

The Colour of Pomegranates

(Tsvet granata/Sayat Nova, SU 1969; D.: Sergei Parajanov)

(Picture 2) *“Don’t look for the biography of Sayat Nova, the greatest Armenian poet of the 18th century, in this film. We have merely attempted to bring the imagery of this poetry to life with film, of which Valerij Brjusov wrote: ‘The Armenian poetry of the Late Middle Ages is one of the brightest victories of the human mind which has gone down in the annals of the world.’”*

“The Colour of Pomegranates”, a cinematic poem divided into eight chapters, begins with these words. It describes the life of Armenian poet Aryutin Sayadyan, known as Sayat Nova, who lived and worked in the 18th century. As in a Medieval book of hours, individual sections of the life of the poet are represented in the form of enigmatic, semi-surreal image compositions, without the assistance of a framework plot: The childhood of the poet, his youth, the poet in the court of the Georgian prince during a prayer before the hunt, the poet on his way to the monastery, the dream of the poet, his old age, his encounter with the angel of death and, finally, his death.

(Picture 3) The historical Aryutin Sayadyan was born in 1712 in Tbilisi, in the Armenia quarter of Avlabara. He completed his training at Sanainskii monastery and in his youth already undertook many travels to India and Abyssinia, and mastered various languages. Even in his youth he was a talented writer of lyrical poems, singer and player of the kamancheh. His, for the time, excellent education impressed the Georgian prince Erekle (Iraklii) II, who named Aryutin Sayadyan as his court poet. There he was promoted thanks to his closeness to the ruler and also took on leading political tasks, e.g. as a diplomat in peace negotiations with neighbouring powers. He lost his position when he fell in love with the daughter of the king. After subsequently spending several years as a travelling singer at other royal courts the poet retired to Akhpatskii monastery in his old age and became a monk, but continued to put his thoughts to paper:

“And I affirm that I will not do without my lute as long as its strings are intact and not torn. For when I was ordained as a monk these strings were in the pocket of my habit and were ordained along with me so that I now only play on holy strings.”

The legend tells that Sajat Nova took part in a poetry competition in Tbilisi, which was at the time occupied by the Persians, and found his end in the cathedral there because he refused to renounce his Christian faith. The historical tradition says that he was killed in a Persian invasion of Tbilisi in 1795.

(Picture 4) Although Sayat Nova probably composed thousands of songs, only 220 that are attributed to him have been handed down. Even today these works haven't lost their popularity in many parts of the Caucasus. The corpus of texts handed down consists of a total of 70 songs in Armenian, 128 in Azerbaijani and 30 in Georgian. It has also been passed down that Sayat Nova was most probably also fluent in Arabic and Persian, and probably also wrote poetry in these languages.

Particularly in Armenia Sayat Nova is officially acknowledged as the greatest *Gusan* (Azerbaijani *Ashyq*) of his time. The Armenian composer Aleksandr Arutjunjan wrote an opera named *Sayat Nova* in homage to him. Today numerous institutions and organisations, such as the largest music school in the Armenian capital Yerevan, bear his name. Included in this is also a long established Armenian dance ensemble in the United States, an annual musical competition program of the Armenian diaspora and - as a special homage by patriotic astronomers - a crater on the planet Mercury.

(Picture 5) The first image of the film shows an open book, pomegranates whose crimson juice runs onto a white cloth, a dagger which is stained with blood, grapes which are trodden on, fish drying and writhing in agony, and thorns. These symbols introduce the themes of the film to the viewer, even without them having background knowledge about Sajat Nova. The red colour of the fruit, especially its juice, symbolically represents the juice of life, blood - and thus life itself. The dagger, stained with blood, the crushed grapes, the fish and the thorns symbolise death. In this way the interpretation is suggested that everything that is alive on this earth is moving between life and death, but only humans are given the ability to understand the beauty and drama of their existence, not least through their ability to express themselves in words and to also record these words in writing. It is no coincidence that the first camera

position is an open book. In the beginning was the word, it says in the bible, and it is also at the start of Paradžanov's film. In a sense the word is the window to the world and stands autonomously for itself, independent of life and death.

(Picture 6) The first sequences are accompanied by the words of Sajat Nova: "I am the man whose soul and life are destroyed." These words have a certain dynamic which also apply to the life of the director. There are remarkable parallels between the life of the poet and that of the director. Like the protagonist of his film, Parajanov was not caught up in a single culture but rather was a wanderer between many cultures. Both were born in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, but were of Armenian descent. Both were doomed by the political situation of their time, both died in the city in which they were born. Sajat Nova died, as already mentioned, in an attack by the Persians, Parajanov fought a lifelong battle against the Soviet film administration and judicial system.

In this landscape of national cinematography Sergei Parajanov is a loner and cannot be pigeon-holed into any of the traditions of his time. While most directors of the thaw period cinema used a documentary style - real streets, real faces, real problems - and rebelled against the stiff studio staginess of the fifties, Parajanov filmed a completely different film in the Kiev Dovzenko studio with "Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors" (*Teni zabytykh predkov*), which on the one hand was an aesthetic contra-manifesto, immediately created an international furore and introduced a new name to international cinematic art. Numerous epigones, who initially worked for him as cameramen, actors or assistants, later reproduced and expanded Parajanov's discoveries. However he seemed to be inimitable and also had no predecessor in Soviet film. Labelled as a poetic film-maker he seemed to live in the self-created world of his mythology and to materialise an imaginary world as he saw it in the cinema.

