

# Sergei Parajanov's Differential Cinema

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## Abstract:

The films of Sergei Parajanov (1924–1990) remain some of the most stylistically unique in the history of the medium and easily place him within the pantheon of the world's great filmmakers. This article offers a new perspective on Parajanov's art through a detailed examination of the two works at the center of his oeuvre, *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969) and *The Legend of Suram Fortress* (1985). In addition to their undeniable aesthetic value, these films may be appreciated as meaningful discourse on our conceptions of time, perception, and identity. Like Parajanov's other films, they dismantle the perceptual and narrative structure of classical cinema in order to stimulate awareness of an expressly raw layer of reality beneath what we customarily take to be static, indivisible essences or identities. With specific attention to the correlation of difference, repetition, and perception, this article also focuses on the effects this presentation of perpetual flux and variation has on consciousness and subjectivity within the films.

**Keywords:** Sergei Parajanov; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Gilles Deleuze; Difference; Jacques Derrida.

A few years following the completion of Sergei Parajanov's *The Legend of Suram Fortress* (*Ambavi Suramis tsikhitsa*) in 1985 the Soviet critic and film historian Miron Chernenko (1987) wrote in *Iskusstvo kino* that despite

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the long hiatus separating this film from *The Colour of Pomegranates* (*Nran Guyne*) in 1969, the new work was a “direct continuation of the previous film, that there had been no break in [Parajanov’s] art” (p. 55).<sup>1</sup> Written in what was still the Soviet Union, Chernenko makes no mention of the fact that the filmmaker’s silence was imposed by the state and enforced with two separate prison terms. Thus, the observation lends a bit of ambiguity to Parajanov’s readmission into public discourse during the waning years of the regime. Chernenko’s article is laudatory and exceptionally perceptive (the issue of the journal also contains an especially illuminating study of the film by Yurii Lotman), but the statement also reveals an early tendency to look at Parajanov’s films as similarly opaque and problematic, constructed on a common tableau aesthetic with frequent close-ups, shallow focus, and an associative, rather than continuous linkage between shots.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, *The Legend of Suram Fortress* is clearly different from its more celebrated predecessor. There is a dynamic depth of field largely absent from *The Colour of Pomegranates*, a close(r) adherence to the action/reaction patterns of classical narrative cinema, and (despite the poor dubbing) a consistent synchronization of sound and image – characters move their lips and we can hear their voices, horses gallop and we hear the hooves. These elements were, of course, common to Parajanov’s breakthrough film, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Tini zabutikh predkiv*, 1965), but *The Legend of Suram Fortress* bears even less outward resemblance to that work. Consequently, the conclusion that this film picks up where *The Colour of Pomegranates* left off may seem astonishingly incorrect. On another level, however, Chernenko’s observation could not be more astute. Sergei Parajanov’s four most acclaimed films are marked by a consistency that reaches far beyond the surface effects arising from the various techniques and symbols, the intricate mise-en-scène and frontal positioning of the actors.

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, each of Parajanov’s later films, from *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* to *Ashik Kerib* (*Ashug-Keribi*, 1988),

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian (specifically Lotman and Chernenko) are my own.
  2. Thankfully the tendency towards generalization in the face of these rather daunting films is not universal. Parajanov’s stylistic tendencies are described in several studies, perhaps most successfully Frank Curot’s “Singularité et liberté: Serguei Paradjanov ou les risques du style.” Though he does tease out some similarities, Curot is also careful to make mention of the films’ idiosyncrasies.

constitute an extreme departure from the norms of classical cinema, and some of the most complex, intellectually daunting works produced in the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Narration overlaps where it should be singular and is unpredictably divergent where it should be logically consistent. The viewer immediately senses that the story, though it never completely disappears, is secondary to more intense aesthetic or philosophical concerns. While undeniably beautiful, the films go beyond a simple representation of events to stimulate the cognizance of something deeper, taking place at the edges of our everyday experience and awareness. Parajanov's art does not strive to imitate the world around us, but rather to enhance our perception of it by conveying a sensation of the invisible forces at the heart of reality.

