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THE PASSION ACCORDING TO HAKOB HOVNATANYAN

Cinema tells us stories; it is narrative by the nature of its material – the “moving photograph” (sequence shot), which contains this or that action. Narrative, movement and action are the three whales, on which classic cinema and our understanding of film stand.

However, even the most intriguing narrative by itself is not a work of art. In order to make it one, simply telling the story is not enough; it also has to be told in such a way, that the story becomes an idea, and not just an idea, but one that can be felt and experienced in such a way, as if it was not an idea at all, but a form perceived through the senses. An idea, which can be experienced in a concrete-sensory form, is in fact what we call a work of art.

However, is it possible to imagine all the above-mentioned in the reverse order? Can a concrete-sensory form, plasticity and texture be conveyed in a way, as if they were an idea, and not just an idea, but one born out of a story, only without that story itself? That is to create poetry using material directly connected to narrative. In other words, to overcome the initially given material.

In 1965, Parajanov completed the film *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, which brought him international fame. The film was dubbed “poetic”, while its author was proclaimed a founder of poetic cinema. In the same year, 1965, Pasolini, in an essay on poetic cinema, presented at Pesaro, claimed that cinema can speak “the language of poetry” only by securing a “narrative alibi”. In the case of *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, ethnic Western-Ukrainian culture served as this alibi. The film, of course, was narrative, while the term “poetic” was used in a metaphorical sense, denoting the grace, beauty and unusualness of what was being shown.

On June 1, 1965, Parajanov began working on the film *Kyiv Frescoes*. In November of that year, the production of the film was stopped by the order of the

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Dovzhenko Film Studio director, footage negatives were destroyed, while the director was accused of having a “mystical-subjective attitude towards the Great Patriotic War.” *Kyiv Frescoes* survives as edited acting tests with added sound. In form, it is an outline, and in content, it is a manifesto and declaration of a new cinematic thinking – poetic (in the strict sense of the word) cinema. In those times, this was quite a serious accusation, and the director had no choice but to leave Kyiv.

In 1966, Sergei Parajanov arrives in Yerevan and in 1967, he starts developing the film *Sayat-Nova* (*The Color of Pomegranates*) at HayFilm Studio. However, after all the fuss with *Kyiv Frescoes*, the director needed to recuperate, to restore his creative potential and faith in himself. He had to make *Hakob Hovnatanyan* to find peace of mind, before commencing the filming of his ultimate work.

Parajanov made the ten-minute-long *Hakob Hovnatanyan* at the Yerevan Studio of Documentary Films in 1967.

Many elements from *Frescoes* migrated to *Hakob Hovnatanyan* – angles and shots used to show monuments of the nation’s iconic figures, fragments of the city and Christian temples, portraits by old masters, armchairs, still lifes, a street organ, empty painting frames, a phaeton, and most importantly – the overall style of the film. However, in *Frescoes*, the style was still looking for support in a story; it was still in need of a “narrative alibi”. The alibi turned out to be not convincing enough, and *Frescoes*, as we already mentioned, was sentenced to capital punishment.

There is no narrative in *Hakob Hovnatanyan*. And therefore there is no need for an alibi. This is pure poetry.

Here is a fragment of the film’s script, which is only four pages long: “Black brocade in combination with a red Kirman shawl¹. A white glove in combination with silver. Red *dgejim*² in combination with a carpet... Black cloth in combination with gold Persian brocade. White *lechaks*³ in combination with court bills. Stamp paper in combination with XIX century jewelry. A long fade out and fade in of a real glass of water... Inside the glass – a rose... A red Empire style armchair against a gray wall background...” And so on throughout all four pages of the

¹ Precious sheep and goat wool shawls from the Persian province of Kirman.

² A lint-free Karabakh carpet.

³ A tulle veil – a detail of a woman's headdress.

script. One can only marvel at the wisdom and insight of the Soviet film officials and censors, who approved the script, green lighting the production of the film.

Hakob Hovnatanyan is a film about a painter – at least that is what all the summaries say, although in the film itself, aside from two title cards – “Hakob Hovnatanyan – a portrait painter” and “A master realist who immortalized his contemporaries with the power of a poet” - there is exactly zero mentions of the artist. However, Parajanov not only knew well and highly appreciated the work of Hakob Hovnatanyan, but what is more important, he deeply felt it and loved it. So what does he tell us in his ten-minute masterpiece? The film does not contain either the painter’s biography, anecdotal stories from his life, or an analysis or contemplations on his oeuvre in general or any work in particular, i. e. nothing, that could call a narrative element. The film even has almost no “moving pictures” – in-frame movement, and even in the seldom instances, where movement does occur, it is in such insignificant doses that it is hard to call it an action. Here are a few more excerpts from the script: “White horses bow their muzzles. Hooves clatter on the pavement. A tar⁴ is played... Kamancha⁵... The Kura⁶ makes noise... The endless horizon with high-voltage poles, a horizon with rushing trains. An ordinary phaeton with lanterns lit at day time”.

