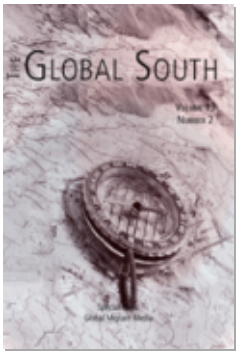
Strange Love: Parajanov and the Affects of Late Soviet (Inter)nationalisms



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Strange Love: Parajanov and the Affects of Late Soviet (Inter)nationalisms

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the function of flatness, stasis, and simultaneity in Soviet Georgian-Armenian director Sergei Parajanov's films, this article focuses on Parajanov's reimagination of the revolutionary avant-garde cinematic language of sensuous thought as an anti-colonial aesthetic project that echoes non-aligned trajectories. Parajanov's films perform Soviet Orientalism in drag, upending the lyric dimensions of an ethno-nationalist cinema as he recasts formalist poetic cinematic aesthetics through the defamiliarization of a queer non-Russian subject. Drawing on affect theory from the early Soviet avant-garde to the work of Gilles Deleuze, I argue that the sensuous materiality of Parajanov's films, focalized around the animism of objects and the dynamism of the static tableau, resists the distinction between matter and spirit. In this way, I argue that he also rejects a vision of liberal agency as a defining critique of Soviet nationalist patriarchal hegemony by instead focusing on the ways in which the material sensuousness of the cinematic image can upend the teleological evolution and assimilation of national form into Soviet content. This article thus takes up his films, in particular *Ashik Kerib* (1988), to trace alternative forms of *feeling* international across the Soviet south.

Should I ever open my own archive, you will find there three prison sentences stripping me of my freedom. And a court condemnation of me as a surrealist who sees the social structure as a chimera. As if I were a chimera perched on top of Notre Dame, with a huge snout and massive hooves, who looks out over the city of Paris. I was such a chimera, who looked out and envied the coming of a new day.

Sergei Parajanov, "Interview with Ron Holloway" (1996)

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The work and biography of Sergei Parajanov feels outside of space and time. His collage and tableau cinematic style—drawing on rich painterly, poetic, folk, and mythic imagery across Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian, Russian, and Iranian traditions—remains disciplinarily and geopolitically disjointed from a hegemonic socialist realist Soviet cinema, as well as contemporary decolonial and queer cinematic traditions. Parajanov's films, set on the southern Soviet periphery, recall Orientalist revolutionary avant-garde aesthetics formulated through the Bolsheviks' eastern expansion at the beginning of the twentieth century to the moment of its close amidst the Soviet empire's slow collapse. His figuration of non-Russian queer subjects has thus remained largely illegible: the image of the *strange lover,* evoked in his Turkic film of the same name (*Ashik Kerib*), is cloaked in his performance of Russian Orientalism in drag. His cinematic *tableaux* not only work to decenter the connection between metropole and colonial periphery, hetero-masculinity and socialist realism, but embody forms of queer desire that extend beyond the discursive legibility of sex and trace an alternative anti-imperial cinematic trajectory through and beyond the Soviet Union. In their very disciplinary and geopolitical itinerancy, his films thus challenge the Cold War militarized geopolitics embedded in the history of the term "Global South."[1]

Parajanov's career was marked by the Soviet empire's colonial practices of assimilation and containment. Born to Armenian parents in the Georgian SSR, he spent his early life working in the Ukrainian SSR, cut short by his arrest on charges of sexual and national deviancy. After spending four years in labor camps and nine months in prison, he returned to Georgia in ill health to make his few final films. Now claimed as a central figure in the development of post-Soviet Ukrainian, Georgian, and Armenian national cinemas alike, Parajanov is also often described as a Soviet filmmaker, a claim that draws on his itinerant trajectory to highlight the fluidity of cultural production within the Soviet space as well as the central role of minority artists in producing Soviet culture. However, his seemingly fluid movement across the southern periphery (Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine) also exposed the borders of the empire and state's politics of containment. Confined in prison and within Soviet borders for much of his life, Parajanov fought to evade surveillance and struggled to secure funding in a rigid state-sponsored film industry. The celebration of Parajanov as a Soviet filmmaker, while historically accurate, conceals the force of colonial violence that marked his life, filmic subjects, and style.

His dazzling surreal montages radically challenge the aesthetic confines of orthodox socialist realism as they intervene in colonial politics. In this opening quotation Parajanov presents himself as a chimera, reclaiming a vision of ethnic impurity as a non-Russian Russophone queer subject. This image of impurity also indicates the moment of imperial collapse in which it was penned. Introducing Russo-supremacist discourses reproduced in Russian sociological

scholarship of the 1980s, this vision of ethnic impurity was accompanied by the emergence of discourses of Russian national purity in the post-Soviet moment.[2] Parajanov's incantation of the film auteur as mythic monster thus imagines a space beyond empire, in the capacious potential of a post-Soviet future that had not yet been nationalized. In this way, his films linger in a suspended state of cinematic sensuousness that refuses both a singular Soviet ethnographic imprint of the colonial past and a post-Soviet nationalist future through a transgression of aesthetic, gendered, ethnic, and state borders.

Several film scholars have taken up the function of flatness, stasis, and simultaneity in Parajanov's oeuvre, approaching his works from a broader cinematic theory, as well as a specifically Deleuzean frame, through his transcultural biography, through his connection to prison culture, or through his expansion of a Soviet tradition of the lyric and formalist poetic dimensions of Soviet cinema.[3] This article focuses on Parajanov's reimagination of the revolutionary avant-garde cinematic language of sensuous thought, drawn from the poetic school of cinema in which shots are connected without regard to narrative sequence, emphasizing instead the creation of a sense of simultaneity among common images, motifs, or a stream of consciousness flattened into a static, tableau-like frame. Parajanov's *tableaux*, in so doing, enact a performative play on Soviet Orientalism, upending the lyric dimensions of an ethno-nationalist cinema as he recasts formalist poetic cinematic aesthetics through the defamiliarization of a queer non-Russian subject. His work thus also recuperates the power of objects to sound, animating the ethno-nationalist object to expose cinematic sensuousness as a strategy for transcending the hierarchical structures of Soviet power. Drawing on the flattened tableau aesthetics of Parajanov's work, this article takes up the ways in which two of his films about the Caucasus, *The Color of Pomegranates* and *Ashik Kerib*, trace an alternative intersectional cinematic trajectory across the Soviet south.

In this spirit, Steven Lee's *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (2015) highlighted the revolutionary potential of the non-Russian avant-garde, envisioning a more expansive Soviet ethnic avant-garde geography. Lee's dynamic remaking of this archive offers a necessary aesthetic and political intervention in Soviet history and the discipline of Slavic studies; however, I also want to trouble the notion that the Soviet international project and the avant-garde were, as he argues, historically "inclusive and decolonizing," or furthermore, that some "transnational optic" could be mined from Soviet Orientalism, even if it remained a "largely unrealized utopian aspiration" (2, 4). Focusing instead on the ethnic minorities of the Caucasus and Central Asia, the mediation of the ethnic international looks radically different from the vantage point of the colonial administration and the historical reality of its instrumentalization in the mass deportation and extermination of ethnic minorities in the 1930s, as well as the cultivation of nationalisms primed for

inter-ethnic violence with the Soviet collapse.[4] I argue instead that the international and avant-garde projects were central to the instrumentalization of Soviet imperialism, through its geopolitical domination of the domestic "East" of Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as in the influence it exercised over decolonizing African and Asian countries. This article thus takes up an internationalist imaginary—not unlike Lee's in its disciplinary ambitions—but crucially remains skeptical of the celebration of the Soviet state's liberatory potential. Instead, I turn away from the Soviet state's internationalist project to the ways in which the echoes of these lost revolutionary dreams might be *felt* through Parajanov's performance of Orientalism in drag.[5]

Emphasizing a queer internationalist spirit through its attachments to the failures of Soviet anti-imperial ideology and the material reality of its colonial practices of containment, I frame my reading of Parajanov's work within a broader theoretical body of scholarship that reimagines the historicity of the queer colonial body, rendering visible the imagination of suspended and projected temporalities and spatial dislocations. Drawing on affect theory from the early Soviet avant-garde to the work of Gilles Deleuze, I argue that the sensuous materiality of Parajanov's films, focalized around the animism of objects and the dynamism of the static tableau, resists the distinction between matter and spirit. In this way, I argue that he also rejects a vision of liberal agency as a defining critique of Soviet nationalist patriarchal hegemony by instead focusing on the ways in which the material sensuousness of the cinematic image can upend the teleological evolution and assimilation of national form into Soviet content. This spatio-temporal dislocation does not signify a rejection of history as such, but rather an attempt to rewrite a hegemonic historical narrative by exposing the ways in which Orientalist ethnology informed cinematic aesthetics and functioned as a means of regulating the bodies of national subjects and rendering their experience illegible. I thus highlight the ways in which Soviet ethnography sought to contain the colonial subject in order to in turn expose Parajanov's sensuous extension of desire beyond these fixed boundaries and borders.

