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The Artist's Film Portrait in the Film *Martiros Saryan* (1965) by L. Vagharshyan: Facets of the Image

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Abstract. The article examines the specifics of the artist's film portrait dedicated to the 85th anniversary of the master and created at the Armenfilm studio in 1965 (director — Laert Vagharshyan, scriptwriters — Laert Vagharshyan and Ilya Ehrenburg, cameraman — Marat Varzhapetyan, composer — Lazar Saryan). The film is analysed in connection with socio-cultural, artistic, ideological aspects of the comprehension and implementation of the artist's creative work and image in the late Thaw period in a non-fiction film. The film openly draws attention to the tragic pages of M.S. Saryan's (1880–1972) creative biography: the 1937 destruction of his portraits of a number of repressed Armenian political and cultural figures, his reaction to accusations of formalism. The film, which was not widely distributed, is an extraordinary example of creating an image of a man of art in Soviet documentary cinema. In addition to the film material, the study is based on the director's memoirs, the contemporaries' reviews and film criticism relevant for that time.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается специфика кинопортрета художника, созданного на студии «Арменфильм» в 1965 году, к 85-летию мастера (режиссер — Л.В. Вагаршян, сценарий — Л.В. Вагаршян, И.Г. Эренбург, оператор — М.Р. Варжапетян, композитор — Л.М. Сарьян). Фильм анализируется в ракурсах социокультурного, художественного, идеологического осмысления и претворения в неигровом кино творчества и образа живописца в эпоху поздней оттепели. В картине открыто привлекается внимание к трагическим страницам творческой биографии М.С. Сарьяна (1880–1972): уничтожению в 1937 году его портретов ряда репрессированных армянских политических и культурных деятелей, его реакции на обвинения в формализме. Не вышедший в широкий прокат фильм представляет неординарный пример создания образа человека искусства в советском документальном кинематографе. Помимо обращения к фильмическому материалу, исследование базируется на воспоминаниях режиссера, рецензиях современников и актуальной для того времени кинокритике.

Introduction

In 1965, the Armenfilm studio (the Yerevan studio of newsreels, documentaries and popular science films) released the film *Martiros Saryan* (director — Laert Vagharshyan, scriptwriters — Laert Vagharshyan and Ilya Ehrenburg, cameraman — Marat Varzhapetyan, composer — Lazar Saryan) marking the 85th anniversary of the master. In his review of the film *The Artist's Path* in *The Soviet Screen* magazine, the famous artist Pavel Korin highlighted the abundance of popular science films about painters and complained that “their popularity was mostly seen as simplification, and science was replaced in them by academic dispassion” [Korin, 1966, p. 4]. According to him, the film *Martiros Saryan* stood out against other works of documentary cinema: “There have been no such films about artists before. ‘A popular science film’ would be a strange definition. After all, it is not easy to define its genre: is it a feature story, a report, a portrait film, or a film monograph? Apparently, none of these. Or, in fact, all of these at the same time. The main thing is that it is a story told by people passionate about painting and Saryan. The film has nothing to do with conventional art criticism. Everything in it is from art” [Korin, 1966, p. 4].

The outstanding scholar, art critic, and art historian Alexander Kamensky also lamented in the review that “not infrequently popular science films about artists are made as series of reproductions accompanied by commentary” and his main concern was that in such films “cinema is just a recording technique, rather than an original form of art”. He insisted that in comprehending and promoting painting cinema should make use of “its special, distinctive capacities and means, becoming a creator, but not a pale shadow of other art forms” [Kamensky, 1966, p. 21]. An interesting example of how the problem can be solved, according to Kamensky, is the film *Martiros Saryan*, since “its authors decided to create a film where the outstanding modern artist and his works appear as... film characters, and not ‘objects being filmed’” [Kamensky, 1966, p. 21].

These thoughts of the artist and art critic reflect the wide-ranging discussion on documentary cinema that took place in the 1960s [Zolotarevsky, 1963]. Thus, along with the canonical focus on cinema-verité and journalistic quality, film criticism put forward a demand for ‘a passionate artist’, ‘ideological depth’, artistic conception, dramaturgy, and sophisticated images. It disapproved of the lack of emotionality in Soviet documentary

cinema: “A documentary film must be born from a concept, inspiration, and artistic vision” [Grigoryev, 1965, p. 5], — and condemned ‘illustrative cinema’, when “the visuals, illustration by illustration, accompany the narration script” [Nifontov, Fradkin, 1963, p. 90]. Moreover, film criticism declared the interpenetration of feature and documentary cinema, given that in a ‘masterful documentary film’ with a careful presentation of ‘real facts’ there should be drama and conflict in place: “The power of all the artistic means of cinema directly depends on how charged they are with the energy of life conflict developed in the film” [Varshavsky, 1967, pp. 172, 168]. (Interestingly, modern researcher draws a conclusion about the ‘documentary nature’ of the feature films of the 1960s which turned to comprehending the existing reality and expressiveness of the surrounding world, including in the national cinema of the USSR that was rapidly developing at that time [Margolit, 2004, pp. 190, 193, 194]).

