

# *Ear to the ground. Searching for ourselves in each other*<sup>[1]</sup>

WITOLD STOK

Arts University Bournemouth  
Goldsmiths University, London

**ABSTRACT.** Stok Witold, *Ear to the ground. Searching for ourselves in each other*. "Images" vol. XXXIV, no. 43. Poznań 2023. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 279–282. ISSN 1731-450X. <https://doi.org/10.14746/i.2023.34.43.17>.

An acclaimed Polish cinematographer and documentary film director describes his meeting with Sergey Paradjanov in the 1970s in Kiev. Stok found himself there in connection with the shooting of Piotr Studziński's documentary film about one of Ukraine's mathematicians. Despite the difficulties created by the Soviet totalitarian state to isolate Paradjanov, Stok managed to reach the director and also to watch his documentary film about the frescoes in Kiev at a special secret club screening. In his essay – a memoir – the author describes the differences between life in the Soviet Union and in more liberal Communist-ruled Poland. He characterizes Paradjanov's artistic profile and his fate in the Soviet Union.

**KEYWORDS:** Sergey Paradjanov, Ukrainian cinema, independent film, Polish documentary, Kiev

Documentaries are filmmaking's foundation, a chance to experience life's nuances, good and bad, mundane and exciting, learning about humanity through direct touch – visiting places you wouldn't otherwise see, encountering things you wouldn't even dream about, and meeting extraordinary people.

In the early 70s, a couple of years after graduating from the Łódź School, having just finished camera assisting traineeship and shooting a couple of short docs to my own credit, I was invited to Kiev for a fortnight to shoot Piotr Studziński's commissioned documentary about a Ukrainian mathematician. Not an especially exciting assignment, but a chance to glance at life beyond our eastern border. Moreover, Sergey Paradjanov lived there. A *Caucasus* Fellini, startling, sensitive, idiosyncratic, and passionate. We were desperate to at least shake our remarkable hero's hand. His magical *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* had been a revelation to us. "In the temple of cinema there are images, light and reality. Paradjanov was the master of

that temple..."; Jean-Luc Godard pronounced. It was an easy decision.

I'd never been to the Soviet Union. On arriving, we got a luxury 'chaika' limousine – naturally with a driver – at our disposal. Only the higher Soviet *nomenklatura* dignitaries had a right to those. In the only other *chaika* (чайка, meaning 'gull') in Kiev, the First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist party was being driven. The people on the streets looked, wondering who was in the car; the two of us inside felt comfortable but odd and ambivalent. Only a few hours on a train from Warsaw, yet it felt like being dropped at the depths of Asia. Warsaw was a part of the same political bloc yet felt on a quite different planet from Kiev. It was shocking, even to us, to see *how* different. The unruly rebel nations like Poles and Hungarians were allowed a little more leeway, to hold down the rattling lid of the simmering political kettle. But inside the Soviet Union, you definitely did not ask awkward questions. Mikhail Bulgakov's magical *Master and Margarita* asked these indirectly in his beautifully cryptic, satirical ways. He came from Kiev, and I hoped to find his traces still there. The horribly yellow and crumbling tsarist University, and Pechersk

[1] "We were searching for ourselves in each other." – Sergey Paradjanov.



Il. 1. Sergey Paradjanov, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), Ivan and Marichka's song. Original Ukrainian title *Тіні Забутих Предків* [*Tini zabutykh predkiv*]

Lavra – the imposing compound of Orthodox churches, both still stood. He evokes it in the closing chapter of *The White Guard*:

Above the bank of the Dnepr the midnight cross of St Vladimir thrust itself above the sinful, blood-stained, snowbound earth towards the grim, black sky. From faraway it looked as if the crosspiece had vanished, had merged with the upright, turning the cross into a sharp and menacing sword. But this sword is not fearful. Everything passes away – suffering, pain, blood, hunger, and pestilence. The sword will pass away to, but the stars will remain when the shadow of our presence and of our deeds have vanished from the earth. There is no man who does not know that. Why, then, will we not turn our eyes towards the stars? Why?[2]

Aside of our daily job, we experienced some of Kiev's less official sides. Taxis, vodka, and

[2] M. Bulgakov, *The White Guard*, trans. M. Glenny, London 1971.

the local sweetish 'champagne' were indecently cheap. After the excruciatingly interminable wait for the waiters in restaurants, finally, a delicious *osietrina* appeared. Cisterns full of cheap young white plonk cruised the streets and people came out of their still pock-marked grim tower blocks carrying bottles, buckets, petrol containers, and jars to fill. Our filming was watched at every step. 50-plus years of Soviet indoctrination did its damage to individuals' minds. One could feel the underlying fear, the assumption that anyone could be an informer. It was easy to break the ice when speaking one-to-one, but once a third person joined the conversation the tone instantly froze.

The one person we truly wanted to meet in Kiev was elusive. For years, Paradjanov was bent on offending the principles of Soviet society with his ideologically indifferent films, his independent mind defiantly disengaged from the

regimented Soviet standards, his lifestyle and sexual preferences. Routinely arrested by the KGB, in between spells in prisons and mental institutions, he somehow managed to deliver a few mind-boggling pictures filled with stunningly sumptuous images. We knew he lived in Kiev. But – even for us, living within the eastern bloc – it was incomprehensible that no telephone book or address directory existed in Kiev. *Nie nada*. Full stop. You could only ask for a person's address or telephone at a special kiosk on the street corner. After a long wait in a queue, your identity card was checked and then they'd give you the address or not. A stern uniformed woman examined our passports, and – hearing our Polish (foreign...) accent – ostentatiously perused her thick books and replied: 'Nobody of the said name is living in the town'. The system had correctly dealt with us, the homosexual-dissident pest remained invisible.