Despite the inherent difficulty in navigating these films, the relatively scant critical attention to them has been remarkably compelling. Parajanov's byzantine cinematic style has been productively linked to other visual arts, cinematic and literary influences have been carefully isolated and elucidated, and elements of his cinematic grammar distinctly outlined.<sup>4</sup> However, the sheer diversity of these elements, influences, and techniques also makes the works resistant to any absolute interpretation. Even within the films and images themselves variation is so unceasing and powerful that often between them, as Serge Daney (1986) has so aptly remarked, "leur seul point commun, c'est nous" (p. 74). Navigating the heavy symbolism and outlining the general characteristics of the director's style, a few earlier studies pointed out, with varying degrees of specificity, that at the core of Parajanov's aesthetic approach lies a powerful sense of reality as perpetual metamorphosis and

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3. Parajanov had actually been working in the Soviet film system for several years and directed a number of formulaic Soviet films before the dramatic mid-career turnaround of *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* in 1965. The film marked not only a new trend in Soviet cinema (it is, along with Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* [*Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962], credited with initiating the "poetic cinema" movement) but seems to have been the beginning of Parajanov's numerous difficulties with the Soviet government. These would culminate with arrests and imprisonments in 1973 and later 1982 on a number of exaggerated, politically motivated charges.

4. Lotman's article, "*Novizna legendy*" [The novelty of a legend], is as yet unavailable in English, but easily one of the more incisive studies of Parajanov's link to other visual arts. As is Katalin Egeres' remarkably thorough article "*Zametki k literaturnym i zhivopisnym istokam vizual'nykh reshenii v kinomatografe Sergeia Paradzjanova.*" [Observations on the literary and artistic sources for visual representation in Sergei Parajanov's cinema].

transformation.<sup>5</sup> But more than this, I would suggest these works themselves may be viewed as meaningful discourse on our conceptions of time, perception, and identity, broadcast through the prism of Parajanov's uniquely differential vision of the world. Again, one cannot say that Parajanov's art mimics the world or our everyday perception. Rather, much like Merleau-Ponty's (1968) description of the philosophical text, it grasps our relationship with the world and

awakens in it regular relations of prepossession, of recapitulation, of overlapping, which are as dormant in our ontological landscape such is there only in the form of traces, and nevertheless continue to function there. (p. 101)

The works roughly dismantle the perceptual and narrative structure the viewer expects from classical narrative cinema and with it our accustomed presumptions and expectations. Here one gradually (or in some cases immediately) comes to sense an attempt to draw into awareness an expressly raw layer of reality beneath what we customarily take to be static, indivisible essences or identities. Parajanov's deeper aesthetic and philosophical concerns are rarely stated as such, but their effect on his art is unmistakable; much like Deleuze's (1994) observation on the relation between art and philosophy,

the conception of the ontological scope of the question animates works of art as much as philosophical thought. Works are developed around or on the basis of a fracture that they never succeed in filling. (p. 195)

As a kind of aesthetic ontology, Parajanov's work rests on a forever shifting ground, a field of perpetual flux and variation, which presents a fluid reality of differing relations and intensities.<sup>6</sup> The work of art is then an event of perpetual unfolding or becoming, beyond the dualistic subjective and objective poles that often rigidly govern the medium, and which the filmmaker either ignores or deliberately subverts. In *The Colour of Pomegranates* this emerges most clearly in the durational experience of

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5. This is put most succinctly by Levon Abrahamian (2001/2002), when he notes that it is "the principle of transformation, of eternal metamorphosis, that was the basis of his work" (p. 82).

6. I use "intensities" here in the sense explained by de Beistegui (2000) as "pure and irreducible differences" (p. 67). These "do not refer to an invariant or an essence, but to the difference in potential that they reveal. They are themselves differences in a field of difference" (p. 66).

time within a character (the poet Sayat Nova), who continuously changes and differs from himself. A similar approach, a presentation of coexistent moments in time and a blurring of the diegetic past and present with the actual time of the viewer, holds for *The Legend of Suram Fortress*. However, this is conveyed in a strikingly different manner, through a multiplicity of perspectives or narrative centers which themselves undergo continual transformations and metamorphoses.

These two films, which form the center of Parajanov's later period, are arguably his greatest artistic achievements and easily the most fitting demonstrations of this unique cinematic style. Fortunately, much of the difficult work that has been done in isolating characteristics of his technique and the astute attempts to navigate the films' dense symbolism has laid the ground for a deeper examination of the filmmaker's aesthetic and ontological orientation. This article takes a slightly different route from previous studies by devoting specific attention to three interrelated issues at work in *The Colour of Pomegranates* and, to a slightly lesser extent, *The Legend of Suram Fortress*: repetition, perception, and identity. It bears mentioning, however, that these films are not philosophical discourse in the traditional sense and thus the relationships with the work of Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche and others whom I will consider are not to be seen as demonstrations of certain positions – it would be naïve to presume that the filmmaker was in touch with all of the concepts at work here and his biography would rule out anything more than a passing familiarity with the thinkers brought into the discussion. Yet the parallels and commonalities, though subtle, are often unmistakable and offer a means of further penetrating and elucidating the remarkable intellectual depth of these works, which even twenty five years after the filmmaker's death, remain some of the most provocatively enigmatic in the history of the medium.