In Armenia, the current issues of the contemporary documentary cinema were also on the agenda: researchers mention “boring nature scene”, “low-quality scripts and unimaginative camera-work”, and the illustrative nature of films [Meliksetyan, 1962, pp. 141, 142]. For instance, among the films which their creators failed to make complete works “distinguished by specific content and expressive form”, V. Meliksetyan named *Mikayel Nalbandyan* (1954, directed by Ya. Kocharyan) and *Avetik Isahakyan* (1956, directed by W. Aikazyan) [Meliksetyan, 1962, p. 145].

What is so special about the film *Martiros Saryan* and the approach of its creators? What does the specificity of the artist's film portrait, which received enthusiastic reviews from the film hero's colleague and outstanding art critic, consist in? Sixty years after film's creation, we consider it interesting to see the film both as an original document of the epoch (after all, “a documentary film, as well as any other work of art, reflects the time shown on screen and the time of its creation” [Karaganov, 1965, p. 4]) and as a significant phenomenon in the tradition of researching and perceiving the art of Martiros Saryan (1880–1972) whose the 145th anniversary is celebrated this year.

After the post-war ideological attack on art, the campaign against cosmopolitanism, formalism, and aestheticism [see: Nesterov; Khrenov, 2025, pp. 264–267], in the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s, creative work of many innovative artists of the first third of the 20th century who had been criticized, suppressed or deliberately forgotten in the Stalin era,

be it K.S. Petrov-Vodkin, A.G. Tyshler or V.A. Favorsky, was rediscovered by art historians and the general public in large-scale personal exhibitions, published monographs and research. Thus, in 1955–1956, personal exhibitions of Martiros Saryan took place in Yerevan, Tbilisi, Moscow, and Leningrad; in 1965 — in Moscow and Yerevan; in 1966–1967 — in Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic; in 1968–1969 — in Kharkov, Volgograd, and Rostov-on-Don. After a period of research oblivion, a number of monographs dedicated to the artist were published: the ideologically standardized monograph by Alexei Mikhailov presenting Saryan's art as a phenomenon of "the revival and flourishing of the Armenian people as one of the socialist nations of the Soviet Union" [Mikhailov, 1958, p. 83]; the monograph by Ruben Drampyan based on an in-depth analysis of the evolution of the master's work [Drampyan, 1964]; the rigorous research text by Alexander Kamensky to the album of reproductions of the artist's works [M. Saryan, 1968] and others. The work of masters of art became recognized at the state level: Saryan, acknowledged as the founder of the Armenian painting of the 20th century, was awarded the titles of National Artist of the USSR (1960) and Hero of Socialist Labor (1965); his series of landscapes *My Homeland* became the laureate of the Lenin Prize (1961); and in 1967 the Martiros Saryan House-Museum in Yerevan was opened.

Thus, we may speak of the ideological construction of the history of Soviet art — the array of reputable masters, fathers of Soviet painting (in A.I. Mikhailov's interpretation: "It was precisely in the Soviet era that the majority of masters who had formed before the revolution reached the true peak of their art, pushing the limits of their artistic worldview and mastering new creative methods" [Mikhailov, 1958, p. 30]) — given an obvious discrepancy with the socialist realism of the art of Saryan for instance or, say, Pavel Kuznetsov. At the same time, the original plastic language, the aesthetic and ethical potential of their art, and their firm creative credo captivated both the creative intelligentsia and the general audience of the Thaw period.

The peculiarities of the cinema language in the artist's film portrait

The director Laert Vagharshyan⁽¹⁾ naturally came up with the idea of the film about the master due to his close relations with the artist's family and friendship with his son, composer Lazar Saryan⁽²⁾. Another example of successful cooperation in the friendly circle of Armenian creative intelligentsia of that time was the popular melodrama *The Song of First Love* (1958) filmed by Vagharshyan in collaboration with Yuri Yerznkian⁽³⁾ which featured the music composed by the members of 'the Armenian Mighty Handful'⁽⁴⁾ — Arno Babajanyan and Lazar Saryan. The details of the filming process, which began in the late autumn of 1963, were described by the director in his memoirs *Meetings with Saryan* [Vagharshyan, 1984].

The concept of the future film was born in Vagharshyan's meeting with Pavel Korin at an exhibition and their subsequent communication. The director pointed out what united Korin and Martiros Saryan: "These artists had to defend their art throughout their entire lives, not compromising their integrity in any difficult times" [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 6], and it is this thought that sets the scene for the film.

