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#Klassiki

Colour of Pomegranates (1969) by Sergei Parajanov

What is there to say about Sergei Parajanov's film epic masterpiece that hasn't already been said? *Sight & Sound* magazine placed it as the 84th best move of all-time. Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation completed the 2014 restoration, re-edited to be as true to Parajanov's own vision as possible. Cinephiles, and even those less fanatical about the medium, pore over every scene. There are mounds of academic work committed to deciphering Parajanov's revolutionary visual language. Nicolas Jaar, an electronic musician, was so inspired by the film he made his own soundtrack, which is now a popular album in its own right. Lady Gaga even references the film in her music video for *911*. In light of this attention, it might be better instead to try to answer, what is *Colour of Pomegranates* (1969) saying?

There are numerous lenses through which one could view Parajanov's work, and all of these readings are most likely true. But, the major themes which comprise the foundation of the film, and indeed the foundation of Parajanov's own life are as follows: the persecution of the Armenian people, made synonymous with martyrdom; ethnographic homage and repurposing art heritage in film; and a queer narrative that defies love and gender normativity through evolving symbols. Parajanov was born to Armenian parents in Soviet Tbilisi, and his deep affiliation with Caucasus and the other persecuted cultures of the USSR staked him as a natural outsider. In the film's opening sequence, the juice of the crushed pomegranates spills out over a map of the Kingdom of Armenia. In another scene a battalion of men eat pomegranates whole. The film's soundtrack plays with diegetic and non diegetic sound, merging them both uncannily into one strange amorphous blur. In this case a vicious and hyperbolic crunch sounds as the men eat, merged with doomsday gongs symbolising the Armenian nation's impending doom.

In Parajanov's own words, the film is a 'series of Persian miniatures.' Parajanov's preoccupation with artistic heritage was longstanding prior to this film; intoned in a deep respect for cultural identity, most likely drawn from his own national identity and path as an artist. His other works have similarly celebrated the contributions of great artists and lovingly replicated ethnographic symbols: *Hakkob Hovnatian* (1967) and

Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (1965) are two pertinent examples of this but certainly all of his films hold, as Carmen Grey aptly stated, 'A voice of the satellite states, transforming their folklore into visual poetry as inscrutable as it is oneiric.' In light of both Parajanov and Grey's statements, to repurpose an often used phrase, each scene is not just like a painting, but in fact pertains to pre-existing works of art. This is used to phenomenal effect as the static nature of the beautifully and painstakingly staged mise-en-scene and internal movement collide: a sheep adorned with flowers wanders slightly to the left; the poet lies dying, still and surrounded by candles whilst chickens maniacally flap around his body; and, iconically, Sofiko Chiaureli raises a piece of lace to her eye.

Chiaureli plays both male and female roles in the film. She plays not only Princess Anna, but Sayat Nova as a young man. This androgynous flow between characters in part provides the film's obvious queer subtext. But on top of this the film is rife with homoerotic symbolism, from the entwined bodies of a massage administered at the baths and the camera's predilection for taking an erotic, and even soft, approach to the male form. Parajanov was unfortunately imprisoned for 'homosexual acts'. Whilst he was openly bisexual in his own life, it is widely thought that these charges were falsified, an attempt to thwart the voice of a subversive genius.

Analysis is interesting but it does not speak to the transformative viewing experience. It is not necessary to understand the subtext, or even the film itself, to enjoy the whirlwind of artistry. *Colour of Pomegranates* opens with the statement, 'The film does not attempt to tell the life story of the poet, rather the filmmaker has tried to recreate the poet's inner world, through the trepidations of his soul, his passion and torments.' This is the most important part to carry with you, the film whilst linear, takes you through another's subconscious: laden with the symbols, mythologies and fixations Parajanov has presumed of Sayat Nova. It is a journey through the soul. At a deeper glance, it is evident that the poet's passions and torments are Parajanov's own. It is best to take his heed, but view the film as a recreation of the director's inner world too.



Sergei Parajanov

Sergei Parajanov was a Soviet film director of Armenian descent who made contributions to Georgian, Armenian, and Ukrainian cinema. He invented his own flamboyant cinematic style, which, combined with his controversial lifestyle, led to repeated persecution, imprisonment and banning of his films. Notable works include: *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969), *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), *The Legend of Suram Fortress* (1985) and *Ashik Kerib* (1988).

About Klassiki

Klassiki screens a highly curated selection of director led films, with each week's choice introducing UK audiences to an important filmmaker's work. An opportunity to experience online a weekly curated selection of the best of Soviet, Russian, Caucasian and East European cinema, KLASSIKI ranges from early silent cinema, to masterpieces of animation, from post-war classics to contemporary Cannes winners. Supplementing the film experience, KLASSIKI offers specially commissioned and downloadable programme notes as well as podcasts and filmed introductions which give biographical, social and political context to each film. We also program film seasons, including RED FRONT: 75 YEARS OF RUSSIAN WAR CINEMA and TASHKENT FILM ENCOUNTERS, to spotlight classic cinema from Central Asia.

This is the birth of Klassiki, our planned free streaming platform, which will allow you to stream great cinema from the region, literally on the hop.

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About Kino Klassika Foundation

Kino Klassika is the only organisation in the world dedicated to spotlighting cinema from Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The foundation creates programmes of film restorations, publications, art commissions and events to educate audiences about classic Russian language and Eastern cinema. This includes a 2-year programme to spotlight the pioneering work of filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and our first restoration projects *Hakob Havnatanyan*, *Arabesques on the Ploshmani Theme* and *Jirdan* (1969). We have recently completed *Melodia! Discovering Musicals from Russia and the Caucasus*, a screening season in partnership with the British Film Institute, Institut Francais, Bristol Watershed and Broadway Nottingham. KLASSIKI continues Kino Klassika's longstanding undertaking to showcase classic films from the region. By giving audiences access to unseen gems as well as the opportunity to meet and chat with directors and filmmakers from Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Kino Klassika are a trusted, credible and essential part of the UK's specialist film exhibition sector.

Kino Klassika's trustees are Professor Ian Christie, Daniel Jowell QC, Roger Munnings CBE and Justine Waddell. The patron of Kino Klassika is Ralph Fiennes.

The Kino Klassika Team

This screening could not happen without the unstinting support of the Kino Klassika team: Joseph Andreyev, Tatiana Isaeva, Zoryana Mischiy, Olja Mljjevic, Seraphina Paisey and Talitha Piggott.

Upcoming Klassiki Screenings

Klassiki will screen a new film in our weekly curated series, until February 4, 2021, where encouraged by the success of this weekly film season, we are launching our new VOD platform, klassiki.online. Please share the news with your friends!

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