PARAJANOV'S PLAYFUL POETICS: ON THE 'DIRECTOR'S CUT' OF *THE COLOR OF POMEGRANATES*

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An ancient book is spread open before us. Over the years, it has passed through many hands; notes and scribblings crowd the margins. In some places, the ink has smeared and the text is all but illegible. There are pages missing, we are told. Yet the book lies before us, a testament to the miraculous circumstances of its survival. The book is Sayat-Nova's *Davtar*, and we see it in the opening shot of Sergei Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates*, a film that has suffered a parallel fate.

In 1992, with little national publicity, a print of the "director's cut" of *The Color of Pomegranates* (*Nran Guyne*, formerly titled *Sayat-Nova*; Hayfilm, 1969) was screened at the Los Angeles AFI Film Festival and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.[1] This version of the Armenian film is currently distributed by Meronk Films/Parev Productions. It also is available on video through Meridian Video, accompanied by the 1965 short *Hakob Hovnatanian*, an homage to the renowned nineteenth-century Georgian-Armenian portrait painter. Aside from the obvious historical importance of a "director's cut," having one is especially significant in the case of this particular film; the official Soviet version, for more than 20 years the only version released in the Soviet Union or abroad, had been heavily reedited by Sergei Yutkevitch.[2]

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Based on the differences between the two versions and the original Russian scenario for the film (as *Sayat-Nova*),[3] it appears that the changes Yutkevitch imposed were aimed at removing a few of the most blatant religious allusions, toning down the subtly homoerotic impact of some of the imagery, and, above all, increasing the film's "legibility"—for *The Color of Pomegranates* has from the beginning borne the reputation of being an exceptionally difficult work, especially for non-Armenian audiences. Yet, in the process of attempting to clarify, the Soviet version nearly obliterates one of the crucial aesthetic strategies of the film—its formal resemblance to an illuminated manuscript.

According to Nora Armani of Meronk Films/Parev Productions, the "director's cut" is the version Parajanov had initially completed in 1969 but that the Soviet government had rejected. The original negative of the "director's cut" had been stored in Armenia since then. Now, as a result of the secession of Armenia and the collapse of the Soviet government, this version is being circulated in place of the Soviet one.

But although the Armenian version is referred to as the "director's cut" and should presumably be definitive, confusing problems remain. Several writers, including Patrick Cazals, author of the first comprehensive book on Parajanov in the West, claim that Yutkevitch removed about 20 minutes of footage in constructing the 73-minute official Soviet version. The original running time would then have

totaled approximately 90 minutes. If so, that leaves more than 10 minutes of footage unaccounted for in the "director's cut," which is about 78 minutes long.

There are a number of possible explanations: (1) the initial running time was 90 minutes, but Parajanov himself removed footage or reconstructed the film at some point *after* its premiere showings; (2) the amount of footage removed to make the Yutkevitch version has been exaggerated (it was not 20 minutes, but less than 10), and this error has been perpetuated in various writings on the film; (3) the version labeled the "director's cut" is in fact a *third* version, reedited or reconstructed by an uncredited party, and may (or may not) adhere more closely to the original form, though it still suffers from several minutes of missing footage. To complicate matters further, the title displayed on the print of the "director's cut" is *Nran Guyne* and not *Sayat-Nova*, which was the supposed title of the original version. It is, of course, possible that the title on the print of the "director's cut" was changed later to conform to the name under which the film had since become known but that the film was left otherwise intact.[4]

Another problem is that some sources, such as Georgian critic Kora Tsereteli, claim that Parajanov was not even permitted to finish the film before its initial shelving.[5] This would seem to contradict Cazals's account that the film was premiered unsuccessfully in various cities in 1969, unless the work was premiered only as a rough cut or as a "work in progress," a practice I am not aware of occurring in the Soviet Union.

The possibility that Parajanov's first version did remain unfinished might help explain why there are several extended passages of silence on the soundtrack of the "director's cut." Yet in *Hakob Hovnatanian*, which bears a great deal of stylistic similarity to *The Color of Pomegranates*, there are also long passages of silence, suggesting that having such intervals may simply have been one of Parajanov's stylistic practices at the time.[6] Further research may eventually clarify these highly complicated questions. Unfortunately, it is also possible, given the extremely troubled circumstances surrounding the film's editing and release, that a completely satisfactory historical account will never be found.

Such problems aside, the "director's cut" is worth examining in detail, especially in comparison to the Yutkevitch version and the poetic scenario. The "director's cut" contains a far greater degree of formal and thematic coherence than the Yutkevitch cut, suggesting that it is probably the more authoritative of the two texts. A close study of the three texts also helps us untangle some of the complicated cultural allusions in which the film abounds and, in the process, reveals some interesting problems in Soviet film practices.

Historical Background

The Color of Pomegranates was Parajanov's next completed feature after the Ukrainian *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Teni zabytykh predkov*, 1964), his fifth feature and his phenomenally acclaimed breakthrough into the international film scene.[7] A 1966 project, the medium-length *Kiev Frescoes* (*Kievskie freskie*), was halted by the authorities in midproduction. Along with the *Hakob Hovnatanian* short, *The Color of Pomegranates* represents Parajanov's acknowledgment of his Georgian-Armenian heritage—for he, like Hovnatanian and Sayat-Nova (by far the most popular Armenian *ashugh*, or troubadour poet), was born in Tbilisi (formerly Tiflis), Georgia, to Armenian parents.

