

## “BEAUTY IS MY ILLNESS”

*by Layla Alexander-Garrett*

Sergei Paradjanov was the personification of theatre, a human carnival and a living legend. A dreamer, a trickster, and a rebel. He brought the film world to his knees with the magnificence of his cinematic images. Yet, at the same time, he was a convict, deprived of civil rights, who collected yellow dandelions growing beneath the gulag fence, for use in his masterpieces. Paradjanov's creativity, which could not be constrained despite the imprisonment, humiliation and suffering which he endured, is perfectly encapsulated in the lines of Anna Akhmatova: “If you knew from what rubbish/ grow lines poetry, knowing no shame...” This was a man who embodied the very definition of freedom, who experienced audience acclaim as well as the wrath of the Soviet system, which strove to stifle any trace of independent thought. Paradjanov, however, was not a dissident. His attitude was more akin to that of his contemporary, the great poet Joseph Brodsky, for whom “Politics is a kind of dark forest. /Both life, and death and deadly dull...”

Paradjanov is one of the greatest filmmakers of the twentieth-century. Directors such as Fellini, Antonioni and Tarkovsky called him “a genius”, “a magician”, “a maestro”.

The hospitality and generosity of Paradjanov have become legendary. His door was open day and night to guests. At his table one might have come across Andrei Tarkovsky, Marcello Mastroianni, Tonino Guerra, and, just as likely, the uneducated young ruffian from around the corner. To Tarkovsky's bewilderment, Paradjanov replied that there is no one unworthy of being his guest, and offered his great friend the option of either leaving the table or sharing the meal with all those present. Paradjanov even suggested that Tarkovsky try going to prison for a year, because speculative theory on imprisonment and its direct experience are two very different things. In his last film, “Ashik Kerib”, the beautiful lead is played by Yuri Mgoyan, Paradjanov's Kurdish neighbour and troublemaker of the local police, whose life was radically changed by meeting the director.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, said Socrates, the fearless libertarian. Paradjanov dedicated his life to the service of beauty; it was beauty that helped him survive five hopeless years in the Soviet gulag. “Beauty is my illness”, he admitted. “I am constantly being criticised for creating beauty. For the fact that each individual shot in my films could be hung in a picture frame, and that you don't make cinema like this... Beauty is everywhere in nature – many people pass it by with indifference. I do not pass by with indifference... That is all...”

Paradjanov continued to create works of art in the gulag. He sewed dolls from sacking, made medals from milk bottle lids; scraps of paper, labels, screws, wrappers – everything was used for making collages, which he likened to a compressed film.

“My art saved me”, Paradjanov said upon his release. He harboured no resentment towards his persecutors; he was not embittered towards life or towards the people who tormented him. Understanding, compassion, love – all-forgiving

and all-trusting – these words, which have lost their value in our time, capture the essence of this great artist, and permeate his work.

Sergei Iosifovitch Paradjanov was born on 9 January 1924 into an old Armenian family, in a house standing on Kote Meskhi Street in Tiflis (as he called his beloved city of Tbilisi). “What is my life story?” – wrote the director a few years before his death – “dard “ (Armenian for sorrow and grief) – that is its eternal form... I turn around - and see my old age. That is how I feel at 63...”

Paradjanov’s parents were Siran Davidovna Bazhanova – his mother – and Iosif Sergeyevich Paradjanov. His father was an antiques dealer, and the family lived in constant fear of his arrest. When recalling his childhood, Paradjanov joked: “every morning, frightened of our home being searched, my mother would make me swallow diamonds, and then she would follow me around for the whole day with a potty.” He was surrounded by beautiful objects from early childhood: Persian carpets, Venetian glass, ancient cameos, exquisite Brabant lace, and the handiwork of local craftsmen with which he would play theatre games, talking to them “as if they were living creatures”. “A director is born in childhood”, Paradjanov would say. “Childhood is a hoard of priceless treasures, from which you draw inspiration, supplementing it with observations of the new era, life, and society...”

In 1942 Paradjanov enrolled on a degree in construction at Tbilisi’s Railway Institute, but soon realised he had made a mistake in his choice of profession and transferred to the musical college at the Tbilisi State Conservatory to study the violin and singing. He also took dance lessons at the choreography school of Tbilisi’s Opera Theatre.

In 1945 he arrived in Moscow, with only his “felt boots, camping stove, and watchman’s coat”, and passed the entrance exams to VGIK (the State Institute of Cinematography). “Having reached adulthood, I roamed around in search of a well-paid job, until I stumbled upon VGIK, where I studied with great success, and ever since then I have been starving”, recalled Paradjanov, remembering his youth, when he would faint whilst queuing up for his daily (400 grams) ration of bread.