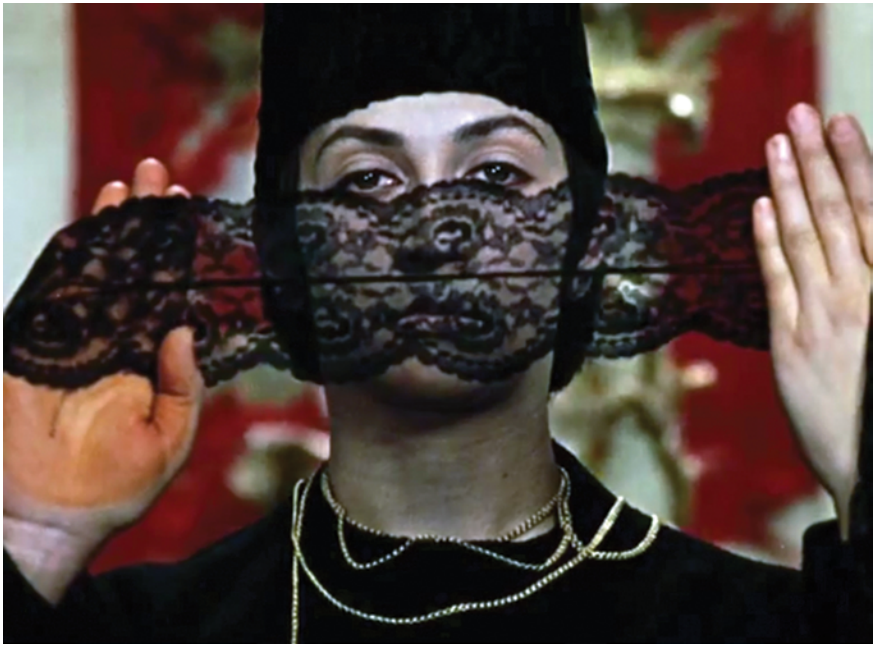
I highlight his poetic or tableau cinema as an occasion for framing a horizon for desire and belonging that remains ever itinerant and resistant to the territorializing and confining structures of Soviet colonialism, post-Soviet nationalism, and their reverberations across contemporary Slavic Studies' management of the Soviet canon. Parajanov's cinematic vision not only foregrounds forms of non-Russian ethnic and queer subjectivity on the former Soviet periphery but envisions a critical alternative to rising nationalism with its attendant forms of patriarchal and ethnic-national supremacy. In this sense, Parajanov's work speaks to the contemporary moment in which few political imaginaries pose alternatives to the series of nationalist and neo-fascist movements that have emerged with the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Cold War

geopolitics. I argue for the renewed necessity of critiques of biopower, which Michel Foucault famously described in *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (2004)—both its application to the frame of the Soviet empire and its revived extension to neo-fascist ends amidst the emergence of new right nationalisms in the post-Soviet moment.

This effort to consider the ways in which Parajanov's films expose the regulation of bodies within the Soviet Union, and on the Soviet periphery in particular, encompasses a historical comparative framing of empire, as it tracks a set of attachments to a lost vision of an international that never occurred. My resistance to thinking Parajanov's work as singularly framed within a discrete historical and aesthetic-cinematic archive formulates a comparative intervention that probes the archive for its absences, missed connections, and failed alignments.[6] I focus on two of his films, *The Color of Pomegranates* or *Sayat Nova* (1968) and *Ashik Kerib* (1988), which engage with poetic or tableau cinematic strategies as well as ethnographic and folkloric content to generate an affective politics that exposes the Soviet management of the body. Beyond a contribution to scholarship on Soviet cinema, my reading of Parajanov's work also opens up a necessary critique of a singular vision of Euro-American empire in which neoliberalism serves the determining feature of biopower by attending to the regulation of gender, sex, and ethnicity as central to the "national problem" of (post-)Soviet coloniality.

Soviet Colonial Biopolitics

For Parajanov, who spent four years incarcerated in labor camps, the Soviet management of the body left a major impact on his life. In the gulag he produced a large body of drawings and collages from materials he gathered, ranging from remnants of prison food tins to print media sent by his friends. These works reflected his intellectual and physical experience of incarceration, highlighting the centrality of the body to his art. For example, a collage series based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*—which presents the Gioconda cast in various emotional states: smiling, crying, and angry—was, according to Parajanov, inspired by a tattooed replica of the image on a fellow inmate's back that contorted as the man moved his limbs, his skin stretching into the figure's smile (Popiashvili 2003, 3–9; Grigorian 2011, 215). The incarcerated body, which is not depicted in the collage itself, nonetheless lies at the foundation of the Gioconda's shifting emotions and ambiguous gendering in Parajanov's later work. In this series of collages, "Several Episodes from the Gioconda's Life" (1988), her emotions are captured in overlays of her moving hands, echoing the expressive gestures of many dances in the Caucasus, as well as Parajanov's cinematic *tableaux vivants.* The tattoo of the Mona Lisa here as the basis of an aesthetic conception of collage and in turn montage highlights Parajanov's



FIGURES 1, 2, 3, and 4 are taken from the sequence "The Poet's Youth" from *The Color of Pomegranates.* Figures 1 and 2 feature the actress Sofiko Chiarueli as the poet (Figure 1), his beloved princess Anna (Figures 2 and 3), and again the poet (Figure 4). The use of lace here as a common object connecting the first two figures highlights the fluid gendering of poet and beloved across the continuous frames of the *tableau vivant*. Figures 3 and 4 trace a montage transition in which a shot of princess Anna pressing lace against her breast cuts to a shot of the poet holding a shell against his chest. As the characters' striped costumes suggest a doubling of form and sameness in the image, the cut juxtaposes difference in the material transformation from lace to shell. However, as it enacts a splitting of these doubles, the transformation of lace to shell also highlights a shared desire, as the form of the shell conjures the erotic image of the princess's breast (Figure 3) in the poet's hand (Figure 4).

connection to prison culture. As references to life in the gulag became popular in Soviet music and art, Parajanov's prison art marks an otherwise uncharacteristic turn in his work to unofficial popular culture.[7]

Marked by Parajanov's own incarceration, the form of the cinematic *tableau vivant* draws upon the intersection of painting, sculpture, and theatre arts and depicts live subjects posed in static compositions, playing on the relationships between movement and stillness as well as between animate subject and inanimate object. Parajanov's prolific collage works share in the cinematic *tableau vivant's* fascination with multimedia, its preoccupation with flatness, texture, and surface, as well as its play on the animation of everyday inanimate objects as artistic subjects. These techniques are particularly vividly presented in his film *The Color of Pomegranates* in which fluid emotional states are captured in the relationship between lover and beloved, both played by actress Sofiko Chiarueli, and articulated through her subtle hand movements across a still frame (Figures 1 through 4). This montage, and particularly the key aesthetic role played by the lace in the sequence of shots, function as a moving collage. A shot of the poet cuts to a shot of his beloved, both played by Chiarueli dressed in a nearly identical blue striped costume. The doubling of Chiarueli as well as her similar costume in both frames instead highlights the movement of the lace across the frames, animating the lace as a central transitional feature between the shots as well as suturing a tie between lover and beloved.

In many of his late collage works Parajanov also inserts his own body into the collages, adding found objects to transform his portraits into still lifes in which his face and limbs blend into the branches of a flower or threads of yarn. These self-portraits-as-still-lifes highlight the tension between auteur and work and obscure the distinction between the body as an artistic subject and an object within the composition. Despite the collages' attention to the erotic body through photomontages of classical sculptures or paintings of the *Mona Lisa*, *The David*, and others, sex and the body somehow seem palpably absent in Parajanov's films, or at least emerge through different registers of visibility, particularly in comparison to the work of his contemporaries Derek Jarman and Pier Pasolini. Parajanov's films direct their sensuous capacities instead toward representations of love through a poetics of creative desire. Though arguably central to his biography and collage work, sexuality and desire remain topics also largely unexplored in scholarship on Parajanov's work.