The two Transcaucasian films also represent the consolidation of Parajanov's mature style; for while *Shadows of Forgotten*

Ancestors remains one of the key works of postwar Soviet cinema, it proved to be a transitional work in Parajanov's career. In the 1964 film, the static tableaux are combined with dynamic, frequently dizzying camera movements. But in *The Color of Pomegranates* and *Hakob Hovnatanian*, as well as the subsequent films *The Legend of Suram Fortress* (*Ambavi suramis tsikhisa*, Georgia, 1985) and *Ashik Kerib* (*Ashug qaribi*, Georgia and Azerbaijan, 1988), both co-directed by Dodo Abashidze, and the unfinished *Confession* (*Ispoved*, Georgia and Armenia, 1989),[8] the camera movements that Parajanov does employ are extremely restrained compared to the wild kineticism of *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*. Tableaux became his dominant technique. This technique, moreover, is integrally related to the director's subject matter: the far-reaching history of the Transcaucasian region (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan) is presented in the manner of paintings from diverse epochs, especially miniatures from medieval Christian and Islamic manuscripts. Even when individual elements within the films refer to the present or the recent past, the weight of history remains a centering, stabilizing force.

In Cazals's account, *The Color of Pomegranates* was initially titled *Sayat-Nova*. In 1969, it was screened in Moscow, Kiev, Yerevan, and Tbilisi, to a poor critical and public reception, and was labeled "hermetic and of a decadent aesthetic." After the reediting, against the director's wishes, it was released in Moscow in 1971 under the Russian title *Tsvet granata* (*The Color of Pomegranates*), which has since become the standard title, even in Armenia (Cazals 18). Parajanov was reportedly happy with the new title, which is certainly successful at conveying the film's exotic nature.

The film's official condemnation was only one episode in a series of bitter encounters with authorities that plagued Parajanov throughout his life. One cause of his persecution was his homosexuality—or, perhaps more accurately, bisexuality—a feature that emerges in this film. Parajanov was "suspected" of homosexuality as early as 1947, while he attended the VGIK in Moscow, and he was imprisoned from 1974 to 1978 on charges of homosexuality after a closed trial that stirred up international outrage. A detailed account of his numerous run-ins with the Soviet government is given by Cazals (14).

Many of Parajanov's film scenarios, among them adaptations of Lermontov's *The Demon*, Pushkin's *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, and the Armenian folk epic *David of Sassun*, were rejected by various Soviet film studios, although it should be kept in mind that other factors, such as cost, could have played a role in their being rejected. With all this in mind, it is hardly surprising that *The Color of Pomegranates* suffered from as much reediting as it did.

One has to question why the Soviet government took so much trouble to give the film a new structure, since its purported nationalistic sentiments have often been cited as a reason for the film's shelving and Parajanov's subsequent persecutions. A typical description of its "nationalistic" imagery runs as follows:

> There are specific images that are highly charged—blood-red juice spilling from a cut pomegranate onto a cloth and forming a stain in the shape of the boundaries of the ancient Kingdom of Armenia; dyers lifting hanks of wool out of vats in the colors of the national flag, and so on (Williams 922).

In fact, the shots that are usually claimed to have the strongest nationalistic sentiments (i.e., pomegranates whose juice bleeds into the shape of Armenia; wool dyed to the red, blue, and orange of the Armenian tricolor; pomegranates smashed by a sword; references to the Iranian invasion of 1795) were strangely allowed to remain in the Soviet cut, while the

shots and scenes that were removed contain no such obviously "nationalistic" symbolism.[9]

Levon Abrahamian, a longtime friend of Parajanov and author of Armenian and Russian articles on his work, says that some of the supposed nationalistic symbolism was, in fact, coincidental—namely, the bleeding pomegranates, whose shape only very loosely approximates that of "historic" Armenia, and the wool dyed in the colors of the tricolor. According to Abrahamian, at the time the film was made, very few people were aware of the actual Armenian colors, which were often mistaken for those of the similar Lithuanian flag (Abrahamian, letter to the author, May 1994). And if one views a newly struck 35mm print of the film, it is apparent that the three batches of wool are magenta/pink, blue, and red—certainly not the colors of the Armenian flag. If I seem to be belaboring a minor point, it is because to emphasize the film's "nationalistic" symbolism is to neglect the more important ways in which Parajanov juxtaposes different cultures and renders problematic the idea of a single national entity. I do not wish to suggest that the film is entirely devoid of nationalistic sentiments or that the question of nationalism played absolutely no role in the film's shelving and Parajanov's subsequent persecution, only that these issues, like many other aspects of the film, need to be carefully reexamined.

According to Suren Asmekian, former redactor-in-chief of Goskino in the Armenian SSR, the film's shelving and reediting occurred mainly because of its unique, nonliteral treatment of its subject. Asmekian cites several other Armenian films that ran into trouble for various ideological reasons—*Voices of Our Quarter* (1960), *Nahapet* (1977), *Farewells from Beyond* (1980), to name the most prominent examples—yet he does not mention the role of ideology, nationalist or otherwise, in the criticism leveled against Parajanov's film. At the same time, the suggestion that the film was shelved solely for formal or stylistic concerns is not entirely satisfactory, given such potentially objectionable content as its numerous religious allusions and homoerotic imagery.

