




CREATIVE USE OF OBJECTS AS SIGNS IN CINEMA: AN ANALYSIS OF SERGEI PARAJANOV'S *HAKOB HOVNATANYAN*

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Abstract. The paper presents an analysis of Sergei Parajanov's short film, *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (1967), and its significance as an example of poetic cinema within Soviet cinematography. Not only feature-length films of Parajanov, but also his short films hold an important place among his *œuvre*, as a multi-modal and multi-channel visualization of the past. *Hakob Hovnatanyan* is a prime example of poetic cinema in Soviet cinematography. A pioneer in this discourse in the Soviet Union was Andrei Tarkovsky with his film *Andrei Rublev* (1966). Examples of this discourse include the Parajanov's films *The Color of Pomegranates* (orig. *Nran gowynē*, 1969), *Arabesque on a Theme of Pirosmeni* (orig. *Arabeskebi Pirosmeni temaze*, 1985), and *Etudes on Vrubel* (orig. *Etyudy on Vrubel*, 1989), which was directed by Leonid Osyka (scriptwriter Parajanov). The paper explores *Hakob Hovnatanyan* as a converter of cultural memory and multimodal vehicle for the construction of the spirit of the city. While in the framework of the short film the city is presented in the open air, in the middle the interior, the everyday life, the hum of language, and the language of clothes and necklaces of Old Tbilisi, Georgia, are presented. The interior and spirit are presented not only on the visual level of paintings, carpets, and furniture (a dresser with a metronome) but also through auditory elements: sound, language, music, etc. Thus, through a multimodal visualization of the past Parajanov presents a new language of cinema (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (orig. *Tini zabutykh predkiv*, 1965), *The Color of Pomegranates*, *The Legend of Suram Fortress* (orig. *Ambavi surami tsikhisa*, 1985), *Ashik Kerib* (orig. *Ashik'-keribi*, 1988, first director Dodo Abashidze)).

Keywords: channels of city presentation, film language, microhistory of the city, modus of city presentation, semiotics of the city, Sergei Parajanov.

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1. Introduction

An important place in Parajanov's *œuvre* is occupied not only by his feature-length films but also his short films. In the framework of Soviet cinematography, in particular in poetic cinema, Tarkovsky was the pioneer with his film *Andrei Rublev*¹. A year later, *Armenfilm* gave Parajanov the opportunity to shoot *Hakob Hovnatanyan*, *The Color of Pomegranates*².

Raisa Sidenova's apt observation that Parajanov made poetic cinema a brand and an "instrument of national expression" with his individuality is quite justified. But we should not

¹ It is known that Parajanov appreciated the works of Tarkovsky and considered him his teacher. He highly appreciated the works of Andrei Rublev himself, Armenian medieval miniaturists (Toros Roslin), primitivists (André Rousseau, Niko Pirosmeni, Nikofor Primachenko, Artavazd Loretsyan, and others) (Yankovskaya-Misakyan & Parajanov, 1969, p. 4). For more on this, see Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev* (Kinokontsern "Mosfilm", 2017a, 2017b; Kiersten, 2014).

² Parajanov wrote to Svetlana Scherbatyuk, his ex-wife, in a letter: "How could I expect 10 years of grace, when back in 1964 it was known that I would not work and shoot anything? What luck that I left and shot *The Color of Pomegranates* and *Hakob Hovnatanyan*, a film about an artist? (Parajanov, 2020, p. 56).

forget that the founder of Ukrainian poetic cinema was Alexander Dovzhenko (1894–1956), “inspired by Ukrainian folklore, celebrating the Ukrainian national identity” (Sidenova, 2016, p. 19, 14). In one of her presentations, Sidenova cites the metaphor of a pipe with holes in the context of explaining the phenomenon of poetic documentary cinema in the Soviet period (Bogosian, 2016). The pipe is the Soviet cultural establishment, which, in trying to close one hole, opened other holes elsewhere. Soviet art-house cinema manifested itself in various countries of the Soviet Union. Parajanov's film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* is the Armenian hole in this pipe, an Armenian manifestation of poetic cinema. After Parajanov's second release from imprisonment in the 1980s, the discourse surrounding poetic cinema in his art redoubled. The great filmmaker directed *Arabesque on a Theme of Pirosmeni*, while Osyka (screenwriter Parajanov) directed *Etudes on Vrubel*³.

One can also look at the creative path of his films from a different perspective. Parajanov was a man of boundaries; he created on different cultural borders. An analysis of Parajanov's films shows that his works can be conventionally divided into a number of different cultural border zones:

- Moldavian (*Andriesh*, 1954, first director Yakov Bazelyan);
- Soviet Ukrainian (*Golden Hands*, orig. *Zolotye ruki*, 1957, first director Anna Nikolenko, second director Aleksei Pankratyev; *The First Lad*, orig. *Pervyj paren'*, 1958; *Natalya Uzhviy*, 1959; *Dumka*, 1957; *Ukrainian Rhapsody*, orig. *Ukrainskaya rapsodiya*, 1961; *Flower on the Stone*, orig. *Tsvetok na kamne*, 1962, first director Anatoly Slesarenko);
- Hutsual-Ukrainian (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*; *Kiev Frescoes*, orig. *Kiyevskiy freski*, 1966);
- Armenian (*Hakob Hovnatanyan*; *The Color of Pomegranates*);
- Georgian (*The Legend of Suram Fortress*; *Arabesque on a Theme of Pirosmeni*);
- Armenian-Georgian (*The Confession*, orig. *Khostovanank*, 1990),
- Russian-Turkic⁴ (*Ashik Kerib*).