As Laura Engelstein (1990, 1992, 1993), Eric Naiman (1997), and Dan Healey's (2001) crucial scholarship on the emergence of discourses of normative sexuality during the revolutionary period and formation of the Soviet Union suggest, the discursive construction of sexuality was imbricated in Russia's ambivalent relationship to European modernity.[8] For example, Soviet institutions distinguished the pathologization of perversions in the West produced under the conditions of capitalist exploitation from a Soviet

revolutionary approach to sexual diversity. In this sense, the legibility of sex in the Soviet Union, like race, was complicated by Soviet avowed anti-imperial and liberationist discourses that were often in conflict with the USSR's own colonial practices. The revolution marked a shift from spiritual and poetic terminology for sex acts rooted in religious discourse to a "modern" medical discourse, which actually resulted in the further regulation of sex and gender identity under the Soviet Union (Healey 2001, 125). That is to say, while discourses surrounding sexual identity also emerged through new medical and disciplinary mechanisms in the Soviet Union, as Engelstein reminds, the shifting political climate during the revolution and Sovietization significantly limited their purview (1990; 1992; 1993).[9] The problem of the illegibility of sexuality as a discursive register in Parajanov's film precisely invites a necessary rethinking of sexuality in the Soviet Union—not as a discursive phenomenon but as central to Soviet biopower, to the management and optimization of the body under the Soviet empire.

A shifting attention within queer theory to thinking about sexuality not as a discursive construction but through a return to Foucault's writings on neoliberalism and governmentality frames sex through an attention to the instrumentalization and optimization of the body and in turn offers the opportunity to imagine more expansive temporal and geographic imaginaries of sex and sexuality (Coviello 2017).[10] The turn to Foucaultian discussions of liberalism, however, poses a problem for any analysis of the Soviet Union, which was not subject to the same progression through late capitalist modernity. More broadly, area studies' engagement with queer theory has presented a set of crucial challenges to thinking historically through a body of queer and affect theory that has long been tied to Euro-American archives and the legibility of sexuality within them. However, the scholarship of José Esteban Muñoz and others has crucially contested the notion that queer theory must be necessarily incompatible with philological, historical, and economic analysis (Muñoz 1999). Following a recent issue of *GLQ* on queer theory in area studies, I argue that what is needed is a consideration of biopower beyond the focus on Euro-American imperialism, the driving forces of neoliberalism, and the history of the transatlantic slave trade (see Arondekar and Patel 2016).[11] In this way I take up Soviet biopolitics through a turn to Parajanov's representations of strange love on the Soviet imperial periphery in the Caucasus in an effort to expand queer geographies.

The Soviet project was perhaps paradigmatically biopolitical in its aims to transform forms of life through the powers of agitational propaganda to shape the social, economic and technological development of the New Soviet Man.[12] As Laura Engelstein and Dan Healy have pointed out, the slow transition to liberal culture in Russia and its rupture during the revolutionary period led to the development of an alternative system of Soviet biopolitics.[13] Indeed,

Foucault took up the subject of Soviet biopolitics directly, arguing that while it modified forms of ownership and production, it imported the techniques of administration and power from capitalist Europe, adding to Taylorism its own forms of "party discipline."[14] He argued that in the Soviet Union the class enemy is racialized, a form of what he calls social racism, wherein a historical notion of a racial group united by common language, traditions, and customs is presented instead in class terms, in this way forming a biological racism through the regulation of the right to kill or protect the life of a particular social class (Foucault 2004, 239–63).

Race operated differently under the Soviet system and any analysis of it necessitates thinking about the intersection between race and class across the Soviet empire. The example of Russian social revolutionaries' articulation of violence against the tsarist regime as a form of class war would support Foucault's claim.[15] However, this collapsing of race onto class confines the site of revolution and the formation of the Soviet state to a homogeneous Russian metropole and like most revolutionary narratives does not address the complex discourses of ethnicity that ordered the Soviet colonial project. This narrative relies on an understanding of peasant subjectivity as the romantic source of inspiration for the construction of the Bolshevik proletariat. In so doing, it obscures the role of Russian Orientalism in racializing the Tatar peasant revolutionary uprising and the figure of the brave Muslim holy fighter, which lies at the heart of this revolutionary imaginary of the Caucasus and the Soviet "East" more broadly.

I argue instead that the Soviet empire regulated the body and mobility of its subjects through the categorization and creation of peoples and nations—a process of cultural, historical, geographic, and economic evolution and assimilation. Reliant on the disciplines of Marxist history and linguistics, and influenced by non-Darwinian models of biological evolution, an assimilationist model of ethnicity exercised its regimes of power through the movement of people within the Soviet republics. The development of nations as ethnic formulations envisioned peoples as geographically determined units that were instrumental to the merging of a Soviet socialist modern totality. This process had the effect of at once isolating non-Russian peoples from one another and situating them within a teleological master narrative of socialist progress. The political value of national art was framed through its validation of a process, which historian Francine Hirsch calls "double assimilation," whereby Soviet Orientalists catalogued, defined and to a certain extent invented national cultures, assimilating diverse peoples into nations and, in turn, into the great Soviet nation (Hirsch 2005, 63–97). Central to this process of double assimilation was Stalin's definition of a nation as "a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture"

(Stalin 1913).[16] In Russian and Soviet Orientalist ethnographic discourse, ethnic minorities were thus tethered to a fixed geographic territory and historical temporality. The enemy of the Soviet state was not framed through an ontological otherness but a temporal and geopolitical otherness, a pre-Revolutionary past and imperialist West, an otherness at once out of the time and place of Soviet progress. The Soviet Orientalist vision of nationality relied on a superstructural categorization that was socioeconomically and geographically determined and thus directed by the dynamic, transformative powers of socialism, which optimized the bodies of its subjects to create the New Soviet Man.[17] While in many cases the Soviet Union promoted the federative structure as securing the fluidity of a borderless union, the marking of national difference as a stage in a path toward assimilation into a hybrid—if in many cases deracialized—Soviet citizenship exposed the structures of Soviet patriarchal hegemony, as well as the precariousness of its transgression.

I turn now to Parajanov's films and the ways in which his poetic cinematic and collage worlds endow his subjects with a fluid sensuousness that transcends the gender and ethnic boundaries that stratify the Soviet Caucasus, resisting modes of identification that seek to capture and assimilate the bodies of his characters within a Soviet totality. His two *strange* love stories *The Color of Pomegranates* and *Ashik Kerib*, which narrate the lives of the eighteenth-century poet Sayat Nova and folk bard Ashik Kerib, draw on the genres of poetry and the folktale to expose and reimagine the construction of nationalist cultural canons, and in turn, Soviet totality. Refusing the confining register of national-Soviet identity, Parajanov's films also reject visions of the heterosexual cisgender Soviet male as the embodiment of the revolutionary spirit as well as the Soviet Orientalist representation of homosexuality in the Caucasus and Central Asia as a primitive vestige of the past.[18]

One of Parajanov's biographers, James Steffen, also highlights the role of sexuality in shaping Parajanov's aesthetics. He writes: "The subversion of norms" including "the introduction of campy, sexually ambiguous and homoerotic elements into the film . . . extends to the representational conventions of realism" (Steffen 2013, 207). Tracing a longer tradition of queer European and Russian Orientalist imaginaries, Steffen argues that Parajanov's films enact an "Oriental drag" as "a vehicle for articulating same-sex desire or ambiguous sexuality," "releasing culturally imposed inhibitions and pursuing an ideal of freely expressed sexuality" (2013, 236, 238).[19] Somewhat in inverse, I instead argue that Parajanov performs Russian Orientalism in drag in order to launch his critique of patriarchal Soviet masculinity. Elizabeth Papazian similarly addresses the ways in which Parajanov's collage aesthetic confronts the relationship between cultural traditions in the Caucasus with a Soviet totality, highlighting "the contemporary problem of the Soviet 'frontier,' where the native culture encounters the totalizing Soviet cultural system which seeks to

subsume all cultures into itself" (Papazian 2006, 304). *Ashik Kerib*, she ultimately contends, is neither a project of synthesis toward a future nor a refusal of history but embodies the state of "perpetual motion," which she likens to a cinematic palimpsest and the formalist conception of *ostranenie* or defamiliarization that breaks the "illusion of ethnographic verisimitude" (308). Indeed, Parajanov's estranging ethnography refuses both a nationalist origin narrative and assimilation into a Soviet totality. However, I argue that Parajanov achieves this distance through his queer performance of a Soviet Orientalist imaginary in order to expose the imbrication of sex, gender, and ethnicity in the formation of Soviet biopower.

Parajanov's filmic collages of intersecting spatialities in perpetual motion resist assimilating the cultural and physical topographies of the Caucasus—its literatures, languages, music, landscapes, colors, and sounds—into a greater Soviet whole by foregrounding a queer performance of Soviet Orientalism articulated through the sensuousness of the filmic medium. Nor does his portrait promise a singular post-Soviet nationalist vision. Rather, in the exhilarating terror of the collapse, between the fall of empire and rise of post-Soviet nationalism, Parajanov's poetic spatialities dwell in the unsettled space of political contest. His critical performance of Orientalism in drag, play with the tableau aesthetics of the icon, and recuperation of objects that sound formulates the structure of this anti-colonial vision.

