



ARTICLE

“Guilty of Being Free”: An Intellectual vs. Soviet Penal System (Prison Letters and Drawings of Sergei Parajanov)¹

Tigran S. Simyan

Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia

ABSTRACT

Sergei Parajanov was one of the most innovative directors of postwar Soviet cinema, which made him suspect to the Soviet authorities and eventually led Parajanov to serving a prison sentence. This article discusses how the trauma of Parajanov’s prison experience was reflected in the textual and visual output (letters, drawings and collages) that he created during his imprisonment out of the materials at hand. The study relies on comparative-historical and semiotic methods. Parajanov’s homosexuality made his position in prison precarious and ambiguous. He went through a variety of occupations and laboriously navigated both the prison hierarchy and Soviet penal system’s vigilant control. However, by his own count, Parajanov crafted 800 objects during his imprisonment. The article explores the recurring motives such as the crane hook, halo, and a hunched posture. This imagery is placed in the context of Parajanov’s everyday life in prison and is interpreted in the light of his textual documents from that period.

KEYWORDS

Soviet prison, punitive system, USSR, thieves’ hierarchy, homosexuality, homosexual discourse, status in the zone, intellectual in the zone

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work was supported by the Science Committee of RA, in the frames of the research project № № 21AG-6C041

¹ “Guilty of being free” was a caption that accompanied Parajanov’s photo at his retrospective exhibition in California in 2004 (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 21).

Introduction

Sergei Parajanov was one of the most innovative directors of postwar Soviet cinema, known for such films as *Teni zabytykh predkov* [Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors] (Parajanov, 1964), *Tsvet granata* [The Color of Pomegranates] (Parajanov, 1968), *Legenda o Suramskoi kreposti* [The Legend of the Surami Fortress] (Parajanov, 1985), and *Ashik-Kerib* (Parajanov, 1988). The film *Teni zabytykh predkov* made Parajanov world famous. In the West, he was called “Maestro of the 20th century” and “hope of the cinema of the Third Millennium” but, unfortunately, as Roman Balayan aptly puts it, Parajanov had to live in a “colourless, mediocre” epoch (as cited in Shirman, 2008, pp. 11, 16). For this “epoch of mediocrity”, Parajanov was too bright and eccentric figure, which made him suspect to the Soviet authorities and eventually led Parajanov to serving a prison sentence.

“The Zone split his life in two: the life *before* and *after*” (Katanyan, 2001, p. 50; my translation—T. S.). Three times Parajanov was imprisoned. For the first time he was arrested on account of his homosexuality in Tbilisi in 1948 and sentenced to 5 years in prison. However, since he was a student of the *VGIK* (All-Union State Institute of Cinematography), after staying in prison for 3 months, he was released under an amnesty (Karapetyan, 2006).

In 1973, the Chairman of the Ukrainian KGB V. V. Fedorchuk sent a notice to the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine V. V. Scherbitsky to inform him that Parajanov had been trying to defend dissident I. M. Dzyuba. Later, Fedorchuk also reported that Parajanov had been openly criticizing the Soviet government, drawing the First Secretary’s attention to Parajanov’s friendly relationships with Ukrainian dissident writers and warning him that Parajanov had been trying to organize mass protests against these dissidents’ political trials in 1972 and 1973. In July 1974, Parajanov was arrested for the second time and charged with “seducing men” and “organizing a den of debauchery” (Grigoryan, 2011). This time he was sentenced to 5 years in a highly secure facility. He served his sentence in different Ukrainian colonies: Gubnik, Strizhevka, and Kommunarsk. On December 30, 1977, he was set free on parole but was forbidden to live in Moscow, Kiev, Leningrad, or Yerevan (his flat in Kiev had been confiscated). The real reason behind Parajanov’s arrest was the speech he gave to local students and young professionals in sciences and arts. The verbatim transcript of his speech marked *Confidential* was sent by the Chairman of the KGB Yury Andropov to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR².

Parajanov was arrested for the third time on February 12, 1982 on charges of bribery. He was sentenced to 5 years in prison but was released on probation after 9 months after Eduard Shevardnadze, who at that time served as the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, had pulled some strings on his behalf (Karapetyan, 2004). The real reason behind Parajanov’s third arrest was his speech during the discussion of the performance of *Vladimir Vysotsky* staged by Yury Lyubimov on October 31, 1981. Parajanov’s friend, poet Bella Akhmadullina gave the following

² For the text of Parajanov’s court speech see Katanyan (2001, pp. 204–222).

laconic explanation of the persecutions he suffered: “He was guilty of being free” (as cited in Katanyan 2001, p. 43; my translation—T. S.). Parajanov’s non-conformity and impulsivity was punished by the state through imprisonment and administrative harassment while his homosexuality made him particularly vulnerable as it made easy to subject him to humiliation and persecution.

The main questions that this article seeks to address are as follows. How was the trauma of Parajanov’s prison experience reflected in his texts (letters), pen and pencil drawings and collages? What role did the *prison period* play in Parajanov’s evolution as an artist?