### **Repetition and Eternal Return**

Unlike Parajanov's other feature-length films, *The Colour of Pomegranates* offers no suggestion of a continuous diegetic topology as it presents the inner world of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian poet Sayat Nova. In perhaps the most astute study of the film, Karla Oeler describes the theatrical nature of Parajanov's shots with reference to André Bazin's declaration that the borders of the screen do not frame the image, but rather mask a world that reaches outward from the portion of reality we see. As Bazin (1967) writes, "what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is centripetal, the screen

centrifugal” (p. 166). Oeler’s implication is that the film does not use the screen in the traditional sense but frames the action as a staged drama.<sup>7</sup> I would emphasize however, that with Parajanov’s cinema, the viewer should not necessarily assume that this frame is entirely centripetal, to the extent that each shot exists as a completely separate unit, outside the context of the whole. Since the film only encourages the viewer’s conceptual construction of a world beyond the frame in rare instances – even within the shots themselves there is little to suggest logical continuity – each shot could be said to constitute its own divergent series, within which time coalesces or overlaps to the extent that, among other chronological impossibilities, we often see the young Arutin (Sayat Nova’s given name) sharing space with his older self. The narrative however does move sequentially; over the course of the film the protagonist experiences his childhood, youth and adulthood. And these series are inextricably part of a larger system. This is not simply the discontinuity or irrational movement between successive shots found in the more basic descriptions of Deleuze’s time-image, where the conceptual jolts caused by occasional divergences from the expected spatiotemporal relationships may, in many cases, play off of the viewer’s familiarity with established patterns in other parts of the film. Parajanov’s technique reveals a more direct orientation to ontological difference, which emerges in a seemingly endless coexistence of contraries and the constant recreation of the world with each successive shot. In Oeler’s (2006) observation, the film moves in a “complex play of repetition and difference among a series of densely symbolic tableaux” (p. 479). This symbolism however is often obfuscated in unceasing series of metamorphoses and divergent permutations. Indeed, should we take Derrida’s (1973) view of difference (or rather *differance*) as a “temporalizing”, the interval between shots would be activated as “time’s becoming-spatial or space’s becoming temporal (*temporalizing*)” (p. 143).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, and particularly relevant to this discussion of Parajanov, “in differents [...] it is necessary that interval, distance, *spacing* occur

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7. As Oeler (2006) writes, “the originality of *The Colour of Pomegranates* is that the edges of the film frame function more as theatrical framing than as cinematic masking: Parajanov does nothing to activate offscreen space; it does not exist” (p. 483).

8. For the sake of greater clarity here, “*differance*” in Derrida’s terms “could be said to designate the productive and primordial constituting causality, the process of scission and division whose differings and differences would be the constituted products or effects” (1973, 137).

among the different elements and occur actively, dynamically and with a certain perseverance in repetition" (Derrida, 1973, pp. 136–37). Though the distance between the two thinkers is deceptively substantial, this is not entirely unlike Deleuze's more intensive descriptions of the time-image. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, for instance, with reference to Godard, he declares,

Given one image, another has to be chosen which will induce an interstice *between* the two. This is not an operation of association, but of differentiation, as mathematicians say, or of disappearance, as physicists say: given one potential, another one has to be chosen, not any whatever, but in such a way that a difference of potential is established between the two, which will be productive of a third or of something new. (Deleuze, 1989, pp. 179–80)

The interstitial spaces of *The Colour of Pomegranates* mark the constant creation of the new which repeatedly fracture conceptual representation and persuade us not to simply identify objects or people with those which came before, but rather to embrace a continued transformation. Within the film's own disjunctive logic, the shots become heterogeneous series whose varying intensities, such as colour or composition, constitute an asymmetric system analogous to the processes of being itself.

Given the playfully inconsistent nature of the film, attempting to flesh this out with representative moments is no easy task. Oeler's observation on the structural significance of difference and repetition, however, provides an ideal point of departure. Repetition, whether through the graphic matching of compositions and movements across the entirety of the film or the immediate reiteration of a shot, pervades both *The Colour of Pomegranates* and *The Legend of Suram Fortress*. In the former film, turning first to some early sequences involving Sayat Nova's boyhood and youth, we can see distinctly the direct relationship the director creates between repetition and difference, particularly through the use of colour as a kind of intensive variant. As he grew up in a family of weavers, the three successive shots of freshly dyed wool dropped onto a metal plate fit neatly into Sayat Nova's overall biography. The brief sequential repetition also isolates colour, even the similarly red shades of the second and third shots, in a sense similar to what Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes in *The Visible and the Invisible*: "a variant in another dimension of variation, that of its relations with the surroundings" (p. 132). Here the variant is rendered all the more visible and salient through the reiteration of what are otherwise identical shots, bringing to