This paper continues the discussion on Parajanov (Simyan, 2023, 2024). Relatively little has been written about director's short films. Grigoryan (2011, pp. 200–201), Zakoyan (2013), Lee (2012, pp. 456–457), Steffen (2013, pp. 126–128), Zhuravleva (2022), Galstyan (2014, p. 107), Kim (2018, p. 3, 30)⁵ have given more or less scanty attention to the topic of *Hakob Hovnatanyan*.

In this paper, we will consider Parajanov's short film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* as a converter⁶ of cultural memory and an expression of multimodality in constructing the spirit of the city.

³ It should be mentioned that since the 1960s with the beginning of the Khrushchev Thaw Soviet poetic cinema and poetic documentary cinema, for example, Otar Iosseliani, Marlen Khutsiev, Artavazd Peleshyan, etc., manifested themselves in different cultural, national, and individual variants, such as Russian (*Ivan's Childhood*, orig. *Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962, directed by Tarkovsky), Ukrainian/Hutsual-Carpathian (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*), *The Stone Cross* (orig. *Kamennyj krest*, 1968, directed by Osyka) and *Zakhar Berkut* (1971, directed by Osyka), *The White Bird Marked with Black* (orig. *Bilyi ptakh z chornoyu oznakoyu*, 1971, directed by Yuri Ilyenko), *Annychka* (1968, directed by Borys Ivchenko) and *The Lost Letter* (orig. *Propala hramota* (1972, directed by Ivchenko), *Babylon XX* (1979, directed by Ivan Mykolaichuk), Georgian (*The Plea*, 1968, orig. *Vedreba*, directed by Tengiz Abuladze), *Arabesque on a Theme of Pirosmeni*, etc.

⁴ Since it was filmed based on the fairy tale of the same name by Mikhail Lermontov (artistic arrangement. For more on this, see Zvereva, 2014).

⁵ Unfortunately, the author of this article was not able to get acquainted with the script of the film. According to Zakoyan (2013), an Armenian cinema researcher, Parajanov's script will be released at the end of 2023 with commentaries.

⁶ From Latin *convertere* – to change, to transform.

The thesis statement of the article is that Parajanov's films have a generative function through the multimodality. The primary material (the material remains of Old Tbilisi (OT), Hakob Hovnatanyan's paintings) becomes the primary modeling system, and the film itself is already a product of the second level, the "secondary modeling system" (Lotman, 1965).

2. Methodological prerequisites

While analyzing empirical material, the article employs an instrumental approach of various theories rather than applies or tests different theories. For example, Parajanov presents OT through different channels of communication, or modes: color, smell, language/noise, "thing-world", etc., in other words, multimodalities. Of course, while identifying the modalities, their functions in the context of the film's narrative are also analyzed. Parajanov's film presents the Armenian artist's work through thematic and aesthetic detailing. In fact, it creates a new semiosis. The term *semiosis* is understood by the author of this article both as a sign process⁷ (Morris, 1938, p. 3, 1971, p. 366), or as a process of meaning-making whereby the subject/object becomes a sign/representamen and acquires meaning for the interpreter for depicting subsequent thought procedures (Nöth, 1985, p. 37), and more specifically to describe the interpretant. That is, when analyzing the "thing-world" in the film narrative, the object world functions as a sign-index in the sense of the term employed by Peirce⁸. The interpretation and signification of the index signs depend on the director's work, the work of the movie camera; what shows, how it shows, how long it shows, angle, time, etc. For example, jewelry, clothes, city balconies, playing cards, and furniture are considered as sign-indices for the reconstruction of different historical epochs. It should be noted that sign-indexes are considered within the film text in functional terms. Otherwise, different historical epochs could be reconstructed (pre-Soviet Tbilisi *versus* Soviet Tbilisi (ST), Georgia).

By analyzing the empirical material, the author of the article adhered to the Peirce semiotic triangle (representamen – interpretant – object)⁹ as it was the most productive in decoding sign-indices and reconstructing codes (the ratio of signifier and signified) of historical epochs. Of course, when reconstructing historical epochs using the example of *Hakob Hovnatanyan* film, the understanding of semiosis was extended in Morris (1971, p. 367) sense, i.e. semiosis is not only perceived in the context of one side of the Peirce semiotic triangle (object – representamen) but as a comprehensive process: semantic (sign bearer – denote/designate), syntactic (sign bearer – another sign) and pragmatic (sign bearer – interpreter/interpretant). The sign sender, in other words, the modeler (= Parajanov) encodes his message through different signs, and sign dimensions, while the interpreter tries to reconstruct it based on different semiotic (cultural) systems (19th century Armenian clothing, jewellery, house interior, music, art of Hovnatanyan, photo/painting, "thing"-world, interior, etc.). Thus, to restate it another way, we can assume that Parajanov is a modeler of his own created system.

⁷ On an expanded understanding of semiosis as learning and knowing, see special research article (Campbell et al., 2019).

⁸ For further detail, see special research articles (Burks, 1949; Goudge, 1965).

⁹ For further detail, see one special source of literature (Nöth, 1985, pp. 39–41).