I. Orientalism in Drag

The material sensuousness of Parajanov's films offers a key to his inversion of a Soviet Orientalist gaze. While his films have been framed in ethnonationalist terms, his performative collage of multiple, conflicting, and often fantastic ethnographic objects which transcend ethnonational and cultural geographies instead exposes the very materiality of his cinematic image. His performative collage of ethnonationalist content defamiliarizes his heroes by troubling a singular vision of gender and ethnicity. This queer performance thus upends the process of assimilating ethnonationalist objects into a larger Soviet whole, instead generating forms of intimacy through the absence of translation in undubbed multilingual tracks or through his fabrication of surreal costumes. His emphasis on the sensuousness of his production, both through sound and texture, emphasizes a haptic play on the surface of the cinematic image.

While *Sayat Nova* was proposed as a remembrance of Armenia's "national" poet, it exposes an inherent contradiction between the nationalizing canon and a transnational cultural geography, drawing on the multilingual composition of the poet's work in Azeri Turkic, Persian, and Armenian narratives. Similarly, *Ashik Kerib* was framed as an Azerbaijani folktale, though Parajanov claimed the film was "shot as a documentary" of Mikhail Lermontov's 1837 Russian

"translation" and fairytale rendering of the Turkic tale (cited in Williamson 1989, 58; Lermontov 1911, 277–83).[20] Lermontov's "Ashik Kerib" exposes an ambivalence between the work of fiction and the ethnographic gaze, which introduces its audience to cultural traditions and Turkic words intended to entertain and educate an explicitly Russian imperial metropolitan readership. By contrast, the multilingual character of Parajanov's adaptation features an Azeri Turkic dialogue track and Georgian intertitles as well as the addition of Russian dubbing in the Soviet-wide release.[21] This multilingual quality of the film instead emphasizes locality, generating a sense of intimacy between characters. While the film features little dialogue, fragments are used to highlight moments of contact, such as when Ashik declares his love for Magul Mageri or when his dying mentor asks for his saz to play one final melody. A short dialogue track also plays a central role in a pivotal scene in the film entitled "The Defiled Habitation" in which Ashik is beaten by a band of horsemen upon entering the contested region of Nagorno-Karabagh.[22] As he calls out "I am your brother," the group of men answer in Azeri and, despite affirming this cultural affinity, curse him as an enemy and stranger. The minimal dialogue track, spotty dubbing, and lack of translation for a Russophone audience highlight moments of linguistic dissonance as they also reveal a familiarity with the political and cultural history of the Caucasus.

The fantastic setting of the film further undermines a coherent image of the Soviet Orient, instead tracing Ashik's migration across a more expansive trajectory, beyond the Caucasus and across a contemporary Global South imaginary. Parajanov makes space his focal point, and his linguistic topographies traverse both the sensuous texture of his filmic landscapes as well as the film's dialogue track itself, generating sonic textures which destabilize the totality of conceptions of national language, territory, and history that Soviet ethnography sought to establish. While Lermontov sets his tale in an explicitly Turkic world, Parajanov extends Ashik's journey across the fictive kingdom of a Nadir Pasha, alluding to the empire of the eighteenth-century Nadir Shah, which extended from the Caucasus to present day Pakistan, Oman, and the Persian Gulf. The film's transnational trajectory thus also echoes a solidary with the Non-Aligned movement. However, this promise of "alignment" is envisioned as an alternative international politics, one unrealizable in the film's invocation of magical transport as Ashik traverses fantastic, surreal landscapes.

Despite Ashik's transnational migration within the diegetic narrative, the film production also met with the material confines of the Soviet empire. Much of the film was shot in the Azerbaijan SSR, while the opening and closing shots of the carved wooden mosque were filmed at the Tbilisi ethnographic museum, itself transported from Ajara, a Georgian region on the Black Sea coast with a significant Sunni Muslim minority (Steffen 2013, 233). At once highlighting the diverse confessional, linguistic, and geographical topographies of the

Caucasus, the film's production exposes the limitations of mobility wherein this very image of diversity must be reconstructed from a museum and a transnational geographic imaginary staged within Soviet borders.

While Parajanov's fantastic costuming, depicting Ashik swathed in an abundance of textiles drawn from the Caucasus to China, often seems to Orientalize his subjects, his cinematic gaze remains conscious of its own staging. In the scene in which Ashik visits the Shah, he exposes his own disguise, breaking the sense of cinematic verisimilitude and connecting this gesture to his performance of masculinity. He sneaks into the palace, whispering to the guards in undubbed Azeri as he crosses the threshold. "Unfortunately I don't have a mustache" (*heyif ki bığım yoxdur*), he says as he traces one across his upper lip with his finger. Utterance and gesture here together reference the connection between a beard or mustache and masculinity, respect, and age, thus underscoring Ashik's youth and sense of invisibility. Parajanov then captures the character's self-disguise as he removes a guard's beard and applies it to his own face, highlighting the artificially of the costuming and his own visibility with this acquisition of a marker of mature masculinity.

His costumes become collages that take on surreal qualities, integrating everyday objects such as buttons as ornamentation. For Parajanov this inversion of the ethnographic is organized around formal principles. In a 1966 essay he writes: "I was able to translate ethnographic material. . . . We wanted to break through to the source of the story, to those poetic elements that gave birth to it. We knowingly gave ourselves up to the material, to its rhythm and style, so that literature, history, ethnography, and philosophy would merge into a single cinematic image (*edinyi kinematograficheskyi obraz*), a single act (*edinyi akt*)" (Paradzhanov 1966, 66). For the film's soundtrack, Parajanov commissioned an Azerbaijani composer to blend traditional mugham music with "Ave Maria," Shubert, and Gluck. He explains, "we wanted European viewers to connect 'Ave Maria' to the Muslim world" (Holloway and Parajanov 1996). In this way, he offers his viewers an aesthetic disorientation of their image of the Caucasus, as something strangely familiar.

When asked in an interview if *Ashik Kerib* is a "film of the Caucasus," he turns the question again toward a recuperative practice of animating the object: "It's like this: My hero's mother made fifteen Kurdish skirts for us. She's a Kurd who works, who clears the streets, who works as a housekeeper. These frilled skirts are first drawn over the head and then draped over the arms. The effect is like a Pasolini film. I don't want to hide that, I want to underscore it" (Holloway and Parajanov 1996). The skirt as object emerges first through the labor of the hero's working-class Kurdish mother, who made it. Parajanov, however, does not try to capture it as an authentic cultural object but reimagines its form, worn in reverse over the head and arms to produce a surreal effect. The sensuousness of the cinematic form and its capacity to instill wonder emerges as

the organizational principle of Parajanov's design. His vision of culture thus instead reclaims the sensuous elements of film over an attempt to catalogue content, as a performance of Soviet Orientalism in drag.

II. Iconographies of Queer Desire

Parajanov's collages and *tableaux vivants* explore the intersection of painting, sculpture, and theatre: that is, the heart of his aesthetic innovation lies in an impure intersection of media and genres. His collage work often also recalls non-perspectival traditions of Qajar painting and Eastern Orthodox Christian iconography. His interest in the secular *tableau vivant* as well as the semiotics of the icon, much like for Pasolini, centers on the *function* of the icon—not as a symbol for the divine, but as an object that itself embodies material evidence of the incarnation of the sacred in the world. The value of the icon is thus not located in its symbolic function but rather in its very materiality, which gestures toward alternative planes of queer desire situated beyond the frame of the cinematic tableau (Peucker 2007, 1–10).

The cinematic *tableau vivant* features in the poetic school of Soviet cinema, which is often used to implicitly describe the ethno-nationalist cinemas of the Soviet empire. Olga Kim (2019) has recently argued that a broader tradition of Soviet ethnonational *tableau cinema* marks a turn away from linear perspective through engagement with non-perspectival artistic traditions including Persian miniatures, Orthodox icons, and collage, which in so doing rejects a teleological vision of Soviet modernity. Distinguishing her use of "tableau cinema" to describe alternately formalist poetic and ethno-national lyricism, Kim argues that "the existing critical framework that gathers the ethno-national cinemas of the 1960s-1970s into the category of the poetic cinema, consciously or otherwise, is complicit in the sanitizing and homogenizing process of dominant culture"; in contrast, "the category of *tableau* is introduced to carve out historical and geographical specificity in the all-encompassing term 'poetic'" that also crucially resists a nationalist tendency, and in so doing alters traditional ways of thinking about Soviet history (19–20).