the surface “a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world – less a colour or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colours” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 132). As Merleau-Ponty’s copious work on artists like Cezanne and Klee attests, this is a modulation with particular relevance to the visual arts, though not necessarily cinema. Indeed, Parajanov’s cinematic miniatures expand on the possibilities the philosopher finds by using the variant to tighten the correlation of differentiation with repetition. The relationship becomes more evident as we move forward to the scenes of Arutin’s courtship of Princess Ana.

Following the intertitle, *We were searching for ourselves in each other*, a sequence of shots juxtaposes Arutin and Ana within what would appear to be the same space, dressed in similarly blue clothing, and, in keeping with Parajanov’s deliberately loose treatment of personal identity, played by the same actress, Sofiko Chiaureli. Several of these compositions are repeated almost exactly the same way in a later sequence following the intertitle *How am I to protect my wax-built castles of love from the devouring heat of your fires*. Again, colour functions as the most obvious variant, with the poet dressed entirely in black and Ana in red. A framed, spinning or swaying cherub returns, as does a length of lace, which changes from white to red and finally black in the hands of the poet. The implication that we have reached another stage in the life of the protagonist and his relationship with Ana is clear from the chronological progression of the story, but more importantly, these sequences and others where we see Sayat Nova together with his younger self, bring to the surface a sensation of the past repeating in the present, and doing so in what would seem an aesthetic accord with Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal return. Despite the deliberate reiteration of the similar however, this is not a naive, teleological and physical variation of Nietzsche’s idea. Parajanov’s artistic rendering is, much like the description in *The Will to Power*, an “approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being” (Nietzsche, 1967, 330). Repetition here is not a matter of physical recurrence within the sequential ordering of time, though the work indisputably does follow a distinct chronological progression. Rather, the constant anachronisms reveal coexistence as much as recurrence – or perhaps what the film suggests is a kind of conflation of the two. In Parajanov’s numerous figurations, the filmic present always contains within itself the past, but it is a past which, like the present, is always in a process of changing or becoming. While the similarity with earlier images is necessary for the visible expression of an invisible process (or the “approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being”) what we see, as in Miguel de Beistegui’s (2004) description of the heterogenetic relationship of the

present and the past, is the recurrence of difference rather than simply the repetition of the same:

If the past indeed doubles the present, if it repeats it, this doubling is not a reproduction or representation, it is nothing like what is made present in the present: between the (virtual) past and the (actual) present, the relation is heterogenetic. The past repeats itself in the present, only differently: its repetition is production, its reiteration creation. (p. 316)

The scenes described above are not the only moments in which the present is permeated with repetitions of the past, whether physically manifest or not. Near the midway point of the film, for instance, the now familiar figure of King Iraklii (whose first appearance has him in close-up turning to the camera with movement similar to what we see here) rests beneath a ball, which swings like a pendulum between young Arutin and an angel with antler wings. Just below them the older Sayat Nova stands to the left of the frame with a llama in the center and Princess Ana to the right. The pistol, which reappears in so many different contexts, is now in her hands and as she fires the young Arutin falls. A white smock begins to rise and cover Sayat Nova's black cassock just before the cut. The shot immediately repeats itself with slight, but nevertheless noticeable variations; the llama is no longer eating the hay, the king turns to face the camera much later, and the smock rises more quickly to completely cover the poet's torso.

While neither this nor any other single sequence is quite representative of the whole, it does exemplify much of what makes this film so unique, and so maddeningly strange to many viewers. Attempting to ascribe it a definite place in the chronology of poet's life is perhaps as impossible as the determination of concrete meaning – though one may certainly speculate on the figurative death of the child, the white covering the black, and the significance of the llama. More relevant to the present task are the ways in which the disjointed movements within the frame reverberate with different sections of the film, accumulating significance with each successive variation and thus forming an internal resonance in the system created between the divergent series. As such, the shots, and more specifically the images within them, begin to exceed themselves, alluding to something in excess of any physical manifestation, a surplus of reality in each new iteration.<sup>9</sup>

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9. To form a more direct (albeit imperfect) parallel with Deleuze's ontology, this could be likened to the echoes within the disjunctive synthesis, where "*coupling* between heterogeneous systems, from which is derived an internal resonance within the system,