When describing the empirical material, semiosis in film, we have used Juri Lotman's (1965, 2004, pp. 250–256, 2011) ideas as a “secondary modeling system”, and binarity as the basis for the construction of semiotic space. These ideas/concepts were used because the narrative of the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* is built on binarity and parallelism of frame construction (see below). Binarity and parallelism of frames cannot be reconstructed without considering the relation of signs within the movie (film syntagma)¹⁰. Parajanov presents Hovnatanyan's work exactly what he considered necessary and important for himself, according to his taste and vision.

The director's approach not only became innovative but also distinctive, imprinting a unique signature on the film that unmistakably bears the creative essence of the filmmaker.

Through the example of the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* the author of the paper tries to answer two key questions which will reveal Parajanov's translation essence: how Parajanov presents the spirit of OT through the paintings of Armenian artist Hovnatanyan and how in diachrony the transformation of the city from the 19th century city to the Soviet era is presented. The answer to these questions may pave the way for analyzing this Armenian film within other contexts, methods, and approaches in English language scholarship, such as in the spirit of postcolonial criticism, describing OT and ST as the frontier zone of the South Caucasus (SC).

In essence, Parajanov's short films were presentations of his concept of the convergence of painting and the cinematic frame. By means of the moving camera he created a dynamic painting of Hovnatanyan and Niko Pirosmiani on a meta-level, already in the language of cinema. Thus, as Parajanov himself aptly noted, he dissolved his filmmaking into painting, which he considered to be the main weakness and the main strength of his works (Parajanov & Zakoyan, 1999). The strength of his film language is that he created a visual creolized cine-text beyond the traditional film language, playing with the works of artists and composers, visualizing and voicing them in new syntagmata. Reflecting on Parajanov's work, Peleshyan¹¹ notes that he was a pioneer in the sense that he “used the possibilities of painting in cinema, <...> did not bring painting into cinema but using cinema he could apply its possibilities” (Pelechian, 2006, p. 129).

The film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* vividly demonstrates the aforementioned qualities. Parajanov's masterful camera work and aesthetic vision transforms a frame into a painting, giving it autonomous value. But the picturesqueness and autonomy of the frame are also obtained at the expense of the material – Hovnatanyan's paintings. For the sake of justice, it should be noted that Tarkovsky was the source of this technique in Soviet cinema. He changes the color at the end of the film, and to the accompaniment of Ovchinnikov's (1995) music, Rublev's frescoes are detailed and emphasized (Kinokontsern “Mosfilm”, 2017b).

Just like Tarkovsky, Parajanov's paintings in *Hakob Hovnatanyan* are presented in a new visual syntagma, accompanied by music, sounds, noises, etc. Camera, music, noise, detail/emphasis are products of Parajanov's subjective and selective work¹². He encodes what Hovnatanyan has already encoded. The result is a new visual text of Parajanov's creation but on a

¹⁰ On the metasemiotic description of narration in cinematography, see special research article (Tsivyan, 1984).

¹¹ See more about his work one special source of literature (Sidenova, 2016, pp. 265–266, 272–278).

¹² Choice is an intellectual, cognitive process.

different level. That is, the director transforms the primary material (Hovnatanyan's paintings) into an autonomous visual text through "movement seen in detail" (Eikhenbaum, 1982). In essence, Parajanov realized Boris Eikhenbaum's (1974) idea, expressed in the latter's article entitled "Problems of Film Stylistics": the invention of the motion picture camera made it possible to turn off the main dominant of theatrical syncretism, the audible word, and replace it with another dominant – visible motion in detail (Eikhenbaum, 1982).

The commonality between Rublev and Hovnatanyan is that the camera is dynamic. But in the film on the same theme *The Color of Pomegranates* the camera is static. Dynamism in the frame is achieved through translational and spherical motions of actors and objects.

In determining a choice of methodology, the author of the article proceeded from empirical material.

3. Hakob Hovnatanyan – portrait artist

The short film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* is a new turn in the director's work. After closing the film *Kiev Frescoes*¹³, it constitutes a kind of prelude, a micro-experience before his central film *The Color of Pomegranates*. In other words, the Armenian director makes films about gifted inhabitants of 18th and 19th centuries OT – Hovnatanyan and Sayat-Nova¹⁴.

The chosen Armenian poets are his inner projections. The choice of presentations of the life and work of these particular Armenian poets is not accidental, as they are all "products" of the cultural frontier of the SC, having lived their lives at the crossroads of different cultures (Armenian, Georgian, Iranian, Turkic).

The film is dedicated to the talented Armenian painter, portraitist Hovnatanyan, who lived in OT. Compositionally, the beginning and end of the film reveal and close the city and its temporal transformations, while the middle is a focused and fragmentary representation of the Armenian artist's paintings. Zakoyan (2013, p. 109) is quite right to note that apart from the verbal headings Hovnatanyan is a portraitist and master realist, who sang by the power of the poet to his contemporaries; nothing else is told about the artist himself.

The origins of Hovnatanyan's portrait painting go back to the tomb paintings of Armenian amkars of the 18th–19th centuries in OT (with irons, folders), Iranian portrait painting (conventional statuary, refinement of black silhouettes), and Russian portrait painting (Orest Kiprensky) (Ginsburg, 1958, p. 112, 114, 121). Khachatryan (2006, p. 33) also notes that the artist was influenced by Kadjar portraiture¹⁵, Iranian-Georgian portraiture, 18th – early 19th century city portraiture, and "imported Russian Western European painting, particularly pictorial and graphic portraits; local production of the so-called trivial culture".

