

Paradjanov (2013)

Drama/Biographical film, colour, 95 min.

Directed by SERGE AVEDIKIAN and ELENA FETISOVA. Written by ELENA FETISOVA.

Cast: Serge Avedikian, Yuliia Peresild, Zaza Kashybadze.

Ukraine: Interfilm Production Studio.

Languages: Ukrainian, Russian.

Sergei Paradzhanov's films regularly provoke passionate responses among committed cinephiles. His mistreatment and premature death conferred upon him the status of modern-day martyr. Avedikian and Fetisova's biopic of the director is obviously born of this same enthusiasm for his art and sympathy for his travails. Paradzhanov's former students and collaborators were involved in the project (Roman Balaian is listed as creative producer and Iurii Mechitov is thanked in the credits), further testifying to the fact that this biopic is a labour of love.

Despite palpable respect for its subject, the film, however, fails to achieve the lofty heights of Paradzhanov's own work. In this case, using the medium of cinema to explore the life of one of the art form's greatest auteurs ultimately results in a gap between the film at hand and Paradzhanov's sublime oeuvre. The lack of a subtitle indicates not that this is the definitive Paradzhanov, but rather that the film lacks an authoritative take on its subject. Paradzhanov's statue in Tbilisi, although cast in metal, conveys more of the man's exuberance and personality than we see in the early part of the film, where he comes across as temperamental and unreasonable.

The directors use segments from Paradzhanov's own films, at one point cutting leading actor and co-director Serge Avedikian alongside existing footage in such a way that he appears to be directing Sofiko Chiaureli, gesture by gesture, during the making of *Tsvet Granata* ('The Colour of Pomegranate', 1968). However, this technique merely reinforces the impossibility of understanding the unique aesthetic behind Paradzhanov's visualization of Saiat-Nova's life story as an associative montage-poem. The tragedy of Paradzhanov's life – his truncated and neglected career – is dealt with in the middle section of the film, where negatively-coded governmental authorities imprison Paradzhanov on account of his 'nationalism' and alleged homosexual conduct. Regrettably, the film does not illuminate the motives of the authoritarian ideologues which incarcerate him. This trope of the heroic individual struggling against the repressive state apparatus is well known, especially to admirers of Soviet cinema, leaving the viewer yearning for a deeper insight into Paradzhanov's oppressors and the forces that motivated them.

The film finds its feet once Paradzhanov has left the shadowy confines of prison and returned to his birthplace, Tbilisi. At this point, Avedikian bears a strong resemblance to Paradzhanov, with his halo of grey hair and sweeping gestures. The atmosphere of Tbilisi with its steep streets, crooked staircases, and colourful balconies is conveyed perfectly. At first Paradzhanov is a broken, uninspired man, seen gutting a fish while bemoaning his mistreatment. A visit from Marcello Mastroianni changes his mood, and subsequently his fortunes. The camera sweeps majestically around Avedikian's Paradzhanov as he entertains his guest and makes a series of toasts, all while bathed in shadows and candlelight. This sequence masterfully conveys the energy of Paradzhanov's personality and his films. His artistic impulses are then

reanimated as he embarks upon his next masterpiece *Legenda o Suramskoi kreposti* ('The Legend of the Suram Fortress', 1984), this time set in the Georgian countryside.

Many important episodes of Paradzhanov's life are left out or passed over, but this is inevitable due to him having led such a complex and transnational life. The Caucasus, which was Paradzhanov's birthplace and the inspiration for three of his major films, is given appropriate weight in this biopic. Much of the second half of the film was shot on location in Georgia, and it is here that the film begins to shed some light on the filmmaker whose artistic style still remains bewildering to some viewers.

The film's unusual and poignant coda depicts Paradzhanov at the Centre Pompidou in 1988, where he is being honoured with a retrospective of his works. He tells the assembled Parisian intelligentsia that he loves living in a leaking, dilapidated shack because it reminds him of films by his heroes Fellini and Tarkovskii. Dwarfed by the postmodern architecture of the city, and overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Paris skyline, Paradzhanov ends the film as a curiously anachronistic figure: a master of cinema, the definitive twentieth-century art form, and yet decidedly not at home amongst the trappings of the late twentieth century.

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