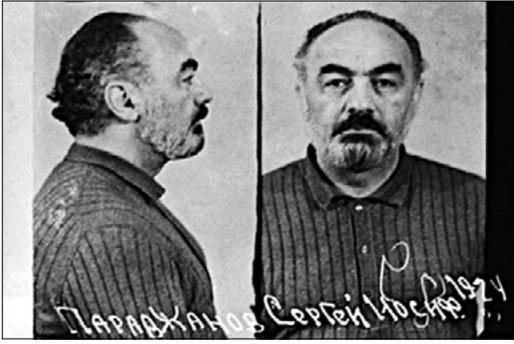
My director Piotr, nicknamed *Bladz'* (incidentally, a Russian-derived slang word for an easy woman), and I were invited to a clandestine midnight performance at the Conservatoire. We were led conspiratorially through a back gate to listen to proscribed modern *concrete* music (!). The audience were excited; for us it was interesting but not so thrilling. Some good soul from Kiev's Dovzhenko Film Studios whom we met at that secret concert took a risk and, albeit distrusting and anonymous, led us the following night on the quiet to maestro's lair, which was literally only three blocks from our hotel (called Swan or Heron or some other wading bird). There was no Paradjanov name on the tower block's list of tenants. The staircase smelled of boiled cabbage and rotting potatoes, and a few doors to the flats opened a little, just enough to keep a check on the new visitors. A couple of stocky men propping up the walls on the landing, unambiguously on duty, looked us searchingly in the eyes. Higher up, someone, rather reluctantly, showed us a door and snapped back to her flat. Paradjanov's door was unlocked. That was the first surprise – an ever-open door. A young man with dreamy almond-shaped eyes showed us in. Chairs were



Il. 2. Author at the time of Kiev shoot, against the BG of Lavra churches

squeezed together to make place for us at the huge table, candles lit the perpetual party spread everywhere. Sergey at once wrapped for us in some lettuce leaves big pieces of moist goat's cheese which somebody had just brought from Erevan, added pieces of chillies, and generously poured glass after glass of lovely half-sweetish Caucasian wine. And he talked, hugged, sung, as though we had known each other for years. Simply, overwhelming human warmth. All the space on the walls was filled with medieval icons. In the kitchen, in the corridor, on the ceiling, beautiful objects: folk art, rugs, painted coffers crowded the three cramped rooms. Now and then, someone brought another bottle or a fresh delivery of cheese 'straight from the airport'. In the corner sat Suren Shakhbazyan, cinematographer of his *Sayat Nova*, not very talkative, significant leucoma on his eye. Sergey took me to the window at the end of the corridor, slid a little the heavy curtain aside to show to me a dimly lit window in the identical block opposite. – 'Look, do you see that sparkle inside? There – it's binoculars. KGB... and what? And nothing, oh well, they watch. They have to watch, you understand, that's their shitty never-ending job, day or night. I pity the boys that they have to take the shifts because of me. ' – Come on', he took me warmly by the arm, squeezed me just a little too tight to his generous body. 'Let's drink, forget. Let's dream together, *Vitya*'.

Sergey was Armenian, born in the Georgian capital Tbilisi, but said: 'I've chosen Kiev because here I could make films, now I can't



Il. 3. Inmate Sergey Paradjanov, prison mugshot  
Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b7/Arrestant\\_Sergei\\_Parajanov.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b7/Arrestant_Sergei_Parajanov.jpg).

do even that; but I grew into this city, into Ukraine. Anyway, I have here my Armenian friends, Armenian cheese, Georgian wine. If I don't earn, people will bring me – as you see. World-famous by then, yet with no chances for a next film, Sergey was like a king to his circle. He showed us a stack of 8 or 9 rejected screenplays. I asked, if they didn't allow him to go to the West would he come to Warsaw, where we cherish his films. He dreamed of it but didn't believe it. Days later, on a clandestine club's projector, his friends screened for us some salvaged scraps from his dismembered film about Kiev frescoes.[3] We never saw him again. Months later he was arrested at a friend's funeral, tried for the crime of homosexuality and, on trumped-up charges of illegal dealing in foreign currency, sentenced to 5 years of the harsh regime prison camp, then the enforced mental asylum (he served four crushing years of his sentence).

"A writer or painter cannot change the world. But they can keep an essential margin of non-conformity alive", said Luis Buñuel. Rearrested in 1981–82 for defending the Theatre on Taganka's censored staging of *Vladimir Vysotsky*, he

[3] *Kyiv Frescoes* – as it is known now, is really a compilation of screen tests for an unrealised feature-length film. The state studio closed the production, fearing an improper outcome of Paradjanov's metaphorical experiments.

[4] Better known as *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969).

bitterly joked that he was probably the only Soviet citizen who had been jailed under Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Andropov. In his haunting film *Sayat Nova*,[4] the 18<sup>th</sup>-century bard says: "In this healthy and beautiful life, torment is my share. Why has it been given to me?" Sergey strongly identified with him: "Arutin is me... Sayat Nova is me". The Armenian troubadour, Haroutiun Sadayan, known as Sayat Nova, was martyred on the steps of Tbilisi cathedral by invading Persians; an epitaph from his poem is now carved on his plinth there: "Not everyone can drink from my rushing spring – my waters have a special taste. My words have a special meaning – not all may read my writing. My foundations are made not of sand but of granite – do not think you may destroy them."



Il. 4. Yerevan tombstone

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sergei\\_Parajanov%27s\\_tombstone\\_at\\_Komitas\\_Pantheon.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sergei_Parajanov%27s_tombstone_at_Komitas_Pantheon.jpg).

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