(Picture 7) His behaviour in life was often just as full of effects and eccentrically theatrical as his artwork. Aesthetic beauty was the prime objective; it could emerge from nothing and transform grey life into a celebration. According to a popular anecdote one day the wife of a prominent foreigner wanted to visit him. The electricity had long been off in his Kiev house; there was no light and no elevator. Parajanov had hundreds of candles lit and his costumed students carried the lady up like the Cossacks once carried Empress Catherine the Great: In

this way the miserable everyday was dispelled and transformed into a theatrical act. Paradžanov was a provocateur, eccentric and mysterious, in life as in his art.

(Picture 8) After graduating from the Moscow film university VGIK he initially made a number of documentary films, then more conventional films for government commissions, in which there is nothing to remind us of the Parajanov who would later be celebrated by the world with numerous prizes. After “Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors” he only filmed three more films before his death in 1990: “The Colour of Pomegranates” (*Tsvet granata*), “The Legend of Suram Fortress” (*Legenda o Suramskoj Kreposti*) and “Ashik Kerib” (*Ashik-Kerib*). Between 1974 and 1979 he was imprisoned, convicted for illegal trade, anti-Soviet agitation and homosexuality. The particulars of his legal proceedings remain concealed, as do the reasons for his conviction.

(Picture 9) In the films of Parajanov, an Armenian born in Georgia, one is inclined to admire the true national timbre, an authentic restoration of the past and forgotten life, whether it be Carpathians (“Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors”), Armenia (“The Colour of Pomegranates”), Georgia (“The Legend of Suram Fortress”) or Persia (“Ashik Kerib”). The nationality of the heroes’ changes, but the style, the colour scale and the symbolism are untouched. The “authenticity” of the national timbre emerges as constructed, artistically created, imaginary, mysterious national exotic. The stylistics of Parajanov is just as bewildering. Static settings capture a moment; however the constituent elements of the film seem to lie in the depiction of movement. Paradjanov divides his narratives into chapters; subheadings give a cursory statement of the content and the individual image compositions often seem to follow the model of Middle Ages book miniatures. Every detail seems to be symbolically important and secretive. The decorative image remains static, the space deliberately flat, the gestures of the actor ritualised, almost like in ballet. It is striking how he conveys tragic and philosophical content with very simple materials in a non-narrative, stylised naive film: Death and sacrifice, betrayal and loss of faith, love and forgetting. All of his films, with the exception of the last work, end at death’s door, and are permeated with a tragic outlook on life. The recognition of death stands in stark contrast to the magnificent, delightfully arranged beauty of the fragile artistic world that he creates in front of the camera, and this creates tension. Only “Ashik Kerib” is a happy, yes strange, initiation fairy tale, which ends with the wedding of the lovers and a miracle.

(Picture 10) Parajanov's poetry comes without the montage common in film: Each setting stands for itself and is focused on slow perception. One doesn't have to relate the image to the surrounding images but rather go into the depth of the space. Therefore every component of the image is overloaded with meaning. Everything that is represented seems important: The symbolism of the colours and the costumes, the symbolism of the poetry which serves as a template, and the symbolism of the respective national cultures. This orientation to the symbolic meaning of the details, which cannot all be decoded, wraps the entire film in a fog of ambiguity.

(Picture 11) In "The Colour of Pomegranates" Parajanov develops his themes with the segmentation of the film into individual chapters. The poet is shown as a child on a cathedral, surrounded by numerous manuscripts and books whose pages are being turned by the wind; he appears as a young man and encounters his muse, who at the same time is his beloved. In the further capitals he is shown as the court poet of the Georgian prince, as a monk, as a child who in a dream returns to his parents and has us mourn their death, as an old man who leaves the monastery, encounters the angel of death and finally dies.

(Picture 12) Characteristic for this film is a diminishing of words in favour of a pure imagery. Instead of the narrative literary principle this is a narrative form which seems more related to cinematically translated painting. At the same time the montage forfeits the constructive function of the cinematic medium in construction of meaning. Meaning is much more than the individual settings themselves, which are overloaded with difficult to identify or unidentifiable symbols. While the interpretation of visual symbols such as the pomegranates, the blood-stained dagger or the opened book still seems relatively easy, with the Caucasian warrior who holds the beak of a peacock between his teeth an interpretation of the image without background knowledge is almost impossible: In 1795 Georgia was conquered by the Persian Empire, which was at the time known as "the Peacock Throne". Just as in the beginning of the "moving pictures" the settings of "The Colour of Pomegranates" provoke the fantasy of the viewer and virtually challenge them to collect the depths of their symbolic interpretations. Quotes from poems and songs of Sayat Nova combine into an individual structure of language, without their content becoming directly comprehensible.

With regard to imagery "The Colour of Pomegranates" without a doubt constitutes a highpoint in Soviet cinema. Characteristics of Parajanov's imagery are its austere beauty, its

anti-naturalism and its metaphorical fundamental character. Often they are compared with Eisenstein's planned intellectual cinematography and with his theories about the use of colour in film.

(Picture 13) Even though the film starts depressingly and is rich in open and hidden death symbolism, it still ends optimistically. "I was always happy in my life", announces Sayat Nova before he dies. Even though he himself - as a human - is also subject to the laws of life and death, his words are immortal: "Whether I live or am no more, my song will awake the people. I am going. But from this day forth the world will not be poorer by a whisker." The name Aryutin comes from the Armenian word "aryutyun", which means "resurrection". Therefore one can already hear in the name that the death of the poet does not mean the end, but rather a condition of resurrection, of life itself.