THE CINEMA OF SERGEI PARAJANOV


Reviewed by Michael Brooke

Serhi 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 appetising for punk’s slash-and-burn dynamism), 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. Peter Bauer is a Swedish artist whose films include Sistet (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 Mark 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, Scrren and Red Bag 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 less or overly polarised by the end of the 1970s, but from today’s viewpoint the earnestness with which they were waged is genuinely thrilling.

Two of the book’s eight chapters are revealingly subtitled ‘The Film That Might Have Been’ and ‘Unproduced Scripts’ 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, Mlesen Makmalba and Kira Muratova, as well as assorted music videos, often perhaps better suited to Parajanov’s tableaux-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, Keer Fresco (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 Encyclopedia 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.

Georgia peach: Parajanov and his wife, Svetlana