

The Colour of Pomegranates

Director: Sergei Paradjanov

Country: Armenia

Date: 1969

A review by Tony Paley for The Guardian.

When Martin Scorsese introduced his Film Foundation's newly restored version of *The Colour of Pomegranates* at the Toronto film festival in September he told the expectant audience they were going to witness images and visions "pretty much unlike anything in cinema history". The 1969 Armenian film, voted 84th best of all-time in the most recent *Sight & Sound* magazine greatest movies poll, only gained a belated official release in western cinemas in 1982, but even the cinephiles and critics who have lauded the film with such extravagant praise since should now prepare to see Sergei Parajanov's masterpiece afresh.



The digital restoration, completed in conjunction with Cineteca di Bologna, comes as close as possible to the director's original vision and it is this version, described by critic and Toronto festival programmer James Quandt as "a cinematic Holy Grail", which will screen at the London film festival in October. Four years after Parajanov completed what was then titled *Sayat Nova* – his dazzling film poem inspired by the life of the eponymous 18th-century poet and musician – he was arrested by the Soviet authorities and spent more than three years in jail while

suffering the indignity of seeing his film re-edited and given a limited release.

The history of and background to *The Colour of Pomegranates* are as remarkable as the film's fantastical imagery. Parajanov was born in Soviet Georgia of Armenian parents in 1924 and was a talented musician before switching his attentions at the age of 21 to film-making and joining the famous Soviet Russian All-Union State Institute of Cinematography film school in Moscow. Three years later he had his first clash with the Soviet leadership and spent two months in jail after being found guilty of homosexual acts, then illegal in Russia. Parajanov was released on appeal and always denied the charges but the episode would later be a key factor in the troubled history of *The Colour of Pomegranates*.

He married in 1950 but his personal life continued to be tormented, and the following year his wife was murdered, the speculation being that her own brothers committed the deed over some religious or financial dispute. His seven-year long second marriage ended in divorce in 1962, the same year as the release of Andrei Tarkovsky's remarkable debut film *Ivan's Childhood*, a turning point for Parajanov, who disowned his earlier work and would later write of his fellow director in the magazine *Film Comment*: "Tarkovsky, who was younger than I by 12 years, was my teacher and mentor. He was the first in *Ivan's Childhood* to use images of dreams and memories to present allegory and metaphor. Tarkovsky helped people decipher the poetic metaphor."

Parajanov was shaped in his early years by the potent intermingling of cultures in his country of birth and perhaps his most significant achievement was to bring the rich heritage of the non-Russian Soviet states of Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine to the attention of world cinema. His later films are a heady mix, combining Parajanov's deep love of the region's folk art and the influences of other Soviet masters such as Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Dovzhenko with, in the case of *The Colour of Pomegranates*, stylistic flourishes borrowed from silent film-makers and modernist film techniques in the form of jump cuts.

The first work of his mature period, and the feature which brought Parajanov to international attention, was *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1964), a story of doomed love among feuding families in the

harsh Carpathian mountains. But it was *The Colour of Pomegranates*, organised as chapters depicting the life of Sayat Nova in a series of poetic, dreamlike tableaux which was to cement his legacy and led the late Gilbert Adair to state in his book *Flickers* that “although in both style and content it gives us the impression, somehow, of predating the invention of the cinema, no historian of the medium who ignores *The Colour of Pomegranates* can ever be taken seriously”. The Soviet cinema authorities were happy to continue to work with Parajanov because of his new-found international reputation, but concerns were being expressed about the script even before *The Colour of Pomegranates* went into production. The film’s idiosyncratic nature allied to the director’s sometimes provocative behaviour plus his involvement in the politics of the region would eventually bring him under close scrutiny.

The Colour of Pomegranates, even in a re-edited form designed to try and make it more accessible, was refused overseas distribution with pirate copies only emerging abroad once the director was in jail and the bid to free him from his prison had become a cause for the international film community. The film opens with a male voice proclaiming “I am he whose life and soul are torment” from a Sayat Nova poem. In his 2013 book, *The Cinema of Sergei Parajanov*, James Steffen states: “Much of the film’s thematic richness and emotional resonance derive from its dual vision as a film about [the poet] and as a coded autobiography of [Parajanov].”

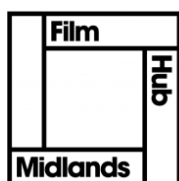
Parajanov, who according to Steffen “was probably bisexual, with a preference for men, especially in his later life”, used the brilliant actress Sofiko Chiaureli to play five parts, including the young male poet as well as female roles. “[Parajanov] made no secret of his sexuality, and indeed,” writes Steffen, “one can find homoerotic elements in many of his mature films and artworks.”

The director was unable to complete new projects before being arrested again in 1974 on the pretext of homosexual acts, but as part of what appeared to be a wider political crackdown by the Soviet authorities determined to quell nationalist sentiment in the region. Parajanov only left jail at the end of 1977. His subsequent outspoken defence of artistic freedom led to his re-arrest on trumped-up bribery charges in 1982 and he probably only escaped further imprisonment because of the likelihood of another prominent campaign on his behalf. Parajanov was able to complete two more films and be hailed on the international film festival circuit in the late 1980s when he was allowed to travel, but was in the early stages of his most cherished project, the autobiographical *Confession*, when he was diagnosed with lung cancer from which he would die a year later in 1990.

The Colour of Pomegranates can be a bewildering experience for western viewers or, indeed, for anyone not steeped in the history of the region in which it is set, but the magnitude of Parajanov’s cinematic achievement is clear to see. At the Toronto screening, Scorsese said: “I didn’t know any more about Sayat Nova at the end of the picture than I knew at the beginning, but instead what Parajanov did was he opened a door into a timeless cinematic experience.”

Jean-Luc Godard, one of the directors who fought for Parajanov’s release in the 1970s, said: “I think you have to live at least 15 miles away and feel the need to walk there on foot to see [*The Colour of Pomegranates*]. If you feel that need and give it that faith, the film can give you everything you could wish.”

From: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/oct/07/the-colour-of-pomegranates-sergei-parajanov-london-film-festival-2014>



THE
NATIONAL
LOTTERY®



FAN
BFI FILM AUDIENCE NETWORK

This film show is part of Shrewsbury Film Society’s *Five at Fifty* season of classic films from 1969 which has been made possible with support from Film Hub Midlands through funds from the National Lottery. Film Hub Midlands support people to watch, show, and make films in the Midlands.