

Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors

SERGEI PARAJANOV

1964

Ivan is accustomed to death. In the first ten minutes of Sergei Parajanov's film there are two funerals, that of his brother, who died saving him, and that of his father, killed outside the church. The funerals are characteristic of Hutsul or Western Ukrainian tradition. Through the snowy mountains a wooden cross, made from two branches tied together, leads the funeral procession. The mourners wail and traditional songs are sung. Orthodox imagery is emblazoned against the white terrain.

Life in the Carpathian Mountains remains touched by nature: its beauty, traditions and often its cruelty. In a terrain so dangerous death is routine. On top of this, the lives of the Hutsul are deeply entwined: generations of feuds, curses and obligations are inherited with each new birth. Ivan has a childhood sweetheart, Marichka. Her untimely death is heartbreaking, but it seems fated. After all, perpetuating a cycle of revenge and cruelty, Ivan's mother cursed Marichka's family after her husband's murder.

Sergei Parajanov, the director, himself suffered terrible loss in his lifetime. In 1950 he married his first wife Nigyar Kerimar, who was subsequently murdered by her relatives because of her decision to convert and marry Parajanov. Whilst *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is adapted from a story of the same name by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, there are compelling personal reasons that attracted Parajanov to this tale of lost love, family feuds and profound, unshakeable grief.

After the terrible circumstances of his first wife's death, Parajanov left Russia for Ukraine, where he established a new life and learnt Ukrainian. It is striking that Parajanov's first noteworthy film, the first release that established him as a unique and exciting director, is deeply vested in folklore and tradition located in Ukraine. Parajanov has come to be known as a lyrical artist for his portrayals of religion, folklore, artistry and cultural traditions; but this was the first of his films that truly and successfully synthesised those elements and established him as the cinema giant we remember today. On *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* release, Roger Ebert commented that the film, 'Won almost every award in sight on the 1964 film festival circuit.' It is important to note how incredibly subversive it was to be releasing the kind of films Parajanov made, films that focused on geographically

located traditions, released into a Russo-centric monopoly in which 'Sovietness' was the value to be achieved and depicted in the arts.

The film still dazzles viewers today for its exciting visual style: traditional garb, religious ceremony and surroundings. These are often depicted in high colour. His courtship with Palagna is wordless. He sees a beautiful woman shoeing a horse and proceeds to help her: she holds the horse's foot and he hammers the nails into the hooves, staring at her and smiling. Then he passes her a red umbrella and lifts her from the horse. The next shot is a close up of him biting into an apple. Then an intertitle reads Ivan and Palagna. In this way, Parajanov approaches film narrative as a visual enterprise. He shows rather than tells. In fact there is limited dialogue in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* but emotion is conveyed none the less. The characters do not describe their feelings, rather we watch them experience their emotions.

As viewers we are trusted to decode the film's rich layers of symbolism: the black and white film used after Marichka's death is an obvious symbol of mourning and the apple Ivan bites after meeting Palagna is a complicated symbol which carries with it the Biblical connotation of temptation as well as signifying a fresh start. Similarly, Marichka is associated from the beginning with lambs, a Christian symbol of goodness, innocence and the Messiah; indeed Marichka dies a selfless death trying to save a lamb and certainly Ivan never gets over her status as godly in his eyes. Palagna, on the other hand is associated with horses which are a raw, powerful and darkly sexual symbol. There is something fascinating at play in Parajanov's visual narrative. He shows us Ivan's skewed perception, but simultaneously the true nature of the other characters. Ivan's perception of Palagna aside, it is evident that she is, by proxy, a victim of the same loss that has swept him away. She is forced to live with the memory of Marichka, a memory that Ivan cannot or will not try to leave in the past.

Roger Ebert described Parajanov's artistry in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*: 'Parajanov has a genuine gift. He has the kind of heedless energy you glimpse in some of the early work of Martin Scorsese, pounding camerawork so filled with itself it can hardly contain the story.'