While the painterly conception of the tableau captures a striking resonance between alternate conceptions of cinematic realism that register in the haptic sensory excitement on the surface of the Parjanov's cinematic image, the *tableau vivant* is also rooted in a performance tradition that exposes the body's mediation of forms of control and containment. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) takes up what is perhaps Soviet *tableau* cinema's Cold War double in her discussion of New Queer Cinema's preoccupation with the *tableau vivant.* Developed as a parlor game in the nineteenth century to bring the high art of painting into contact with the low art of acting, she argues that the use of the *tableau vivant* in New Queer Cinema marks a historical return that carries the material traces

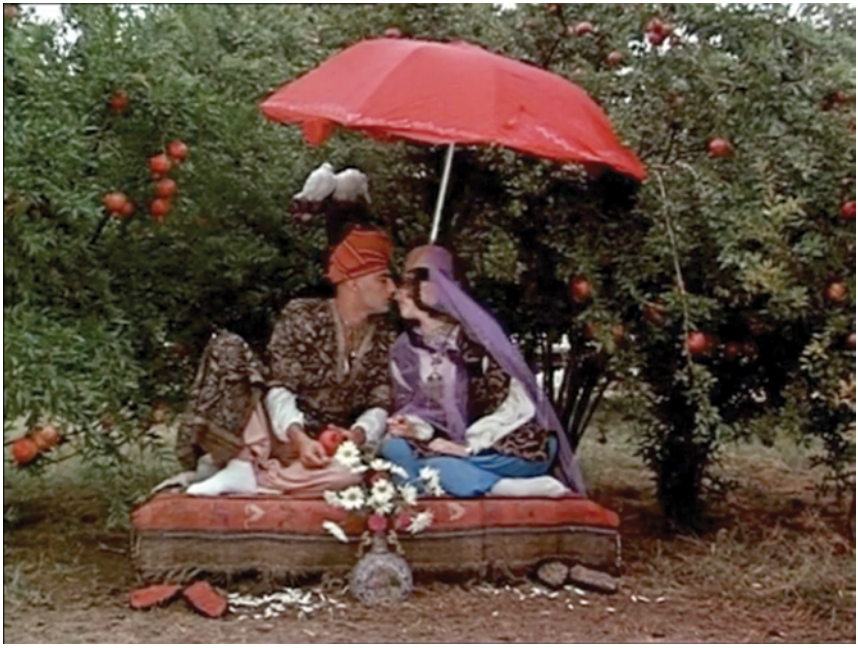
of its mediating bodies. Recalling the slave auction as one of its first non-religious examples, the *tableau vivant* calls up the violence on the body forced into stillness as it "also offers a queer image of aliveness, of sheer animacy unfettered by the narrative drives of biography or history, and in so doing conjures up the possibility of a future beyond both reproduction and writing" (2010, 150–151). Parajanov's *tableaux* strike this resonance between a stillness that exposes forms of colonial and sexual containment and an aliveness that flickers in its queer attachments to failed revolutionary dreams. While the *tableau* of Ashik's capture by the Shah mirrors Parajanov's own experiences of incarceration, Ashik's Orientalist drag—costumes ornamented with mythologized everyday objects and collections of textiles from the Caucasus to China—is also bound to the failed dreams of the international, and its echoes in the Soviet south's fading connections with the Non-Aligned movement. Parajanov's *tableaux vivants* thus carry the traces of possibilities for a broader repertoire of bodily, sensorial forms as they resist capture in national and imperial borders and heteronormative figurations of Soviet masculinity.

The *tableau vivant* also recalls the religious image of the icon. Parajanov's films not only engage with the aesthetic and semiotic functions of iconography but directly thematize the icon as part of a negotiation of the value of cultural symbols, drawing on religious art's connection to a spiritual plane.[23] In Lermontov's "translation" he employs a parenthetical gloss for his Russian readers, equating the Sufi prophet *al-Khidr,* who returns Ashik to his beloved, with the Orthodox Saint George (Lermontov 1911, 280).[24] Parajanov, in turn, reframes this intercultural translation through his use of iconography in his cinematic *tableaux*. Two successive scenes entitled "The Defiled Habitation" and "There Is One God" are formally linked by the repetition of a tableau of Ashik dressed in Georgian costume, surrounded by children against a backdrop of snow-covered ruins and holding an Orthodox icon of St. George (Figure 5). The character of Al-khidr, on the other hand, is integrated into the film's diegetic narrative, transporting Ashik home in a later scene. However, the *tableau*, removed from the diegetic narrative, functions as an icon. Ashik is integrated into this still *tableau*, with his saz replacing Saint George's sword. After being beaten by a band of local men mounted on horseback proclaiming: "Anyone who travels in a foreign land is an enemy. We are all enemies," he is saved by a group of children who assemble around the icon, juxtaposing Karabagh's inter-ethnic conflict against the peaceful future invoked by the children. Parajanov's suspension of time in the *tableau* materializes Ashik's saz as a weapon against hostility and concretizes the link between hospitality and the unity of God, reflected in the titles of the two scenes. The title "There is One God" perhaps alludes to an inter-faith spiritual unity of both Orthodox Christianity and the Islamic *tawhid*.[25] Indeed, Parajanov specifically added these two scenes after the initial editing to respond to inter-ethnic

FIGURE 5: Still from the sequence "There is One God" from *Ashik Kerib.* The children hold an Icon of Saint George to welcome the Muslim Ashik. In place of a sword, Ashik here carries a saz wrapped in a purple cloth.

violence between Muslim Azeris and Christian Armenians in Karabagh that year (Steffen 2013, 243). This connection is also echoed in the Orthodox notion of the spiritual unity (*sobornost*) of the church (*sobor*), conceived as both the physical and spiritual dwelling, materialized in the ruins of "The Defiled Habitation."[26]

Ashik Kerib also juxtaposes the scenes of Ashik's betrothal with early Qajar paintings, a tableau tradition from Qajar Iran (which historically included territories in contemporary Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia) that presents lover and beloved as androgynous gendered figures (Najmabadi 2001, 2005). Indeed, Parajanov also notes the connection between the androgynous gendering of Qajar art and his decision to cast Sofiko Chiaureli as both princess Anna and the young poet Sayat Nova in order to present the lovers as "the reflection of each of their thoughts" (Parajanov 1969, 187).[27] The collage-like suturing of the still, flattened tableau of the ornamental painting (Figure 7) to the moving *tableau vivant* of Ashik and Magul Mageri's betrothal within the diegetic narrative (Figure 6) generates a series of non-binary doubles. It simultaneously stimulates a flattening and animation of the image that draws on the very materiality of the image in order to gesture beyond the tableau and cinematic frames toward a more fluid spiritual plane of non-binary desire.



FIGURES 6 and 7: Stills from "The Rituals of Betrothal" in *Ashik Kerib* juxtapose a shot of a tableau, an ornate Qajar rendering of androgynously gendered lovers (Figure 7) against a *tableau vivant* of Ashik and his beloved (Figure 6), which stages a resonant image of the betrothal. Here the ritual is generated in the montage itself in the relationship between the tableau as object and subject of the diegetic narrative.

The connection between our strange lover and the sacred icon thus establishes a non-verbal, extra-diegetic continuity between the fragmented scenes. The sequence also recalls the aforementioned use of spiritual and poetic terminology rooted in religious discourse for descriptions of sex during the pre-revolutionary period. Parajanov's representations of forms of hybridized spirituality made visible at the surface of the icon thus also anticipates post-Soviet, post-national ways of speaking about sex that draw on the poetics of the pre-revolutionary past and a transnational migration across aesthetic geographies. This evocation of heterodoxy shifts the presentation of sex away from its role in mediating a relationship to a modern western sexuality to one that aims to recover and invent new ways of being human. The expansion of conceptions of sex through a capacious sensuousness also extends across geographical and historical registers, presenting spiritual and erotic desire as exceeding the coherency of state power.[28]

III. Objects That Sound

Most central to Parajanov's project is his rejection of narrative time for the still frames of the *tableau.* This technique operates through a theory of sensuous thought developed in the 1920s poetic school of film popularized by Sergei Eisenstein.[29] Eisenstein's theory, like much of the Soviet avant-garde, was in dialogue with Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach,* which outlines the transformative powers of art.[30] Marx critiques existing materialist theory, particularly Feuerbach's conception of sensuousness as "only in the form of the object, or of contemplation," arguing instead for sensuous activity as "practice" (*praxis*) (Marx 1969, 13–15). Praxis is for Marx through Feuerbach connected to the very sensuousness of work, which emerges through Marx's invocation of one of Feuerbach's racist epithets, a "dirty-Jewish form of appearance," which here also refers to the representation of the Old Testament God's anthropomorphic and visceral labor in making the world. The sensuousness of a kind of artistic and divine creation fashioned from dirt thus becomes the basis of the sensuous materialism that Eisenstein transports to the screen. Art possesses a power to transfigure life, that is, both the life of the body and the life of society, or biology and politics.