The study analyzes Parajanov’s prison letters to friends and relatives and the visual content (drawings and collages) that he created out of the materials at hand. The author of the article limited himself to analyzing Parajanov’s prison letters and visual content, since in future work the correlation of his prison life and films will be analyzed. This study also draws on the previous research on this topic—for example, Steffen (2013, pp. 186–201), Razlogov (2018), Mikaelyan (2019), Simyan (2019). It should be emphasized that there is not much literature on this problem in Russian and English, since Parajanov’s prison letters were published in Russian relatively recently. Accordingly, they have not yet been translated into English to generate second-level scientific texts.

Methodologically, the study relies on comparative-historical, semiotic, interdiscursive and discourse analysis methods. Of course, Parajanov’s prison life is described in the context of the Soviet punitive system with the help of oppositions *top vs. bottom*, *power vs. intellectual*. By describing Parajanov’s life are also used the metalanguage concepts of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), the theory of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), associated with the description of the transition from severe corporal punishment (torture, quartering, gallows, etc.) to non-corporal (Foucault, 1975/1977).

From the Grand-prix to Granite Quarry

Parajanov was impulsive and often acted on the spur of the moment. He also had a “loose tongue” (Karapetyan, 2004). He lived as if he was constantly walking on thin ice (Karapetyan, 2006). Bella Akhmadullina shrewdly described his character by pointing out that “it was not the prison that wanted him, but rather he wanted to get into prison” (Katanyan, 2001, p. 105; my translation—T. S.).

For Parajanov the 5-year sentence was a severe shock because he had expected to get just one year for *sodomy* according to Article 121 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR. As Parajanov’s common-law wife Svetlana remembered later, when the verdict was announced, Sergei’s face had the look of a wounded deer (Katanyan, 2001, p. 48).

The persecutions of homosexual men in the USSR started in the 1930s³ (Healey, 2018). One of the ideologists of proletarian literature and the mouthpiece of the

³ For our context and understanding of the attitude of the authorities to homosexuality as an invective in the 1960s, we should recall Khrushchev’s criticism of the exposition of young avant-gardists on December 1, 1962 in the Manege. For more details, see Zelenina (2020).

political leadership, Maxim Gorky in his article *Proletarskii gumanizm* [Proletarian Humanism] (1934) wrote the following:

In the country ruled by the proletariat, fearlessly and successfully, homosexuality, which corrupts the morals of our young people, is considered socially criminal and punishable by law. (Gorky, 1957, pp. 238; my translation—T. S.)

The same year the Soviet government adopted a law that expressly prohibited male homosexuality—Article 121 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR. The crime of sodomy (*muzhelozhestvo*) was punishable by up to 5 years in prison. In case of a forced sexual intercourse with a nonconsenting person or a minor, the punishment could be up to 8 years in prison (Kon, 2010, p. 133).

For Parajanov, his prison sentence signified a transition from one existential state to another: from freedom to unfreedom, from civilian life to prison life. Parajanov had to adjust to the new environment. In a letter to Lilya Brik, he wrote that he was not Mowgli in order to learn the language of the jungle (Katanyan, 2001, p. 50), by which he meant the language of the prison.

To make matters worse, the investigator used a witness who gave a false testimony that he had been raped by Parajanov to fabricate shameful and humiliating charges against the film director. In his letter to Lilya Brik, Parajanov wrote that he had been deprived not only of his flat but also of “his coat of an artist and a man” (in original “mundira khudozhnika i muzhchiny”) (Katanyan, 2001, p. 60; my translation—T. S.). Parajanov’s son Suren wrote:

I am not saying that my Dad did not break the law but this article [of the Criminal Code—T. S.] was chosen deliberately to humiliate him. They found some three random witnesses and, which is the most ridiculous thing, on top of this charge they stacked a naked women pen and playing cards, like the ones you can buy from almost any kiosk. (as cited in Tsereteli, 2008, p. 268; my translation—T. S.)

In an attempt to defend his masculinity, Parajanov proposed to Svetlana but she declined (Katanyan, 2001, p. 60).

Another severe blow was the loss of his “coat of an artist”. In his letter to sister Ruzanna, Parajanov writes that the system deprived him of his profession, authority, and name (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 72), referring to his expulsion from the Union of Cinematographers of Ukraine in May 1974. In her memoirs about Parajanov, Kora Tsereteli quotes Alina Litinskaya, Parajanov’s friend from Kiev, who described Parajanov’s expulsion the following way:

There was a meeting at the studio where the decision was taken not to let Parajanov ever again join the Union. This decision was documented in the special minutes of the meeting. It was legal nonsense but it was not this fact that upset him the most: among those who signed the document there were some people he cared much about. (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 93; my translation—T. S.)

In his prison letters, Parajanov described various prison jobs that he was assigned to. In his letter to Tamara Ogorodnikova, for example, he vividly depicted his work as a scrap metal cleaner (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 222) (Fig. 1).

This was a grueling, physically demanding job, which is reflected in the picture in his slouching posture. Igor Ushakov, who was Parajanov’s co-mate in the prison in Perevalsk, remembered the hard work in metal shops where cranes and elevators were manufactured and assembled (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 226). This also explains why in all the self-portraits drawn by Parajanov in this period there can be seen a crane hook. Not only is it a realistic detail but it also has a certain symbolic significance: metaphorically, a crane hook may represent the threat coming from the Soviet penal system, like the Sword of Damocles hanging over the artist’s head. On the other hand, the hook may also represent an invitation to suicide, which could be perceived as a way out of the unbearable situation.

