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Parajanov's *Color of Pomegranates*

A Story of Cinematic Rebellion Against the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union is known for its communistic propaganda that led to “the eventual disappearance of national, cultural, religious, and economic distinctions”. During this time, Armenia, a country that relied heavily on the Soviet Union’s economic support, had no choice but to follow the strict regimes of its new government. Along with Armenia, many countries in the Soviet Union suffered immensely as popular media was replaced by propaganda and censored to the guidelines of socialist realism. Armenian director Sergei Parajanov was one of the few artists to release an avant-garde film during this time period. His rebellious nature and cinematic style of surrealism clashed with the sanctioned art style in the Soviet Union. Parajanov’s film *The Color of Pomegranates* has become a revolutionary film associated with the USSR and with Armenia in particular.

Based on the late Armenian Poet and songwriter Sayat Nova, the Armenian influence in *The Color of Pomegranates* is highly apparent. Sergei Parajanov, born as Sarkis Hovsepi Parajanians to artistically-gifted Armenian parents, in Tbilisi, Georgia, grew up with a deep understanding of art and film. After moving to Moscow to study directing at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, he was sentenced to 5 years in prison for homosexual acts that were considered illegal at the time. After three months, he was released because the charges were proven to be false. However, some still speculate that Parajanov was in fact a homosexual and that his films were censored not only because they were politically unaligned with the socialist realism art style, but because his rebellious lifestyle was also thought to be political retaliation.

He would be arrested twice more for other false charges including rape, homosexuality, and bribery. He was unwelcome in the Soviet cinema world until the political climate relaxed more towards the 1980s. At this point, his health would decline until he eventually passed away from lung cancer in the year 1990. He left behind a great legacy of works including the iconic film *The Color of Pomegranates*.

His professional career as a filmmaker started in 1954 but in an artistic fashion, he claims that all the films he made before the year 1965 were garbage. The negative attention of the USSR started with the film *Shadows of the Forgotten Ancestors*, but with the negative attention also came international publicity and thus launching Parajanov's impressive and rebellious career. For about a decade, almost all of his films were banned by Soviet film administrations, including *The Color of Pomegranates*. Even after significantly cutting and reediting the film to appease the administration, the film was not released in his homelands until 20 years later.

The film was created when Parajanov returned to his homeland of Armenia in 1969 and started a film called *Sayat Nova*. The film was shot in poor conditions as he did not have the proper tools or resources to create the feature film he had hoped. In an interview with Ron Holloway for the Spring 1996 Issue of KINEMA Parajanov claims, "I had to make the film under the most difficult conditions. I had no technical prerequisites, no Kodak material, and no processing of the film stock in Moscow. I had absolutely nothing. I had neither enough lighting, nor a wind machine, nor any possibility for special effects. Nevertheless, the quality of the film is indisputable"(Holloway). However, he claims that this made the film more realistic and interesting because he would have to be creative with his equipment and props which gave the film more of an effect than anything real would have (Holloway). Parajanov is incredibly proud of this particular film, and rightfully so. In the same interview he explains that *Sayat Nova* "is

like a Persian jewelry case. On the outside its beauty fills the eyes; you see the fine miniatures. Then you open it, and inside you see still more Persian accessories” (Holloway). Indeed the film was like a Persian jewelry case, but one with many illegal jewels according to the USSR’s standards.

Debates on cinema as a possible form of political intervention had been raging ever since the rise of Soviet Cinema when Lenin commented that cinema was ‘the most important art form’. Stalin reestablished this belief but “After Stalin’s death, the Soviet film industry went through waves of liberalization and renewed repression, but for the most part the directors who came to prominence in the post-war era – including Sergei Parajanov – did not adhere to the revolutionary political outlook of their predecessors.” (Fairfax). The political stake of filmmaking along with Marxist thought, specifically Marx’s Camera Obscura Ideology led to intense re-works of various films including *The Color of Pomegranates*. Marx’s Camera Obscura Ideology explains that a “society or authority legitimates itself by naturalizing itself, by rooting itself in the obviousness of the visible” (Debuysere). According to this logic, all films had to be considered ‘political’, because they were always already overdetermined as expressions of the prevailing ideology, merely reproducing the world as it is experienced when filtered through this ideology. In this way, all films created, unless literal, could be interpreted as rebellious and political in nature. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Parajanov and his avant-garde style did not fit into this ideology.