In 1950 Paradjanov married Nigyar Serayeva, a charming tartar girl. One year later she was brutally murdered by her family for apostasy; thrown under a train.

In 1952, Sergei Paradjanov graduated from the directing course at VGIK, where he studied under Igor Savchenko. It was then, under the supervision of Savchenko and Alexander Dovzhenko, that his diploma film “Moldavian Tale” was made. After he completed his studies, Paradjanov was sent to work in Kiev, at the Dovzhenko Film Studio. His directorial debut was the feature-length film “Andriesh” (1954). Paradjanov made a number of feature films in Ukraine: “The First Lad” (1958), “Ukrainian Rhapsody” (1961), and “Flower on the Stone” (1962); and several documentaries – “Nataliia Uzhvii”, “Dumka”, and “Golden Hands”. He would later refer to these early films as “garbage”.

In 1955 Paradjanov married the seventeen-year-old Ukrainian beauty Svetlana Sherbatyuk, who became his life-long muse. The marriage lasted over six years, during which time they had one son, Suren.

In 1964, at the Dovzhenko Studio, Paradjanov made his first true masterpiece, “Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors”, based on the novella by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, for which he acted as both director and screenwriter. Thus a new genius entered the world of cinema, producing a new cinematic language of vivid painterly expression unlike anything else before it.

Since childhood, Paradjanov had been drawn to folk art, tales, legends, and music. “These have always been the source of my inspiration... This passion and love for folk art can be found in my films “Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors”, “The Legend of Suram Fortress”, “Ashik Kerib”...”

The film “Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors” was honoured with numerous international awards, and Paradjanov’s name gained world renown, placing him amongst the ranks of the world’s greatest directors.

In the first two years after its release alone, the film amassed over thirty prizes at international festivals in more than twenty countries (it received an award from the British Film Academy), which is noted in the Guinness Book of Records.

The film tells the story of a blood feud between two old clans, and two lovers – a Carpathian Romeo and Juliet – Ivan and Marichka, who dared contradict their parents’ will. “I had hardly begun to read Kotsiubinsky’s story when I knew I wanted to make a film of it”, wrote Paradjanov. “I fell in love with this crystal-clear feeling of beauty, harmony, eternity... where nature becomes art, and art – nature”.

Even more brave and innovative was Paradjanov’s next film “Sayat Nova”, made in 1969 at the Armenian Film Studio. It was released under the title “The Colour of Pomegranates”, and was given the lowest ranking (category three) by the authorities, with a limited distribution. In the context of Social realism principals, the film was regarded as a “defiance and provocation” by the party and cinematic establishment. A directive ensued from Goskino (USSR State Committee for Cinematography) to close the picture, and only the intervention of the greatly respected Soviet director Sergei Yutkevich, who re-edited the director’s material, allowed for its release. At the time it was the only way in which the film could be saved; today it would be regarded as an outrageous infringement on the rights of the auteur.

“The Colour of Pomegranates” is rightfully described as a unique cultural phenomenon. The vibrant opulence of the film, and the director’s unrelenting fantasy and wild independence, astounded both worldly critic and unsophisticated viewer alike. In the film, Paradjanov takes to a new level the possibilities of “imagery in music, and the expressivity of the silent shot”. “My direction easily dissolves into painting, and therein lies its greatest weakness, and probably, its greatest strength”, he explained. “We impoverish ourselves by thinking only in cinematic terms. That is why I am always painting, why I am more willing to talk to artists and composers”.

“The Colour of Pomegranates” is made up of a number of vignettes, in which the director reconstructs the life of the medieval Armenian poet Sayat-Nova: his love, his search for the truth, his creative highs and lows. “I am he whose life and soul is suffering”, – these words of Sayat-Nova are the leitmotif of the film. “I am Sayat-Nova”, wrote Sergei Paradjanov on one of the pages of his script.

Despite his international fame, the Soviet bureaucrats did not forgive Paradjanov his independent existence. In 1973 Sergei Paradjanov was unlawfully arrested in Kiev, on fabricated charges of “raping a member of the communist party, and trading antiques” and sentenced to five years in the hard labour camps. “I am working, getting accustomed to the dirty life,” wrote the world-famous director from the gulag, “hard labour is terrible... I don't know how to swear, and I have no tattoos... They come here at the age of nineteen, with a fifteen-year sentence. Killers, drug addicts... In the camp there are a thousand human lives and a thousand horrors. All this reminds me of Bosch. Terrible... What shall I do after my release? I will not return to cinema. It has ruined me...”