There is no question that *The Color of Pomegranates* places unusual demands on its audiences, non-Armenian and Armenian alike. Some Western critics have even subtly discouraged their readers from attempting to interpret the film, laying all emphasis on its visual beauty. Mansel Stimpson, for example, writes in *Films and Filming:* "Best, perhaps, to approach this difficult film as you would a visit to a picture gallery; but go." Yutkevitch's and the Soviet government's concern about the film's "hermeticism" were hardly without justification.

An 'Aesthetic' Biography

While innumerable filmmakers have modeled their images after paintings and many have also made films about artists and their work, I can think of no other film in which the aesthetic principles of the plastic arts have so thoroughly shaped a director's style. Parajanov himself has proudly acknowledged these influences:

> We impoverish ourselves by thinking only in film categories. Therefore I constantly take up my paintbrush, therefore I prefer to associate with artists and composers rather than with colleagues in my own profession. Another system of thinking, different methods of perception and reflection of life are opened up to me. That's when you feel that the cinema is a synthetic art ("Perpetual Motion" 48).

Indeed, one of the main visual inspirations for *The Color of Pomegranates* is the rich and iconographically complex traditions

of Georgian and Armenian art—not only the media of architecture and painting, but also crafts such as costuming, metalwork, and rug weaving. These influences are so pervasive that they disrupt potential narrative flow in favor of displaying individual images whose beauty is undeniable but whose immediate relationship to the narrative is not always clear. The result is a collage of disparate elements that overwhelms the viewer with its intensity and density.[10]

Because of Parajanov's use of avant-garde techniques, *The Color of Pomegranates* bears little resemblance to a conventional dramatic narrative. For example, the transition of Sayat-Nova from a child to a youthful troubadour is represented by having the child step behind the youth and disappear from view, in a single shot. Thus, a significant passage of time is conveyed not by a cut, fade, or dissolve but through pantomime.

The alienness of this and other devices used in the film derive in part from the director's decision to adapt lyric poetry to film rather than narrative prose or drama. Since he constructs meaning primarily through visual and aural metaphors rather than through plot, character development, and dialogue, any changes in the order of shots could have a profound effect on how one interprets the work. Yet, paradoxically, such alterations might not be as easy to spot as they would in a more conventionally structured film.

Parajanov's earlier film, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, is hardly more conventional, but it has the advantage of being adapted from a literary work derived from folklore, an impressionistic novella by Mikhailo Kotsiubinskii. It also retains the broad outline of the novella's plot. As David Cook points out, rather than obscuring the story beyond comprehension, the stylistic devices employed in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, such as its extremely mobile camera work and vivid color experiments, serve to "destabilize the viewer perceptually and therefore psychologically, in order to present a tale that operates not at the level of narrative, but of myth" (22). Although *The Color of Pomegranates* operates on a mythic level, similar to what Cook has indicated regarding the previous film—"Youth passes from innocence to experience to solitude and death" (22)—this "archetypal pattern" is not as readily apparent to the casual viewer.

Unlike the relatively accessible literary source for *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, the later *Color of Pomegranates* was inspired by a series of poems that, while universally popular in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, are far from easy to understand. This is because Sayat-Nova (born Arutin, or Harutiun, Sayadian) employed several languages in his poetry; not only did he write poems in Tiflis Armenian and Georgian, as might be expected, since he was raised in Havlabar, a large Armenian enclave of Tiflis (now Tbilisi), Georgia, but he also wrote in Azeri, a Turkic language of Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, while Sayat-Nova wrote the Armenian poems mainly in the Tiflis Armenian dialect, at times he used other dialects, such as Lori and Grabar (classical Armenian), and even mixed in Georgian, vocabulary derived from Farsi (Persian), and Azeri (Injejikian 34). For example, in the first line of one of his most famous songs, "The World Is a Window" (*Ashkhares me panjara e*), the word *panjara* is not the usual Armenian term for "window" but is derived from the Farsi *panjarei*. The script also hints at the influence of classical Iranian poetry upon Sayat-Nova by having the poet sing the story of Layla and Majnun, from a work of the same name by the twelfth-century Iranian poet Nezami. As a consequence, if one is to represent Sayat-Nova's linguistic and cultural diversity in a film (as Parajanov did, at one point repeating the same poem in three languages), at least some

parts are bound to be unintelligible to many audiences—including the executives of the Hayfilm studios. In short, we are faced with a work of art that must necessarily be somewhat obscure if it is to represent its subject authentically.

Of course, the film would have been easier to understand if it had followed the format of a conventional dramatic biography. Parajanov instead opted for the avant-garde, lyrical approach he and other directors from the various Soviet republics had been cultivating to striking effect since the early 1960s. Two of the most important of these directors are Andrei Tarkovsky, whom Parajanov has called a seminal influence on his mature work ("Prisoner" 60), and Yuri Ilyenko, who was the director of photography for *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* before going on to make his own features, among them *Swan Lake: The Zone* (*Lebedyne ozero—zona*, 1990), which is based on an oral account by Parajanov of his prison experiences.[11]

The three directors shared an interest in dreamlike imagery, a painterly sense of lighting and composition, and a passion for folk and Christian motifs, the latter causing considerable political trouble for each of them. Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublyov* (1966), Ilyenko's little-seen first feature, *A Well for the Thirsty (Rodnik dlia zhazhdushchikh*, 1965), and Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates* were all shelved for a number of years partly because of their religious content.