Due to Saryan's advanced age, it was decided to shoot not only for the film, but also for the chronicle in order to capture the days of his life on film. As remembered by the director, to engage the artist into the

- (1) Laert Vagharshyan (1922–2000) — the son of the actor and People's Artist of the USSR Vagharsh Vagharshyan, a VGIK graduate, film director, screenwriter, head of the Armenfilm studio (1967–1969), Honoured Artist of the Armenian SSR (1966), People's Artist of the Armenian SSR (1976). His works include the dramas *Born to Live* (1960), *Chaos* (1973), the documentary film *Aram Khachaturian* (1983), etc.
- (2) Lazar (Gazaros) Saryan (1920–1998) — the younger son of M.S. Saryan, a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory (student of D.D. Shostakovich, D.B. Kabalevsky, and A.V. Alexandrov), professor, rector of the Yerevan Conservatory (1960–1986), Honoured Artist of the Armenian SSR (1960), People's Artist of the Armenian SSR (1972), People's Artist of the USSR (1991). Composed pieces for symphony orchestra, chamber works, and film music.
- (3) Yuri Yerznkian (1922–1996) — a VGIK graduate, film director, professor, People's Artist of the Armenian SSR (1975), laureate of the State Prize of the Armenian SSR (1979) for directing and screenplay of the film *The Snow in Mourning* (1978).
- (4) 'The Armenian Mighty Handful' was a friendly and creative association of Armenian composers of the same age: Alexander Arutiunyan (1920–2012), Lazar Saryan, Arno Babajanyan (1921–1983), Edvard Mirzoyan (1921–2012), and Adam Khudoyan (1921–2000). The community emerged in their college years at the Yerevan Conservatory, which four members of the group graduated from (except L. Saryan). In their music ranging from academic to popular compositions they strongly relied on national musical traditions.

work “it was necessary to ask him to paint a picture. That was the only way to bring the bulky lighting equipment into his studio, and accustom the family to the inevitable bustle of the filming process”, and he asked the artist to paint an autumn still life for the film [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 7]. Sometimes, especially in winter, taking part in the filming process did not come easily to the master: “A few days ago he asked to stop filming for a while. The light of our jupiters made the eyes ache — age was taking its toll. But he never complained about his health or bad weather, even though he had difficulty moving, worked little, and was terse” [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 9]. Meanwhile, perfectionism that was characteristic of him manifested itself in his reaction to the filming process. Saryan told the director: “Why do you hurry? Film as much and long as needed! Experiment. This is art, after all. And try to reach the best quality possible. The best. Otherwise, I will not agree to the film being released” [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 14].

The director suggested his own vision of the master’s image and interpretation of his creative work, setting himself the task of “not so much reporting the facts of Saryan’s life and work, as trying to convey the sensations that his painting evokes”; “what I wanted to do in our film was to convey Saryan’s unique feature — his ‘magic of colours’” [Vagharshyan, 1984, pp. 8, 9]. Running ahead of the story, we shall note that according to P. Korin, the result was achieved: the creators of the film “through images and words convey the unique, distinctive features that continue to amaze the audience throughout three generations, a special world, the world of Saryan’s colours and lines” [Korin, 1966, p. 4].

When developing the film concept and in the filming process itself, the director appealed to the documents from Saryan’s archive (memoirs, letters, and diaries) and critical reviews of his work, talked to the master, and travelled throughout Armenia with his film crew to see and investigate the landscapes and the ‘artistic topography’ he depicted. By means of staged, reportage, and improvisational shooting and the techniques of observation, experimentation, and dramatization, the director ensures a comprehensive method of plot development: he mixes life events with types and motifs of painting, developing a storyline from showing the master in his life and creative environment to his recognition and celebration at present — through an extensive flashback into his creative biography with an emphasis on the constant struggle for his art.

The brilliant narration by I. Ehrenburg (who hesitated at first, but agreed to write the film text, was committed to it and read it in style [see: Vagharshyan, 1975]) made on the ready footage and the piercing music by the artist’s son organically merge with the visuals into an intermedial cinematic space. Kamensky described Ehrenburg’s text as “an excellent work specifically for cinema, for it possesses true visuality” [Kamensky, 1966, p. 24] which manifested itself in the coordinated dynamism of the film image and text. “Laconic phrases with deep meaning and impact”, energy, sentimentality, and sarcasm “attribute a clear purpose and poetic completeness to many parts of the film” [Kamensky, 1966, p. 24]. According to Kamensky, between the film music and image there is “a relationship of figurative parallelism. The visual and sound series create a harmonious counterpoint” [Kamensky, 1966, p. 23].

The linear narrative is accentuated by dramatic episodes — the director emphasizes the criticism of the master’s art in different periods of his career and at the same time his unwavering adherence to his ideals. This comparison determines the plot action. Close-ups of Saryan’s works alternate with staged shots and work and life observation: painting at an easel in the studio and outdoors, friendly conversations and tea parties, walks in nature, and communication with loved ones. The director recalled filming unawares: “We were in constant attendance at Saryan’s house — in order ‘to catch guests’... One of the episodes included in the film developed itself: Shostakovich and Saryan were talking over a cup of coffee on the veranda. They were talking about the destiny of Soviet art and exchanging worries and hopes. As they were making jokes and drinking coffee, Shostakovich’s fingers were tapping a musical rhythm, and Saryan, gazing into the face of Shostakovich, was getting ready to paint his portrait” [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 35].