After the release from prison, Parajanov made up a pun to describe his experience:

When I was told that I was going to work in a granite quarry [“gran-kar’er” in Russian], I thought it should be something enormous because I knew the word “gran” only in connection to “Grand-prix”, like the prize I had been awarded in Argentina. It turned out this time I was awarded a granite quarry. (Katanyan, 2001, pp. 52–53; my translation—T. S.)

Figure 1

Drawing on a Letter to Tamara Ogorodnikova. Sergei Parajanov as a Metal Cleaner



Note. Source: Tsereteli (2008), p. 222.

During his time in prison, Parajanov was, as Roman Balayan puts it, a regular *frayer* (a private person not linked to the criminal circle) within the rigid hierarchy of the Zone (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 225). There he was given a name *Serega the kinshchik*. The inmates used to call him *kinshchik*, which literally meant “a cinema-man”, a person who showed movies (as in a widespread saying “No cinema tonight—the *kinshchik* is ill!”). He also drew playing cards for fellow inmates and angels on the postcards they sent home (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 226). Other prisoners liked him: Igor Ushakov describes a situation where the *blatnyie* (thieves-in-law) ordered the inmates to let Parajanov go first to the prison commissary (“Clear the way! Let the *kinshchik* stock up”) (as cited in Tsereteli, 2008, p. 227). Obviously, Parajanov would not have managed to survive in prison without the assistance of the *blatnyie*.

Blatnyie provided protection for Parajanov. Quite illustrative in this respect is the story of Parajanov’s relationship with Mirgazym, who was the *smotriashchii* (“watcher”)—the person who maintained order in the workplace or in the cell. Mirgazym was asked by the *zampolit* (political officer of the guards) in Strizhavka to look after Parajanov. When the inmates there found out that Parajanov was a famous film director from the entry *School of Parajanov* in the reference book, Mirgazym gave him a top bunk first (the top bunks were meant for *frayers*). After Parajanov asked Mirgazym for a job in the workshop assembling maize harvesters, the latter gave him a bottom bunk (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 233). This transition signified a change in Parajanov’s status in the prison hierarchy as he became closer to the *polozhenets* (a criminal who replaces the boss in his absence and is usually appointed by the latter to control the territory and conduct matters).

To avoid attracting excessive attention from the criminals, Parajanov refused to accept the position of a *kultorg* (the person in charge of cultural and educational activities) or bath director and instead chose to work as a floor sweeper in Mirgazym’s workshop. Parajanov knew that one wrong move could get him into trouble, which is why he chose a harder job but under Mirgazym’s wing. When Mirgazym was about to be released, he appointed a *regular guy* (in original “patsan”) from Kiev to look after Parajanov (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 233).

It should be noted that the Soviet authorities constantly kept Parajanov in view and measures were taken lest his punishment should be mitigated and he should be sent to an open-type correctional facility (the so-called *khimiia*) or be released on parole (Zakoyan, 2020, pp. 74, 81).

The Parole Commission considering Parajanov’s parole eligibility noted the following cases of rule violation: (a) Moustache; (b) Slippers—wore them to go to the canteen; (c) Demonstrates little enthusiasm for work (when sweeping). To this Parajanov sadly commented: “No enthusiasm, no consciousness, and no feeling of responsibility and, which is more important, I want to go to Iran⁴” (Zakoyan, 2020, pp. 232–233; my translation—T. S.). On top of that, the Commission made a note of Parajanov’s hunger strike and of being friends with the *blatnye*.

⁴ Parajanov wanted to go to Iran to make the film *Layla and Majnun*. He wrote a letter to Brezhnev, asking him for a “joyful change in my fate—my return to life” (as cited in Katanyan, 2001, pp. 67–68; my translation—T. S.).

The notes made by the Parole Commission show that in the eyes of the penitentiary system, Parajanov had failed to be “corrected” and, on the contrary, aligned himself with people from the criminal world, rejecting the moral foundations of the Soviet society. Parajanov saw himself as a captive of the Soviet system, physically confined to the space of the prison rather than a convict (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 232).

In his letters to his wife Tamara, Parajanov depicts himself as a metal workshop sweeper with angel wings and a halo (Fig. 2).

The third picture (Fig. 3) emphasizes his innocence (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 235).

A pensive looking and bent sweeper calls for sympathy and at the same time exposes the cruelty of the Soviet penal system, which cripples the prisoner’s soul.

The picture portrays a street sweeper dodging a crane hook, which symbolizes the threat coming from *above*—from the political establishment. One of the captions in the picture—*Khodataistvo o pomilovanii bylo otkloneno* [Motion for freedom declined]—refers to the Commission’s refusal to let Parajanov be transferred to the *khimiia* while the slogans “Labour and only labour! Correct yourself and your friend!” (my translation—T. S.) were probably widely used within the penal system itself.

The motives of a “saint sweeper” and hook of a crane recur in his letter to his friends—Galina and Gurgun Misakyan. In this portrait, Parajanov drew a sacred trident and spiked halo as a sign of sanctity (Fig. 4) (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 328).

These recurring motives in Parajanov’s drawings indicated his belief in his innocence of the charges brought against him. Looking at the shot breakdown of the film *Confession*, we come across a street sweeper with a halo (Fig. 5) (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 113).

