


YVETTE TAJARIAN*

*Candidate of Sciences (Art History),
Matenadaran (Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts
named after Mesrop Mashtots), Head of Matenadaran museum,
Associate professor, YSU
yvettetaj@yahoo.com
0000-0001-9302-0104 
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BETWEEN LENS AND COLLAGE: THE ARTISTIC DIALOGUE OF SERGEY PARAJANOV AND YURI MECHITOV

Abstract

This article examines the artistic interactions between Armenian filmmaker Sergey Parajanov (1924–1990) and Georgian photographer Yuri Mechitov (b. 1950), focusing on their collaborative experiments in photography and collage during the late 1970s–1980s. While Parajanov is internationally recognized for his films, particularly *The Color of Pomegranates*, this study highlights his creative partnership with Mechitov, whose portraits and documentary photographs reveal new aspects of the director's artistic persona. Drawing on interviews, memoirs, and photographic archives, the paper analyzes how Parajanov staged his image before Mechitov's camera, turning everyday gestures into visual allegories. Special attention is given to how Mechitov's photographs

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became sources for Parajanov's collages, where single images were transformed into layered works of visual poetry. The discussion shows how Mechitov's documentary practice intersected with Parajanov's surrealist sensibilities, creates a corpus that transcends the boundaries between cinema, photography, and visual art. By examining these collages, the article shows that Parajanov emerges as a versatile artist whose creative range extended beyond cinema to include collage, photography, painting, and other forms of expression. The study presents only one example of these facets, underscoring the multidimensional nature of his artistic identity.

Keywords: *Sergey Parajanov, Yuri Mechitov, film, Armenian filmmaker, photography, collage, visual art.*

Introduction

Artists who mastered the photographic medium demonstrated that photography is far from a "dead" art form; to deny its evident aesthetic and historical significance is to turn a blind eye to its value. Among the first to recognize how photography could transform the character of painting was Pablo Picasso. This insight developed particularly with the emergence of Cubism. Between 1911 and 1912, Picasso frequently used a camera to produce original images that he subsequently reworked into paintings.

The renowned Armenian film director Sergey Parajanov (1924–1990) was born in Tbilisi, where the Armenian population was at the time considerable.¹ He pursued his studies in Moscow under the distinguished Ukrainian director Igor Savchenko. During this period, Parajanov resided in Kyiv and worked at Alexander Dovzhenko's film studio. His films *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and *The Color of Pomegranates* brought him international acclaim.² In *The Color of Pomegranates*, many scholars identify elements that diverge from prevailing intellectual tendencies of the period, often associating them with surrealism.³ Nevertheless, within the Soviet Union he was primarily known among fellow cinematographers; his unique films were frequently relegated to secondary screenings rather than the main cinema halls.⁴

¹ Tajarian, Laporte-Eftekharian 2022, 192–193; Ayvazyan 2022, 387–409.

² Madoyan 2001, 22–25.

³ Grigoryan 2018, 26–34.

⁴ Galstyan 2021, 99.

An exceptional book published last year provides valuable insight into Parajanov's creative practice. It offers a detailed account of the making of *The Color of Pomegranates*, revealing his working methodology.⁵ The book demonstrates how Parajanov first sketched the frames in pencil as preliminary drafts and then developed the screenplay. The preserved pages also contain his handwritten notes, where certain passages were crossed out in pencil or pen, while new elements were added. Thus, the book presents the dynamic evolution of his creative process, from the initial sketch to the final version of the film.

Zaven Sargsyan, a leading researcher of Parajanov's life and former head of his museum, recounted the director's own words about his vocation:

*"I believe you have to be born a director. It's like a child's adventure: you take the initiative among other children and become a director, creating a mystery. You mould things into shape and create. You torment people with your "artistismus" – frightening your mother and grandmother in the middle of the night. You dress yourself up like Charlie's Aunt, or as Andersen's heroes. Using feathers from a trunk, you transform yourself into a rooster or a firebird. This has always preoccupied me, and that is what directing is."*⁶

According to Sergey Parajanov, photographers should focus on capturing images of prominent individuals if they wish to achieve recognition. One photographer who developed a close creative relationship with Parajanov was the Georgian photographer Yuri Mechitov. Through this collaboration, both Mechitov and Parajanov achieved significant artistic success.