Kamensky acknowledged the merit of the filmmakers in creating a multi-dimensional image of the man and the artist whose notable feature he considered to be “the precious ability to always see the world as if for the first time” [Kamensky, 1966, p. 22] (this important quality was also written about by the artist himself: “The ability to get surprised is one of the greatest gifts of nature... Happy are those people who manage to keep it with age” [Saryan, 1985, pp. 75, 76]). According to the art critic, the film crew “managed to film and edit in such a way that seemingly random

bright episodes of the master's everyday life merge into a clear portrait akin to the images in his art" [Kamensky, 1966, p. 22].

Dramaturgy of the creative path

The steady rhythm of the master's life in his declining years in the circle of family and admirers is shown as "the evening of life" [film quote] of his hectic creative biography.

His early symbolist works from the cycle *Tales and Dreams* (1903–1909) discovered by the film crew, including in private collections, which were displayed at the exhibition of the *Blue Rose* (1907, Moscow)⁽⁵⁾, criticized at the beginning of the century, and rejected by Soviet art criticism are presented as the source of "the new world, the world of Saryan", in which he "decisively broke with naturalism" and "confidently expressed his uncertainty" [film quotes]. The narrator's text is remarkable for its innovative conceptualization, consistent with the spirit of the times, in interpreting the artist's plastic searches. Along with emphasizing Saryan's deep roots in the Armenian traditions and the organic existence of the master, a graduate of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, a student of K.A. Korovin and V.A. Serov, in Russian artistic culture at the turn of the century, the film text recognizes the importance of the French school (P. Cézanne, H. Matisse, and P. Picasso) for Russian innovators of the 1910s, including P.P. Konchalovsky, P.V. Kuznetsov, A.V. Lentulov, I.I. Mashkov, M.Z. Chagall, M.F. Larionov, and R.R. Falk, who, back in the late 1940s, were denounced for 'formalism'. Realism in its narrow sense is designated as "a collection of coloured photographs"; it is claimed that

(5) The program exhibition of symbolists — young artists and sculptors, graduates and students of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Attended by A.A. Arapov, P.I. Bromirsky, V.P. Drittenpreis, I.A. Knabe, N.P. Krymov, P.V. Kuznetsov, A.T. Matveev, V.D. and N.D. Milioti, N.N. Sapunov, M.S. Saryan, S. Yu. Sudeikin, P.S. Utkin, N.P. Feofilaktov, A.V. Fonvizin, as well as N.P. Ryabushinsky, philanthropist and organizer of the exhibition. The exhibition was considered a manifesto of Russian symbolist artists — starting from its aesthetic program (the declaration of expressing the non-material in painting, primitivizing the depicted objects, pictorial musicality, and decorativeness) and finishing with the exhibition design in accordance with the principles of the synthesis of arts (walls and floors of the halls covered with grey cloth, artists with flowers sitting by their paintings, literature readings and musical concerts). The exhibition received mixed reviews in the professional community and the press.

"the new era brought new vision" and that Saryan with the pure, bright colours and generalized forms of his works "is not an epigone, but a revolutionary in art" [film quotes]. The shots of the famous masterpieces on the East of the 1910s are accompanied by laconic and sharp wording: "His *Dogs of Constantinople* 'barked' at the dried-up art critics" [film quote].

It should not go unmentioned that when scrutinizing the visual imagery Kamensky pointed out a number of film fragments that were not very impressive, "where the pictures simply follow in quick succession and the viewer goes through the frames as if flipping through the pages of an album of reproductions". He stated that "in such cases there is no cinema, just as there is no painting, since, falling out of the film dynamics, in an alien environment it seems a dead shadow of masterpieces" [Kamensky, 1966, pp. 22–23]. However, according to Kamensky, such fragments are few and "in the majority of fragments one can see the filmmakers' desire to establish creative interactions with painting, to give it an impulse in time and space, and to make it the subject of cinematic experience" [Kamensky, 1966, p. 23]. Among the most successful fragments, Kamensky mentioned the 'existence on screen' of the painting *In Persia* (1915, private collection): the structure of the work in the form of an 'unfolding scroll' is used with good effect in the display of individual details of the composition "which are gradually arranged on a concentric axis"; and the 'clever dynamic move' in the film reproduction of the painting *Street. Noon. Constantinople* (1910, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow): "We seem to be strolling along a narrow street, plunging into its yellow heat, with our gaze sliding over the clear blue of the sky or over the hot glare of the sun on the roofs and walls of buildings" [Kamensky, 1966, p. 23].

A view from up heigh, a panoramic vision characteristic of the formal structure of the master's landscapes since the 1920s (wide spatial plans highlighted by rich colour areas covering vast lands) is mastered by means of cinema, and "this system of Saryan's vision acquires a new, original expressive form in the film" [Kamensky, 1966, p. 23]. Kamensky positively evaluated repetitions, increased emphasis on visual contrasts and accents in the paintings (e.g. the face-mask juxtaposition in *Self-Portrait with a Mask* (1933, The State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow), etc.), and close-ups of the plastic texture and brushstrokes, but criticized "external originality — for example, the unjustified diagonal cuts or close-ups of individual fragments of the paintings with no connection to everything

else” [Kamensky, 1966, p. 23]. Despite his obvious and understandable art criticism principle, Kamensky gave credit to the filmmakers: “...in my opinion, there are incomparably more valuable discoveries and convincing solutions in this film than in any other domestic film on the visual arts” [Kamensky, 1966, p. 23].