Parajanov perhaps most immediately recalls what Eisenstein termed "sensuous thought" (*chuvstvennoe myshlenie*) or elsewhere "prelogical thought" (*dologicheskoe, pralogicheskoe*) a concept that describes the particular medium through which one experiences film.[31] Interestingly, this theory emerges out of Eisenstein's engagement with Marxist psychoanalytic and linguistic analysis, particularly the work of Alexander Luria and Lev Vygotsky, which was based on ethnographic research in the Caucasus and Central Asia.[32] This intellectual genealogy illustrates Parajanov's doubled engagement with ethnography at the level of form

and subject. Sensuous thought, this largely wordless form of speech, replaces an emphasis on phonetics with semantic meanings produced extra-verbally and perceived through sensations of sound and vision. Sensuous thought does not function mimetically but rather through the materialization of thought itself, the sum of psychological events of human consciousness. Parajanov's embrace of sensuous thought diverges from Eisenstein by rejecting the location of politics within the symbolic economy of Soviet nation-building. His work instead invests meaning by reappropriating the sensorial and affective registers of film to generate a fluid temporal and geographical portrait of the Caucasus.

In this sense, Parajanov is also critically engaging with Eisenstein's notion that film can materialize a totality of human consciousness precisely in his refusal to fix a national object in the film. Karla Oeler (2006) discusses Parajanov's engagement with sensuous thought, arguing that his portrait of the inner world of the individual poet manifests a vision of collective consciousness. *The Color of Pomegranates*, she writes, "is a reflection on a self-consciousness that is at once individual and collective—a lyricism steeped in national traditions" (485).[33] Oeler's reading in some ways recalls Frantz Fanon's vision of national consciousness in *The Wretched of the Earth,* as the center from which international consciousness develops (Fanon 2004, 180). However, for Fanon, the relationship between national and international consciousness is mediated through a materialist history of race. Fanon builds on Marx's vision of the "poetry of the future" in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* by turning to the sensuousness of experience and the body as a site of historical materialism (Fanon 1986, 223; Marx 1913, 13).

Drawing on this historically mediated anti-colonial, post-Marxist solidarity in the tradition of Fanon, while turning away from a futurity compromised by Soviet totality, I read Parajanov's work through a double critique of the hegemonic forces of a progressivist and Russocentric Soviet imperialism and the vision of a return to the origins of ethnic purity promoted by (post-)Soviet nationalisms. Parajanov's engagement with sensuous thought, I argue, similarly exposes a materialist vision of race and ethnicity through its critique of a singular "national form." For Eisenstein, sensuous thought develops an extra-verbal language that envisions a direct connection between the viewer, actor, and auteur. Parajanov diverges from Eisenstein's orthodox dialectic, developing instead a vision of sensuous thought that reveals the disjunctures within language and the colonial psyche by exposing temporal discontinuities within it, whether through purposely offset dubbing that creates a linguistic cacophony or through the creation of suspended narrative temporalities in his *tableaux*.[34] Parajanov's focus on the simultaneous coexistence of multiple cultural traditions in the Caucasus thus exposes Soviet ethnography's emphasis on a singular national form as the central force driving its progressivist vision of the evolution of the consciousness of the colonial subject.

These conceptions of the sensuous, emotional affect underlying the poetic film tradition could also be framed through contemporary affect theory. Gilles Deleuze's description of affect, following the work of Henri Bergson, as "a motor tendency on a sensitive nerve" is in some ways prefigured by Soviet theories such as Anatoly Lunacharsky and Alexei Gastev's vision of thought's material and social mediation through the reflexes of the body and collective bodies (Deleuze 1986, 87). Parajanov's invocation of Soviet aesthetic theory indebted to Marxist psychoanalysis thus exposes an alternative virtual affective tradition, one driven not by the late-capitalist dividual but rather structured by a Soviet materialist history of race in which the body is regulated according to geopolitical regimes that impose the evolution and assimilation of national form into Soviet content.[35]

For Parajanov, the sensuousness of the *tableau* thus articulates its function to generate a visceral response from the viewer by harnessing heterodox sources of materialist inspiration. His focus on the materiality of the flattened *tableau*, in turn, animates the filmic gaze itself as integral to the economy of desire in the film. His attention to the texture of the found object is central to the relationship between his collages and cinematic *tableaux.* At once evoking the contemporary artistic movements Pop Art and Sots Art's play with an iconography of capitalist and socialist realisms, Parajanov employs the collage form to challenge the opposition between matter and spirit, exposing the animism of objects and haptic play at the surface of the cinematic image. This shift crucially pivots on a turn away from identifying agency as the center of an anti-imperial, anti-nationalist resistance by instead focusing on the sensuous play developed at the surface of the queer desiring colonial body.[36] Parajanov's collages and cinematic *tableaux,* I argue, also call upon objects to resonate or sound, subverting a vision of the erotic and political passivity of the object as ethnonational commodity by highlighting its haptic, material resonance on screen. His work thus enacts a play between still frames, as well as characters and their setting, in order to reimagine the experience of marginalization from a hegemonic Soviet patriarchal metropole through the invention of the structures and new forms of affective belonging in his adaptations of cinematic sensuous thought.

Parajanov also draws on the principles of sensuous thought to reflect on the process of poetic creation, focusing on the inner reflective life of the poet Sayat Nova and the spiritual journey of Ashik Kerib. *The Color of Pomegranates* is organized around a sequence of non-narrative *tableaux* depicting the poet's childhood, his encounter with his beloved princess Ana in court, his spiritual enlightenment, and his death. Despite the film's focus on a linear life narrative, the *tableau* form creates a dynamic suspension that relies on poetic and folkloric temporalities. The centrality of the poetic, both to the form and subject of the films, disconnects the representation of love from a biopopolitical

imperative for heteronormative reproduction and a static vision of a national historical past. Instead the films situate love within the vital stillness of the viewer's experience of Parajanov's queer anti-colonial imaginary. The sequence from *Sayat Nova* entitled "The Poet's Youth" introduces the poet's discovery of verse through a montage that foregrounds the sensuous and affective power of the lace and shell as longing gestures that extend across the cut, connecting the images of the androgynous double and the beloved other (Figures 3 and 4). In this way, the montage presents gender fluidity through the queer desire embodied in the gesture of the cut.

Ashik Kerib presents a similar sequence of stages of poetic inspiration, including: the poet falling in love, leaving the garden of his home, becoming an ashik, being enslaved by Nadir Shah, recovering his faith, and returning to his beloved Magul Mageri. While in *The Color of Pomegranates* the *tableau* is generated through still shots portraying the poet-lover's contemplative states, in *Ashik Kerib*, the poet-lover is presented through pan shots and jump-cuts between cinematic *tableaux*, paintings, and sculptures. For example, as discussed above, the living yet still *tableau* of the betrothal cuts to wide shots of sculptures of fruit and a Qajar painting of lovers (Figures 6 and 7). The flatness of the Qajar painting, in turn, animates the *tableau vivant* of the betrothal, echoing a likeness between painting and diegetic narrative and highlighting the androgynous gendering of the lover and beloved in both frames. The very principle of verisimilitude is tuned to an interior resonance between painting and shot, as well as lover and beloved, rather than reflecting on the relationship between the film and an outer reality.

The sensuousness of Parajanov's *tableau* captures his journey through his inner struggle to reconcile his experiences as a stranger, evoking his allegorical name the *Strange Lover* (Ashik Kerib). His sadness is articulated in his capture by Nadir Shah's guards, in which he is compared to a gazelle. Indeed, the hunt for the gazelle is a central thematic of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic love poetry in which the poet-lover ashik's pursuit of the beloved, also in Sufi poetry a symbol for God, is recounted through the poetic form of the *ghazal,* or love ballad. In Lermontov's version of the story Ashik meets his beloved Magul Megeri while on a literal hunt for gazelles. She finds him asleep in the forest and scolds him: "Why are you sleeping under the grapevines, she sang, stand up you fool! Your gazelle is passing." Lermontov captures Magul Megeri here as Ashik's dreamlike poetic and divine inspiration (Lermontov 1911, 277).