Let us pay attention to how Kubat'yan (2002) presents the rhythm of the film's visual sequences on the verbal level:

"The portraitist Hakob Hovnatanyan. The story about his life is only eight minutes long and is not accompanied by a text. There is no need for a text. He who has sight, let him

¹³ For more on this film see special research article (Simyan, 2021).

¹⁴ Sayat-Nova was a borderline author of Armenian, Georgian, Turkish, and Persian cultures, so was Hovnatanyan.

¹⁵ For more on this, see special research article (Tajarian, 2022).

see. The streets of old Tiflis, where he lived, the Armenian church, where he was baptized and buried, the cemetery where he lies. And the canvases. Women's portraits, men's, children's portraits. The change of plans – general, medium, close-up. Quiet, smooth passages of the camera. Suddenly, the camera pounces. More, more. Eyes, eyes, eyes. Hands, hands, hands. That's it, it seems. But the essence of this painter, his view of the world and his place in the world – as if in the palm of his hand. A miracle? It seems so”.

In Parajanov's shots, it is Hovnatanyan's portrait paintings that are presented in detail with different framings and from different points of view. In the middle of the film the director has distinguished four visual thematic blocks: 1) jewelry on hands, 2) presentation of Armenian women, 3) men (eyes, faces, etc.), 4) and children (Bozulbang, 2022).

It should be noted that Hovnatanyan's paintings, regardless of their aesthetic and compositional solutions, are signs of a paradigm shift in the depiction of objects. In his paintings we mainly see not tsars, queens and saints but real women and men from the nobility and merchant classes. The very change of subjects (especially women) is a presentation of secularization and democratization in painting and social values. But Parajanov presents women of upper (rich) rather than lower (poor) estates, the *kekels* (“low”) represented in the plays of the Armenian playwright Gabriel Sundukian¹⁶.

Since Hovnatanyan's paintings also served the role of photography, the artist portrayed people as recognizable. Wealthy Armenian merchants hung these paintings on the walls of their houses. That is, the recognizability of the paintings was an important factor for these paintings. Nersisyan (2007, p. 63), speaking about the psychologism and spiritualization of faces depicted in the works of Hovnatanyan, notes that

“the main thing in Hovnatanyan's works was to reveal the personality in a person. This is what allowed Hovnatanyan's art to emerge from the Middle Ages and step into the new time”.

In other words, the accentuation of individuality was the reason for the transition from the transmission of the mask-image to the individualization of the image. Parajanov's camera, while gliding over the faces of the men and women of Hovnatanyan's paintings, conveyed this very aspect. Parajanov's camera worked as a critic, showing the inner world of people, thus capturing the essence of Hovnatanyan's work. In fact, Parajanov was ahead of art scholars in understanding Hovnatanyan's work.

In his film, Parajanov also indirectly conveys the reasons for the “death” of Hovnatanyan's work. As photo salons appeared in OT, Armenian rich merchants stopped ordering Hovnatanyan's paintings. In other words, photography and photo salons “killed” Hovnatanyan's art.

The changes in the spirit of the time and the winds of new technical means, like the appearance of daguerreotype, photography in OT changed fashion and tastes. Parajanov presents this historical epoch in another short film, *Arabesque on a Theme of Pirosmani*, the photographer's studio in Sololaki¹⁷, where poses women in hats, lovers who despise each other, children, etc. (Tarantino, 2019) (Figure 1).

¹⁶ For more on this, see special research article (Simyan & Ghazaryan, 2020).

¹⁷ Sololaki is a district in OT. In the 19th century, the district was inhabited by rich Armenians (for more information about OT, see Simyan, 2019c).



Figure 1. A still from the film *Arabesque on a Theme of Pirosmiani* (3:49 min.) (Tarantino, 2019) (source: National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi)

One of the episodes in Sololaki's photographic studio presents a man with a beard and a yellow ball in his hand, moving his hips to the music of a shuffleboard (Tarantino, 2019). The yellow long ball in this context becomes an ersatz male organ, but at the same time a sign of childhood. The irony of the situation is represented by syntagmatic details such as masculinity (beard), athletic physique and not knowing what to do with his clay "ball" except for presenting it in the air and rubbing it aimlessly in front of the camera. His movements indicate psychological incoherence and inconsistency.

The image of the man is situated in the context of the previous episode when a bouncing balloon girl is shown in front of the camera (Tarantino, 2019). The girl is congruent, but the man is not. Of course, the movie does not reveal the man's childhood traumas, but the self-presentation without the presence of signs of patriarchy, masculinity (head of the family, husband, lover, children, etc.) speaks of a sign-simulacra, empty masculinity, i.e. masculinity without content. It is more a mask than an embodiment of masculinity. It was after the arrival of such photo studios that the demand for orders from the Armenian artist sharply decreased (Drampyan, 1969, p. 12), as the merchant class and peddlers of OT were not able to appreciate the uniqueness of Hovnatanyan's art, prompting the artist's desire to move to Iran. The rebirth of Hovnatanyan's creativity occurred in the 20th century.

