

# ARMENIA ON MY MIND

## ODE TO REMARKABLE ARMENIANS

### KHATCHKARS

### DUDUK



This text is now merely on Armenia, Armenia lingering on my mind, Armenia I had always wanted to know, the country I have visited but briefly once and would love to know more in depth...

Before I move on to other subjects, here is some more about *Sergei Parajanov*, a titan whose work is becoming more and more known, despite his once relative obscurity and his untimely demise at 66; Parajanov who I talked about in my previous text but not enough as there can never be enough reminiscing of someone whose life and creativity mean the “refusal of time and empire”, someone grudgingly taken by the Grim Reaper as He, the Reaper, knows only too well that great Sergei remains ever victorious until the End of Time.



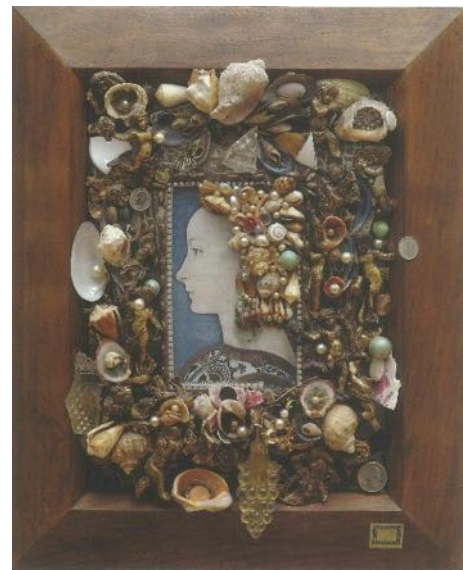
*Mona Lisa collages by Parajanov*





Stills from the film *The Colour of Pomegranate* with lithe, unearthly Georgian actress *Sofiko (Sophia) Chiaureli* notably in six male and female roles. The ethereal *Sophiko* passed away in 2008, age 70, in *Tbilisi*.

Take note of the playfulness and celebratory traits of a man who roughed it so hard in life, when he comes up with this collage: *"I sold my dacia!"* (summer house or weekender). Only someone of limitless inner freedom could create and artwork like this in face of persistent adversities. This looks so much more like *Felini* rather than oppressed artist in the Soviet regime...