However, in the film the roles are inverted, and Ashik becomes the beloved gazelle. After he sneaks into Nadir Shah's palace, the guards capture him. Parajanov frames Ashik's capture with a high angled shot in a tableau-like refusal of linear perspective. This *tableau vivant* of Ashik's capture is juxtaposed against a Qajar painting of a hunted gazelle, comparing Ashik to the trapped beloved as well as to the ornament of the gazelle painting itself (Figures 8

FIGURES 8 and 9: From the sequence "The Kingdom of Nadir Pasha, Son of the Late Nargiz-Khanum" in *Ashik Kerib.* This montage sequence juxtaposes a similar pair of a still tableau (Qajar painting of a hunted gazelle) (Figure 9) and a moving image of Ashik's own capture (Figure 8), which uses a high-angled shot to echo a flattened perspective common to Qajar painting.

and 9). The presentation of Ashik as the beloved subverts a vision of Soviet cis-masculinity and stages Ashik's *strange* desire.

This gesture is echoed in the final sequence of the film entitled "Honors to the Bride's Father," in which an older, royal Ashik (depicted in full eyeliner with a small mustache) holds a dove, kisses its head, and sends it flying straight into the camera's gaze. The dove flutters and settles finally on the camera lens. The scene cuts to black with a dedication to the memory of Andrei Tarkovsky. The bride's dowry—a dove—is Parajanov's gift to Tarkovsky, and perhaps to cinema itself. This final gesture, in turn, reveals the cinematic gaze as another strange lover to whom our Ashik sends his final affections. The scene frames Parajanov's project as a whole to imagine a world defined not by imperial, national, or gender boundaries but by a boundless love and queer desire fostered in the very sensuousness of cinema and the dynamic social relations that it exposes between viewer, camera, and image.

Parajanov's offering also speaks to the task of anticipating a post-Soviet decoloniality that remains critical of the rise of post-Soviet nationalisms. His cinematic *tableaux* offer a simultaneous critique of both nationalist and Soviet patriarchy, making visible a anticolonial legacy that extends beyond the Caucasus across a broader Global South geography, while highlighting a distinctive vision of dislocation that defines the (post-)Soviet context. Parajanov's sensuous *tableaux* draw on this anti-colonial imaginary not only to critique the construction of ethnicity and gender mobilized through Soviet biopower but, in so doing, to generate an alternative vision of subjecthood that reimagines new ways of feeling, moving, and being together in the world that are so necessary for any hope for the future.

Notes

1. The term Global South has roots in a wide range of sources from the subaltern international solidarity of Antonio Gramsci's "Southern Question" to post-Soviet US military strategy. My use of this term aims to expand trajectories of (non)alignment by reading across Soviet South and non-aligned archives, building on the important work of scholars such as Anne Garland Mahler and Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra in their Global South Studies digital platform (https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/). For a longer discussion framing the relation between Soviet aligned and nonaligned decolonial solidarity, see Feldman (2020).

2. As Mark Bassin notes in his discussion of Lev Gumilev's theories of ethnogenesis as the foundation of post-Soviet discourses of ethnic purity, "the refusal to acknowledge the inviolability of ethnic difference would always lead to what one of Gumilev's disciples refers to as the "chimerization (*khimerizatsiia*) of the societies affected" (Bassin 2016, 261; see also Gumilev 1990, 484, 473).

3. Drawing on Parajanov's biography, transcultural identity, and interest in ethnography, Levon Abrahamian (2001–2002), Elizabeth Papazian (2006), Joshua First (2015), and most recently Olga Kim (2019) have outlined the poetic formalist and lyric qualities of Parajanov's work. Kim crucially distinguishes tableau from poetic cinema as a critical intervention. Frank Curot (2000) describes a tableaux

aesthetic in Parajanov's film through the use of prolonged close-ups, the organization of images based on visual resonance or symbolism, an emphasis on flatness, the autonomy of sound from image, and use of title slides and the still life. Miron Chernenko (1996) has called the mixture of collage and cinema in Parajanov's work a *kaleidograph,* while more recently Kirill Razlogov (2018) draws linkages between Parajanov's transcultural identity, bisexuality, and engagement with Soviet prison culture (*blatnaia kul'tura*) through his time spent in the Gulag. In the Deleuzean spectrum, Robert Efird (2018) argues that Parajanov's use of stasis, repetition, doubling, flatness, and simultaneity works toward the "dismantling of the traditionally representational approach to cinematic narrative and perception" and renders "notions of nationality, religion, and even gender . . . in constant flux," a "destabilizing of any self-identical subject, a destabilization closely tied to this adherence of the past in the present" (476–7, 480). Through a comparison with Wes Anderson, Peter Sloane (2018) frames this Deleuzean tension between kinesis and stasis in Parajanov's work as "a poetics of the deconstitution of the reconstitution of character, narrative, and filmic movement" (250).

4. While Lee importantly discusses the Stalinist purges at many junctures, his turn to global anti-imperial imaginaries instead of the Soviet reconquest of Russia's Imperial territories during the Civil War understates the imbrication of state violence in the practice of the instrumentalization of internationalist ideology.

5. This reading finds its Cold War double in what Elizabeth Freeman describes as New Queer Cinema's binding to the failed, lost, and impossible revolutionary imaginaries of the 1960s and 1970s. See Elizabeth Freeman's discussion of "temporal drag" in New Queer Cinema (2010, 59–93).

6. For me, this vision of comparative literary method exceeds the disciplinary boundaries of its more canonical frames such as translation and world literature paradigms, but rather seeks to recuperate a line of engaged, reflexive disciplinary critique that has more recently been taken up in the fields of critical race studies and queer theory, but which also takes inspiration from an older vision of postcolonial theory invoked in Edward Said's secular criticism.

7. Recently Kirill Razlogov has extended Fernando Ortiz's vision of transculturalism to frame representations of sexuality and criminality in Parajanov's films, drawings, collages, and assemblages. Razlogov presents Parajanov's bisexuality as a part of his transculturality, within which he includes his connection to the "united four worlds" of criminal culture (*blatnaia kul'tura*) linking "the criminal underground, the forces of order and authorities, the intelligentsia and the people" (2018, 38). For Razlogov, Parajanov's connection to prison culture and his collage work by extension serve as a form of communication with fellow inmates and as a means of connecting his artistic practice, through a kind of prison ethnography, to a field of mass culture generated through the structures of mass incarceration, which his otherwise obscure avant-garde filmmaking (lacking in mass appeal) was disconnected from. On Parajanov's interest in prison culture, see also Parajanov and Sarkisian (2014, 83).

8. While gender and sexuality have received much more attention in Slavic Studies over the last ten years, these topics are largely framed within an area-studies lexicon. To this end Brian James Baer (2002) argues that the repression of sexual discourses in the Soviet Union during the period when homosexuality was illegal (1934–1991) produced silences that complicate attempts to map it. Furthermore, Baer continues, Euro-American accounts of homosexuality in the USSR were complicated by the remainder of Cold War politics in the 1990s, which often resulted in problematic comparisons between the Soviet Union and pre-modern Europe, as in John Boswell's *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (1994) or the fantastic images of a Soviet exotic "East" in Duncan Fallowell's *One Hot Summer in Petersburg* (1992).

9. Building on Engelstein, Healey writes: "Socialism had constructed 'hygienic' conditions (economic stability, rational marriage legislation, maternity and childcare support) in which an unproblematic natural heterosexuality could take its course. Sexual perversions (*polovye izvrashecheniia*) had apparently ceased to exist, for socialism had eliminated the wellsprings of satiety, excess, and exploitation of women said to produce such distortions in capitalist societies" (2001, 2).

10. Peter Coviello offers much great insight on capitalism's logic of sexual capture, inviting us to look beyond sexuality to more temporally and geographically expansive imaginations of sex. He writes: "In

the first cluster I wish to consider, then, we can map a shift in queer critical practice away from what might be named a *discursive* reading of sex—an understanding of 'sexuality' as a thing produced, or 'constructed,' by the array of discourses that 'speak' of it, be they medical, legal, educational, ecclesiastic, and so forth . . . From sex as a discourse we emerge into readings shaped more definitively by an understanding of sex as biopower—as part of a regime of corporeal optimization that Foucault explores most deeply in texts that are *not* volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* but are concerned more closely with shifts in strategies of liberal (and neoliberal) governmentality and their relation to modes of sovereignty. In the register of biopower, 'sexuality' becomes clearer as an implantation designed not solely at the scale of the individual, with the aim of producing his or her 'truth' of character or being. 'Sexuality' names, rather, a model of differential maximalization interwoven with a range of other forms of deployment that look to seize, as Foucault says, *life itself,* its labor and its reproducibility but also its functioning, its flourishing or decline, its malleable utility across a diverse set of regulable locales" (518).

