

## WORKING TOGETHER

NOTES ON BRITISH FILM  
COLLECTIVES IN THE 1970S

Edited by Dan Kidner and Petra Bauer, Focal Point Gallery, 274pp, £15.00, ISBN 1907185054

### Reviewed by Sukhdev Sandhu

Received wisdom used to be that British cinema was moribund in the 1970s. It was lamented that even the *Carry On* films had gone crap. Give or take the odd horror film, and outliers such as Kevin Brownlow's *Winstanley* (1975), the standard line is that just as with literature (inert until the arrival of Salman Rushdie-style postcolonialism) and pop music (apparently desperate for punk's slash-and-burn dynamism), the 1970s was a desert.

Such sweeping historiographies rarely tell the whole story. In recent years, a growing number of artists and curators have begun to explore one of the most neglected aspects of British film culture in the 1970s: the rise of film collectives such as The London Women's Film Group, Cinema Action and the Berwick Street Film Collective. Put it down to what Hal Foster has called "archive fever", a renewed interest in the 'militant image', the art world's enduring fondness for spotlighting utopian or vanguardist groups from the past or, more generally, a creeping sense that today's

recessional and austerity-plagued cultural landscape has a lot in common with the 1970s: a mode of filmmaking that for many years was either ignored or dismissed as a leftist relic of pre-identity politics is now beginning to get its due.

*Working Together* has been assembled by two individuals with a commitment to commitment. Petra Bauer is a Swedish artist whose films include *Sisters!* (2010), about the Southall Black Sisters, a group set up by Asian and Afro-Caribbean women in 1979, initially to campaign against domestic abuse; Dan Kidner is a curator involved with bringing back into circulation the film essays of the English maverick Marc Karlin. Gorgeously produced, on roughly textured paper that evokes the heady days when cine discourse was circulated via Gestetnered and mimeographed documents, the book reproduces key articles from journals such as *Afterimage*, *Screen* and *Red Rag* in which the politics and practice of radical cinema are discussed with passion and rigour. These are supplemented by insightful interviews with collective members and essays by Esther Leslie (exploring the impact of Brecht) and Nina Power (offering readings of 1973's *Women of the Rhondda* and 1974's *The Amazing Equal Pay Show*).

Some of the debates – between activist and deconstructive approaches to political image-making, for instance – may have become leaden or overly polarised by the end of the 1970s, but from today's viewpoint the earnestness with which they were waged is genuinely thrilling.



Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners*

It's valuable to be reminded of a time when it was commonplace in Britain to talk of cinema and social change. The book is not just an exercise in nostalgia though: now that DVDs and online links decentralise the traditional cinematic venue to a previously unimaginable degree, it's bracing and even galvanising to read about the social spaces in which films were exhibited – workers' education centres, or East End pubs frequented by the same dockers whose struggles were being documented. Less exhaustive (by design) than Margaret Dickinson's still-essential *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain 1945-90*, *Working Together* is a reminder of the crucial difference between independent cinema and indie cinema. Hopefully, it will inspire others to continue its remapping of post-war British film history. 📍

## THE CINEMA OF SERGEI PARAJANOV

By James Steffen. University of Wisconsin Press, 306pp, \$29.95, ISBN 9780299296544

### Reviewed by Michael Brooke

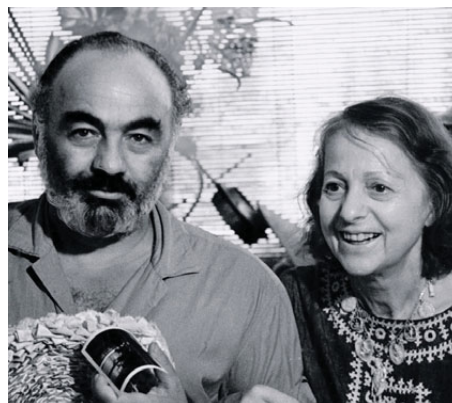
Sergei Parajanov (1924-90) is so often canonised, alongside Andrei Tarkovsky, as the Soviet Union's most important post-war director that it's initially surprising that this is the first English-language book about him. However, the peculiar challenges are laid out in a lengthy 'Note on Transliteration' before the text proper begins, covering the issue of four source languages (Armenian, Georgian, Russian, Ukrainian) and three alphabets. Indeed, the Romanised spelling of Parajanov's own name is far from settled: Steffen diplomatically opts for the one favoured by the Sergei Parajanov Museum in Yerevan.

The book is not a biography (although Steffen tantalisingly admits plans to write one) but it does include much biographical material, including riveting behind-the-scenes accounts of the many diplomatic battles Parajanov fought in order to realise his unconventional vision, and the compromises that he had to make. It's no coincidence that his major films all have a strong literary basis, since this made them easier to green-light; and for all the challenges of mounting such films within the Soviet film industry, it's unlikely that he would have got any further in a more commercialised environment.

Steffen also explores the complicated reality behind various myths about Parajanov and his films, especially their alleged 'dissidence' and 'nationalism'. In fact, the Soviet film industry

was unexpectedly (if under-reportedly) keen to highlight ethnic regional cultures, and if these often came in ersatz packages, Parajanov was just as guilty of inventing supposedly traditional rituals and artefacts. Although *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1964) was adored by Ukrainian nationalists, *The Legend of the Suram Fortress* (1984) was vilified in its native Georgia for allegedly tainting local legends with Armenian and Persian influences. Similarly, the (slightly longer) Armenian version of *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969) has been marketed as the 'director's cut', in preference to the Soviet version – since the subject of the film is the Armenian poet Sayat Nova, the intertitles are supposedly more 'authentic'; in fact, they're no more Parajanov-approved than the Russian intertitles. (Usefully, Steffen lays

*Two of the book's eight chapters are revealingly subtitled 'The Film That Might Have Been' and 'Unproduced Scripts'*



Georgia peach: Parajanov and his wife, Svetlana

out the structural differences between the two extant cuts and Parajanov's original conception.)

Parajanov's films often appear so exotic that it's easy to assume that they're completely *sui generis*. Steffen traces their own local and occasional Western inspirations (unsurprisingly, Parajanov was a fan of Fellini and Pasolini) while also exploring the influence of his work on such diverse talents as the filmmakers of the 'Ukrainian Poetic School', Derek Jarman, Emir Kusturica, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Kira Muratova, as well as assorted music videos, a form perhaps better suited to Parajanov's tableau-based aesthetic than the feature.

Although all of Parajanov's completed films (and television documentaries) are discussed in detail, perhaps the book's greatest value lies in its exploration of his many unrealised projects – one, *Kiev Frescos* (1966), was an incomplete torso, but most never progressed beyond the script-and-sketches stage. The fact that two of the book's eight chapters are subtitled 'The Film That Might Have Been' and 'Unproduced Scripts' is gloomily revealing in itself; another chapter covers his persecution and imprisonment for much of the 1973-82 period. (Parajanov's attitude towards officialdom is encapsulated by the KGB-circulated story that when the state-published *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* asked him for biographical information, he replied "Inform your readers that I died in 1968 due to the genocidal policies of the Soviet regime.")

The only complaint about an otherwise enthralling and desperately overdue book is that its illustrations are in black and white, doing one of the cinema's great masters of colour a severe disservice. But few are likely to read it without prior exposure (happily, Parajanov's major masterpieces are now available in excellent DVD editions), and Steffen supplies plenty of verbal colour. 📍