*"I sold my dacia!"*, collage by *Parajanov*

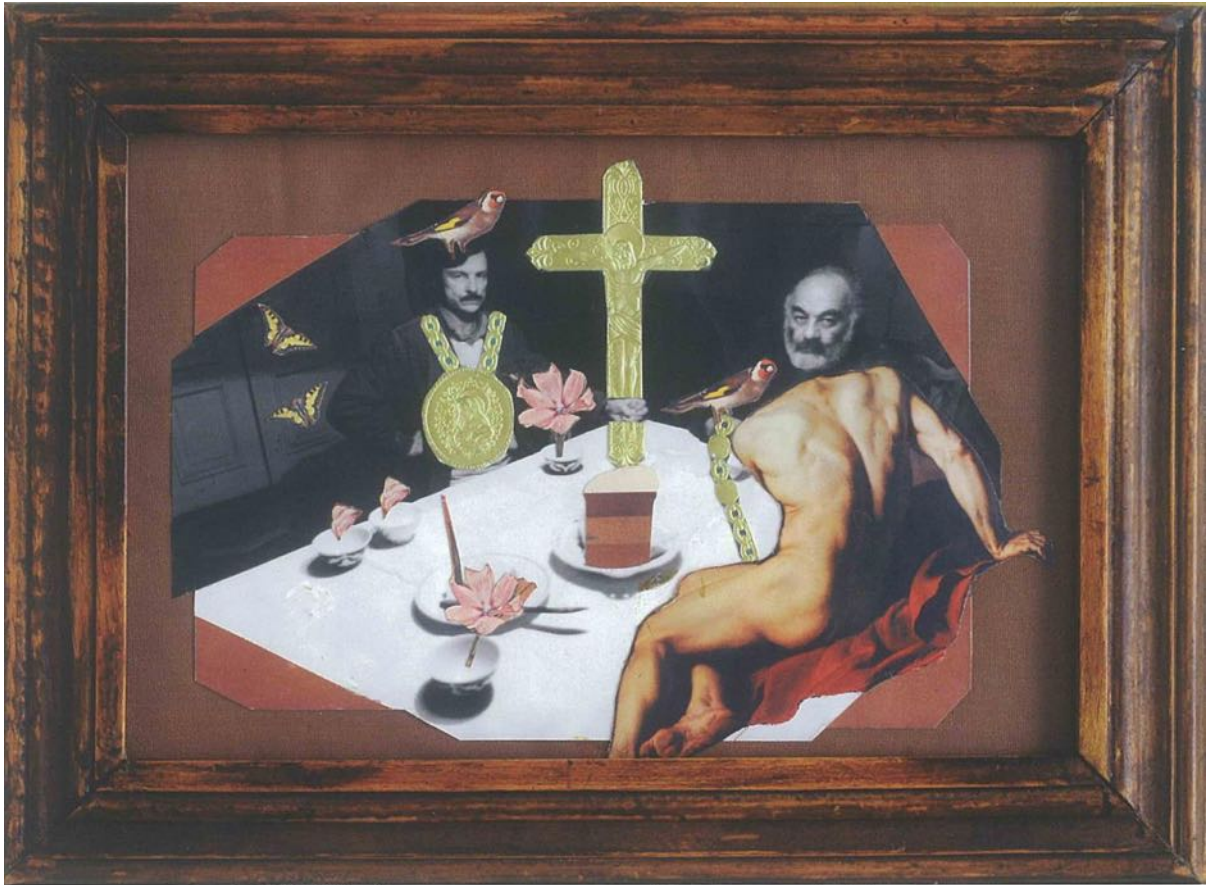
collage by *Parajanov*

To finish this segment on *Parajanov*, let us read what *J. Hoberman* wrote in May 2018 about this dazzling film poem that *Sayat Nova* is:

"Understanding is not synonymous with enjoying. The visual language of some movies is so personal and hermetic that interpreting it could be compared to reading a novel written in hieroglyphics. "The colour of pomegranates", also known as "Sayat Nova", made by Soviet director *Sergei Parajanov* (1924-1990) is one".

*Sayat Nova* in Persian means the King of Song or the Hunter of Song, a name given to this otherworldly 18<sup>th</sup> century Armenian poet-troubadour (*ashig*). The film was made mainly in Armenia and in a lesser measure in Georgia and Azerbaijan.





*Parajanov and Tarkovski collage by Parajanov*

At the Parajanov museum in Yerevan, an affable man, *Garegin (Garik) Grigoryan* told me about another genius, apart from Parajanov, a film director, whose assistant he was himself: *Artavazd Peleshyan*. When I checked out his work, I was also bewildered and fascinated!

So, *Artavazd Peleshyan*, another film master from Armenia, together with *Parajanov* and *Vartanov* form the Divine Trinity of Armenian cinematography. What is it with this small country that produces so many talented people? As the saying goes, is it the water...?

One of my friends from Belgrade, having read my previous text on Georgia and Armenia tour, drew my attention to the theatre play *"A Beast on the Moon"* by *Richard Kalinoski* which has been playing in Belgrade for some years now. It is an intimate drama about an Armenian immigrant couple in Milwaukee whose marriage is haunted by the 1915 genocide. The play has been translated into 12 languages, produced in 17 countries around the world, and showered with awards. Although not an Armenian himself, Richard has been married to an Armenian lady for seven years...

Last night I have seen *Aida*, an opera staged in Sydney Opera House, drawing a lot of attention for its lavish costumes and set design. The main role of *Aida* was sung by an Armenian, *Natalie Saroyan* who was as gracious and dignified responding to ovations at the end of the opera, as she was beautiful.

Then another friend sent an article from, New York times, again about Armenia. The journalist *Peter Balakian*, is a poet who returns regularly to his ancestral country and says that after the recent “velvet revolution”, the sense of a new era is palpable.

He talks about thousand-year-old lace-like carved stone crosses, (khatchgars) which feature so prominently around Armenian churches, or emerge from fields of roadside poppies. They fascinate me too. I have seen terrific examples in Ethiopia, but Armenian crosses are unsurpassable.



Apart from things and places I have already visited in Armenia, I would like to check what Peter writes about and to experience it firsthand: The Cafesjian Centre for the Arts in Yerevan, the cafe-abundant Tumayan Street, to walk the old cobblestone street off bustling Amirian Street to check on various wonderful eateries such as Anteb, Babylon, vine-trellised courtyard restaurant and art gallery on Abovian Street, try desserts at Sherep restaurant, and go back again to Republic Square with its monumental rosy tufa stone buildings, illuminated fountains, to be part of the most resilient crowd optimistic about their future in spite of all adversities.