Nearly everything that happens in this (or any) sequence, has happened many times before or will happen again, though we never see exact copies. In its other appearances, for instance, the ball is either held or tossed. Here it swings like a pendulum, mirroring the motion of the suspended rugs from earlier in the film and, in several shots, the young Arutin himself. The way the shirt rises on Sayat Nova also happens in reverse several times over the course of the film and finds other variations as characters step into and out of open clothes. Repetition, which so emphatically marks Parajanov's mature cinema, is never simply the recurrence of the same but rather the visual manifestation of a largely invisible process of variation and transformation. Similarly to Deleuze's (1994) formulation, repetition in Parajanov's work becomes "the formless being of all differences" (p. 57), but it manifests through the variation, rather than exact replication. De Beistegui's (2004) formulation provides a closer analogy, since here "the eternal return is precisely and only that of difference, of the differentiating in difference, which allows everything to co-exist: the present with the past, the past with the future..." (p. 324). It is tempting to look for balance and symmetry through poetic associations, but the repetition of figures across the film may also be deliberately disjunctive. Artistically, the isolation of difference through repetition marks not the similarity of images or figures, but rather the individuating factors such as colour. Though perhaps more intricate and certainly larger in scale, this invites an interesting comparison to Deleuze's (1994) description of the decorative motif, where the artists do not simply juxtapose instances of the same figure,

but rather each time combine an element of one instance with *another* element of a following instance. They introduce a disequilibrium into the dynamic process of construction, an instability, dissymmetry or gap of some kind which disappears only in the overall effect." (p. 19)

With the constant repetition of compositions or movements, as well as the immediate recreation of certain shots, Parajanov follows a similar principle, but one that gains complexity in accordance with his medium. Rather than disappearing, the gap (or interstice) is brought to the fore and marked as the fracture in which difference or transformation unfolds, establishing a sensible correlation with repetition via the isolation or figuration of intensive variants.

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and from which in turn is derived a *forced movement* the amplitude of which exceeds that of the basic series themselves" (1994, p. 117).

The relationship between the films is analogous to that of the scenes or shots within them. *The Legend of Suram Fortress* repeats the principles outlined above but takes them in a slightly different direction. Though Lotman (1987) claims that the film marks a new kind of cinematic language thanks to its novel approach to montage and the apparent independence of each individual shot (p. 65), it is far closer than its predecessor to the techniques of classical narrative cinema. Still, the film flaunts artifice and the falsity of its story in nearly every frame. There is little chance of suspending disbelief when we see modern oil tankers in the background of a scene depicting 18th century Georgia.<sup>10</sup> Chernenko's (1987) declaration, that the normal flow of time simply does not exist in the traditional sense applies to *The Colour of Pomegranates* just as well as it does here (p. 62), as does Lotman's (1987) observation that the film is essentially panchronic: that to set the action within historical categories is to miss the point (p. 67). The appeal of the legend and particularly Daniel Chonkadze's story, with its multiple narrators and almost casual manipulation of chronology, to Parajanov's artistic sensibilities is obvious. As with the film, the novel recounts the story of the shady Durmishkhan, his abandonment of the lovelorn Vardo and eventual adoption by the wealthy Osman Aga. Having given up the search for her lost lover, Vardo eventually becomes a fortune-teller while Durmishkhan marries another and soon inherits half the fortune of his wealthy benefactor. The fortress of the title only comes into play years later, when Vardo reveals that entombing a "blue-eyed youth", namely Durmishkahn's son, Zurab within the walls, is the sole means of keeping the structure intact and thus the only way to prevent an invasion. As with its predecessor, *The Legend of Suram Fortress* recreates certain scenes and relies on the viewer to establish connections between shots and movements spread out across the film. Once again, the reiteration of an action or a movement creates disequilibrium, rather than symmetry, as elements of one iteration may be recombined with different elements in the next. This begins almost immediately in the film when, after a brief prologue, the credits roll over shots of the fortress from numerous different angles and distances, with the final image shattering on a broken mirror. But perhaps the three enigmatic shots of the character Vardo in the *Prayer* section

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10. Here and in other respects, the film expands on the precedent set by its hypotext, Daniel Chonkadze's 1860 novella of the same name. Parajanov's own attraction to the work is hardly surprising. The story is told by a number of different narrators, who in turn tell the story through several different focalizers. All the while, the overarching narration seems to emphasize the fictionality of what is being told.

provide the most specific example, as she embarks on the search for her lover, Durmishkhan. At a glance, each of these successive shots appear to be the same. However, the veil falls over her head in a different position each time, the motion of her hands and even the expression on her face is distinctly altered with each repetition. The sequences that follow are similarly repetitive, but the range of variation has expanded. Vardo appears on a hillside asking three different men if they have seen Durmishkhan. The film then cuts to a shot of her offering a dove to St. Nino. The next has her offering a rooster to an archangel and finally a ram to St. David. With each successive shot, the repetitions continue but the differences between them expand. As in the previous film, the viewer experiences a trace of the same, but the real constant in these reiterated actions is their difference; it is in this paradoxical manner, this repetition of difference, that the film isolates and expresses transformation.