Methodologically, the article combines iconographic/iconological interpretation with formal-stylistic analysis and contextual reading; it triangulates evidence from Mechitov's photographs, Parajanov's collages, interviews, and secondary literature, while preserving figure concordance and the original citations. The research proceeds by pairing each photograph with its derivative collage or documented staging and situating these pairings within the socio-cultural milieu of the 1970s–1980s Tbilisi and late-Soviet cultural politics. The study's significance lies in clarifying Parajanov's mechanisms of self-fashioning at the intersection of photography and collage, establishing a methodological bridge

⁵ Zakoyan, 2024, 54–77.

⁶ Sargsyan 2005, 15.

between film studies and art history, and reframing Tbilisi's late-Soviet cultural environment as an active determinant of artistic practice.

Some Details of Mechitov's Photographic Path

Yuri Mechitov was born in Tbilisi in 1950. His father, Mikhail Mechitov, was a well-known artisan. The Georgian surname "Mechitishvili" is associated with the manufacture or sale of chit; the prefix "me-," analogous to the English "-er," indicates affiliation with a trade. Mikhail spent his entire life in a sewing workshop making hats. Wearing a hat was considered a sign of dignity in Tbilisi, and he created hats for many well-known figures – reportedly sewing 13–15 caps for Brezhnev.⁷

Mechitov's mother was an Armenian from Tehran; his maternal aunt also came from that city and lived during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Although Mechitov does not conceal his Armenian roots, he does not consider himself Armenian; in his own view, he would claim that identity only after fully mastering the language. He notes that residing near Armenia or speaking English rather than Armenian does not by itself confer Armenian identity. At the same time, he remarks that many English-speaking Armenians in the United States will never consider themselves Americans precisely because they are Armenians.⁸

Mechitov studied at the Georgian Polytechnic Institute. He became interested in photography at the age of eight, using a camera purchased by his grandmother, and only at twenty-nine did he begin to organize his archive. He later reflected: "In the beginning, I simply captured what I thought was beautiful; in fact, I now have fifty-five years of photographic experience."⁹

Among his earliest surviving images is a photograph taken when he was ten years old, depicting his younger brother Gia playing in the sand. Although he began in a documentary mode, over time he discovered his preference for photographing people, and portraiture became his primary genre. He has held more than fifty group exhibitions and over twenty solo shows.

From the age of seventeen, Mechitov developed a strong affinity for cinema. He shot several documentaries and worked for a time as a methodologist in an amateur film studio. He also attempted to enter a theater and film institute.

⁷ Bakhtamyan 2015.

⁸ Bakhtamyan 2015.

⁹ Bakhtamyan 2015.

During this period, he met Sergey Parajanov, who later became his mentor and then his close friend. "When Parajanov passed away, he left behind sadness, pain, regret, and wonderful photographs," writes Mechitov.¹⁰

In 1979, as he was beginning to grasp composition, color, form, and space, he prepared for his first solo exhibition. Although he had been drawing since childhood, he found it difficult to select fifteen photographs, and quickly drew additional ten works so as not to miss the exhibition; friends provided substantial support. A subsequent solo exhibition in 1982 at the Union of Artists displayed eighty photographs and secured his recognition as an accomplished photographer.

For Mechitov, the person is central. He teaches his students that ninety-nine percent of portraiture is human contact and only one percent is the technical act of exposure. His recent black-and-white album *101 Portraits* has been in high demand; many observers remark that it reads less as a set of portraits than as a visual history of the country.

