to the declaration of the third Armenian republic. The new republic opted for the flag of the first Armenian republic whose colors were red, blue and orange. It is not surprising that Armenians of the Diaspora, who had always regarded the tricolored flag as a national symbol, perceived this scene as an unambiguous expression of nationalist sentiment.
6. The author is referring to Parajanov's unfilmed scenario *Treasures from Mount Ararat*, written in the summer of 1987 (Editor's note).
7. It is interesting to compare this aspect of Parajanov's poetics with that of his favorite director Pier Paolo Pasolini, with whom he is often - and quite rightly - compared. Whereas the homosexual or sexually explicit intent in Parajanov's films generally dissolves in the process of its aesthetic visualization, Pasolini by contrast creates details and even entire plot-lines (for example in *The Arabian Nights*, 1974) whose primary justification appears to be their homosexual content.
8. For some reason Sayat-Nova wants to slake his thirst from a baptismal font. This was yet another shot that doubtless vexed the above-mentioned priest who was generally dismayed by the liberties Parajanov took with the specificities of ritual worship. Sayat-Nova's sacrilegious act, itself entirely unjustified and probably due to Parajanov's unprincipled aestheticism, seriously diminishes the laconic power of the shot, in which the empty font serves as a premonition of the invasion.
9. A short film on the nineteenth-century Tiflis Armenian portraitist Hakob Hovnatanyan, made concurrently with *The Color of Pomegranates*.
10. The author has published a series of articles analyzing the nationalist rallies that swept through Armenia in the late nineteen eighties as a festive holiday. Cf. "The Karabagh Movement As Viewed by an Anthropologist," *The Armenian Review* 43, nos. 2-3 (1990), pp. 67-80 (Translator's note).