Of all these directors, Parajanov is the most paradoxical in his use of avant-garde techniques and backward-looking subject matter. This is hardly the usual approach for a biography; in fact, the introductory titles to the Armenian version of the film make his intentions explicit:

> This film does not attempt to tell the life story of a poet. Rather, the filmmaker has tried to recreate the poet's inner world, through the trepidations of his soul, his passions and torments, widely utilizing the symbolism and allegories specific to the tradition of the medieval Armenian poet-troubadours (*ashugh*).

Yet even beyond the film's poetic structure, Parajanov takes a number of liberties with the popular conceptions of Sayat-Nova's life. According to popular tradition, Sayat-Nova fell in love with King Erekle II's sister Anna while he served as court poet in Tbilisi, and he was thus forced to enter a monastery. In the film, the court-related episodes are rendered ambiguously, raising the possibility of homoerotic feelings as well, as Tony Rayns has suggested in his highly perceptive review. For example, when the poet as a child peers into some sulfur baths in Tbilisi (identified in the original scenario as the Erekle baths), we see *two* figures of beauty—one masculine (the king), one feminine (the Princess Anna)—and both carry a strong erotic charge.

The film also adds a number of characters, such as the "Angel of Death" and the "Angel of Resurrection," many of them played by the Georgian actress Sofiko Chiaureli, who also plays the adolescent Sayat-Nova in a typically Parajanovian androgynous twist. These characters obviously do not figure into traditional accounts of Sayat-Nova's life and are best understood as being primarily metaphoric or allegorical. And although historically authentic props, settings, and costumes are used diligently throughout the film, elements from other historical epochs are self-consciously thrown in. Finally, the film's flamboyant directorial techniques and poetic structure constantly draw attention to its own stylization, not unlike how an *ashugh* earns recognition for his skill as a singer and poet through his virtuosic improvisations.

A Game of Associations

Perhaps the main reason the film is so difficult is its great density of texture. One

After Sayat-Nova's dream sequence ends with him mourning his parents' death, the poet (V. Galstian) emerges into the snow, a scene that was removed from the Yutkevitch version. In the next scene, he has become an old man. Courtesy of BFI.

episode provides an excellent example of this: Sayat-Nova's dream of his childhood and youth. At one point the visual component consists of stylized pantomimes of the child Arutin spinning wool with his parents, tearing off and eating a piece of the *lavash* (a large, flat bread) his parents are holding, and so on, leading to a funeral for his parents.

The aural track, by contrast, consists of a fragmented version of "Kele Kele," a popular love song that compares the beloved to a little quail and is more commonly associated with the composer-musicologist Komitas than with Sayat-Nova.[12] To complicate matters further, "Kele Kele" is intercut with fragments of a song commemorating Vartan Mamikonian, an Armenian national hero and saint who was martyred while resisting Iranian attempts to force Christian Armenians to convert to Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism), the official religion of the Iranian empire. So, besides the juxtaposition of romantic and familial love, there is an evocation of different historical epochs simultaneously, not to mention Armenia's history of religious persecution under the Iranian empire.

In this, Parajanov displays the influence of Pier Paolo Pasolini, a director he greatly admired and to whom he dedicated one of his finest collages. For example, in one portion of *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pasolini uses Odetta's rendition of the African-American spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" to provide a counterpoint to the story of Christ. Such music does not provide period atmosphere—or function like an ordi-

nary extradiegetic film score; rather, it provides independent, self-conscious commentary on the action within the film.[13]

In such instances as the dream sequence described above, the film resists being reduced to a single, clearly stated idea; the sight threatens to explode, unable to support the plethora of meanings it attracts like a magnet. Parajanov's dialectic of sound and image, his constant exploitation of asynchronized and postsynchronized sound, encourages the viewer to look beyond the immediate historical and biographical context of the film and consider transcaucasian culture in the broadest manner possible. The viewer is invited to share in a game of associations: by the end of the film, when we see the three pomegranates of the second shot smashed by the dagger of the fourth shot, the image may at once evoke for us Sayat-Nova's death, the 1795 Iranian invasion of Tiflis (when Sayat-Nova is widely believed to have been killed), or even the Turkish-sponsored Armenian genocide of 1915, to name only a few of the possibilities opened by the dense, interconnected allusive structure.

The result of Parajanov's experimentations is a film of unprecedented richness but one that could hardly hope to draw the audience of the more accessible *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*—even given the strength of Parajanov's considerable reputation. It is easy to see, then, why the Soviet government decided to recut the film. As the "director's cut" reveals, the changes Yuktevitch affected were not aimed at just removing a few objectionable shots or scenes; they were also part of a broad-reaching strategy to change the structure of the film as a whole, so that it would fall more in line with accepted Soviet film practices and at the same time be more approachable to general Soviet and international film audiences. However, in recutting the film, Yutkevitch disrupted its delicate structural harmony—and as a result made it even more difficult to read as a work of film/poetry.

Censorship Strategies

Given the lack of access to primary documents concerning the reediting of the film, one way by which we can ascertain possible censorship strategies is to analyze the differences between the two versions. The first major instance of reediting occurs at the beginning of the film, when we see the young poet curled up in a fetal position and rain pounding upon the stone carvings of a church. The soundtrack begins with thunder, then lays over that a voice-over recitation of the account of the creation from Genesis. The thunder disappears, leaving only the voice-over.