Figure 2

Sergei Parajanov. Page of Letter Addressed to Tamara Stepanovna Shevchenko, 1975



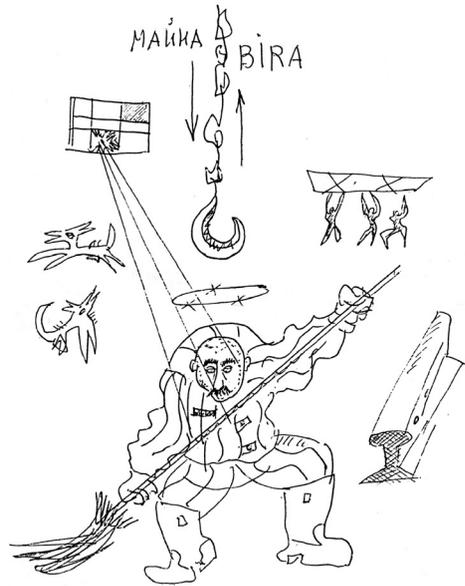
Note. Source: Zakoyan (2020), p. 264.

Figure 3
 Sergei Parajanov. Page of Letter
 Addressed to His Wife Svetlana
 Shebatyuk, 1977



Note. Source: Zakoyan (2020), p. 235.

Figure 4
 Page of a Letter Addressed to Parajanov's
 Friends Galina and Gurgen Misakyan,
 1977



Note. Source: Zakoyan (2020), p. 328.

Figure 5
 Sergei Parajanov. Street Sweeper. Storyboard from the Film Confession



Note. Source: Tsereteli (2008), p. 113.

Thus, Parajanov could have emphasized the status he held at the Zone rather than his innocence: “I consider December 17, 1973 to be my date of death. I died that day. I am being accused of something but I don’t know what” (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 108; my translation—T. S).

Interestingly, Parajanov continued using this avatar—the floor sweeper—in his post-prison period: for example, in 1988, he created a self-portrait—a doll of a floor sweeper (Fig. 6) (Mikaelyan, 2019, p. 109).

The very fact of such ironic self-presentation points to a certain degree of frustration but from a hindsight perspective. Even 11 years after his second release and 6 years after his third, Parajanov continued to mentally revisit his prison experience, drawing ironic self-portraits in the *zek* uniform. This irony is particularly evident in the doll he created with the help of bottle brushes for the beard and twigs for the broom. The greyness of these brushes points to the filth and dirt of the epoch; Parajanov’s brush-beard is also dirty.

Figure 6

Sergei Parajanov. S. P. Prisoner with Broom.



Note. Source: Zakoyan (2020), p. 153.

Artistic and Sexual Non-Conformity

Male homosexuality in the Soviet Russia was criminalized and stigmatized any man who was involved in the proceedings over sexual offences. In his seminal work on sex in Russian society, Igor Kon gives the following figures: even though we don't know exactly how many people were convicted under Article 121, it was used to send to prison 1,000 men annually from the 1930s to the 1980s (Kon, 2010, p. 134). According to Dan Healey, in the 59-year period that this article remained in force, the number of convictions reached 60,000, and in the year when Parajanov was convicted this figure was 1,355 (Healey, 2001, pp. 311, 316; Valodzin, 2020). The total number of convicts shows that the Soviet punitive system went against biology, biological (genetic) *failure*. The mistake was in the incorrect interpretation of the phenomenon. The law on homosexuality *solved* the problem of an external factor, propaganda. The law severely crippled the fate of biologically (genetically) determined homosexuals or bisexuals⁵.

As mentioned, Parajanov was arrested in 1948 and charged with an offence under Article 121 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR. He was aware of the fact that it would be impossible to conceal his first conviction and in his last speech in court, he admitted openly that he had been previously convicted in the so-called *Mikava case*. Mikava worked in the state security apparatus of Georgia. When 20-year-old Parajanov met him, Mikava was the chairman of the Georgian Society of Cultural Relationships and, as Parajanov himself described him, "an experienced professional *pederast*":

He occupied a high rank, was older than me, he took advantage of my gratitude for his helping me to enter the conservatory, and so he seduced me, Parajanov said. At Mikava's initiative, Parajanov had repeated intercourse with him, playing the "active" sexual role. Then he found the strength to break up with Mikava, dropped out of the conservatory and travelled to Moscow. In Moscow, Parajanov entered the Institute of Cinematography hoping that what he called his "sin" would never recur. (as cited in Korchinsky, 2008; my translation—T. S.)

In his court speech, Parajanov pointed out that he had been trying to overcome "the abnormality and hideousness" of his behaviour, the "abnormal feeling", "shameful passion", "sin", "pernicious" attraction (as cited in Korchinsky, 2008; my translation—T. S.). It should be noted that Parajanov struggled with his homosexuality by actively pursuing heterosexual relationships. Neither his first nor second marriage, however, was successful. His second wife Svetlana Shcherbanyuk left him. Parajanov's speech reveals the mixed feelings he had about his sexuality as his attraction was not equally split between genders and was fluid. Parajanov was worried about his strong sexual attraction to men, not

⁵ For more on the discourse on the normalcy and pathology of homosexuality in the 1920s and 1930s and the struggle for the traditional family see: Healey (2001, pp. 155–185); Reich (1966, pp. 157–166, 211–214); on the case of Leningrad: Ivanov (2013, pp. 126–144).