Parajanov, who had already developed a deep appreciation for the Armenian artist's work from an aesthetic perspective, translated these artistic expressions into the visual language of cinema¹⁸. Parajanov's shots of Hovnatanyan's paintings accentuate the national features of Armenians, such as the large eagle-noses and expressive black eyes, which is typically Armenian eye color. The framing and editing of Parajanov's camera accentuates the inner world of the depicted people, thus accentuating the portraitist's skill even more vividly.

¹⁸ The work of Hovnatanyan was introduced into scholarly circulation by art historian Drampyan (1939, 1952, 1969).

Zakoyan (2013, pp. 110–111) explains Parajanov's creative process as follows:

"<...> reality becomes a text only when it ceases to be a reality, that is when it: 1. Fragments; 2. A fragment is torn from its natural context; and 3. From the fragments torn from the context, a new text is built (formed), which represents not reality itself but our attitude (comprehension) toward it".

In fact, the researcher represents the semiosis of the second level, and converts the selected visual details of the pictorial text into the language of (poetic) cinema. Parajanov's encoding is already the third level. Let us demonstrate this with the example of women's jewelry. The first level is encoded by the jeweler, the second by Hovnatanyan, and the third by Parajanov. Simply, it is necessary to consider that coding and conversion are possible only when the (aesthetic) sign enters into a new syntagmatic relation. Parajanov's collages and the collage-like frames in his films, such as *The Color of Pomegranates*, are guided by the same artistic logic.

4. Old Tbilisi: exterior, interior, music, *The Hum of Language*

One has to wonder why Parajanov emphasized OT at the beginning and the end of the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan*.

He was born and raised in ST but lived in the material world of OT. His father was an antique dealer, selling cultural memorabilia. Since childhood, he was versed in the objects of the past. This knowledge of material culture helped him in his creative work. In *Hakob Hovnatanyan* he reconstructed the city, the material culture, the way of life, and mores of the 19th century with a few strokes. In the film, Parajanov presented his native city through speaking objects in two-time vectors: OT and ST.

4.1. Communicative channels of presentation of Old Tbilisi (fonts and paintings)

Parajanov conveyed the spirit of OT through the typeface, which refers to a certain epoch¹⁹, evoking the print of newspapers, decrees, and letters of Russian Empire (RE) (Figure 2).

Zakoyan (2013, p. 115) takes a different view:

"The informative load of the captions is minimal, to say that they add something to the content of the film would be a strong exaggeration, they are rather formal signs, compositional boundaries, giving the film a kind of narration".

It should be added and clarified that, apart from the compositional marking and rubricating, the font conveys the spirit of a bygone era, referring to the characteristic Cyrillic print of RE.

Looking ahead, while the phenomenon of Hovnatanyan as an artist-master is presented through details of clothes and jewelry, OT is represented through things and object syntagma-ta (lace tablecloths, chairs, picture frames, details of clothing and jewelry, harmonium, walls of houses, balconies, etc.). It is the presentation of the past through things and parts that make Parajanov's films authorial. The syntagmatic presentation of the parts makes his films poetic,

¹⁹ See special research article (Chernyavskaya, 2022).



Figure 2. A still from the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (0:02 min.) (source: Bozulbang, 2022)

in other words, the parts presented acquire additional connotations (metaphors, metonymies). Otherwise, the films would have turned into documentaries/autobiographical films²⁰.

In one of his interviews during the filming of *The Color of Pomegranates*, Parajanov explicitly lamented that cinema treats objects in a utilitarian way, it does not use the language of things as signs-indices of historical eras: furniture, fabrics, or jewelry reveal an era no worse than papyri (Grigoryan, 1968, p. 4). This is to say that Parajanov expands the channels of signification. In one of his interviews in January, 1988 he noted: “in my understanding, directing is an attitude to texture, attitude to epoch, attitude to time” (Parajanov–Vartanov Institute, 2017, p. 331). The texture is created by the material world, and the relation to a given epoch and time is established by a knowledge of material culture and the ability to present it.

This principle was tested and vividly presented before *The Color of Pomegranates* in the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan*. Parajanov always used authentic, real things in his films (carpets, jewelry, musical instruments, sharmanka, expensive shawls from Kirman (Sasanian province), tulle veil, court bills, coins, banknotes, coats of arms) (Figures 3–5).

²⁰ Film critic Badasyan (1988, p. 22), while speaking about the state of Armenian documentary cinema, notes that Parajanov's film *Hakob Hovnatanyan*, permeated with a poetic breath, had a great influence on Armenian documentary filmmaking. As one can see, in Armenia this innovative film was perceived not as a product of auteur cinema, but as a documentary film with a poetic breath. It should be noted that the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* by Parajanov is the second attempt in this genre. The first attempt was undertaken in Ukraine, in November 1965, after the screen test for the upcoming film *Kiev Frescoes*, guidance has the project immediately closed. Obviously, Parajanov had no intention of making a film in the spirit of communism decoding reality (Dziga Vertov), something objective and propagandistic. This will become evident if we compare Parajanov's screen test (*Kiev Frescoes*) with Vertov's films, for example, *A Sixth Part of the World* (orig. *Shestaya Chast Mira*, 1926), *Three Songs about Lenin* (orig. *Tri pesni o Lenine*, 1934), etc. Movie guide of the *Dovzhenko Film Studios* immediately realized that he was preparing to shoot about the events of the Great Patriotic War through his, that is, Parajanov's prism, which would be an innovative, modernist film, but communist in content. How the script for the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* was approved remains a mystery. It happened either out of ignorance or wisdom of communist concepts. Zakoyan (2013, p. 109) adheres to the latter version: one has to be amazed at the wisdom and foresight of Soviet film officials and editors who approved the script and released it into production.