In the Yutkevitch version, the voice-over is excised altogether, leaving only the thunder, which continues full force throughout the scene. The thunder in the Soviet version *could* be construed as relatively realistic ambient noise to accompany the visual suggestions of the storm, but in the Armenian version, the voice-over is anything but realistic: it is another example of Parajanov's provocative, often playful use of asynchronized sound. The absence of the voice-over gives the scene more of a literal, realistic feel; the casual viewer, not knowing what to expect, might try to interpret the scene simply as an evocation of the poet's childhood. The recitation from Genesis adds an otherwise missing dimension by suggesting more forcefully the awesome power of God (in conjunction with the lightning and thunder), as well as the formative influence of the bible on the young poet. So, besides removing the most overtly religious element of the scene, this alteration disrupts the dialectic of sound and image that Parajanov had originally constructed and strips away one of the layers of meaning within the scene, reducing its density and emphasizing the literal over the metaphoric.

Another significant deletion of religious material relates to a painting from an illu-

Although Yutkevitch retained the *Matagh* (*Sacrifice*) section title, he used it with a different episode than in Parajanov's scenario. The grouping of three is one of Parajanov's recurring stylistic techniques. Courtesy of BFI.

minated manuscript. The image, of Saint George and a child riding a horse, first appears immediately before the scene in which the young Arutin's father performs a blessing on him by painting a cross of chicken blood on his forehead, which he mischievously wipes off. In the "director's cut," this visual quotation reappears during the episode relating to the poet's old age, as an ironic comment on the poet's crisis of faith toward the end of his life. By removing the later shot, the Yutkevitch version disrupts the structural balance of the film.

In addition to deleting material from several episodes, Yutkevitch rearranged certain shots, even creating one autonomous sequence where none had previously existed. The section, titled *Matagh* (Armenian for "sacrificial offering"), which appears near the middle of the Yutkevitch version, consists of footage depicting the sacrifice of rams. The footage for this scene is found untitled in the "director's cut," interpolated in the section concerning the poet's old age and death. Within the context established in the "director's cut," the sacrifice sequence is one of the many metaphors for the poet's Christ-like suffering—and, by association, for the suffering of the Transcaucasian peoples in general. In contrast, the self-contained scene in the Soviet version creates another, unrelated context for the footage—the sacrifice is part of the monastery's daily functions of wine pressing, wheat threshing, oil making, and christenings. Thus the rearrangement weakens the sequence's religious and symbolic implications.

Another apparent reason for the reediting is the homoerotic subtext of many of the

images, what Rayns refers to as the "palpable homo-eroticism in the film's gaze at men other than the poet" (282), although I would argue that the camera's gaze at times also includes the poet as an erotic object. Still, it is true that the male body in general is given far more attention than the female body.

The only instance of female nudity in either version occurs in the previously mentioned sequence set in the sulfur baths of Tbilisi, when we see the torso of Anna, who is lying on the floor of the bath. Water is poured over her body, and her left breast is covered by a golden seashell. In the men's bath, by contrast, we see a half-nude man of striking physical beauty (King Erekle II) undergoing a massage, plus a group of nude men, hands cupped over genitals, each standing underneath an attendant who pours water over them while another attendant washes the mud from their bodies. The woman's body is made abstract by the torso's dissociation from the head and limbs and by the symbolically charged presence of the seashell on the left breast, but the men's bodies, shown in full, are given more of a concrete physical presence. This in itself is hardly indicative of homoeroticism. It is, however, only the first in a series of displays of male bodies throughout the film. If the intent of these portraits of masculine beauty was, in fact, homoerotic, it is hardly surprising that some of the deleted shots also prominently feature male bodies.

One such deleted shot depicts a room full of *ashughs* posing with *kamanchas* and *tars*, fiddle-type and lute-type instruments, respectively, that they often play. A pair of men dressed in leather aprons, drenched with sweat, roll on a carpet at the *ashughs'* feet. An even more significant deletion occurs near the end of the film, when bare-chested mowers sweep the grass-covered roofs of the monastery with scythes. The mowed grass rains down upon the poet, who stands next to a lamb on cornices under the roof. In the Yutkevitch version, not one shot remains from this rather lengthy sequence, which contains the doubly dubious virtues of religious symbolism and displays of the male body.

Many earlier scenes, such as those showing the monks washing each other's feet, stomping grapes, or sucking the juice from pomegranates in the monastery, contain even more clearly homoerotic overtones. The erotic nature of these scenes is suggested as much by the sensuous heightening of the soundtrack, however, as by the physical contact between the men, underscoring the importance of the soundtrack to the film's construction of meaning. Yet these scenes were not removed, perhaps because they were still useful to Yutkevitch for shaping a more traditional biographical outline—they could be interpreted by the viewer simply as being episodes distilled from Sayat-Nova's daily life as a monk. Nonetheless, the presence of the deleted shots, in association with the material allowed to remain, makes the cumulative homoerotic tone more clear than ever.