...to all of them but to some that I was drawn to and that evoked passion in me. [...] Sexual relationships with men were more attractive to me than with women. I could easily abstain from relationships with women but the bursts of passion towards men literally burned me from the inside. (as cited in Korchinsky, 2008; my translation—T. S.)

Parajanov's words reveal a great tension between his aspiration for a conventional heterosexual relationship and homosexual desire.

In his last word in court, Parajanov said: "Your Honours! I am homosexual and I have never concealed it. It's my tragic disease" (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 127; my translation—T. S.). He also said that quite possibly "this sin has been in my genes since birth" (as cited in Korchinsky, 2008; my translation—T. S.).

It should be noted that Parajanov often raised the topic of homosexuality in his prison letters. In his letter to wife Svetlana, for example, he wrote:

Sociologists in this country have come up with a new idea: the son of a communist should be a communist. The son of an accountant—an accountant. The son of an engineer—an engineer. The son of a street sweeper—a street sweeper. So, the son of a pederast should be a pederast, obviously. (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 228; my translation—T. S.)

This means that Parajanov was afraid of not only what the Soviet penal system could do to him but also how his conviction might affect his son. He was afraid that Suren could also end up in prison: Suren might get arrested under a contrived pretext, for example, buying smuggled goods such as a used T-shirt with a Mickey Mouse print. Parajanov's greatest fear was that his son's freedom would be sacrificed so that investigating officer Makashov could get another star on his shoulder straps for his 60th anniversary (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 228).

Parajanov recognized the dangers of his "hard and tragic situation" and asked his sister Ruzanna to send him the record of his conviction to dispel the rumours in the zone and thus avoid the stigma directed at the homosexuals playing the *passive* role (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 48). In criminal and prison communities, passive homosexuality was considered acceptable only for those of inferior "prison castes". Moreover, if someone was suspected of being the "passive one", they could be raped or even killed: "If they think I was passive, I could be murdered!" he wrote, "It's appalling in strength and mass" (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 63; my translation—T. S.). Marina Vladi expressed hope that the letters by her husband Vladimir Vysotsky, a famous Soviet singer-songwriter, as well as his photographs with Parajanov that had been sent to the zone could have helped alleviate the situation for the latter. As Marina Vladi noted, *zeks* (inmates—T. S.) were very fond of Vysotsky because he wrote many songs about them and about the *zone*" (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 38; my translation—T. S.).

In a letter to Svetlana Parajanov described the horrors of the *zone* and asked to show his letters to their son to help him overcome "the period of mutation—the crisis of adolescence and childhood pathologies" (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 126; my translation—T. S.).

Figure 7Sergei Parajanov. *Prison Bitches*

Note. Source: Zakoyan (2020), p. 151.

Dystrophia, drug abuse, during the night I hear them screaming “Mum”; they wet their beds and put their mattresses reeking of urine on the snow to dry. They are all from the crater of Kiev. The gays—golden-haired *twiggies*⁶ with beautiful hands, yet unshaven. When they—*men*—turn up here, at the zone, they are adopted by code-bound thieves, who turn them into their bitches and errand boys (*shestiorki*). (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 126; my translation—T. S.)

Within the prison social hierarchy, *twiggies* occupied an inferior position. The only way for them to survive in prison was to be *adopted* by the thieves and to become their *sonnies*, *slaves* or *shestyorkas* (errand boys) and thus acquire the necessary protection.

In his drawing *Tiuremnye suchki* [Prison Bitches] (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 151) (Fig. 7), Parajanov depicted the inmates who had been *turned out*—coerced into having sex

⁶ The word *twiggies* was derived from the name of the British supermodel famous for her gamine look (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 126).

and thus branded as victims of sexual abuse⁷, although nothing in this drawing indicates the inferior status of these people. In his memoir about Parajanov, Roman Balayan describes a situation when Parajanov was saved by one lieutenant. When a certain code-bound criminal (*vor v zakone*) found out that Parajanov was a homosexual, he chased him off from the bunk bed and threw him out in the rain. After three hours outside, Parajanov was almost dead with cold until he was seen by some lieutenant passing by (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 223).

Apart from adopting a *twiggy*, another way to cope with the sexual deprivation was to seek contact with the women inmates whom one could meet through the penal system (the so-called *zaochnitsy*). In high security prisons, however, inmates were allowed to have visitors only once in 6 months. In one of his letters Parajanov is telling about an 18-year-old prisoner who killed his stepmother for beating his father. This young man

...is drawing one and the same girl—his beloved—and dresses her in various robes. Then tries to undress her. [...] He will leave prison at Christ's age. I already have 1,001 such novellas. Each more horrible than the other. (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 109; my translation—T. S.)

Once an Italian journalist in Venice asked Parajanov:

"How do you feel about the fact that Pasolini was homosexual?" "Excuse me", Parajanov replied, "Where are we? In Italy? In the country of Leonardo da Vinci? Michelangelo? Who cares what they were doing in bed! But since we are on the subject of homosexuality, out of the three of us—you, me and Pasolini—it is you who is the sexual minority!" (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 88–89; my translation—T. S.)

