



Ladoni (Palms)

The following interview between Artur Aristakisian and Galina Antoschewskaja appeared in abbreviated form in the Internationales Forum des Jungen Films catalog from the Berlin Film Festival, 1994. The English text was created in 1997 from a complete German transcript of the interview, which took place in St. Petersburg, in Russian. Using the German transcript (original translator unknown), my colleague Tülin Emircan produced a literal English version, which I in turn freely interpreted, taking liberties as I thought appropriate in the writing of the final text, below. This methodology, while in part derived from necessity (the lack of an original), was in no small part inspired by Tarkovsky's writings on the adaptation of literature to cinema, wherein he states that a director must be prepared to abandon one's source to remain true to it. In this sense, the generational separation from the Russian freed me to adapt subjectively, and not literally. Aristakisian's original words are long lost in the following text, and what remains is the expression of a vision inspired by Aristakisian.

*Translation by Tülin Emircan and Ross Lipman.
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Palms

There is a beggar in Kishinev who wanders the streets all day long, speaking aloud to his unborn son. People stop and listen to him. The child was to be born twenty years ago, but his bride aborted it. From that day on, the man's life was transformed. He lost his reasoning.

Seven years ago, I also walked the streets of half-destroyed Kishinev, telling my son--who was not granted birth, either--about my town. In this way I got to know people, most of them beggars. They had become beggars through the experience of love.

I shot the film between 1986 and 1990, accompanying the beggars for months on end. They were willing to open themselves before the camera. One even told me that he was ready to kill himself on camera, so that I could film his death. Sometimes shooting became a kind of game. Once I put the camera in the hands of a blind beggar, and he took two panning shots. One of them can be seen in the film.

-- Artur Aristakisian

Exodus of Love -- Interview with Artur Aristakisian

Q: How did you come to the idea to make this film?

A: I shot the film between 1986 and 1990 in my home town of Kishinev. For two years I edited and worked on the soundtrack at the VGIK training studio in Moscow. Filming in 16mm allowed me to shoot much more footage of each individual than would working in 35mm. Then the edited material was transferred to 35mm; a process which I think brought about a particular aesthetic most appropriate to speaking of the lives of the beggars.

Had it been possible, I would have used color in the final sequence, at the Jewish cemetery. In this cemetery, no new graves are dug. The images of the dead look out at us, and dead ravens lie in the snow.

The people I filmed got used to me, in the way that one gets used to a stray dog. I could be near to them as long as was necessary. For months I went to their homes, and they told me everything.

The film material, when sharply focused, transforms all things into pictures, or artworks. The film material thus sacrifices itself to the one it features. It gives up its intrinsic light, and in so doing, transforms all events into pictures; into pure light.

Reality is arbitrary; subject to the selection of our will, or seeing. In this reality lies our salvation. But when salvation appears to us, it disappears in an instant. The film material fixes the hope for salvation. The reality and moment that are fixed; that have been taken, can be given back, as the literal development of the shared substance of the body of Man--the body of God's mother--putting us in relationship to a spiritual essence, rather than just re-presenting a moment.

Q. The title of your film is Palms. What does the word mean to you?

A. As a child, I would often be left alone for long periods of time. And I would often feel the touch of unknown hands. These strangers first appeared to me through their palm's touch, caressing my face and covering my eyes. This would happen again and again, when someone was trying to calm me. Palms open me to men and unite me with them in the darkness. This was the secret of that time as a child; I would wait for help, and it would come to me in the form of naked palms. As in tales, these palms held the secret of love.

The open palm at once offers mercy, and at the same time is granted it. When a baby is born, it's received by palms. The last request of the dying is the touch of a palm. Embraces are performed through palms. The crucified Love views us with palms. Our hands look into heaven with palms. And as our palms can look into heaven, so can they look into people's faces. That is how I would like my camera to see--in the way of palms. I want to touch and caress people with it.

Q. Your film is about beggars, people who have broken with society....

A. The beggars I met in the street were only the social reflection of that beggar whom I was seeking, the beggar who lives inside us. The outer beggar emerged from this spirit. The beggar's life became a form and way of love. The beggar's life begins as a vocation, and transmutes into a sphere synonymous with the lover's. Blessed are the spiritually poor. The film is my version of the first commandment of blessing.

These beggars have nothing but their love. Because of this, they are the holders of a transfigured relationship. Not of a blood relationship, but of a spiritual transformation. They are holders of a new death. Not violent death, but a redeeming death, that frees us all.

The film material, which sacrifices itself to its subject, became for me a form of this redeeming death. The beggar's life is similar. Something lives inside you, and opens your eyes and heart.

I spent days with these beggars, who became beggars because of their love. They told me their stories. About the persecutions they suffered as a result of their love. They told me of their moments of joy, of their losses and privations. We talked about how best to tell their stories. And together we decided that the life story of each individual should be the tale of their love.

The movie grew into a long documentary fresco, shot in the language of parables and religious metaphors. It is a wreath of blossoms, in which one love flows into the next. These men and women were filmed in the state of waiting for their love. They remained in that state of love; of the time of last encounters with their love.

Q. How was the movie produced; how was it financed?

A. Even before I enrolled at the Moscow Film Academy, I shot a lot of material on the old Kishinev. During my studies I could drive to Kishinev and shoot new material, to connect with the footage and characters filmed earlier. The film was shot as a documentary. But there is an unseen protagonist, whose sight is dissolved in the camera's, and whose disembodied voice addresses his unborn yet already killed son.

While shooting, I thought I should determine a particular genre for my film. I would call it a documentary parable, or a dramatic chronicle. The beggars are at once

actors and vagrant kings. They chronicle their own exodus of love. And I would like for them to pierce the heart of the viewer.

As for the financing, I sold my books and belongings, and with the money I bought film stock. At that time it was cheap and easy to come by. When I ran out of money and film stock, some beggars gave me the change they collected. I worked on the sound and editing for two years.

Q. The word "System" appears in your movie. What does it mean?

A. I read in the gospel of Matthew, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest". So I began to think about the System; about who controls our fortune. And how what is not part of the body of God, cannot become love.

Q. Through your film, I for the first time encountered a penetrating belief in God. For that I thank you! Is the bible a part of your perception of the world?

A. In this film I sought to express my perception of the Christian commandment of blessing. I didn't want to address either a social or religious theme, but rather to create visual, poetic metaphors. When we see the world, we can't perceive the metaphors that surround people. Therefore film is for me a method of changing the way we see.