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SAYAT NOVA (THE COLOR OF POMEGRANATES). Directed by Sergei Paradjanov. Adapted by Paradjanov from the poetry of Aruthin Sayadin. Produced by Armenian Film Studios (Yerevan). Distributed by Facets Multimedia, Inc. At the Collective for Living Cinema, April 9 and 10.

Also south of 14th Street—the freaked-out land of art-house acid—Sergei Paradjanov's *Sayat Nova* is screening Saturday night and Sunday afternoon at the Collective in its first local appearance since the 1980 New York Film Festival. Most simply described, the film is a poetic evocation of the life and work of an 18th century Armenian troubadour. Paradjanov—who made the boisterous, erratic *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (an explosion of lyrical pantheism such as the Soviet cinema had not seen since the salad days of Dovzhenko)—has been an international cause célèbre since his 1974 arrest. Now 58 and living in poverty, Paradjanov is said to be painting, after four years in the gulag.

Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors won 16 awards abroad but tagged Paradjanov a “nationalist” at home. Once his political patrons fell from power, he had 10 scripts rejected before being permitted to film *Sayat Nova* in 1969. The finished work was then shelved until 1973, when it was released without fanfare in a reedited version. (Although *Sayat Nova* was never made available for export, a clandestine print reached Paris in 1977.) Even truncated, *Sayat Nova* is an extraordinarily beautiful film—without doubt the most remarkable feature to appear at the New York Film Festival during the past few years.

Paradjanov represents 18th century Armenia as the backwoods crossroads of Eurasia. Any one of its linked tableaux is a startling combination of Byzantine flatness, Quattrocento beatifics, and Islamic symmetry. It's truly amazing how Paradjanov coaxes this visionary mix of Fra Angelico and barnyard surrealism out of the most economical use imaginable of weatherbeaten churches, casually tethered animals, and peasant grandmothers—punctuating his static compositions with a deft use of jumpcuts and Méliès-style movie magic. The film has perhaps three lines of dialogue in an ebb-and-flow soundtrack that alternates wail-

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ing folk melodies and choral chanting. And nothing I know has ever used the faded green and orange tones of Soviet color stock to greater effect—with its whitewashed backgrounds, *Sayat Nova* looks 200 years old already.

Some of Paradjanov's strategies—dancelike gestures, impassive performers, angels with wooden wings, a pasteboard cloud descending as a vision, the constant repetition of key props (books, silver balls, Persian rugs)—recall the poignant gravity of Richard Foreman's early theater pieces. Paradjanov seems to be illustrating *Sayat Nova*'s verses literally but, as a filmmaker, he's so deep into Armenian folk culture he can work with a throwaway modesty that's a quantum leap beyond second-rate surrealists and professional symbol-mongers of the Jodorowsky-Terayama mold. If from anyone, Paradjanov's hieroglyphics derive from Eisenstein. *Sayat Nova* has *Ivan the Terrible*'s moldy grandeur minus the weightiness, the paradise-lost exotica of *Que Viva Mexico* without the underlying hysteria. It's a truly sublime and heart-breaking film. Why settle for white bread when you can have cake? ■

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