In 1988, at a press conference in the USA, Sergei Parajanov spoke of homophobia in the USSR:

When I was in Rome, I gave some lectures. Someone said that the Soviet people don't like Pasolini's work because he is homosexual. There were 20 students at the lecture, all looking very much like Pasolini. All of them had purple collars made of paper lace. They had also put some purple-coloured lilies on the windowsills. It was a wonderful theatre—a continuation of Pasolini. I replied that Russian people like Tchaikovsky's music very much, forgetting that he was homosexual. I have been to prison three times. I was accused of homosexuality—*active*, but it doesn't matter... In Italy, I saw the works of Leonardo, Michelangelo. I am glad I am neither sexologist nor sexopathologist. I was looking at their works and I didn't remember that they were homosexual.

⁷ For more on this, see Starkov (2010, p. 174). It should be noted that in the prison world there were double standards in relation to homosexuality: deprived of the opposite sex, inmates of a higher status could engage in situational homosexual encounters since masturbation was considered inappropriate for the higher castes.

In my case, our government have made their deepest apologies to me. The Soviet Criminal Code states that the hormones can be cured in prison. When an active [homosexual] becomes *passive* and vice versa. (Karapetyan, 2006; Tsereteli, 2008, p. 127; my translation—T. S.)

Parajanov was a free mind in his views on sexuality and claimed that for creative artists it was utterly irrelevant. Moreover, it was not for the viewer who evaluated an aesthetic oeuvre to assume the role of sexologist or sexopathologist. Parajanov's words reveal his ironic attitude to the Soviet penal system, which was trying "to fix the hormones" by locking people up.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Parajanov managed to gain more freedom by distancing himself from his traumatic experience in prison although he still found himself compelled to address the topic of homosexuality (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 191). But he did it in an ironical manner when, for instance, talked of his supposed *connections* with the Communist government: after the film *Ashik-Kerib* was shown in Munich, it lost the right to participate in the film festival in Venice. In Italy the film received a lot of publicity, media also paid much attention to Parajanov's biography, in particular, as he put it, his "homosexual connections with the Communists" (Karapetyan, 2006; my translation—T. S.).

Intellectual Isolation

Parajanov's criminal conviction caused a kind of intellectual lethargy because during his stay in prison, he found himself in a thoroughly dehumanizing environment, in an intellectual and information vacuum, deprived of the personal, cultural, and professional connections he used to have. Parajanov expressed his feeling of isolation and his dismay at being unable to follow the cultural and cinema news in multiple writings. In his letter to sister Ruzanna Parajanov asks her to bring him some books—*Metropolitan* [the Metropolitan Museum of Art—T. S.], *Bosch*, etc. "You will take all of them back. In case you want to leave something—if Igor has got the Impressionists or the Dutch, etc., maybe he could give them to me as a present or find where to buy them cheaper" (Zakoyan, 2020, p. 145; my translation—T. S.). This letter shows how much he hungered for new impressions, yearning to refresh the paintings in his memory.

The following drawing can be considered a visual metaphor of his intellectual ordeal in prison (Fig. 8).

A castle represents the isolation and the suppression of creativity as Parajanov's forced silence between the films *Tsvet granata* [The Color of Pomegranates] (Parajanov, 1968) and *Legenda o Suramskoi kreposti* [The Legend of the Surami Fortress] (Parajanov, 1985) lasted 15 years. Only in 1985 his film received international recognition at Pesaro International Film Festival of New Cinema.

In 1988 in New York, at the press conference following the screening of *Ashik-Kerib* Parajanov remarked that he had "left his energy in prison" though this was where he became an artist. "From there I brought 800 works" (Karapetyan, 2006; my

translation—T. S.). For Parajanov, collage became a quasi-narrative, a unique kind of cinematography in a compressed form.

Collage *Perechen' opisannogo imushchestva* [Property Inventory List] (1977) (Fig. 9) can be a perfect example of such narrative.

In this laconic work, the penal system is embodied in the hands of an officer writing the inventory list. The system had taken away the Parajanov's most treasured possessions—vintage and antique things, personal memorabilia. This collage is also a way to say goodbye to the things that were precious for Parajanov.

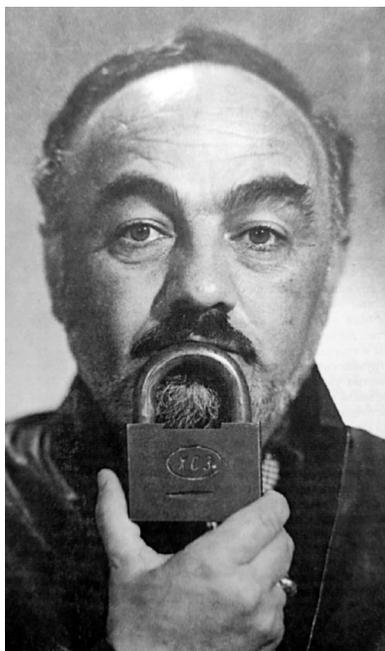
Parajanov turned the *zone* into a creative laboratory. As Parajanov once said, “they thought that in prison I would become anti-Soviet but instead while being in isolation I studied life” (as cited in Mikaelyan, 2019, p. 101; my translation—T. S.).