While the reverberation of images or movements is less pronounced here than in *The Colour of Pomegranates*, the instances are no less significant and often more germane to the progression of the story. The most important differences have already been pointed out by Yuri Lotman, who may have been the first to grasp the significance of repetition in Parajanov's work. For instance, he notes that Vardo, who has long given up her search for Durmishkhan and become a fortune-teller, listens to the unborn Zurab by pressing her ear to the belly of his mother, just as later she will put her ear to the wall in which the young man is entombed. In turn, both shots also repeat earlier scenes with Vardo and, along with numerous other elements, suggest an unsettlingly close connection between the unhappy fortune-teller and Durmishkhan's wife. Indeed, Vardo's farewell scene with Durmishkhan early in the film is repeated with careful precision later when his pregnant wife writhes on the ground in her place, announcing her intention to call their child either Zurab or Gulisvardi (the formal version of Vardo's name). This association is further and more intensely reinforced at the film's conclusion where Vardo claims the entombed young man as her son. This film may not match the subtlety and sophistication of *The Colour of Pomegranates*, but instances such as these offer a more lucid outline of the problematic, protean nature of personal identity common to both these works and the links to deeper expressions of perpetual change and transformation.

### Difference and Identity

The chronic subversion of fixed or static notions of identity is a profound effect of the perpetual transformation that marks Parajanov's cinema and correlative to the dismantling of the traditionally representational

approach to cinematic narrative and perception. In fact, the whole concept of identity, whether it be the consistent representation of individuality (to say nothing of gender or ethnicity) or, on a more fundamental scale, the qualitative self-same properties of people or objects, is always fluid in Parajanov's mature work, fraught with an ambiguity that toys with traditional categories. Though they never disappear, these categories are subordinate to the constant recurrence of difference.<sup>11</sup> Together with the various transformations of Vardo and Durmishkhan's wife, the most obvious example in *The Legend of Suram Fortress* is the character of the benevolent Osman Agha. Notions of nationality, religion, and even gender are in constant flux from the very start in this figure. In terms of the film's larger plot, he is a secondary character (with only an indirect relation to the events surrounding the fortress of the title) and yet the viewer learns far more about him than anyone else.

As Durmishkhan leaves Vardo at the beginning of the film, he comes upon this wealthy Muslim trader by chance and relates to him the story of how he attained his freedom. Osman Agha, in turn, reveals his own history. Born a Georgian named Nodar Zalikashvili, he murdered his tyrannical prince and, dressed as a woman, fled the country. In his escape he renounces his faith, his nationality, and his name; he lives first as a warrior and then a prosperous merchant. Eventually Osman Agha takes Durmishkhan under his wing, bequeaths this dubious character half of his fortune and participates in his Christian wedding. This last event marks yet another transitional point for the character, the beginnings of his reconversion to Christianity and the reassumption of his original name, acts which precipitate his elaborate murder a short time later. As in *The Colour of Pomegranates*, the delineation of individual identity is further erased or confused by the use of the same actor in different roles. In addition to being (if only nominally) the film's co-director, Dodo Abashidze plays Osman Agha and Simon, the teacher and, by the end of the film, ersatz father to Zurab. This relationship oddly matches that of Osman Agha and Durmishkhan, while it also recalls Vardo's quasi adoption of Zurab.

There is a slightly different demonstration of the film's fluid presentation of identity in Vardo. After being abandoned by Durmishkhan at the beginning of the film, she becomes the fortune-teller,

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11. As Deleuze (1994) explains, the conditions of this relationship are such "[t]hat identity not be first, that it exist as a principle but as a second principle, as a principle *become*; that it revolve around the Different" (p. 40).