The director was aware of the problem of presenting portraits in the film: “Presenting portraiture in a film is not easy. How to group portraits, how to tell the viewer about them, how to show them? These were not simple questions” [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 25]. This problem is solved by means of presenting thematic blocks of portraits (e.g. family members, Armenian figures of science and art, etc.) with a brief commentary based on the artist’s stories and the director’s observations, and the corresponding background music, be it a gentle lyrical melody accompanying the faces of the master’s sons in the painting *Zarik and Sarik* (1928, M. Saryan House-Museum, Yerevan) or a dramatic violin part accompanying the entrance of the *Portrait of the Composer A. Khachaturyan* painted during the war (1944, The State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow) in which the intense gaze of the portrayed and the colour scheme based on the combination of saturated dark blue and burgundy create an image of the agitated inner world of a person. Through the use of pauses in the off-screen narration, long shots, straight and side angles, emphasis on unhurried contemplation, and sound accompaniment to accentuate dramatic moments, the filmmakers engage the viewer in an in-depth analysis of the works. Of course, this is a purely authorial, selective approach, in terms of both the choice of paintings to be presented and the camera focus on their fragments and details.

Following the filmmakers’ concept, the most important episode of the film, “The birth of a painting”, was supposed to give an insight into the secret of Saryan’s art and to allow the audience to “witness the birth of a painting” [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 36]. Saryan is painting wild flowers on glass and on its other side there is a camera installed to capture the master’s concentrated gaze and creative maestia. “...He began slowly. Before touching the glass, Saryan’s brush seemed to be groping for the exact place for the stroke... We created special conditions for filming. The windows of the studio were curtained. In the dark room only Saryan’s figure, the glass, and the palette were in the spotlight. Right in the very first seconds of work, his brush captured the attention of all the members

of the film crew and some magnetic atmosphere was created. The strokes applied by Saryan to the glass seemed to strangely freeze in the air. Martiros Sergeevich was fully engaged in his work when, all of a sudden, the camera began to rattle in idle rotations — the film had run out! But Saryan, paying no attention to us, continued his work.

The cameraman asked him to take a ten-minute break, but the master continued to paint as if he did not hear. Varzhapetyan asked again. Saryan checked him sharply and did not leave the easel.

Thus, with short breaks we filmed the entire process of creating the painting” [Vagharshyan, 1984, pp. 36–38]. Kamensky considered this episode, the longest in the film (about 10 minutes), to be the best and most impressive one — including due to the created effect of “participation in art” and the fine work of the director and cameraman “who very subtly and tactfully developed the change of viewpoints and then edited the entire episode with excellence” [Kamensky, 1966, pp. 21, 22]. The painting process is accompanied by an orchestral composition and the off-screen commentary is absent: the dynamics of brushstrokes resonates with precise musical accents — piano chords and the increasing beat of the drums when new brushstrokes appear, smooth string passages when the master is finalizing details, and an incredible life-affirming violin part as culmination at the completion of the painting.

Saryan depicted the bouquet of meadow flowers in front of him in fantasy forms and shades — the master created a picturesque still life inspired by living nature, but transformed according to his own artistic vision. His love for minor forms of flora found expression in a whole gallery of magnificent still lifes [M. Saryan: *Flowers*, 1987]. It was exactly through depicting beautiful flowers that the artist, who had helped refugees and had been deeply affected by the national disaster of the Armenian genocide of 1915⁽⁶⁾, returned to painting [see: Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 11]. And by the end of the war, he had created the pictorial offering dedicated to the Victory entitled *To the Armenian Soldiers, Veterans of the Great Patriotic*

(6) Saryan, who took an active part in the activity of the Committee for Assistance to Refugees in Etchmiadzin, was overwhelmed by the ‘orgy of death’ that was unfolding around; he demonstrated the ‘signs of a mental disorder’ and his friends urgently transferred him to Tiflis [Saryan, 1985, p. 194].

War. Flowers (1945, The National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan) — the ‘fireworks’ of bright meadow flowers in simple vases and glass jars.

In this episode, Vagharshyan makes a reference to the famous film *The Mystery of Picasso* (1955) by Henri-Georges Clouzot that shows the master creating a series of graphics and paintings on stretched translucent paper behind which a camera is placed (interestingly, this film was highly appreciated by Ilya Ehrenburg [Vagharshyan, 1975]). In the article in *Cahiers du Cinema* (1956), A. Bazin saw Clouzot’s innovation in the fact that discarding biographical, didactic, and descriptive elements, he focused on conveying the “development of painting in time” (including through “accelerated montage”): “The spectacle as such consists in the enchanting alternation of emerging forms, free and born in front of our eyes”, which brings the film to the level of “an aesthetic symbiosis” between painting and cinema [Bazin, 2009].