The avant-garde nature of *The Color of Pomegranates* made the interpretation of the film easy to attack. There is no dramatic narrative that can be seen in many feature films today. The film covers the life of Armenian poet and songwriter Sayat Nova and was actually the initial title of the film. *The Color of Pomegranates* title was adopted after the film was heavily re-edited to

fit the socialist realism that the USSR was trying to instill. Unsurprisingly, Parajanov did not subscribe to the idea of socialist realism and in an interview claims, “Socialist Realism can’t really be defined. It’s not an encyclopedic concept. It exists only in our books. How can Socialist Realism be used as a label for films...” (Holloway). In this way, his views match that of Marx when Marx claims that “Ideology, then, is an imaginary assemblage (bricolage), a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the ‘day’s residues’ from the only full and positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence”(Althusser). They both agree that an ideology is not something that can be considered real especially when it is not concrete. Ideology, specifically socialist realism, only exists in books as Parajanov says.

The idea that Parajanov’s films can be interpreted in one way or another is up for debate. The purpose of the avant-garde is to allow room for that type of interpretation and not be concrete. For example, the passage of time in *The Color of Pomegranates* is shown “not by a cut, fade, or dissolve, but through pantomime” or slow exaggerated movements in single shots (Steffen). According to James Steffen’s article titled “Parajanov’s Playful Poetics: On the Director’s Cut of *The Color of Pomegranates*”, “Since [Parajanov] 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” (Steffen). Yet, unless one already viewed the original work, forced re-edits that Parajanov made would go unnoticed because of the obscure nature of his filmmaking. However, this obscure avant-garde nature is also what could easily be interpreted as anything the USSR deemed politically rebellious and thus, illegal.

Between the years of 1917-1991, film content was heavily restricted and censored, being regulated by the Soviet film administration. In the beginning, the industry became “linked with the Constructivist art movement” and most films addressed major political events and included innovative cinematic techniques in order to promote this political end. However, “with the consolidation of Stalinist power in the Soviet Union, and the emergence of Socialist realism as state policy, which carried over from painting and sculpture into filmmaking, Soviet film became subject to almost total state control” (Cinema of). This created a reflection of tension “between independent creativity and state-directed outcomes” (Cinema of). This reflection led to more success outside of the Soviet Union and filmmakers were slowly given a higher tolerance for what they were allowed to do. Due to Sayat Nova being a national poet and hero to many Armenians, the Soviets “openly encouraged cultural projects of various kinds related to the poet” (Steffen). Yet, even with this encouragement and the more relaxed state of the film administration, Parajanov’s film was heavily censored.

Parajanov’s film, *The Color of Pomegranates*, could be considered explicit to viewers and would be the main cause of the censorship he received when the film was due to be released. According to James Steffen’s book titled “The Cinema of Sergei Parajanov” *The Color of Pomegranates* labeled “most of the chapters as ‘miniatures’” and “sought to cue potential viewers from the outset that the underlying narrative principle was a series of loosely connected episodes inspired by the illustrative qualities of medieval Armenian and Persian miniature paintings”(Steffen). Along with this, there was a lot of re-editing on the part of Parajanov in order to comply with the socialist realism style of the Soviet film administration. For example, in the beginning of the film, we see Sayat Nova in a fetal position while it rains and during this, there is thunder and then a voiceover. However, in the Soviet version of this film, there is no