Figure 3. A still from the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (0:09 min.) (source: Bozulbang, 2022)



Figure 4. A still from the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (0:15 min.) (source: Bozulbang, 2022)

As seen in these frames, the director conveys the spirit of 19th century OT and refers to RE through the presentation of everyday objects, interiors, and games with money (bingo, cards). In the film, fragments of Hovnatanyan's paintings are intertwined with the material world of OT of the 19th century. The portrayed headband and jewelry can be used to reconstruct the taste(s) and status of the wearer.

It should be noted that the camera conveys the transition from the conventional to the real, juxtaposing the material world the frame of a pot on the windowsill of OT apartment, with a fragment of Hovnatanyan's painting *Portrait of Shushanik Nadiryan* (orig. *Shushanik Nadiyany*

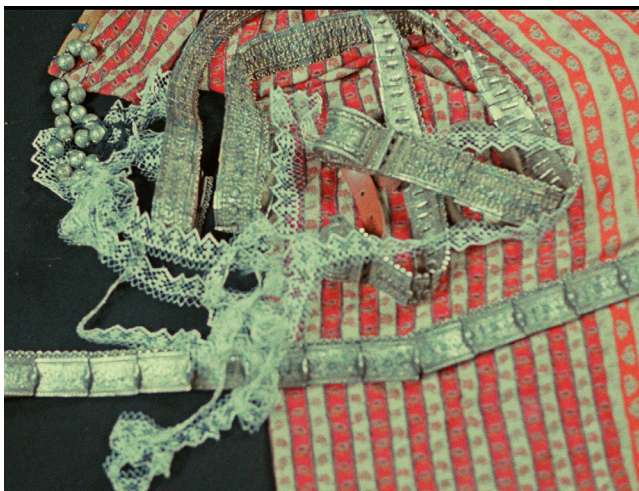


Figure 5. A still from the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (0:50 min.) (source: Bozulbang, 2022)

dimankary, 1840–1850) (Bozulbang, 2022). From the OT interior, the film shows an antique chair (Bozulbang, 2022). A harmonium is shown several times in open and closed form (Bozulbang, 2022). The objects shown are important objects of the 19th century OT interior.

In visual syntagma, the physharmonium in the open state begins to accompany Hovnatanyan's female paintings. Parajanov presents these images in Armenian church songs, *sharakans*, which in turn indicates the religiosity of these women, who went to prayer and liturgy. Parajanov was a great music connoisseur. He chose a *sharakan* to the words of Nerses IV the Gracious *Amen, Holy Father* as interpreted by Makar Yekmalyan²¹, which is performed during Feasts of Jesus Christ. The men in the paintings of the Armenian artist are presented with the sounds of drums.

Among the musical paraphernalia of the 19th century OT interior, one can also see a metronome on a closed harmonium. The metronome makes the visual row dynamic and also indicates the rhythm of time, the spirit of the time. This instrument was also needed for the children of the nobility and merchant classes of OT so that they could play at the right tempo. It should be noted that we can hear a teenager speaking in the background in French (Bozulbang, 2022). The episode reveals the realities of 19th century OT, referring back to the second part of the century before last, to the European influences of the city. It is well known that the language of the 19th century was French, and all wealthy families taught their children French. The hum of this language in the background of the music is relevant, and individual phrases like *look at the necklace, look at the blue dress, it's beautiful*²² refer to Hovnatanyan's paintings, such as *Natalie Teumyan* (orig. *Natalya Teumyani dimankary*, 1840) (necklace), *Portrait of Princess Melikova* (orig. *Melik'ovayi Dimankary*, 1840) (blue dress) (Radiovan, 2019).

²¹ Sharakan can be listened to as performed by Heghine Khachatryan (Armenian National Music, 2021).

²² The author would like to thank his former student Anahit Hovhannisyan for translating the French phrases.

The children's phrases not only describe the pictures but also fit into the context of the game. It is obvious from the hum of speech that the mother of a family with one child has come home. The slightly older child does not want to play with the younger one. The following phrases are heard:

"Look, mom, he's a little bit so... sky, sooner the sky will come down to earth than I will play with him (a typical phrase of Tiflis Armenians), no, me, why is it you? Not at all. I <...>. At the end of the discrete conversation, we hear a baby crying and the boys' names, 'Vartan! Hovhannes!'. And again, the phrases 'Look at her eyes, are they beautiful?'" (Bozulbang, 2022).

The last phrase in French is heard in the context of the presentation of Hovnatanyan's paintings.

The children's dialogue about the game (will/will not) is presented on different levels. This dialogue of the children prepares for the next scene, where the clatter of backgammon dice is heard. In all likelihood, Vartan and Hovhannes's father, who is fed up with the children's meaningless dialogue, ends this episode with a meaningless phrase in Armenian: *Verj tve'q, t'ooe'q, mardavari ban aseq, mard ban kskana* (in English: *Stop it, leave it <...> at least say something that makes sense <...> so you can understand it* (Bozulbang, 2022).