Through Mechitov's photographs, one can discern striking details of Parajanov's life and personality. In 2004, for Parajanov's 80th anniversary, Mechitov – then in Yerevan – teamed with director Levon Grigoryan to prepare a book on the filmmaker. Published in October 2009 under the title *Chronicle of Dialogue*, Mechitov regards this book as the most ambitious project of his life.¹¹

One photograph reproduced in the book was taken on May 15, 1981. Parajanov called it the "Shot of the Century." Based on this image, he later created a series of collages. A sculpture derived from the photograph was erected in 2003 in the Sharden quarter of Old Tbilisi; the sculptor is Prasto (Vazha Mikabidze).

In 2010, in honor of his 60th birthday, Mechitov mounted one of his largest exhibitions, "Years Transformed into Suffering," at the Karvasla Museum of History in Tbilisi, covering photographs from 1979 to 2009. In a post-exhibition interview with the Ukrainian journalist Natalya Sakhno, he reflected on his creative path, noting the shift from documentary to portrait work.¹² The same year saw the publication of *101 Portraits* by Yuri Mechitov, featuring prominent cultural and political figures.

¹⁰ Mechitov 2009, 10.

¹¹ Mechitov 2009, 65.

¹² Berkut 2016.

The Relationships of Sergey Parajanov and Yuri Mechitov

Mechitov observed that Parajanov possessed an extraordinarily creative disposition and the capacity to transform a small circumstance into a major event. He was admired by Fellini, Wajda, Forman, Tarkovsky, and others. Parajanov exhibited the aesthetic sensibility of a great artist – indeed, a compulsion toward beauty. He sometimes thought of himself as a painter of small canvases, wishing to paint without consideration for plot, to paint only beauty. He believed that beauty could be found everywhere. His collages confirm that he was convinced of his ability to animate the inanimate.

According to Mechitov, Parajanov sought to disseminate beauty, to reveal it to everyone, and could mock those who failed to perceive it. He “infected” those around him with the talent to see and create beauty, giving of himself freely to admirers and followers alike – sharing ideas, carpets, wine, scripts, fruit, and bread.

Parajanov’s method of working with the camera was theatrical: he staged scenes to secure the shot. After his contact with Parajanov, Mechitov too began to stage each frame, whereas previously he had simply recorded what he saw. For Parajanov, unmediated feeling – love, hatred, fear – and sincerity in any situation were paramount; it was a way of life. He did everything to make each moment unforgettable. For Mechitov, the key to understanding this phenomenon lay in Tbilisi, a city he describes as carnivalesque and competitive – an environment that shaped Parajanov’s sensibility.¹³

Parajanov loved carnival costumes, scarves, hats, and multicolored garments. He involved friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and even strangers. He was passionately interested in collage. As Mechitov recounts, Parajanov could not live under constraints on speech and never readily distinguished between what could or could not be said; for that reason the Communist Party resolved to imprison him on various charges. Even in prison he remained creative: in 1975 he produced his famous *Margarita*, sending daily letters and small-format collages to Lilia Yurevna. He fashioned collages from whatever was at hand – barbed wire, dry branches, rusty nails, fragments of paintings.

Several films were made about Parajanov in later years; among the most successful is *Ron Holloway’s Requiem* (in the 1980s), dealing with his

¹³ Mechitov 2025, 91–94.

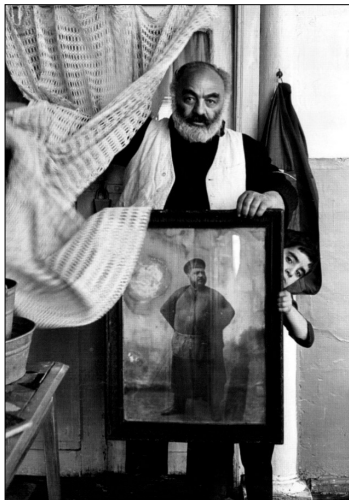
imprisonment, which Mechitov found revelatory. A French documentary by Patrick Cazals also appeared in 1986.