The staged scenes in Vagharshyan’s film also bear witness of the creative process — in the possibility of dialogue with the Spanish master and the French film. Meanwhile, G.P. Chakhiryan considered Vagharshyan’s film to be a “bright artistic phenomenon of modernity” that testified to the high level of Soviet cinema in Armenia, and believed that in the discussed impressive episode the director and cameraman took the revelation of the mystery of art a step further than the creators of *The Mystery of Picasso* — not only did they depict the birth of the painting, but they also captured the “artist’s inspired face” while painting [Chakhiryan, 1971, pp. 91, 83]. The emphasis on the humanism and humane attitude in Soviet art is predictable.

In his memoirs, Vagharshyan considers the episodes from the two films, comparing the work of the two artists with a touch of ideology: paying tribute to the genius of Pablo Picasso, he juxtaposes the “contrasts and deformations” in his art with the “delight and surprise at the beauty of life” in Saryan’s, assuming that “Picasso expresses the drama of the epoch, whereas Saryan expresses its idea” [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 41]. Today, such a comparison does not appear entirely appropriate due to different cinematographic implementation, aesthetic and ethical intensity of art, plastic experiments, artistic manners, and creative paths of the painters who expressed worldviews and perception of the drama of the 20th century in their own ways. However, the statement about the significance of the great Armenian master’s art in the world art, including

due to his life-affirming message in expressing the harmony of the universe, is remarkable and justified.

The sense-forming episodes of the film are the views of Armenian nature which convey the artist’s inseparability from his homeland and rootedness in its nature and culture. The low-angle shot of Saryan sitting on rocks captures literal inseparability of his figure from the mountains — the artist’s image is organic and seems to grow into the mountain texture with his sharp silhouette and the colours of his clothing (ochre, dark brown, and dark grey). The panoramas of ridges and vast valleys hidden in mist, views of the ruins of the Garni Temple⁽⁷⁾ and the Zvartnots⁽⁸⁾ naturally neighbour with the shots featuring the Catholicos of All Armenians Vazgen I (who Saryan was on friendly terms with)⁽⁹⁾ at the consecration of the Saint Mesrop Mashtots Church in Oshakan⁽¹⁰⁾, and the holy city of Etchmiadzin. These episodes emphasize the inseparable connection between Armenian culture and Christianity, and the special role of the Armenian Apostolic Church — the spiritual and social core of the people throughout its history. Visual focus on the images of ancient temples in landscapes (*Ashtarak. The Karmravor Church of the 7th century*, 1956, M. Saryan House-Museum, Yerevan) and the artist’s concern for preservation and restoration of the

- (7) The most famous landmark of the lost fortress and the Garni summer residence of the Armenian Artaxiad and Arsacid dynasties is a classical temple (1st century) constructed of grey basalt. Was destroyed by the earthquake of 1679 and restored in 1966–1980. Located 28 kilometres from Yerevan, in the valley of the Azat river, the Kotayk province.
- (8) The Temple of Vigilant Forces in honour of St. Gregory the Illuminator (7th century) destroyed by an earthquake in the 10th century. Situated near Yerevan and Etchmiadzin. The ruins of Zvartnots were discovered in archaeological excavations in 1901–1907, which T. Toramanyan took part in.
- (9) Vazgen I (secular name Levon-Karapet Palchyan, 1908–1994) — Catholicos of All Armenians in 1955–1994, theologian, National Hero of Armenia (1994). He contributed to the integration of the Armenian diaspora and patronized the restoration of the monuments of the Armenian spiritual and material culture. According to the memoirs of K. Saryan, it was in Saryan’s house in the mid-1950s where a meeting of the high clergy of Armenian churches from all over the world took place preceding the election of a new patriarch. The artist himself was a member of the Church Council (Supreme Spiritual Council of the Armenian Apostolic Church) for many years. Vazgen I conducted a farewell funeral liturgy for Saryan in Etchmiadzin in May 1972 [Saryan, 2024].
- (10) Saint Mesrop Mashtots Church in Oshakan (5th–19th centuries) — the resting place of the relics of Saint Mesrop Mashtots (361/362–440), the creator of the Armenian alphabet, the founder of Armenian literature and writing, theologian, and educator. Located 30 kilometres from Yerevan in the Aragatsotn province.

national historical and cultural heritage⁽¹¹⁾ present the image of Saryan the Christian, who, according to the later memoirs of his granddaughter, ballerina and ballet critic Katarine Saryan, had a particular religious view: "...not only saying prayers and observing rituals — the entire life should be a service to God. For him, churches were, in the first place, the embodiment of the Divine principle in the people who created them" [Saryan, 2024]. Apart from adding to the biography, such a direct introduction of a religious component in manifesting the artist's sense of nature and national identity to the film is a sign of the Thaw period worldview marked by the rehabilitation of religious consciousness [see: Khrenov, 2025, pp. 250, 252]. The national block of the film is strengthened by the presentation of Saryan's portraits of his outstanding contemporaries: the architects Alexander Tamanyan⁽¹²⁾ (1933, The National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan) and Toros Toramanyan⁽¹³⁾ (1934, The National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan), and the poet Avetik Isahakyan⁽¹⁴⁾ (1940, The National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan).