11. As Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel write in a 2016 issue of *GLQ* on queer theory in area studies, this disciplinary formation provides "the kind of thick, linguistic, cultural detail that is needed, even if its limitations, which tie area in both its regional and disciplinary specificities, to US political or economic interests, have been signaled" (155). As Arondekar and Patel insist, queer theory should broaden its understanding of empire beyond a focus on neoliberalism as a determining feature of biopower, which places the US ever at the center of queer geographies, expand its understandings of race beyond the transatlantic slave trade, and extend queer geographies outside common US origin sites and British colonial trajectories.

12. Indeed, as much rich scholarship has demonstrated, the revolutionary transformations can be framed within a broader Soviet project to generate new forms of life through collective farming, the creation of proletarian intelligentsias in Russia and the national republics, and the creation of new cities and urban infrastructures (Kotkin 1995, 106–143; Tucker 1992, 101–15; Fitzpatrick 2002, 40–61; ed. Fitzpatrick 1978; Conquest 1987; Viola 1999; David-Fox 1997).

13. Building on Engelstein, Healey argues that a specific and local use of disciplinary mechanisms was significant to the formation of a monolithic approach to homosexuality in Russia under authoritarianism (2001, 10).

14. Foucault writes: "It is without a doubt true that the Soviets, while having modified the regime of ownership and the State's role in the control of production, for the rest have simply transferred the techniques of administration and power put to the test in capitalist Europe of the 19th century. The types of morality, forms of aesthetics, disciplinary methods, everything that was effectively working in bourgeois society already around 1850 has moved en bloc into the Soviet regime . . . Just as the Soviets used Taylorism and other methods of management experimented with in the West, they adopted our disciplinary techniques, adding to our arsenal another arm—party discipline" (Foucault, "Crimes et Châtiments en U.R.S.S. et Ailleurs," cited in Foucault 1994, 64).

15. For a discussion of Foucault's engagements with Soviet biopower, as well as an alternative theorization of a revolutionary biopolitics of class struggle, see Erlenbusch (2017); Prozorov (2014). My reading contests Prozorov's argument that Soviet biopower cannot be considered racist, citing the targeted mass incarceration and murder of national elites during the purges, as well as the nationalities policies of the 1930s, which were instrumental in the Soviet colonial territorial divisions and the drawing of borders that contributed to a long legacy of interethnic violence.

16. Ironically, Stalin's definition of the Soviet national minorities, which ultimately served as the basis for his colonial assimilation policies, also inspired the early twentieth century American communist and gay rights activist Harry Hay to conceptualize homosexuals as a cultural or social minority, drawing on Stalin's definition of the nation as community. Richard Wright's *American Hunger* evokes a similar affinity for Stalin's text.

17. See Francine Hirsch's discussion of the influence of revolutionary era ethnography on the Brezhnev period, particularly linguist Nikolai Marr's influence on the work of Iulian Bromei in the 1960s, which outlined a historical evolution of ethnosocial communities from primitive societies through feudalist

peoples to socialist nations and argued that this dynamic process of evolution was facilitated through assimilation (2005, 101–144).

18. On a Soviet Orientalist vision of homosexuality in Central Asia as a vestige of the past, see Healey 2001, 169. On Soviet masculinity, see Borenstein (2000); Fitzpatrick (1992).

19. Steffen does indeed distinguish Parajanov's biographical connection to Persian and Turkish culture through the Caucasus as a factor that distinguishes his work from this tradition of Russian Orientalism, implicating "a part of himself (as) the exotic Other" (2013, 239). He also briefly notes Parajanov's use of what he calls "decorative orientalism," particularly in his film *The Legend of Surami Fortress*, which like *The Color of Pomegranates* and *Ashik Kerib* presents orientalist features through the still life and tableau (84).

20. Indeed the character may have been based on a historical figure, Âşhık Garip. See Başgöz 1952, 331–39.

21. As Joshua First (2015) argues, Parajanov's films lacked mass appeal. Nonetheless they were well-known by fellow filmmakers and screened at VGIK (The Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography), the main Soviet film school, which drew filmmakers from across the Soviet Union as well as non-aligned African and Asian countries in line with a late Soviet return to an official internationalist friendship of the people's policy. On Parajanov's limited popular reception, see First 2015, 112–16.

22. Interethnic violence erupted between Armenians and Azeris over the contested territory of Nagorno-Karabakh following the collapse of the Russian imperial government in the Caucasus and Soviet border redistricting. Violence associated with the dispute over the territories erupted again during the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues today.

23. In her connection between the cinematic *tableau* and forms of non-perspectival painting such as Orthodox icon and Qajar art, Olga Kim (2019) foregrounds Parajanov's interest in pre-modern theological traditions that blur the distinction between the painter and the space of the painting. She argues that Parajanov's high angled shots combining frontal and overhead positions, as well as his descaled use of large objects and monochromatic shades in the background plane, subvert an illusion of depth and in so doing connect the viewer to a higher spiritual state of being (Kim 39; see also Nasr 1969).

24. Al-Khidr is referred to by Lermontov as "*Khaderiliaz*" with a gloss equating him with St. George. For more on al-Khidr, see Shaikh 2014, 14.

25. *Tawhid* is a metaphysical conception of the Unity of Being most often attributed to the thirteenth century Islamic philosophers Ibn Sabʿīn and Ibn ʿArabī.

26. *Sobornost'* is a Russian Orthodox concept that refers to a union of individual believers in a unanimous whole.

27. Justin Weir similarly contends that queer desire functions metaphysically in the film in which "painterly, collage-like aesthetics are in dialogue with the film's androgyny and depictions of ambiguous sexual desire"; the effect is to transform "the triad *looking–wanting–being* into a mechanism of the film's creation of cinematic meaning" (Weir 2017, 176, 181).

28. Taking up José Esteban Muñoz's conception of the sensuous traces of queer desire as a "hermeneutics of residue," Sara Gabler Thomas argues that sensuousness (and synesthesia in particular) offers a register for thinking through extensions of desires across global south/north trajectories through a refusal of the state's identification, consolidation, and containment of the colonial body. The excess of sensuous desire in my account of Parajanov's film similarly leaves traces of desires for non-statist global south horizons (Thomas 2016; Muñoz 2008, 17).

29. Like Parajanov, many other filmmakers who contributed to the poetic or tableau schools featured the use of non-Russian folklore, costumes, music, and decorative arts in their work. According to Steffen (2005), filmmakers often recall the silent films of Alexander Dovzhenko as models of this genre. On the Poetic school of cinema see also the 1927 Formalist collection *The Poetics of Cinema* (*Poetika Kino*) with notable contributions by Boris Eikhenbaum and others. Joshua First (2009) argues that "poetic cinema" was a Ukrainian tradition that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, which was also inspired by the French

Surrealist tradition, in particular the notable influence of French communist poet and translator Louis Aragon.

30. For a discussion of Eisenstein's plans to make a film of Marx's *Capital* and the development of his theory of film as the manifestation of conscious thought in relation to Marx and Feuerbach, see Michelson (1976).

31. This term was introduced in Eisenstein's speeches to the All-Union Creative Conference for Soviet Film Workers in 1935 (Eisenstein 1996, 16–46).

32. For a discussion of the influence of this tradition of ethnology on Eisensein's cinematic theory, see Widdis (2017, 51–123); Rebecchi (2017). Vygotsky's work on "inner speech," a theory on which Eisenstein directly bases his work, is developed in Vygotsky 1934, 103–162.

33. Oeler argues more broadly that this dynamic can be understood through the poles of Eisenstein's and James Joyce's identification of individual and collective manifestation of consciousness, offering Joyce's work too as a critique of a material historical consciousness. She continues, "Through realizing, with precision, the images of an individual self-consciousness, *The Colour of Pomegranates* aims at the expression of a collective or shared consciousness" (2006, 485–86).

34 Steffen notes that Parajanov uses intentionally unsynchronized dubbing to turn focus to the tableau (2013, 233).

35. Deleuze argues that control societies borrow the old methods of societies of sovereignty. He introduces the dividual to describe the impact of control societies under late capitalism on individual subjectivity in which the individual subject is substituted for coded dividual material that is regulated by the corporate state (1992, 7).

36. My argument here alludes to Fred Moten's (2003) vision of the resistance of the black subject through the capacity of the commodified enslaved black body to sound, framed in the context of the avant-garde improvisational jazz tradition. Rather than highlight a liberal vision of the agency of the speaking subject, Moten instead offers a critical rethinking of Marx's "impossible speaking commodity," arguing that the "resistance of the object speaks precisely to the history of the black subject" (1). In this way, he disrupts a notion of a proper Marxian formulation of sociality-in-exchange with the "impropriety of the (exchange-) value that precedes exchange" (12). He writes, "Part of this project is the drive that animates the improvisation through the opposition of spirit and matter that is instantiated when the object, the commodity, sounds" (13).

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