who predicts Zurab's gender to his pregnant mother, and later describes to the young man the means for maintaining the fortress. Her parallels with Simon and Osman Agha, however, are not balanced; Parajanov displays a multiplicity of possible roles or identities that move freely from character to character as the film develops. What makes Vardo so interesting is that the transformation of the character is tied to the force of time or, as the intertitles put it, "the run of time." This "run" is the compression of several years into mere moments as both actresses playing the character appear on screen simultaneously, overlapping each other within the same shot. There is a measurement of time in the metronomic movements of the younger Vardo as she sways from side to side, but any segmentation of selfsame moments is undermined when the black veil comes down to reveal an entirely different, older version of the character. This later version then begins the same movement, leaving behind her a now still image of the past – an image which nevertheless remains shrouded in the present. The shot is reminiscent of the modern oil tankers earlier in the film, since here too different sheets of time occupy the same impossible space and once again emphasize the intentional artificiality or falseness of the world Parajanov creates. As Lotman (1987) notes in his description of the film's "panchronic" tendencies, "it is impossible and unnecessary to place the action of the film within historical categories. It flows in the repetitive time of myth and freely combines elements of different epochs" (p. 67). It is tempting to see this as a variation of the layers of time Deleuze finds in the deep focus shots of Jean Renoir and Orson Welles, but something quite different occurs here. Unlike the depth of space and the layering of time in films like *Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du jeu*, Jean Renoir, 1939) or *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), the image here is deliberately flat and thus the two versions of the character appear to occupy the same space simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> It is something found repeatedly in *The Colour of Pomegranates* and undoubtedly owes much to the influence of Persian miniatures and orthodox iconography. The older Vardo (a substantially different person) emerges not from another time, but from the same time – the image is a flat composite of the present and the past, an indeterminate overlap of different temporal planes rather than a distinct layering. Thus, the presentation of time in these films is both

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12. In fact, this tendency in Parajanov's work may bear some relation to what Deleuze (1989) refers to as the "series of time, which brings together the before and the after in a becoming, instead of separating them; its paradox is to introduce an enduring interval in the moment itself" (p. 155).

emphatically durational and logically sequential. These implications extend not only to disruptive notions of personal identity but, particularly in *The Colour of Pomegranates*, to concomitant splits in subjectivity and perception.

### The Unfolding Subject

Despite the use of intertitles, neither film provides consistently clear transitions from sequences of diegetic reality to oneiric states or visions. *The Legend of Suram Fortress* offers a less complex, though nonetheless daunting approach to cinematic subjectivity. Unlike its predecessor, the narrative here is not bound to the consciousness of a single character but, following the precedent of Chonkadze's text, shifts its interest focus among several main characters. The degree to which these characters may focalize events, however, varies. Despite his considerable screen time, little of what we see reflects the perception of Durmishkhan, while Osman Agha provides both exaggerated flashbacks and disorienting oneiric sequences. This is especially so in the *Wedding and Black Intoxication* sequence. Here the camera moves seamlessly from an objective image of Durmishkhan's wedding into Osman Agha's jarring mystical reverie, where characters spin mysteriously, a child transforms into a lamb mid-shot, and the holy images of an icon come to life.

The astonishingly disjunctive presentation of reality in these flirtations with subjectivity, most commonly through the character of Osman Agha, mark perhaps the film's clearest echo of *The Colour of Pomegranates*, where we are encouraged from the beginning to consider ourselves as looking at the world from the mind of the protagonist. Despite its chronological sequence structure, this earlier film adheres more closely to what Husserl (1964) calls "the *immanent time* of the flow of consciousness" than any normal experiential representation (p. 23). There is little distinction between the waking world of the film and the oneiric or imagined states Sayat Nova experiences. By the same token, images of the past are not separated from those of the present. Much like Osman Agha's reveries, dreams and memories slip into the fabric of diegetic reality with little or no indication. In fact, the persistent adherence of the past to the present is the most distinguishing characteristic of the film's complex, durational approach to temporality— an approach echoed perhaps most distinctly in the *Run of Time* sequence of *The Legend of Suram Fortress*. Unlike the later film, however, the narration here remains immersed within the single, yet overwhelmingly expansive figure of Sayat Nova. As the declaration in the opening credits states, the film does not depict the poet's life but strives to recreate his "inner world."