For Mechitov, the mystery of photography lies in the discipline of film: one may shoot a hundred frames, but only a few are worth keeping – a necessary limitation that preserves the image's aura.

A single photograph by Mechitov could become a source of inspiration for Parajanov. From one shot he created many works that, through his reimagining, acquired a different quality and a new life. Returning to the source image reveals how Parajanov's leap of thought and imagination yielded masterpieces from a single photograph.

The First Meeting of Parajanov and Mechitov

The first meeting between Parajanov and Mechitov occurred in 1977, one year after the director's release from prison. On November 5 or 6, 1978, acting on a painter friend's advice, Mechitov sought him out. Before that encounter, Mechitov had not heard of Parajanov and had not seen his films.¹⁴ At that time a



highly successful portrait was created in which Parajanov styled himself as the Gioconda. Significantly, their relationship began not with Parajanov showing his films – which might seem logical – but with Mechitov showing his own work. Parajanov quickly grew fond of Mechitov and his circle.

By March 1981, two and a half years after his release from a Ukrainian prison, Parajanov – then unemployed – staged another composition for Mechitov. The photographer had met a young Kurdish boy whom, according to Parajanov, thieves used as an underfed accomplice, small

enough to slip through windows and open doors from within. In Fig. 3, Parajanov records countrymen buying traditional costumes. Mechitov took several frames, but only this one was deemed successful – thanks to Parajanov's careful orchestration of "mystique."

¹⁴ Mechitov 2025, 152.

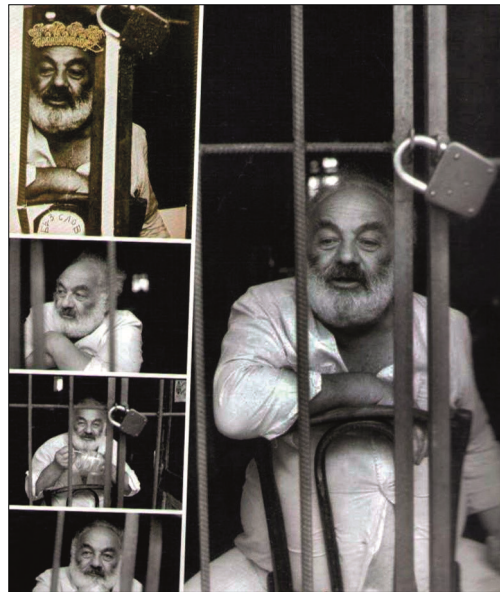
Between Lens and Collage: The Artistic Dialogue of Sergey Parajanov...



May 1981 (Fig. 2)

collage “I, with the Flight of a Black Crow.”¹⁵

A common refrain holds that entrance doors once remained unlocked, but crime patterns changed. According to Mechitov, Parajanov locked himself behind fashionable iron grilles at night while leaving the door ajar. Fig. 7 records him holding a jar of yogurt.¹⁶ The resulting series depicts him eating naturally – images more authentic and heartfelt than any meticulously staged shot alternative.



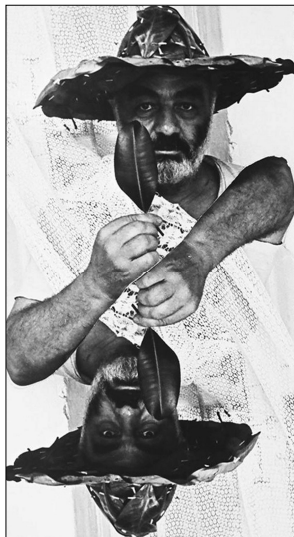
August 1986 (Fig. 3)

¹⁵ Bakhtamyan 2015.

¹⁶ Mechitov 2014, 111.



**Artistic Interaction between
Mechitov and Parajanov in the
1980s (Fig. 4)**



“Card of Life” (Fig. 6)
the pain of objective reality; yet the upright figure – Parajanov as he is – resides within the dream.



