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TradFest and
Filmhouse Edinburgh

*Supported by Creative Scotland
and Film Hub Scotland, part of
the BFI's Film Audience Network*

Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors

Sergei Parajanov

Ukraine (1965)

Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors represented an arrival point for its director, Sergei Parajanov. The ninth film he had made in the Ukraine, Parajanov described the film as embodying “the time when I arrived at my material, at *the people's* themes; where there was ethnography, and God, and love, and tragedy”. *Shadows* contains arguably some of the most remarkable images ever committed to camera. Memorably, the film opens as we, the audience, plummet from the treetops down onto a screaming man in the snow, from the perspective of a falling tree. Later in the film, we run with the camera behind Ivan through thick snow at his father's funeral; and then, later still, we run again down a steep wooded bank behind a pack of hounds to the river where Marichka's body has been found. This breathless, almost documentary sense of present tense is part of the film's unique cinematic magic; a mythic past that simultaneously feels bracingly contemporary, almost avant-garde.

Tragically, *Shadows* was to mark the start of prolonged tensions with the Soviet authorities that eventually saw Parajanov incarcerated in a maximum security prison for over four years. Parajanov described how “the Ministry saw [*Shadows*] ... and realized it violated the principles of socialist realism ... that dominated in the cinema of that time. But they couldn't do anything, because in two days it was Kotsubinsky's centenary, so they said, ‘all right, show it’, hoping they could ban it later”.

Parajanov's struggles with the Soviet authorities raise interesting questions of *whose* folk? The notion that, rather than blithely accepting absolutist images of ‘the people’, we should remember to ask *whose* conception of the folk is being enacted in any given representation? The issue of ‘universal’ images co-opted for very specific purposes is reminiscent of Vittorio Mussolini's angry shouts of ‘this is not Italy!’ at the premiere of Visconti's proto-neorealist noir *Ossessione*. For in the Soviet Union, with a state-imposed mandate on socialist realism, images and conceptions of ‘the folk’ were abundant in state culture and art, often serving as the carriers for quite different perspectives and ideologies. The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (who would also fall foul of the Stalinist authorities) similarly deployed counter-images of ‘the folk’ in his work on Rabelais and carnivale that, according to Michale Holquist, were “precisely and diametrically opposed to those celebrated in Soviet *folklorico*”. As Holquist describes, “Bakhtin's ‘folk’ are blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; they are coarse, dirty, and rampantly physical, revelling in oceans of strong drink, poods of sausage, and endless coupling of bodies. In the prim world of Stalinist *Biedermeier*, that world of lace curtains ... and militant propriety, Bakhtin's claim that the

folk not only picked their noses and farted, but enjoyed doing so, seemed particularly regenerate. The opposition is not merely between two different concepts of the common man, but between two fundamentally opposed worldviews with nothing in common except that each finds its most comprehensive metaphor in the folk”.

There is certainly an element of Rabelasian carnivale in *Shadows*, which revels at times in the bawdiness, absurdism, and grit of Hutsul folkways. In *Shadows*, the folk feel both universal and particular, simultaneously mythicized and deeply worldly. Bakhtin’s and Parajanov’s respective conceptions of ‘the people’ are perhaps linked by a certain sense of pluralism, subversiveness, and poetic freedom. Looking at Parajanov’s work as a whole (or what is available of it in the UK), you’re struck by the director’s heterogeneous, polyglot images of the folk, who are often depicted as moving between bounded specificities; between languages, religions, cultures and nations. Parajanov himself made films in the Ukraine, in Georgia, Azerbaijan and in his native Armenia. When asked to dub *Shadows* from the Carpathian Hutsul dialect in which it was shot into Russian, Parajanov ‘emphatically’ refused, resisting the centralising, ‘universalising’ tendencies of the state. It may well have been this projection of pluralism (what Richard Taylor describes as Parajanov’s ‘heterodoxy’) at a time of state-imposed ideological orthodoxy that made Parajanov appear so dangerous to Stalinist authorities.

Like Tim Neat’s *Play Me Something, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* also features a remarkable sense of rendered orality. One sequence of the film is startling and unique in its treatment of oral culture. Recalling perhaps the ethnographic films of Jean Rouch, image and oral commentary are detached as separate textual strands in counterpoint: we see images of Ivan (whether they are what *actually* happened, or what folk *said* happened is unclear) whilst simultaneously hearing a gossipy succession of voices describing what happened in accounts that subtly undermine what we are seeing on screen. The speaking characters are not named or identified, and thus seem to appear as the voices of ‘the folk’; the community voice or folk epistemology invoked when Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Italo Calvino or Gabriel Garcia Marquez write ‘it was said that...’ or ‘folk believed that...’ or ‘I heard in town that...’

Moving outwards, this remarkable invocation of orality perhaps provides a metaphor for the sense of community perspective in *Shadows* as a whole. Here we should recall the words of Gilberto Perez on *Battleship Potemkin*, describing the film’s “different sense of unity in the spectator, a sense not of individuality but of class consciousness, of collective solidarity, a kind of unity at odds with the individualism of bourgeois ideology”. Whilst *Shadows* features a central ‘mythic’ narrative about the fate of star-crossed lovers Ivan and Marichka, it seems less interested in telling its story in a conventional, first-person perspective, than through the words and lives of the onlooking people; what one might describe as the ‘folk experience’ of the story. It is as though we watch the story unfold from the people’s gallery, from among the folk. *Shadows* brims with people – labourers in the fields, drinkers in the taverns, hawkers at the market, worshippers in the church and dancers at a festival - many of whom we never know as named or narratively-differentiated characters. Significantly, the film does not end with the death of Ivan, but with the communal experience of his funeral, where a community of people we do not know as individuals dance, drink, celebrate, remember and forget. Indeed, it is hard not to see Hamish Henderson’s notion of folk’s ‘democratic muse’ in the way the film deserts its central narrative to show instead the communal experience of festivals, churches, taverns, and markets. “It was in you that it a’ began” Hamish Henderson wrote, and likewise *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* would seem to situate the myth of two lovers back within the communities that created it.