In the camp Paradjanov worked as a cleaner and in the laundry; he did the jobs that the other convicts considered beneath them. They could never believe that it was a famous director before them, not a thief or a spy. “I am in captivity, but not in a labour camp... I am working as a cleaner in the workshop. Recently someone deliberately flooded the workshop. All night, standing in ice-cold water, I scooped out the water with buckets. I am spitting blood. Can this really be my end?”

Imprisonment did not destroy the artist. He writes that he managed to bring out eight hundred works of art from the prison, including figures made out of ordinary sacks, such as the doll of Lilya Brik; a series of drawings entitled ‘Requiem for Pasolini’ (Paradjanov heard of the tragic death of his favourite director whilst in the camp); and collages. The distinguished director Roman Balayan said: “amongst the thousands of his collages are several true masterpieces. Many people have called, and still call, him a genius; I never did so, I called him a “force of nature”. Elemental, inexplicable, never fully comprehensible...”

Paradjanov taught his fellow inmates to draw, he wrote letters for them to their families, accompanied with sketched portraits drawn with a ballpoint pen (that was all he was allowed to use). He recalled with pride the prison exhibition he put on, in which both inmates and guards took part.

Paradjanov endured his isolation stoically. “It is harsh and even frightening, but necessary and formative”, he wrote in his letters home. “The world of “ashugs” minstrels, of angels and archives is ridiculous in comparison to pathology, slang, and, simply, tattoos. Of course I am ridiculous, as I allow people to push ahead of me, or offer up my seat.”

As a result of numerous campaigns on his behalf orchestrated by such renowned cultural figures as Aragon, Truffaut, Godard, Fellini, Antonioni, Visconti, Lilya Brik, Vasili Katanyan, Bella Akhmadulina, Andrei Tarkovsky and many others, Paradjanov was released on 30 December 1977.

Paradjanov was dubbed “the Armenian, born in Georgia, sent to a Russian prison for Ukrainian nationalism”. For this “Ukrainian nationalism” Paradjanov was forbidden to live in Ukraine, so he returned to Tbilisi. “Thirty years later, I returned to the city where I was born in 1924. I returned an old man, and it was as if I had two wings growing from my back; on the one side I had fame, triumph, recognition, and on the other – the humiliation of a slave, prisoner, convict. I have neither official titles nor awards. I am nobody. I live in Georgia, in Tbilisi, in

the old city of my parents, and when it rains I sleep under an umbrella and I am happy because it reminds me of a Tarkovsky film...”

In 1982 Paradjanov was arrested once more. He spent eleven months in a Tbilisi prison, without any kind of judicial hearing. Despite his international recognition, Paradzhanov was a constant target of attacks from Soviet authorities. No other director went through what Paradjanov suffered: two arrests, a five-year sentence, and, after his release a fifteen-year ban from working in cinema!

In the period of forced idleness, without permission to film, Paradjanov continued to produce art, by making sketches for future films, writing scripts and memoirs. He wrote over twenty screenplays, such as “Confession”, “Demon”, “The Sleeping Palace”, “Ara the Beautiful”, and “The Martyrdom of Shushanik”. None of these were produced. The Soviet authorities considered Paradjanov’s work unworthy of Soviet screens. “The people do not know such a director”, - they decided for the people. Such was the unparalleled harshness and blindness of “the most humane system in the world”.

All these years Paradjanov spent in poverty, but he did not complain to the powers that be. As Mandelstam, who died in Stalin’s labour camps, wrote: “In opulent poverty, mighty misery/ Live calmly, comfortable be”.

In 1984 at the Georgian Film Studio, Paradjanov managed to make the film “The Legend of Suram Fortress”, based on an old Georgian legend about the self-sacrifice of a young warrior in order to save his homeland. “The fortress will stand only if the most beautiful young man is immured within its walls” – the prophetess delivers her terrible verdict... and a fearless young man steps out from the warriors, whose sacrifice renders the fortress eternally indestructible.

Once again Paradjanov astounded the viewer with the force of his imagination, the exquisiteness of his aesthetics, the richness of his palette, the ritualistically intense deliberate theatricality of the acting, and the grandiosity of the costumes, which he was directly involved in creating.