After the discrete dialogue, Parajanov also conveys the linguistic spirit of OT. Armenian, French (Bozulbang, 2022) and numerals in Turkish and Persian are heard in the film during a backgammon game (Bozulbang, 2022). The number six in Persian (*shesh*) and five in Turkish (*bes*) are mentioned²³. The shot with the cat on the Turkmen carpets is interesting, revealing the realities of OT (Figure 6). In the summertime the carpets are hung up for the purpose of ventilation and protection against moths (Bozulbang, 2022).

Carpet al.o reminds us that OT was a trading crossroads between the West and the East. Carpet is in itself an attribute of OT, an essential part of the OT interior. It should be noted that this shot refers to the OT, when the sellers displayed carpets for sale on the balconies, reminiscent of Vahik Elibekyan's painting *Carpet Sellers* (orig. *Prodavtsy kovrov*, 1978) (Manukyan, 1991, p. 23).

The spirit of the OT is also conveyed through the sound of an organ-grinder and the instrument itself against the background of the OT in an interesting thing syntagma: organ-grinder-ring-dome church (Bozulbang, 2022). There is an interesting shot that symmetrically rhymes, with two male and two female heads wearing typical 19th century headdresses (Figure 7).

²³ There is nothing strange about this since OT was a multicultural city and Armenians, mostly of the older generation, even still use the linguistic *surzhik* for numerals during backgammon games. From Persian they use *ek* (1), *du* (2), *si* (Armenian *sy*) (3), *ja(h)ar* (4), *pyanj* (5), *shesh* (6), from Turkish *bir* (1), *iki* (2), *dort* (4), *bes* (5). The numerals such as (3) and *alti* (6) are not used in any combinations when denoting numbers in *zarah* (dice). But it should be mentioned that in some number combinations Turkish is used simultaneously for one number and Persian for another as in 6/5 (*shesh, besh*), 4/4 (*dort ja(h)ar*). In all other cases Persian 5/5 (*du besh*), 6/6 (*du shesh*), 3/3 – *juht si* (*sy*), (*joft* (Persian), *juft* (Turkish), 2/2 – *du* (b) *ara* (dow (b) *ara* = literally *make two (times)*) are used for repeated numbers, but for 1/1 Armenians say *h(h)ap ek* (*hap ek*). In Armenian, *hap* means: 1. *haf* = bark, 2. puppy. In all likelihood, the second meaning is close to our context. The ironic phrase is *play two little (puppy) woofs*, i.e., in an emergency situation, the player expects 6/6, 5/5, but *two little woofs* come out. But the first phrase (*two little (puppy) woofs*) among backgammon players is not commonly known.



Figure 6. A still from the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (7:16 min.) (source: Bozulbang, 2022)



Figure 7. A still from the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (7:53 min.) (source: Bozulbang, 2022)

Symmetry is also conveyed in the image of white horses walking harmoniously. Another symmetry can be deduced by contrasting running horses and children. In the exterior space of the city, symmetry functions (1+1) rather than 2+2 as in the last shot with the human heads.

Symmetrical frames have different functions: 1) giving the frames aesthetic autonomy (Parajanov's poetics is based on this: each frame is an aesthetic object); 2) giving rhythmicity to the visual flow; 3) providing connecting links with subsequent similar frames, thus creating a visual ensemble, and in the temporal aspect – duration; 4) gathering “things” and objects into one frame – OT (horses, women with tulles on a shuffle, men in caps, etc.).

In other words, the parallelism of frames based on binarity generalizes and gathers important subjects, “things” into one visual, mental, and temporal bundle through repetitions. In essence, Parajanov’s accentuated objects begin to function in a new iconic, connotative dimension. It should be noted that Parajanov’s concept of constructing visual texts is correlated with “the law of constructing a real semiotic system” (Lotman, 2004, p. 251).

At the end of the film, the urban space shifts and the Komitas Pantheon is focused on and presented under the heading “Tiflis the Armenian Pantheon”. In other words, a part of the Armenian OT and Tbilisi is presented, accompanied by the duduk, referring to sorrow and grief. Note that the coupling of frames in the urban space occurs on the level of colour in the following syntagmatic chain: white horses, a smashing jug of matsoni (white yogurt), white shorts, a white tombstone, white grazing horses (Bozulbang, 2022).

5. Synthesized representation of Old Tbilisi and Soviet Tbilisi

Soviet Tbilisi, retaining the details of OT in its colorful courtyards – the arches in the background of light bulbs, the patterns of balconies (Bozulbang, 2022) – is presented against the background of a backgammon game.

There are interestingly contrasting shots showing the walls of old Tiflis, already plastered in the Soviet era, and balconies with typical Soviet attributes – gymnastic rings (Bozulbang, 2022) (Figures 8–9).