That the world as such is not presented outside the curvature of Sayat Nova's perception is not necessarily a unique approach to cinematic narration, as films like Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947) and Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (*Russkii kovcheg*, 2002) also depict events entirely from the perspective of a character. The latter film even seems to take a cue from Parajanov's ahistorical compressions of time as recognizable figures from Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and the present day all inhabit the film's single 90-minute shot. What sets *The Colour of Pomegranates* far apart from these films is the continuous destabilization of any self-identical subject, a destabilization closely tied to this adherence of the past in the present. To be sure, in the two aforementioned films the viewer actually looks through the eyes of the protagonists as they participate in the world around them, while here we do not see what Sayat Nova perceives before him but find ourselves immersed in a reflective thought process. As Oeler (2006) puts it, the images of the film are those of the "poetic consciousness gazing back at itself" (p. 482). We not only see Sayat Nova's perceptions of the world but more importantly his reflections and changing conceptions of his own identity through and within time. Oeler's (2006) observation that the film is "a reflection on reflection" and "a reflection on a self-consciousness that is at once individual and collective" (p. 485) is undoubtedly correct. The film creates a compelling aesthetic experience of consciousness along the lines of Merleau-Ponty's (2012) declaration that "the being of consciousness consists in appearing to itself" (p. 396). However, while the diachronic unity of consciousness throughout the film is undeniable, this fictional subject is not a self-identical embodiment through time. In its presentation of a consciousness reflecting upon itself, the film dissuades the viewer from positing a static agent or subject who unifies the heterogeneous series. Rather, the poet's consciousness unfolds as yet another unfixed, albeit central, element in a nexus of shifting differential relations. Sayat Nova perceives himself, but these images of himself are constantly changing. As the reflections of the protagonist take place within the temporal flux, the viewer is encouraged to conclude that the fictional agency behind the presentation of these images does not stand outside the flow of time but moves and changes with it. Time and its visible effects on identity work in the Deleuzian sense as a force of creative difference where, "[i]t is as though the *I* were fractured from one end to the other: fractured by the pure and empty form of time" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 86). It is at the horizon of this continual fracture and division that the self-reflection and the perpetual differentiation of the poet's various self-projections is activated. As de Beistegui (2004) extends the Deleuzian argument: "[d]ifference and opposition captures the very process of

reflection itself, the absolutization or the becoming-subject of substance” (p. 86). This destabilization does not necessarily mean that the consciousness is simply at the mercy of time's differential force, but rather a moving piece in the perpetual flux of existence.

The reflections we see are those of the protagonist in a variety of different figures and genders. As the film progresses, the images of the poet – as he himself perceives them – multiply and differentiate; his changing consciousness is reflected through an aggregate of different self-projections. The viewer sees different Sayat Novas occupying the same space, played by several actors of both genders and reflected in an array of other characters. To put it a bit more simply, we could say that he seems to see himself throughout the world around him. To cite just the clearest example, I have already noted that Sofiko Chiaureli plays both the young poet and Ana, but her portrayal of multiple other roles also places the familiar face of Sayat Nova in a mime, an angel, and a nun.<sup>13</sup> What we see is not simply a solipsistic reverie but something very much akin to Merleau-Ponty's (2012) description of subjectivity through reflection. For Sayat Nova,

It cannot be said that I am the consciousness that I discover through reflection and for whom everything is an object: my “myself” [*mon moi*] is spread out before this consciousness just like everything else, my consciousness constitutes it, it is not enclosed within it, and so it can constitute other myselfs without any difficulty. (p. 375)

This presentation of consciousness unfolding within time, as a phenomenon which continually differs from itself, is perhaps Parajanov's crowning achievement and urges that along with identity the viewer disassemble notions of consistent, self-same subjectivity – even while we see this subject embodied in a variety of different characters. Much of what makes *The Colour of Pomegranates* so fascinating from this standpoint is that the unique presentation of consciousness within the temporal flow is also the basis for the film's differential image of time. In this relationship, the reflection, much like the fleeting images of personal identity, is set in motion by the process of time as creative difference splitting the subject from itself. What may seem technical sloppiness or an almost primitive approach to narration in Parajanov's films is in fact the natural result of these differential systems, where characters and their perceptions are divided in the temporal flux. We are

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13. James Steffen (2013), in fact, puts the number of roles at no less than five (p. 125).

thus presented not with the typically refined, consistent image of being and subjectivity but a primordial, paradoxically pre-reflective gaze which, even as it confronts us with a dense forest of signs and symbolism, attempts to strike the viewer on a purely sensory level.

This may indeed be the driving force in all of Parajanov's mature cinema. It is not necessarily the significance of any symbols, nor the characters themselves, which are of primary importance. Rather it is this continuous variation and metamorphosis at seemingly every level. Though clearly preoccupied with reflection, the director uses this preoccupation to reveal a pre-reflective level of reality or consciousness and produce a sensation of raw temporal flux. The resulting presentation recalls Husserl's (1964) description of "the consciousness of continuous change" as "the primal matter of fact, namely the consciousness of the transformation of the impression into retention" (p. 153). Parajanov, however, takes this a step further and (especially in *The Colour of Pomegranates*) pushes the consciousness of transformation to an awareness of continual self-differentiation, in tight correlation with the play of repetition and difference so prominent in both of these films and indeed all of his later works.

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