At the beginning of perestroika the attitude towards Paradjanov changed. In 1988, the Georgian Film Studio released his last film, “Ashik Kerib”, based on Mikhail Lermontov’s story of the same name. “Ashik Kerib” is one of the most brilliant films of Paradjanov’s oeuvre. The film presents a kind of journey into the secret world of the orient, with its culture, traditions, rituals, entrancing music and poetry. The screen is likened to an oriental miniature, combining to inimitable effect the colours and musical sounds which pour forth from it.

It is another love story, about a poor, handsome ashug and the beauty Magul-Megeri, the daughter of a rich local man, who won’t stand to see her betrothed to a pauper. Ashik Kerib embarks on a seven-year voyage so that he may become worthy of the hand and heart of his beloved.

“I was making the film for myself and for my people. I am a Christian... We were shooting the film while there was a war in Karabakh. We were making a Muslim film. According to the laws of patriotism we should have dropped the film and gone to the trenches. But this would only have let down Lermontov.” Paradjanov preferred to use art as a weapon against war.

Paradjanov dedicated his last film to his friend Andrei Tarkovsky, who passed away in Paris in December 1986.

For the first time, Paradjanov was allowed to go abroad, having been invited to international festivals, where he would win over the hearts of the audience with his sparkling wit, generosity, kindness and unequalled sense of humour.

In 1989 Paradjanov began to shoot his autobiographical film “Confession” at the Armenian Film Studio. He had harboured the dream of creating “a most sacred film” since 1969, when, dying of double pneumonia, he begged the doctor to extend his life “if only by six days”, so that he might use the time to write a screenplay about his childhood. He used to say that each director has one “most important” confessional film, like Tarkovsky’s “The Mirror”. “Of all my unwritten and unrealised screenplays, first and foremost I would want to stage this one. I must return to my childhood in order to die in it...I want to go back to my roots, master the past, wake up the shadows of my ancestors... From the shards, fragments and scraps of the past, from the smiles of subjects and faces, I am trying to stick together the images of childhood, to rescue them from oblivion and death...” The following lines by Paradjanov come from the script’s epigraph: “‘Confession’ is a film-memory elevated to an image! Only the director born in 1924 in Tiflis can make this film!” – signed “AUTHOR (died in childhood...) 1969”.

Work on the film was interrupted due to Paradjanov’s increasingly poor-health. The director only spent two days on the film set, managing to shoot just one scene from his childhood memoirs – the funeral of the neighbours’ daughter, Vera.

At the invitation of the French government, Paradjanov went to Paris for treatment, but his illness was already incurable. Sergei Paradjanov passed away from lung cancer on 21 July 1990, in Yerevan.

His flat on Kote Meskhi Street in his beloved Tiflis was wrecked. Sad is the written truth: “There is no prophet in his fatherland”.

Sergei Paradjanov died, having witnessed only the very beginning of his immortality. “With Paradjanov’s departure the cinema world lost one of its magicians. Paradjanov’s fantasy will always inspire and bring joy to people around the world”. These words were signed by Federico Fellini, Marcello Mastroianni, Francesco Rossellini, Alberto Moravia and Giulietta Masina.

Paradjanov’s contribution to world cinema is indisputable. His unique cinematic language has no parallel; it never ceases to amaze viewers with its unique poetic imagination.

“One must know how to express passions, to see, to love, and to worship. Love is not enough! One must worship...” – this is the main motif of Paradjanov’s art, this is his testament.

Paradjanov is an acknowledged master of world cinema, yet his work is hardly known in Britain. The Paradjanov Festival will be an important cultural event for London and Bristol. For the first time the public will be given the opportunity to see a full retrospective of the director’s films. The festival will run from 22 February to 9 May. It will open at the National Theatre with an exhibition of the work of eminent Georgian photographer Yuri Mechitov - a close friend of Paradjanov, who made a chronicle of the director’s life (22 February – 28 March).

Paradjanov's films and documentaries about his life will be shown at the British Film Institute (BFI Southbank) from 1 to 17 March. The BFI Gallery will display an installation by Mat Collishaw, inspired by the works of Paradjanov (27 February – 9 May); an international symposium will be held on 6 March, as well as a workshop on 13 March.

Pushkin House and the French Institute Ciné Lumière will host film screenings and meetings with guests of the festival. There will be a concert held at St. Eghiche Armenian church on 27 February. In April, the Paradjanov Festival will continue in Bristol.

The festival will unite audiences of different cultures and nationalities, giving them the opportunity to experience, and forever preserve in their hearts, the beauty and uniqueness of Paradjanov's art.

Details of the Paradjanov Festival can be found at:

[www.paradjanov-festival.co.uk](http://www.paradjanov-festival.co.uk)

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