Parajanov could see beauty even in the most trivial or horrifying things:

Imagine a wooden latrine sitting in the corner of the yard, all covered in colourful stalactites and stalagmites. These appeared because *zeks* peed in the freezing cold and their piss—of different colours—got frozen: those who had nephritis had green piss, those with bruised kidneys peed with red, those who drank *chiffir*, orange [...] It all sparkled in the sun, a sight of unspeakable beauty—like a Venus Grotto! (Katanyan, 2001, p. 53; my translation—T. S.)

Figure 8

Sergei Parajanov with Lock



Note. Source: Katanyan (2001), p. 100.

Figure 9

Sergei Parajanov. Property Inventory List, 1977



Note. Source: <https://parajanovmuseum.am/ru/gallery/?catId=3>

As Zaven Sarkisyan, the director of Parajanov's museum in Yerevan observes, Parajanov considered beauty the most important thing in nature. He was obsessed with beauty and created beauty out of nothing. For him the beauty is the revelation of the transcendent (Sarkisyan, 2014).

In one of his interviews, Parajanov complained that the prison had robbed him of 15 years of his life—the years of “complete stagnation, destitution, with no means of support [...] I am destroyed, primarily as a creator. I am ripped off, first and foremost, regarding my creative work” (Karapetyan, 2004; my translation—T. S.). Parajanov's experience of incarceration had a devastating effect on him both mentally and financially.

Parajanov liked being deliberately provocative in his public speeches: for example, in the speech he gave at the Taganka Theatre in Moscow he started talking of his immortality and said that he was pampered by the Pope, who sent him diamonds and jewels, which he sold to buy caviar. Parajanov complained about the time he lost in prison: “Someone wanted me to do nothing. Must be some rival who wanted to get rid of me” (Karapetyan, 2004; my translation—T. S.). Despite his outward audacity, however, Parajanov could not but feel bitterness and frustration about the fact that his mature years, which might have been his creative prime, had been stolen from him by the Soviet state.

Figure 10
Sergei Parajanov



Note. Source: Katanyan (2001), p. 65.

He also struggled to socialize: his friends tried to find him a job in Tbilisi and Yerevan, on television in Moscow, but he was still traumatized by his incarceration experience and explained that he needed more time. He said that he had seen too much *“there—in prison: The dead can resurrect, it’s much harder for the living”* (Katanyan, 2001, p. 78). In this context, the observation of Parajanov’s friend is quite remarkable: Roman Balayan remembered having a “paradoxical feeling” after Parajanov’s release that “it was all of us that were in prison while he was free [...]” (Parajanov, 2006, p. 221; my translation—T. S.). Balayan also noted: “Soviet Ukraine wanted to bury Parajanov but in reality, it immortalized him. They locked him up but he managed to give to them, to himself, to all of us—such a beauty” (Parajanov, 2006, p. 221; my translation—T. S.). In other words, Parajanov transfigured his unfreedom into the creativity of a free spirit—in his collages, drawings, and letters⁸.

He had, however, fits of severe depression and despair: in the drawing of 1964, one of the angel wings is cut off, leaving him incapable of a creative flight (Fig. 10) (Katanyan, 2001, p. 65).

⁸ After his release, Parajanov gave away some of his collages to his friends and relatives but most of his prison works are now exhibited in his museum in Yerevan.

The suffering and the vulnerable state of the artist's soul are represented by the drops of blood. This transience of artistic creativity is conveyed through the combination of what looks like a halo and barbed wire as if Parajanov binds together innocence and sanctity with suffering and unfreedom. Similar emotions are described in Parajanov's autobiography:

After thirty years, I returned to the city where I was born in 1924. I came back an old man, carrying behind my back, like two wings, on one side—fame, triumph, and recognition, and on the other—humbleness of a slave, prisoner, *zek*. (Tsereteli, 2008, p. 9; my translation—T. S.)

Conclusion

Impulsive and eccentric, Parajanov found himself to be in constant antagonism with the Soviet government and its doctrines, which resulted in his personal tragedy and severe creative crisis lasting for 15 years. The stress, monotony and hardships of prison life drained his artistic energies although he did manage to create a variety of *compressed* texts—collages and drawings. In prison, Parajanov took on a variety of jobs, including that of a builder, fabric mender, laundry worker, floor sweeper, orderly (*dnevalny*), janitor, fireman, metal cleaner and so on. The daily routines of his prison life, his state of mind and body are described in his letters and drawings, where recurring motives such as the crane hook, halo, and a hunched posture play an important role. His prison letters are imbued with terror and desperation as he feared not only for his own life but also for his son's. They also give us valuable insights into what life was like in Soviet penal colonies. Thanks to his friends' help and support (Vysotsky, Katanyan, Lilya Brik and others) and his own cautiousness, Parajanov managed to survive even in a seemingly deadlock situation when he was *sandwiched* between the Soviet penal system and the inmate community, consisting of code-bound criminals (*vory v zakone*), *underbosses* (*smotriashchie*), and so on. In his prison works, Parajanov turned the homosexual and prison discourse into an object of creative play and means to convey his irony and disdain towards the Soviet political system.

References

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* [A. Sheridan, Trans.]. Penguin Books. (Originally published in French 1975)

Gorky, M. (1957). *Sobranie sochinenii v 30 tomakh (stat'i, doklady, rechi, privetstviia, 1933–1936)* [Collected works in 30 volumes (articles, reports, speeches, welcome addresses, 1933–1936)] (Vol. 27). Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury.