The drama reaches its peak when the tragic events of Saryan's life are narrated — the effect is achieved by means of a thrilling melody or alarmed intonations of the off-screen narration in silence. The disastrous Armenian genocide of 1915. The 1928 fire on a ship in the Istanbul port which destroyed forty paintings — the result of the artist's fruitful work during the Parisian period (1926–1928). The 1937 burning of a number Saryan's portraits of political and cultural figures of Armenia, his friends,

"repressed and slandered" [film quote] (of those to be destroyed only the *Portrait of the Poet Yeghishe Charents*⁽¹⁵⁾ (1923, The Charents Museum of Literature and Arts, Yerevan) survived, preserved by the staff of the Museum of Literature and Arts for 20 years). The artist's own attempts to destroy his works in the post-war years, during the campaign against formalism — the painting *Big Oriental Still Life (Egyptian Masks)*, 1915, M. Saryan House-Museum, Yerevan) bears the scars. Engagement in the film concept and verbalization of the tragic moments of Saryan's creative life (in this respect, the film was in many ways ahead of art criticism publications) are the evidence of the inertia of de-Stalinization, which, as is known, in the late 1960s was already being replaced by a 'balanced' attitude towards Stalinism. Meanwhile, again quite in the spirit of the times, it is claimed that the artist "faced the revolution with strong faith" [film quote].

Kamensky, who had not escaped conviction for 'cosmopolitanism' in the late 1940s, rightly noted that "Ehrenburg's text with true journalistic acuity reveals the drama of the artist, who, despite multiple attacks and persecutions during his long life, always remained a wise optimist, a glorifier of the high and blessed beauty of people, life, and the world" [Kamensky, 1966, p. 24]. Following the principle of contrast in film production, the director balances the tragic episodes with the footage of the artist's celebration on being awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labor in 1965, a storm of applause at the anniversary exhibition in Yerevan, and captured by a 'hidden camera' the enthusiastic faces of exhibition audience — all this proves the master's well-deserved recognition.

The director commented on the reaction of the Soviet cinema authorities regarding the concept and destiny of the film: "In one of the official discussions of the ready film, a doubt was expressed whether the 'difficult' fate of Saryan was worth talking about, since he was awarded all the titles, awards and prizes that a Soviet artist could receive.

- (11) An example of the artist's restless work to preserve national monuments was a resonant petition for the restoration of the Surb Khach Church in Rostov-on-Don (built by Armenian settlers in the 18th century) destroyed during the Great Patriotic War and slated for demolition. R. Saryan mentioned that through his authority the artist ensured that the church was included in the list of historical monuments of special purpose and was restored: "Imagine, in 1958 in the Soviet Union, succeeding in reaching a decision to restore an Armenian church... It was simply inconceivable. But Saryan came up with the initiative to establish a Museum of Armenian-Russian Friendship there and it worked" [cit. ex: Sarkisyan, 2016].
- (12) Alexander Tamanyan (1878–1936) — architect, urban planner, representative of neoclassicism, academician of architecture of the Imperial Academy of Arts (1914), People's Architect of the Armenian SSR (1926), creator of the general plan of Yerevan (1924) and other Armenian cities.
- (13) Toros Toramanyan (1865–1934) — architect, archaeologist, researcher of the history of Armenian architecture, Honoured Scientist of the Armenian SSR (1933). Took part in archaeological excavations in Ani and Zvartnots, in the reconstruction of the Etchmiadzin Cathedral.
- (14) Avetik Isahakyan (1875–1957) — poet, prose writer, publicist, academician of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR (1943). The main themes of his works are the fate of the Armenian people, its culture and history.

- (15) Yeghishe Charents (Yeghishe Sghomonyan, 1897–1937) — poet, prose writer, translator, public figure. The tragic events in the history of the Armenian people resonated with him and found expression in his works (the poem *Dantesque Legend*, 1916, the novel *Land of Nairi*, 1922–1924, etc.). Was arrested on charges of counter-revolutionary activity, nationalism, and Trotskyism; died in a prison hospital.

All this is true. <...> Saryan, as it is known, throughout his entire life had to overcome adversities. Bearing in mind this overcoming, Saryan's titles and awards can be recognized as victory of his art in a struggle that was anything but easy. It was in this context that Ehrenburg discussed the difficult fate not only of Saryan, but also of other artists: Eisenstein, Shostakovich, and Akhmatova, and of his own fate, too.

One of the comrades still demanded that the text be corrected", to which Ehrenburg gave a definitive refusal [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 43].

The film premiered at the Central House of Cinema in Moscow and at the Moscow cinema in Yerevan, and received positive reviews from writers, artists, and art historians. The filmmakers rightly believed that their role, along with that of numerous publications in the press dedicated to the artist's anniversary, was to awaken public interest in Saryan's creative work, in "the destiny of his art" [Vagharshyan, 1984, p. 44]. However, the film did no go further than preview screening; for 'ideological reasons' it was not distributed widely and is stored in the Gosfilmofond archive. Speaking of the film, the former long-time director of the Martiros Saryan House-Museum, the artist's granddaughter Rouzan Saryan (she also appears in the film — the little girl wearing a light-coloured dress and white bows is drawing on the ground with chalk under the loving eye of her grandfather) emphasized that "the film is a true masterpiece in domestic documentary filmmaking... The wonderful work produced in those distant years has not lost its relevance so far" [cit. ex: Galoyan, 2018].