Narrative, movement and action, as well as title cards and speech, are minimized as much as possible in cinema. So what holds the film together?

Any creative process is accompanied by the overcoming of both the material itself, and our knowledge on it. Whether the artist chips away the excess from a block of stone, freeing the goddess figure imprisoned in it, or selects and arranges words in a special way, releasing the meaning hidden in them, he or she invariably overcomes the sign (and therefore conventional and automated) sphere of language and ascends to the meaning (the sphere of ideas).

The material of cinema is all visible and audible reality. To become a film, it must be captured, “photographed” and overcome by us. What and how do we overcome, what and how do we “chip away” from this reality?

Any type of picture taking, even the first photographic experiments of a six-year-old child, begins with framing. What do we do, when we frame reality? We make a selection from the image of the world, presented to us by reality, choosing

⁴ A plucked stringed musical instrument.

⁵ A bowed stringed musical instrument.

⁶ A river that runs through the city of Tbilisi.

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the part of it that most fully reflects and expresses our attitude towards it. We subjectivize objective data by inserting our own meaning in it ("we comprehend it"). Thus, by framing various fragments of reality and linking them together in a sequence, we create a text, which we mistakenly perceive as a text given to us by reality itself. However, actually, reality becomes a text only when it ceases to be reality), i.e. when it is: 1) fragmented, 2) when the fragment is pulled out of its natural context, 3) when fragments pulled out of their natural contexts are combined to make a new text, which is not representative of reality, but of our attitude towards reality (our comprehension of it). This is how any text is created – from Dostoyevsky's novels to the amateur pictures of a beach photographer.

Hakob Hovnatanyan is no exception. However, in this case, before calling action, the author does not frame reality itself, but the material that has already been framed and functions as a text. Therefore, a new text is created out of an already existing one, as if the latter were reality itself. Is this not also what Parajanov did in his later collages, cutting and gluing in a new way typographic copies of the works by old master painters?

Parajanov frames Hovnatanyan's paintings just as one would frame reality, capturing all that is valuable and significant for him. However, what turns out to be valuable and significant for Parajanov is what was peripheral and even a background element in the primary text. Here is another excerpt from the script: "The backgrounds of the paintings... We hear a dhol⁷... Greys... Dark greys... Ochres... Blacks..."

Our (spectator's) attention is focused not on the portrait of the model (the whole), but on the lace cuffs of the shirt, a scroll clenched in a fist, a rosary hanging in one's hands, a silver belt at the waist... A whole gallery of hands, each with their own unique character, intonation, and plasticity. A similar gallery of eyes - male and female, sad and flirtatious, thoughtful and decisive. They, like the hands, no longer belong to their models; they are not part of a portrait or image of this or that individual, but independent objects of aesthetic perception. They do not even function as parts instead of the whole (metonymy, synecdoche), because in essence we do not see the whole. In the film, Hovnatanyan's canvases are almost never presented in their entirety, and even the ones that are presented, are in no way correlated with their fragments. By framing Hovnatanyan's texts,

⁷ A percussion instrument.

Parajanov transports the periphery to the center, transforming it into “an object of autonomous contemplation” and giving it an independent aesthetic function. Sequences created in such a way, are connected via editing, thus creating a wholly new text, where Hovnatanyan’s characters are assigned auxiliary roles, while the habits, manners, preferences, public tastes are brought to the fore, gradually becoming the protagonist of the film.

In two other successive montage sequences, galleries of first female and then male faces are shown. The first sequence is accompanied by a *sharakan*⁸. Faces, introspective, thoughtful, pleading. The second sequence is accompanied by a drum rhythm rich in volitional impulse. The faces from Hovnatanyan’s canvases, depicting a generalized image of a model, become situational in Parajanov’s film. They reflect the specific reactions of men who are seemingly conversing and who have gathered to make a very important and responsible decision. We see officers of the highest ranks and important officials, wealthy merchants and Church hierarchs, meaning that their meeting had national significance.

If we add to the already discussed sequences with fragments of Hovnatanyan’s paintings a few more still lifes, static shots of Tiflis⁹, several short sequences throughout the film with intra-frame movement (horses grazing at the cemetery and young boys playing at that cemetery, a moving carriage, a kitten hanging from the carpet and a carpet falling, a cable car against the backdrop of a temple) and three or four shots of a street organ and organ grinders - then we will see that we have listed all the available visual material of the film.