It is not coincidental that much of the censored material I have mentioned comes from the end of the film. The scenes relating to the poet's old age and death suffered the most from reediting, for reasons that are difficult to fathom. For example, the final shot of the Soviet version, which consists of Sayat-Nova being led away from his *kamancha* by a pair of angels, occurs much earlier in the "director's cut"—as if to suggest that the poetic gift abandoned him before he died, not upon his death. The final shot of the "director's cut" is instead a profile of the "Angel of Resurrection." The Armenian title introducing the episode in which it is found is particularly telling: "I saw everything clearly and strangely blunt, and I understood that life had left me." This is followed by a shot of the old poet picking up a lamb another monk passes to him,

accompanied by the chirping of birds on the soundtrack. This very bleak and ironic moment has no equivalent in the Soviet version and leads one to wonder if its bitter, pessimistic tone was not another target of the reediting.

The most pervasive instance of how the reediting affects the film's meaning relates to the division of episodes with intertitles. The Yutkevitch version uses intertitles colored in "pomegranate red," written in Russian, to introduce the film and to display a few of Sayat-Nova's poems. The intertitles also serve to divide the film into eight chapters: childhood; youth; at the prince's court; prayers before the hunt; the poet's becoming a monk; the poet's dream and his mourning his parent's death; the poet's old age and leaving the monastery; meeting the "Angel of Death" and burying his love; and the poet's death.

The Russian chapter divisions, which describe the outward actions of the poet in the manner of the "argument" of an epic poem, indicate only the bare outline of the film. They contain no information that could not be deduced by a viewer who possesses a rough familiarity with Sayat-Nova's life, with the possible exception of the identification of the metaphoric characters. As most non-Transcaucasian viewers probably have no such familiarity with Sayat-Nova, the titles could be helpful, since they state the most obvious points, leaving the viewer free to concentrate on the subtleties. Yet the Russian chapter titles add nothing to the artistic quality of the film; they are purely functional.

The Armenian version uses black intertitles, written in Armenian. They *do not* divide the poet's life into discrete chapters—it is expected that we identify for ourselves which stages of Sayat-Nova's life are being represented. The Armenian intertitles instead concentrate wholly on the interior life of the poet—that is, the development of Sayat-Nova's thoughts regarding such topics as love, poetry, and the physical world. They also leave it to us to identify the metaphoric characters, such as the "Angel of Resurrection."

The main purpose of the Armenian intertitles is to display what viewers would assume are Sayat-Nova's writings, the themes of which form the basis for the ensuing scenes. The few poems displayed in the Russian version are in each case different from those chosen for the "director's cut," so they do not possess the same immediate and necessary relationship to the scenes that follow them. As a consequence, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for the viewer to determine just what the film is trying to say.

One example of how the deletion of the original intertitles affects interpretation of the film relates to the frequent presence of lavash. Like so many other objects in the film, such as the pomegranates, seashells, and wool, the lavash carries a complex series of associations. Besides the common Christian symbolism of bread, there is the association with familial love in the dream sequence with the parents.

There is also a symbolic meaning to the bread that is dependent on the intertitles. One title reads: "The bread you gave me was beautiful, but the soil is even more beautiful. I'll go soon and turn to dust. I am weary." This is clearly connected to the episode in which the poet holds a funeral procession for the "Nun with White Lace" (another manifestation of his beloved), during which a pair of angels take a folded piece of lavash stuffed with soil from "The Angel of Death" and give it to the poet. He sniffs the bread longingly and clutches it to his chest. In the reedited version, the absence of that particular intertitle makes the symbolism of the lavash in this scene much more difficult to interpret, since it lacks a context for interpretation. This is by no means the only instance in which the reediting inadvertently (or perhaps deliberately) renders the themes of certain scenes nearly unintelligible in its striving for linear clarity.

That the film was restructured through the insertion of chapter titles and the deletion of the original intertitles yet such a large number of religious and homoerotic elements remained raises the question of whether there was *any* coherent strategy behind the reediting. It is possible that rather than objecting to specific kinds of imagery, officials felt that the film had simply crossed too many boundaries—stylistic and otherwise—and that *something* needed to be done with it, though nobody was quite sure what.

Illuminations

Another, even more crucial difference between the Russian and the Armenian versions is that the latter version, as it is edited, continually develops a subtle interplay between the *text* (the written material displayed in the intertitles) and its *illustrations* (the scenes that follow and are related thematically). The Russian version finally places greater emphasis on the poetic images than on its prosaic text (the purely functional chapter titles). This distinction between text and illustration is not always absolute: the soundtrack in certain places—most notably, the singing of "The World Is a Window"—contains excerpts of Sayat-Nova's poetry that are not represented on the intertitles, and written representations of Sayat-Nova's work are sometimes present within the visual context, such as the scene set in a tomb, in which Sayat-Nova and Anna alternately mourn over a sarcophagus and hold up a black cloth displaying the text of a poem written in Azeri, recited on the soundtrack in three different languages.[14] There are also numerous inscriptions in stone and pages of books represented in the film. However, this alternation of text and illustration is the central thematic and structural principle of the film. The basis for this technique lies with the art of manuscript illumination.