And outside of Yerevan, I would follow in Peter Balakian’s steps and visit the Goris River and stay at Mirhav, reach the ninth-century monastery Tatev, perhaps go back again to Lake Sevan to have a “perfect whitefish soup” at the lakeside restaurant Dzvadzots, visit another Tufenkian hotel Avan Dzoraget, beneath the mountains on the Debed River. It will be lovely to catch up with my new friends *Roseanna Badalayan* and *Artsvi Bakhchinyan* and listen again to the divine singing of a tenor *Armen Badalayan* and his soprano wife *Suzanna Melqonyan!*

But, by the same token this time over I would not miss listening to the magical sounds of duduk, one of my favourite instruments.

Exactly 45 years ago, I was privileged to listen the great French-Armenian cantautor *Shahnour Vaghiag Aznavourian* at a concert in Belgrade. It was a memorable experience. On 14<sup>th</sup> of September this year (2018) I am going to Sydney State Theatre to see and listen to that same man and pay my homage to him. While so many of us around the age of 70 (if we are still alive and still do remember our names), “stop being arsonists (long ago!) and become firemen”, putting our feet up in cosy slippers, watching our favourite TV shows, this phenomenon is wrapping up his last world tour with this concert in Australia at the age of 94!

Oh, yes. *Shanhour (or Chanhour) Vaghinag Aznavourian*, a singer-lyricist-actor-public activist-diplomat. He may be only 160 cm tall but reading his biography leaves one flabbergasted, And he goes by the name Charles Aznavour. I hope he will sing: “Et moi dans mon coin...” or whatever he would, as so many of his songs are my “favourites”; once more I want to see this great man reputed the “best actor” among singers on the stage, and an excellent actor in general (remember the film “Shoot the pianist”) His diminutive stature presents no problems as he completely dominates the stage and one loses any notion of his actual height. Another high achiever of a short stature. Just don’t put him next to the long-legged *Cherilyn Sarkisian* as the contrast might be too stark.

The daughter of an Armenian in America goes by the name *Cher*, and her biography is no less vertiginous than that of Charles Aznavour. Singer-actress-author-businesswoman-comedian-dancer-fashion designer-model-philanthropist-record producer-songwriter-television host is so much more than merely a pulchritudinous woman in fishnet stockings (at times). She is the winner of Grammy Award, Emmy Award, Academy Award, 3 Golden Globe Awards, Cannes Film Festival Award, etc; she sold 100 million records and is one of the bestselling artists in history, but, outside of her music and acting, she is noted for her political views, philanthropic endeavours, and social activism... Cher is also touring Australia at the moment.

When I think of remarkable Armenians, I’d like to mention *Kosta Balabanov*, an archaeologist living in Macedonia Republic of former Yugoslavia, one of the greatest experts on Byzantine icons, and especially the ones found in Macedonia. He was also an honorary consul of Japan in Macedonia, a person of huge standing in the cultural world of this country, who I was privileged to have had conversations with on a number of occasions.

To finish with, I cannot bypass *Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff*. Born in Armenia, of Armenian mother and Greek father, Gurdjieff is one of most charismatic and controversial spiritual teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He inspired the formation of many groups even after his death, all of which still function today and follow his ideas. I came across his unique trilogy some 25 years ago, read it and know a number of people who are followers in Sydney, Australia.

*Gurdjieff* and his teachings remain an enigma as he has as many critics and detractors as he has followers and devotees. There is an ambiguity and incompleteness about his work, but the controversies and open questions only keep fostering his legend and cult status.

I would like very much to see *Peter Brook’s* film “*Meetings with remarkable Men*” (1979), starring *Dragan Maksimovic* and *Terence Stamp*, as the book of the same title is fascinating in recounting a life so vastly different and more interesting than that one of most people.

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This text was commenced and almost completed back in September. A number of distractions followed which have thwarted my intention. Firstly, I was advised that Charles Aznavour concert on 14<sup>th</sup> September in Sydney (one night only) has been cancelled due to “health reasons”; then the shattering news of his passing came not long afterwards, hitting me hard and without an energy and incentive to finish off this text...

I could write so much more about this remarkable man, but many a wonderful and wise thing had already been written. Instead, I would only utter

Vale, Aznavourian, the best of the Frenchmen and of the Armenian! We knew when you leave us one day it will be but to join the celestial realm in the Eternity, nothing less! I am going now to play your record with so many of my favourite songs and think of you...

*Michael Galovic, October 2018*