The film’s audio content is likewise laconic. The clicking of a metronome, the tuning of a kamancha, silence, church singing, drums, arpeggios and out of frame talking which functions as noise (baby talk in French, a few words in Armenian and a few words in Persian to the sounds of nardi¹⁰ being played), silence again, a street organ, synchronized sounds of water being splashed on the street, a copper tray with apples falling on the pavement, a milk jug shattering on cobblestone and the melody of a duduk.¹¹

Hakob Hovnatanyan’s sound design is worthy of a separate study. The function it has in the film is more than equal to that of the images. And in the

⁸ A general name for Armenian original (non-biblical) spiritual songs.

⁹ The pre-1936 name of the modern-day Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia.

¹⁰ A board game akin to backgammon.

¹¹ An Armenian woodwind musical instrument.

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episode, where nardi is played, it creates an independent, autonomously beholdable acoustic character, in relation to which the image serves a subordinate function. In the musical sections, the sound does not only concretize and give meaning to the visuals, but also vests it with a certain narrative, as we see in the drum sequence. As to the synchronized sounds, they serve the function of a kind of virtual synecdoche, indicating that the main action is left outside the frame – quite an important business, it seems, if one were to judge by the emotional excitement that these shots carry within them. All of the above-mentioned ways of using sound are aimed at creating a kind of life that exists beyond the frame, simulating a certain story, creating the feeling of experiencing the said story without actualizing it. And finally, the unexpected and abrupt intrusion of the timpani straight into the melancholic melody of the duduk with the image of the cable car cabin at the end of the film creates an overwhelming feeling of a dramatic resolution - a change of eras and worlds. The film is mesmerizing; we closely follow “what is happening” on screen, although in reality nothing is happening. We empathize with textures, plasticity, intonations and shades - the invisible aura of a specific time and place, just as we would empathize with specific characters in a masterfully crafted play.

It might seem that the film's connection to Hovnatanyan himself is very vague and it is simply using the painter's works as clay to form its own aesthetic object. In some sense, this is true, however, in that case why is the film called *Hakob Hovnatanyan*?

In his attempt to grasp the echoes of the past, recreate the shadows of his own ancestors and the atmosphere of a bygone era, Parajanov relies on the vision and worldview of an artist very close to him in spirit. He reads deep into and focuses on seemingly insignificant details, which were undoubtedly very important for Hovnatanyan himself and which basically reflect his essence. Through his penetration of the “non-essential” and “not relevant”, Parajanov highlights, gives voice to and de-automatizes the work of the great artist in the modern public consciousness. An artist from the past simplified in textbooks appears before us in a new and unexpected light. Before Parajanov, we did not know Hovnatanyan like this. T.S. Elliot said it perfectly, noting that only in living poets do the poets of the past live. Just a year later, Parajanov did the same with Sayat-Nova. Thanks to *The Color of Pomegranates*, the poet of the late Middle Ages became relatable, accessible and modern.

The entire informative component of *Hakob Hovnatanyan* comes down to five title cards: "Tiflis XIX century", "Hakob Hovnatanyan – a portrait painter", "A master realist who immortalized his contemporaries with the power of a poet", "Tiflis Armenian pantheon." Tiflis is mentioned here twice - at the very beginning and at the end. These two title cards frame the film. The city, in fact, is the protagonist of the film, observed, identified and suffered through by Parajanov in the work of Hovnatanyan and in his own life.

In form, all five title cards are presented in a separate frame, in large hand-drawn font, the way film titles are usually presented. In function, they are more reminiscent of explanatory title cards in silent films, which were placed, as they are here, at the beginning of a film, yet not directly one after another, but with shots of the "unfolding" film between them. The final title card – "Tiflis Armenian pantheon" – is an exception, as it appears at the end, it stands apart from the first four, as if in anticipation of the film's ending. The informative load of these title cards is minimal; to say that they add something to the contents of the film would be a big exaggeration. These are more kind of formal signs, compositional points, which give the film a kind of narrative form. And they perform this dramatic function brilliantly. They, together with two long fades, act as supports for the plot and the unfolding drama, the culmination of which falls precisely on the title card "Tiflis Armenian pantheon." No punctuation. Read it as you wish ("Pardon do not execute"¹²). Next comes the resolution.

Parajanov was a reanimator of cultures (the shadows of forgotten ancestors), and in this case he revived in the modern public consciousness the atmosphere of the era, the rise and fall of old Tiflis, the art of its exponent Hakob Hovnatanyan and "the beauty of the era's material texture and the plasticity of the XIX century."

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¹² A popular expression, used to describe two mutually exclusive possibilities, where depending on punctuation the meaning changes completely.