As one would expect in a film about a poet, books and words are assigned the utmost importance. Parajanov frequently depicts open books and illustrations from medieval Armenian bibles. In addition, the visual content of the film is highly suggestive of the iconography of medieval Armenian miniature paintings. The frequent use of heavenward gazes, frontal gazes, arms outstretched in the shape of a cross, and arms stretched upward as if in prayer recalls the poses in miniature paintings.[15]

The crowded compositions and subdivisions within the frame suggest other influences. In certain shots, for example, Parajanov employs the triple arches of the fountain at the Haghbad monastery for impressive effect: each archway serves as a frame for a separate composition—yet the three compositions are nearly identical.[16] By photographing characters against walls or neutral backgrounds of indeterminate depth, the effect of a flattened perspective is created. Moreover, the animals that appear in the film, such as roosters, peacocks, and lambs, are a common feature of medieval Armenian iconography. There is also imagery in the film recalling Iranian manuscript illuminations for works such as Ferdowsi's Iranian national epic, the *Shahnameh* (*The Book of Kings*)—Iranian-style armor, men on horseback, men with drawn swords, and so forth.

The analogy to manuscript illumination can be extended further: like the medieval painters who expressed individual interpretations of the Gospel through subtleties of composition, gesture, and color, Parajanov communicates a highly personal perspective on the life of Sayat-Nova through his private iconographic system. And the great historical and aesthetic value of the authentic relics and locations depicted in the film is, in a sense, like the burnished gold that lovingly graces the pages of the richest manuscripts.

In spite of the many differences between the published early scenario and the film

"The World Is a Window," one of Saya-Nova's most famous songs, is used to great aural and allegorical effect in *The Color of Pomegranates*. Here, Sayat-Nova (N. Gegechkori) attends the funeral for the "Nun in White Lace" (S. Chiaureli), usually considered another manifestation of his beloved. Courtesy of BFI.

as it comes down to us, the scenario does reveal much about Parajanov's overall conception. For instance, the scenario describes one episode as a "miniature in which are played the games, the passions, and the childish imagination of the future poet" (*Sept Visions* 91). This episode corresponds quite closely to the one in the "director's cut" titled "From the colors and aromas of this world, my childhood made a poet's lyre and offered it to me."

Such correspondences suggest that the Armenian version really does better reflect Parajanov's intentions and may well be a true "director's cut" or something close to it. It is also significant that the *entire episode*, like many others in the scenario, is treated as a single "miniature," further supporting my contention that the film as a whole is structured after an illuminated manuscript. It is this dimension of the film that suffers the most in the reedited version. Although many scenes remain intact and in the same order as in the "director's cut," the concept of the film as an illuminated manuscript, in its play between text and illustration, becomes much less clear.

The demonstrable superiority of the "director's cut" aside, the selection of Yutkevitch to reedit the film is intriguing. Far from being a faceless Party hack, Yutkevitch was a highly respected director in his own right. His films (such as *Othello* [1955], for which he was named Best Director at Cannes) were frequently praised for their refined visual sense. He also had previous experience in reconstruction/

restoration: in 1967, he had reconstructed Sergei Eisenstein's unfinished *Bezhin Meadow* (*Bezhin lug*, 1937) from stills.

In reediting Parajanov's film, Yutkevitch apparently used the Russian poetic scenario as a reference. A few of the poems by Sayat-Nova that Yutkevitch did use (such as "Cherish Books") were, in fact, quoted in the scenario, though not retained for the film. He also included an opening inscription by the Russian symbolist poet Valeri Briusov, whom Parajanov quoted in the scenario, although Yutkevitch quoted a different passage, and the "*Matagh*" title Yutkevitch attached to the sacrifice sequence was found near the beginning of the scenario, though it introduced a different episode. None of the material Yutkevitch used from the scenario was in the final "director's cut"—apparently Parajanov no longer felt that a Russian poet's praise was necessary to justify his subject. Also, in the process of making the film, Parajanov's initial conception had undergone a series of refinements that Yutkevitch, not being familiar with Parajanov's extremely broad range of cultural references, could hardly have understood. Indeed, it is possible that one reason the film encountered difficulties with the authorities was the many differences between the Russian scenario and the finished product.

Conclusion

The features described above are only a few of the advantages of the "director's cut" over the Yutkevitch version. The availability of a more authoritative version would be of great importance for any film of this stature, but for *The Color of Pomegranates*, it reveals a work even richer and more beautiful than realized before, an achievement for any director.

If the Soviet version at times seemed hopelessly obscure, the Armenian version reveals that every shot was carefully selected to convey Parajanov's intentions, as subtle and difficult—even bizarre—as those intentions might be. Although the concept of "director as author" and questions of authorial intentionality are certainly not pertinent to every film (or every director), they must at least be grappled with to reach a basic understanding of *The Color of Pomegranates*. It is not without reason that Parajanov is credited in the Armenian version as *filmi heghinak* ("author of the film"), considering the degree of control he exercised over the film's production and the extent to which he diverged from the commonly accepted biographical legend of Sayat-Nova in imposing his private vision over the filmic text (especially the inclusion of homoerotic elements). The fact that such a project was even funded in the Soviet Union (let alone anywhere else) suggests that there is still much that we need to learn about Soviet concepts of film authorship and creative expression, not to mention the daily workings of its film studios.

Far from being completely inaccessible to Western audiences, *The Color of Pomegranates* can and should be thoroughly analyzed for its formal techniques and its various allusions and symbols. Many of these references are not necessarily obscure in themselves, consisting as they do of folk motifs, Christian symbolism, and popular songs. Rather, it is their density and unusual juxtaposition that make the film so demanding, even to Armenian viewers.