“Two Realities” (Fig. 5)

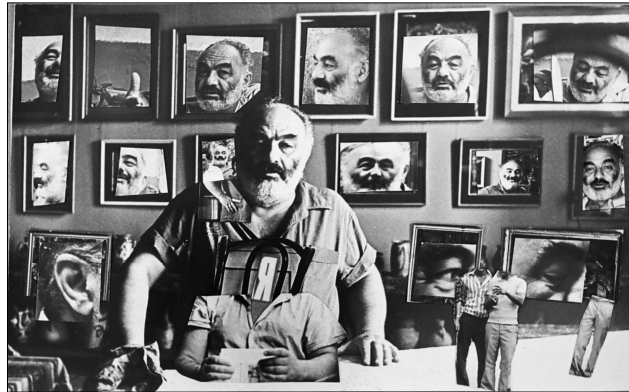
The collage opposes several realities. One is the dream-reality in which Parajanov dwells – nonexistent in the objective world yet granting the largest visual space. Opposed to it is childhood memory, linked by a staircase leading from youth into the dream. Another layer is the inverted, cat-formed world that stands for

layer is the inverted, cat-formed world that stands for the pain of objective reality; yet the upright figure – Parajanov as he is – resides within the dream.

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In this collage Parajanov contemplates the world with a gaze that does not change, however the world turns. Symbolic elements are crucial: a leaf in his hand, a hat fashioned of the same leaf, and perhaps in the original photograph he even crushed it. The collage becomes an act of self-presentation: first self-esteem, then self-portrait.

Those who shout "Me" the loudest appear headless, while those who are truly grounded are present everywhere. The collage is populated with many headless "Me" figures – timeless types who sit where they do not belong and thus diminish. By contrast, the genuinely great cannot be contained within prescribed frameworks or dictated ideologies,



"Me" (Fig. 7)

like the partial figures trapped in the rear plane. Parajanov stands in the foreground – hears and sees in the first dimension – and, in the shared dimension, thinks and grants permission.



"Me by the Flight of the Black Crow" (Fig. 8)

Created from Mechitov's photograph, this collage – tentatively titled here "Parajanov's Flight," and titled by him "Me with the Flight of a Black Crow" – captures an unearthly, dreamlike ascent. The emotions on his face are lucid and sincere. The sky, too, is destabilized: it may just as well lie under his feet. Did he style himself as merely "a man among others," or did he imply that anyone might fly, if only they could see their wings? Those who know him best argue that he was a

white crow – one who never enters quarrels.



"A Glance at Freedom" (Fig. 9)

spiritually imprisoned. Pain suffuses the composition, and most gazes are evasive. Only one figure – a young woman in a portrait – meets the viewer directly. She may have been killed, yet she is luminous; truth resides in her image. Parajanov alone looks straight at it: at truth.

The heroine is the woman in the mirror – both present and absent. The collage embodies the paradox of ascent and descent: one climbs and sees the fall. A woman can raise and can cast down, yet she is sheltered in the tabernacle; ultimately, she covers the globe in the form of a watermelon. The ambivalence extends across the entire scene, where presence and absence coexist.

Conclusion

When art historians, critics, and journalists hear the name Parajanov, they generally imagine the filmmaker. This article attempts to observe and evaluate Parajanov and photographer Mechitov from a different vantage. Journalist Bakhtamyan's interview with Mechitov provided additional source material, and we have highlighted it here; the questions and responses allow a deeper view of their relationship. Unique works of art emerged through the interplay of human relationships and professional collaboration. This study may be useful for historians and journalists who address Parajanov and seek new perspectives. Parajanov was an artist of vast resources, mastering diverse technical strategies.