Parajanov presents the clash of eras not only through the example of OT courtyards but also through large syntagmatic spaces. The juxtaposition of OT and Soviet-electrified Tbilisi is conveyed through a carriage and high-voltage poles and wires, churches and wires (Bozulbang, 2022). Interestingly, Parajanov shows the Saint George’s Church, Tbilisi (13th century), the Church of Saint Michael of Tver, Tbilisi (1913), and the Matekhi Church, Tbilisi (13th century) in the syntagma of the monument to Vakhtang I, founder of Tbilisi. The presentation of



Figure 8. A still from the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (6:32 min.) (source: Bozulbang, 2022)



Figure 9. A still from the film *Hakob Hovnatanyan* (7:16 min.) (source: Bozulbang, 2022)

different churches in the film indicates the multi-confessional and multicultural nature of OT. For the reader it should be noted that multiconfessionalism is manifested in the fact that in Parajanov's film different churches belonging to different Christian denominations such as Armenian Apostolic Church and Orthodox Church, which in its turn is manifested in Russian and Georgian versions.

Note how Parajanov says goodbye to OT in his short films. In *Arabesque on a Theme of Pirosmiani*, the end is conveyed:

- 1) by the transition from Pirosmiani's paintings to three-dimensional theatrical sets referring to OT;
- 2) to the music of the shalakho from *Vinny Pogreb* to ST with its uniformly high-rise buildings (Figure 10). Thus, Parajanov indicates that one "play"-era (OT era, pre-Soviet) has ended and a new Soviet era has begun.

While in the Georgian film about Pirosmiani Parajanov depicts the transition of an era in terms of theatrical and decorative elements, the end in *Hakob Hovnatanyan* is represented through a non-verbal play. In the last frame of the film, Mother Georgia and the Statue of King Vakhtang Gorgasali with his right hand raised are shown. The non-verbal sign functions in the context of farewell; the founder of the city says goodbye to his recipient and the filmmaker to his viewer (Bozulbang, 2022).

But Parajanov's *Hovnatanyan* theme does not end here. It is also presented in another compressed text, in another cultural collage – *Prayer about Hovnatanyan* (orig. *Molitva pro Ovnatanyana*, 1967) (Figure 11).

The collage, in fact, represents the multiculturalism of OT, where Armenians, Georgians, and others lived and created. The usage is from the work of Hovnatanyan, which depicts Armenian women. Zhuravleva in her commentary on the collage noted that Hovnatanyan portrayed Georgian women: "In the left part of the work the author has placed portraits of



Figure 10. A still from the film *Arabesque on a Theme of Pirosmiani* (17:23 min.) (source: Tarantino, 2019)



Figure 11. Sergei Parajanov. *Prayer about Hovnatanyan* (1967) (source: Sergei Parajanov Museum, Armenia)

Georgian women created by Hovnatanyan <...>" (Parajanov–Vartanov Institute, 2017, p. 42). The language of clothing, ornaments, and decorations leaves no doubt that the women depicted are Armenians²⁴.

²⁴ It was worth rewriting a lot in the commentary, which is presented in the book *Maestro Sergei Parajanov* (Parajanov–Vartanov Institute, 2017).



Figure 12. Sergei Parajanov. *Parable about the Son* (source: Sergei Parajanov Museum, Armenia)

According to the material world, the symbolism of the collage, it can be understood that the city of Tbilisi is represented in diachronicity. The left part refers to the 18th century.

The right side refers to two centuries. Pirosmeni's *Gate Keeper* (orig. *Dvornik*, 1904), the dome of the Orthodox Church, referring to the RE, points to the OT of the 19th century, the ropes and the cable car point to the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, all Christian symbols (Jesus, angels) point the Christianity of the Middle Ages.

Tbilisi has always accompanied Parajanov. During his second imprisonment, the city repeatedly emerged in the director's mind – *Parable about the Son* (orig. *Pritcha o syne*, 1974–1977) (Figure 12).

This graphic work refers more to the carnivalesque OT than to ST. The feast on the bank of the Kura (river), against the background of an Armenian church, the gestures of the feasting revelers and the *tar* point to a past era, and OT in distant Ukraine in Perevalsk (Voroshilovgrad region) appears not as a fragment of a real city but as a memory, a reconstruction of a cultural urban text (cf. the works of Pirosmeni, Vano Khojabekyan²⁵, Elibekyan, etc.).

6. Conclusions

Parajanov embodies the essence of bygone eras and breathes life into them with the help of a new language of cinema, creating innovative tools for his cinematic self-expression, and introducing painting and cinema into the process of synergy. In this context, through different communicative channels such as typefaces, "things" (newspapers, banknotes/pennies, etc.)

²⁵ For more on this, see Khojabekyan's graphic works (National Gallery of Armenia, 2011) and analysis of the era (Simyan, 2019a, 2019b).

convey the spirit of the pre-Soviet era, the era of RE's. In this context, Parajanov presents the language of clothes, necklaces, the inner world of the depicted people in Hovnatanyan's paintings, as well as the urban space of OT and ST from inside (interior) and outside (exterior). The point of view, the angles of presentation of the thing world become an important technique of the poetics of the presentation in terms of composition. The camera's movement through different textures allows things themselves to speak. The interpreter of the film plays a key role in decoding the sign (representamen) and reconstructing different times: OT of the 19th century and ST, which is in an era of transformation. The epoch is represented through different channels of communication: visual and auditory (noise, hum, hum of tongues, color, smells, etc.). The city of Tiflis is presented as a "border" city in the cultural sense of the word, seen by a "border" filmmaker, a bearer of different cultures, such as Armenian, Georgian, Ukrainian, Hutsul, etc. Parajanov's short film is its internal projection, as Parajanov, having presented in his own way the work and life of his "heroes" (Bozulbang, 2022, OT versus ST), reveals his inner world through them.

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