Grigoryan, L. (2011). *Paradzhanov* [Parajanov]. Molodaia gvardiia.

Healey, D. (2001). *Homosexual desire in revolutionary Russia: the regulation of sexual and gender dissent*. The University of Chicago Press.

Healey, D. (2018). *Russian homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350000810>

Ivanov, V.A. (2013). Kontrrevoliutsionnye organizatsii sredi gomoseksualistov Leningrada v nachale 1930-kh i ikh pogrom [Counterrevolutionary organizations among Leningrad's homosexual population during the early 1930s and their destruction]. *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii*, 3, 126–144.

Karapetyan, G. (2004). Sergei Paradzhanov/Eduard Shevarnadze. Kto, gde i kak prevzal 15 let molchaniia Mastera [Sergei Parajanov/Eduard Shevarnadze. Who, where and how broke the 15 years of the artist's silence]. *Druzhba narodov*, 3.

Karapetyan, G. (2006). Sergei Paradzhanov [Sergei Parajanov]. *Kreshchatik*, 4.

Katanyan, V.V. (2001). *Paradzhanov. Tsena vechnogo prazdnika* [Parajanov. The price of an eternal holiday]. DEKOM.

Kon, I.S. (2010). *Klubnichka na berezke: seksual'naia kul'tura v Rossii* [Strawberry on a birch tree: sexual culture in Russia] (3rd ed.). Vremia.

Korchinsky, A. (2008, January 30). Vsia pravda o sudimostiakh Paradzhanova [All the truth about Parajanov's convictions]. *Segodnya.ua*⁹ <https://ukraine.segodnya.ua/ukraine/vcja-pravda-o-cudimocitjakh-paradzhanova-91288.html>

Mikaelyan, A.G. (2019). Etnografiia zony po Paradzhanovu [Ethnography of prison according to Parajanov]. *Kritika i semiotika*, 2, 100–113. <https://doi.org/10.25205/2307-1737-2019-2-100-113>

Parajanov, S. (Director). (1964). *Teni zabytykh predkov* [Shadows of forgotten ancestors] [Film]. Kiev-film.

Parajanov, S. (Director). (1968). *Tsvet granata* [The color of pomegranates] [Film]. Armen-film.

Parajanov, S. (Director). (1985). *Legenda o Suramskoi kreposti* [The legend of the Surami fortress] [Film]. Gruzia-film.

Parajanov, S. (Director). (1988). *Ashik-Kerib* [Film]. Gruzia-film.

Razlogov, K. (2018) Parajanov in prison: an exercise in transculturalism. *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 12(1), 37–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503132.2018.1422223>

Reich, W. (1966). *Die sexuelle Revolution: Zur charakterlichen Selbststeuerung des Menschen* [The sexual revolution: on the self-control of human character]. Europäische Verlagsanstalt.

Sarkisyan, Z. (2014, February 19). Khot' neponiatnyi, no i neponiatyi [Though incomprehensible but also unappreciated]. *Colta.ru*¹⁰ <https://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/2109-hot-neponyatnyy-no-i-neponyatyy>

⁹ Доступ к информационному ресурсу ограничен на основании Федерального закона от 27 июля 2006 года №149-ФЗ «Об информации, информационных технологиях и о защите информации»

¹⁰ Доступ к информационному ресурсу ограничен на основании Федерального закона от 27 июля 2006 года №149-ФЗ «Об информации, информационных технологиях и о защите информации»

Shirman, R. (2008). The dangerously free man. In S. Zakharkin (Ed.), *Sergei Parajanov. Collages. Graphics. Works of decorative art* (pp. 11–16). Dukh i Litera.

Simyan, T. (2019). Sergei Paradzhanov kak tekst: chelovek, gabitus, inter'er (na materiale vizual'nykh tekstov) [Sergei Parajanov as a text: man, habitus, and interior (on the material of visual texts)]. PRAKSEMA. *Problemy Vizual'noi Semiotiki*, 3(21), 197–215. <https://doi.org/10.23951/2312-7899-2019-3-197-215>

Starkov, O.V. (2010). *Kriminal'naia subkul'ura: spetskurs* [Criminal subculture: special course]. Wolters Kluwer Russia.

Steffen, J. (2013). *The cinema of Sergei Parajanov*. The University of Wisconsin Press.

Tsereteli, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Sergei Paradzhanov. Kollazh na fone avtoportreta. Zhizn'—igra* [Sergei Parajanov. Collage against the self-portrait. Life is a game]. DEKOM.

Valodzin, U. (2020). *Criminal prosecution of homosexuals in the Soviet Union (1946–1991): numbers and discourses* (Working Paper, EUI HEC, 2020/02). European University Institute, Department of History and Civilization. <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/67530>

Zakoyan, G. (Ed.). (2020). *Sergei Paradzhanov. Pis'ma iz zony* [Sergei Parajanov. Letters from the prison]. Antares.

Zelenina, G.S. (2020). “Eto—izvrashchenie, eto nenormal'no”: ratsionalizatsiia esteticheskogo shoka v manezhe 1 dekabria 1962 g. [“This is perverted, this is not normal”: Rationalizing aesthetic shock in the Manezh on December 1, 1962]. *Shagi*, 6(4), 52–70. <https://doi.org/10.22394/2412-9410-2020-6-4-52-70>