A look at freedom – or rather, at the world beyond the grilles – reveals a sprawling prison more populous than any carceral institution. The collage suggests a paradox: some prisoners are free in spirit, while many outside are



"In Front of the Mirror" (Fig. 10)

His career confirms what an artist can achieve when talent, energy, and knowledge are devoted to high aims. Mechitov, for his part, read and understood the character of his native Tbilisi compatriot. Study of Mechitov's portraiture suggests that one essential feature is the ability to say much with few details; he presented "his genius" with such skill that even unfamiliar viewers can apprehend the artist Parajanov through these images.

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ԻՎԵԹ ԹԱՋԱՐՅԱՆ

*Արվեստագիտության թեկնածու,
Մալենադարանի Արևելագիտության բաժնի ավագ գիտաշխատող,
Մալենադարանի թանգարանի ղեկավար,
Երևանի պետական համալսարանի դոցենտ,
yvettetaj@yahoo.com*

0000-0001-9302-0104 

**ՕՐՅԵԿՏԻՎԻ ԵՎ ԿՈԼԱՃԻ ՄԻՋԵՎ.
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ԳԵՂԱՐՎԵՍԱԿԱՆ ԵՐԿԽՈՍՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ**

Ամփոփում

Հոդվածը նպատակ ունի ուսումնասիրելու հայ կինոռեժիսոր Սերգեյ Փարաջանովի (1924–1990) և վրաց լուսանկարիչ Յուրի Մեչիտովի (ծ. 1950) միջև ձևավորված արվեստաբանական փոխազդեցությունները՝ հատկապես կենտրոնանալով 1970–1980-ական թվականների ընթացքում նրանց լուսանկարների և դրանցից ստեղծված կոլաժների վրա: Չնայած Փարաջանովը «Նոան գույնը» ֆիլմով ձեռք է բերել միջազգային ճանաչում, սակայն նրա լուսանկարների հիմքով ստեղծված կոլաժները շատ քիչ են ներկայացվել: Այս ուսումնասիրությունը շեշտադրում է նրա ստեղծագործական գործակցությունը Մեչիտովի հետ, որի դիմանկարներն ու վավերագրական լուսանկարները բացահայտում են «ռեժիսոր-արվեստագետ» կերպարի նոր կողմերը: Հիմք ընդունելով հարցազրույցները, հուշագրությունները և լուսանկարչական արխիվները՝ հոդվածում վերլուծվում է, թե ինչպես էր Փարաջանովը բեմականացնում իր կերպարը Մեչիտովի օբյեկտիվի առաջ՝ առօրյա ժեստերին հաղորդելով այլաբանական իմաստ: Հատուկ ուշադրություն է հրավիրվում այն հանգամանքին, թե ինչպես Մեչիտովի լուսանկարները վերածվեցին Փարաջանովի կոլաժների աղբյուրների, որտեղ առանձին պատկերները վերաիմաստավորվում էին՝ դառնալով բազմաշերտ ստեղծագործություններ: Վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ Մեչիտովի վավերագրական գործելակերպը հատվում էր Փարաջանովի սյուրռեալիստական զգայնության հետ՝ ձևավորելով այնպիսի ժառանգություն, որը հաղթահարում է սահմանները կինոյի, լուսանկարչության և կերպարվեստի միջև:

Սույն հոդվածը գալիս է հաստատելու, որ հանրությանը հայտնի ռեժիսոր Սերգեյ Փարաջանովը հանդես է գալիս որպես բազմաշերտ և բազմակողմանի արվեստագետ: Նրա ստեղծագործական տեսադաշտը չի սահմանափակվում միայն կինեմատոգրաֆիայով. Փարաջանովը հանդես է գալիս նաև որպես կոլաժիստ, լուսանկարիչ, գեղանկարիչ և այլ արտահայտչաձևերի կրող: Ուսումնասիրության այս դիտարկումն ընդգծում է նրա բազմակողմանի ստեղծագործական ինքնությունը:

Բանալի բառեր` *Սերգեյ Փարաջանով, Յուրի Մեչիպով, կինո, հայ կինոռեժիսոր, լուսանկարչություն, կոլաժ, կերպարվեստ::*