There are, of course, aspects of the film that may always defy analysis. Indeed, the inscrutability of certain scenes might well account for a large part of their fascination. This is nothing new in itself; for centuries, scholars have been debating over even basic points of interpretation in the poetry of Jalal-ud-din Rumi. Critics such as Mansel Stimpson are undoubtedly right in declaring that the film can be appreciated for its unique qualities as an art object even if one cannot understand

all it has to say. As Western viewers, it would be more fruitful if, instead of passively letting the film's strange and beautiful images wash over us, we tried to come to terms with the specific historical and cultural background that gave rise to it in the first place. *The Color of Pomegranates* transcends its specific biographical subject; it is a lyric poem, a private meditation on the fate of a people, a richly illustrated album of treasures—anything but a bland, dutiful biography.

Ultimately, no amount of reediting could completely eradicate the film's sense of cultural pride, its religious sentiments, or its sensuousness and eroticism. One critic, Richard Roud, went so far as to name *The Color of Pomegranates* as "the greatest Soviet film since the war" (944). Yet, for a film of such recognized stature, it has remained infrequently seen and even more rarely discussed in depth. Now that a more complete and artistically coherent version is available for viewing, the film's extraordinary achievements can be better appreciated.

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Notes

[1] Whenever possible, I have used the *Armenian Review* system for the transliteration of Armenian words. Any inaccuracies or inconsistencies that remain are solely the author's responsibility.

[2] Sergei Yutkevitch (1904–85), director of such films as *The Black Sail (Chyornii parus*, 1929), *Othello* (1955), and *Theme for a Short Story (Syzhet dlia nebolshovo rasskaza*, 1969), also taught at VGIK.

[3] See Parajanov, *Sept Visions*, 87–119. The French translation was published before the original Russian.

[4] Cazals, unfortunately, was unable to see the Armenian version before his book was written, so his possible insights on these matters are not yet available to us. Except for a capsule review of the film in a *Los Angeles Times* article by Kevin Thomas and Michael Wilmington about the L.A. Film Festival, I have been unable to locate any other mention of the "director's cut."

[5] Tsereteli also wrote the scenario for Parajanov's short film *Arabesques on a Theme of Pirosmani* (*Arabeski na temu Pirosmani*, 1986).

[6] In the Yutkevitch version, these silences were filled in some places by music and sound effects from adjacent sections of the film; in other places they were left intact. It is possible that one of the initial objections to the "director's cut" was its excessive use of silence.

[7] Parajanov's previous features, *Andriesh* (1954), *The First Lad* (*Pervyi paren*, 1958), *Ukrainian Rhapsody* (*Ukrainskaia rapsodia*, 1961), and *Little Flower on the Stone* (*Tsvetok na kamne*, 1962), all of them made at Dovzhenko Studios in Kiev, have only recently been screened in the U.S.; they were dismissed by Parajanov as inferior to his later works, in spite of occasional flashes of brilliance. In fact, even at their weakest moments, they are considerably more interesting than Parajanov allowed and are well worth reconsidering.

[8] The scenario for the semi-autobiographical *Confession* is published in *Sept Visions*, 179–216. The rushes for the film have been edited and included in the documentary *Bobo*, by Vladimir Hairapetian (Aisor Film Studio, Yerevan, 1991).

[9] It is even stranger that these or similar shots are often mentioned by writers such as Cazals as being among those removed from the Soviet cut. These discrepancies may perhaps be explained by the unusual density of the work and the understandable challenges this poses to the viewer's memory. Also, the bootleg print first circulated in the West in support of the international campaign against Parajanov's imprisonment seems to have been censored even more heavily than the official Soviet-release version.

[10] The term *collage* is especially relevant, since collages constitute a major portion of Parajanov's creative output and a large number of his collages are now on display in the Parajanov Museum of Yerevan. In their free combination of elements from different historical epochs, Parajanov's later works resemble his collages, which were frequently constructed out of discarded items such as old lace and dolls. One of his most remarkable collages, an homage to Leonardo Da Vinci, features several cut-up reproductions of *La Gioconda*, including one wearing a beard and an earring—yet another of Parajanov's forays into sexual ambiguity, the openness of which no doubt contributed to his troubles with Soviet authorities.

[11] Parajanov's scenario for *Swan Lake: The Zone* is reprinted in *Sept Visions*, 159–77.

[12] The Armenian monk Komitas (1869-1935) transcribed and arranged thousands of Armenian folk songs, including "Kele Kele." He ceased composing in 1919 and drifted in and out of sanity after the 1915 genocide.

[13] Tigran Mansurian, an Armenian avant-garde composer, provided the decidedly non-traditional arrangements for many of the traditional melodies used in the film. Though some songs—such as the Georgian hymn "*Shen khar venakhi*" ("You Are the Vineyard")—are presented more straightforwardly, others—such as Sayat-Nova's "*Ashkarums akh chim kashi*" ("In This World I Will Not Be Sad")—are fragmented and arranged polyphonically. As a whole, the soundtrack to *The Color of Pomegranates* is among the most daring to come from the Soviet Union during that period.

[14] This scene may be an allusion to the tragic conclusion of *Layla and Majnun*, in which the lovers meet their end in a tomb.

[15] For a good introduction to this subject, I recommend Dournovo.

[16] Many scenes were shot on location at Haghbat, the actual Armenian monastery where Sayat-Nova resided after leaving the court of Erekle II.

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