voice-over and just thunder which can be passed as a “realistic” scene from Sayat Nova’s childhood. The original meaning with the voice-over and thunder was meant to portray the power of God, but that became too religious and thus it had to be removed. This rearrangement and re-editing of the film, “weakens the sequence’s religious and symbolic implications” (Steffen). The voice-over version remains in the Armenian version of *The Color of Pomegranates*. Although the reedits and rearrangements were aimed to fall in line with Soviet film practices and appeal to the general soviet audiences, these re-edits made the film even more avant-garde than it already was and opened it up to a wider array of interpretations. Many comments from the Armenian Communist Party had decided that the film was not really about Sayat Nova and instead about Parajanov’s private fantasies, including homoerotic content that they would later be imprisoned for. However, this may be because in the Armenian version of the film, the opening title states, “ This film does not attempt to tell the life story of the poet. Rather the filmmaker has decided to recreate the poet’s inner world, through the trepidations of his soul, his passions and torments...” (Steffen).

According to scholars and viewers, the scenes that contain supposed homoerotic content are very obvious and clear. In the article “Parajanov’s Playful Poetics”, Steffen provides this example of the film as evidence of this homoerotic content:

“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 useful [in] 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" (Steffen).

This is the only instance of a homoerotic scene that when you think about it from an outside or modern perspective, in no way seems erotic, nonetheless, homoerotic. However, when watching the film, the way in which the men are in physical contact can be construed as sexual in nature. This is enough evidence for the USSR to label Parajanov, himself, as a homosexual or to claim that he has participated in such scenarios.

One more example of a homoerotic scene is when Sayat Nova, as a child looks into a sulfur bath and sees "two figures of beauty", the king and the princess, and "both carry a strong erotic charge"(Steffen). Indeed, if this was a scene of eroticism, then it would be obvious that the view of the King in the bath would cause havoc amongst the Soviet film administration. However, as an artist and avant-garde filmmaker, Parajanov was not new to the idea of an aesthetic and the "figures of beauty" make just an aesthetic preference and not erotically charged. This is difficult to prove or disprove considering the many charges against Parajanov, but it is open to interpretation just like his film.

Of course, Sergei Parajanov was subject to criticism as a filmmaker during the Soviet Union Era. His life was tremendously affected by *The Color of Pomegranates* and his other films following the attempted release. His outspoken criticism of the soviet film administration and their clear disdain for Parajanov led to many false arrests. In 1973, 4 years after the attempted release of *The Color of Pomegranates* Parajanov was continuously rejected by movie studios and

was later sentenced to 5 years in prison for bribery and homosexuality. Of course, this arrest was met by protests from all over the world and even from within the Soviet Union. Other blacklisted filmmakers spoke up to no avail. Eventually, a communist poet assisted in the release of Parajanov in which he immediately returned to his hometown of Tbilisi, Georgia. After 15 years of unemployment “after *The Color of Pomegranates*, thanks to the efforts of the Georgian intelligentsia, Parajanov was permitted to direct” (Maestro Sergei). The next feature Parajanov directed was his Azeri masterpiece *Ashik Kerib* (1988), which was also selected by prestigious festivals, in Venice and New York, and won the European Film Academy Award (Maestro Sergei). Even after this, Parajanov claims that he is proud that his film *The Color of Pomegranates* never won any awards (Holloway). Assuming he did win an award during the Soviet Union Era, that would mean that he would have conformed to the socialist realism style that was forced upon him. If that happened, it would have actually been considered a failed film by Parajanov.

There is another way to mark the success of *The Color of Pomegranates* and that would be its incredible impact on today’s creative minds. Artists like Lady Gaga, and alternative rock group R.E.M. created music videos inspired by the iconic film including 911 and Losing My Religion. In fact, Lady Gaga’s music video, 911, contains scenes that are almost identical to the film and even contains Armenian caution tape (911). There is no denying that the video was heavily influenced by Parajanov. Even if it was purely for aesthetic reasons, the work of Parajanov will live on and as long as that happens, then his story, his aesthetic, and his film *The Color of Pomegranates* will live on as well. It is a revolutionary film that portrays the life of a poet and musician that did things a little differently than most and thus created a new world. Sergei Parajanov can also be considered held to that same regard.



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