Conclusion

The filmmakers managed to present a creatively conceptualized complex image of the artist within the context of the epoch — an innovator of the early 20th century who developed his unique pictorial language on the basis of national art and Russian and French schools; a contemporary painter engaged in active thinking and constant plastic searches. The evolution of Saryan's artwork is shown with a clear emphasis on his unbreakable spirit and faith in his own art and is given a corresponding interpretation. "He is a truly desperate artist. He paints desperately: he strikes the canvas with his brush like a sword. His paintings astounded three generations. Not once he was rejected and reviled, but he walked his rocky road" [film quote], — pointed remarks and the vibrant intonation of the off-screen

narration enhance the expressive visual image of the master engaged in painting.

This film is an interesting example of creating an artist's image in Soviet documentary cinema in the period of "the rise of national cinema in the 1960s" [Margolit, 2004, p. 193] and a successful experience of national creative collaboration. Formally, it was in line with the official concept of multinational Soviet art, according to which the stigmatized cosmopolitanism was relegated to the sidelines, but the international and the national were thought of as "two dialectically related manifestations of the common nature of art" [Mamatova, 1982, p. 10]. The formulations of these issues were modified in Soviet film criticism through the Thaw period and the late Soviet period. Thus, in the early 1960s, Chakhiryan addressed the national uniqueness of "individual branches of Soviet cinema", generally reducing these features to "the unity of multinational Soviet cinema" [Chakhiryan, 1962, p. 15]. In the early 1980s, such rhetoric conceptualized in broad generalizations, which are now considered utopian: the construct of "a single Soviet people — a new social and international community" is supported by the mutual enrichment of national cultures [Mamatova, 1982, p. 5], and "...all the best in the art of any nation, including accomplishments in cinema, becomes common property and is included in the treasury of the general Soviet culture" [Mamatova, 1982, p. 157].

Reflections on the same issue can be found in Saryan's memoirs too: "The natural and historical conditions of people's lives which form the basis of national specificity in art, fortunately, are not the same... The evolution of human history in all its diversity is the essence and face of world art... Every artist, apart from mastering painting techniques, must study their native culture, appropriate it, and absorb its historic atmosphere. Of course, isolation is death, but adoption of someone else's experience must take place on national soil. There is no such thing as cosmopolitan art; what exists instead is national and universal culture" [Saryan, 1986, p. 90]. Even though these statements may be in line with the official agenda, the integration of national culture and the world culture was a personal stance of the artist who did not compromise his life philosophy and aesthetic ideals. And so was the director's concept of the film about Saryan: while formally complying with ideological standards, it stood out for the subtle interpretation of the artist's creative biography, the emphasis on

the national roots of his art, and emotional expression, which altogether could have influenced the distribution of the film.

This scraping through the forced officialdom of sincere conviction (the characteristic symbiosis of self-awareness and creative being of a Soviet person) finds evidence in Saryan's greeting to the First Founding Congress of the Union of Cinematographers of the USSR in 1965. In a series of appeals, including those from foreign people of art (Z. Fábri, B. Michalek, A. Delon, etc.), he raised an urgent problem of introducing people to art: "We should also keep in mind the exceptional capacity of cinema to promote painting, to feel, understand, and interpret it. I would like to see more films about artists and sculptors, about works of all types and genres of fine art. The people really need such propaganda" [Great Films, 1965, p. 2].

It is a well-known fact that the practice of promoting fine art and studying artists' creative paths in documentary cinema is really diverse, with formats ranging from interviews, research films, television series to docudramas and video podcasts: a series of films by Yakov Mirimov (*Sculptor Konenkov*, 1956; *Artist Sergei Gerasimov*, 1961; *Artist Pavel Korin*, 1963, etc.), a series of interviews with American artists of the second half of the 20th century *Painters Painting* (1972) by Emile de Antonio, or major BBC films and series, including those by the art critic Waldemar Januszczak – just to name a few.

Documentary films on Saryan's creative biography were directed by Rozaliya Frangulyan (1955, 1961, 1980) and Andrey Sudilovsky (2005). Sudilovsky's television film *Martiros Saryan. Three Ages* is a linear narrative about the master's path accompanied by the commentary of the art critic Shahen Khachatryan and the artist's granddaughters Rouzan and Sophia Saryan, which adds scientific and biographical weight. The film is based on a significant research material, is informative and verified from the viewpoint of art history, but is rather balanced and neutral in contrast to Vagharshyan's film, which is expressive and immersed in creativity, poetical and penetrating, including due to the director's personal intonation. A document of its time (the 1960s), an extraordinary work in terms of cinematography, the film by the Armenian director occupies its rightful place in 'Saryan studies', presenting an original concept of the artist's image, his creative legacy, and new perspectives in perceiving his art.

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