The Reinterpretation of Folk Traditions of Christmas Masks in Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and Mykolaichuk's *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the cinematic treatment of Carpathian winter masquerade rituals in Sergei Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965) and Ivan Mykolaichuk's *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* (1981). Rather than functioning as ethnographic illustration or decorative folklore, the ritual mask operates as a dynamic cinematic instrument mediating crises, transitions, and the articulation of otherwise inexpressible experiences. In Parajanov, masquerade is embedded within a cosmological logic that overrides individual agency: masks visually dissolve subjectivity, and liminal moments—Christmas and death—activate forces beyond human control. Here, masks do not facilitate communication or action but manifest existential threshold states, ultimately marking exclusion from the cycles of life. By contrast, Mykolaichuk repurposes the same ritual complex to emphasize personal and social communication. Temporal compression, the layering of historical strata, and the coexistence of archaic and Soviet-era masquerade figures render the ritual a space for overcoming social and personal muteness. Masks function both as protective shells and as enablers of speech, allowing characters to express emotions, assert agency, and negotiate relational dynamics otherwise constrained by social norms. Comparative analysis reveals how a single ritual form can be adapted in cinema to produce radically different effects on how subjectivity is made visible and expressed. The study demonstrates that cinematic engagement with traditional masquerade does not merely reproduce folk practice but creatively translates its internal logic into narrative, symbolic, and aesthetic terms, producing layered meanings accessible to both initiated and general audiences.

KEYWORDS

Carpathian Folklore; Ritual Mask; Parajanov; Mykolaichuk; Cinematic Anthropology.



Introduction

This article examines the cinematic rethinking of traditional Ukrainian winter masks in two landmark films of the late Soviet period—*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), directed by Sergei Parajanov, and *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* (1981), directed by Ivan Mykolaichuk. Despite the sixteen-year gap between them, these films engage in a profound artistic dialogue. What unites them is not merely their shared setting

in the southeastern Ukrainian Carpathians[1] and the folkloric motif of Christmas masking by ritual maskers, but also a specific use of the mask as a medium. In both cases, masks are neither a decorative element nor an ethnographic illustration; rather, they function as a complex artistic device that allows the characters to articulate what, under conditions of rigid social or personal constraints, remains unsayable.

The aim of this article is to trace the changing functions of masking practices within the winter calendrical cycle in poetic cinema[2] and to show how cinematic space becomes a site of artistic rethinking of ritual. At the centre of the analysis is the question of how and why in these films the mask ceases to be merely an ethnographic attribute and turns into a tool of psychological and narrative release, activating within the language of cinema those emotional states that remain blocked in everyday social communication.

The proposed comparison is not accidental. The connection between the two directors is not only aesthetic but also deeply biographical. Ivan Mykolaichuk, whose artistic career began with the leading role in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, in effect grew up within Parajanov's artistic system of coordinates. In a world where ritual, music, and visual symbolism replaced verbal text and became the language of emotional experience, Mykolaichuk organically mastered the idiom of visual metaphor. Years later, in his final directorial work, *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*, he—like Parajanov in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*—turns to the image of the ritual maskers, yet transforms its function in accordance with a different internal vector of narration.

Ethnographic research,[3] including my own over many years of field observations in Ukrainian villages in the Carpathian region, shows that in traditional rural life the direct expression of strong emotions—love, jealousy, desire, fear—is often tabooed or strictly constrained by norms of behaviour. Ritual practices associated with wearing masks temporarily suspend these restrictions, granting the individual the right to anonymity and a kind of ritual alibi. In this space, the tradition of ritual masking becomes a legitimate channel of ritual communication.[4]

The role of the mask in the two films has not yet been examined in detail as an independent instrument of communication. There exists a substantial body of scholarship on Parajanov's poetics;[5] however, the mask as a language of the unsayable—a device that took shape in his cinema and was further developed in Mykolaichuk's later work—has so far remained on the periphery of scholarly attention.

I proceed from the premise that both films translate the anthropological function of ritual into the very fabric of cinematic language. The arrival of the ritual maskers here constitutes a narrative threshold, a moment of truth, a point of extreme semantic tension beyond which the familiar order of life becomes untenable. Yet the vector of this ritual intervention in the characters' destinies is fundamentally different in each film. In *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, the coming of the ritual maskers appears as a destructive force: it does not merely reveal a hidden fracture in human relationships, but definitively shatters the illusion of family well-being, laying bare the protagonists' insurmountable loneliness and propelling them toward a tragic finale. In *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*, the semantic function of the mask changes: it becomes a bridge over the abyss of muteness and cultural alienation. Here, the ritual alibi does not destroy but rather creates, granting the characters the right to a degree of sincerity and intimacy that in everyday life seems unattainable.

Summaries of the films

Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (1965, dir. Sergei Parajanov)

Parajanov's film is based on the eponymous novella by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky (Kotsiubynsky 1912), a classic of Ukrainian literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the screenplay was written by Parajanov in collaboration with Ivan Chendei, a writer from the Ukrainian Carpathians.

The action of the film unfolds in a Hutsul village in the Carpathians. At the centre of the narrative is the tragic story of Ivan Paliychuk and Marichka Hutenyuk, whose love proves doomed because of the longstanding feud between their families. After his beloved's death, Ivan remains trapped in despair for a long time, unable to return to ordinary life.

In an attempt to reintegrate himself into the customary rhythms of community, Ivan eventually marries another woman, Palahna, yet this marriage brings him neither happiness nor inner balance. In the end, Palahna begins an affair with the village *molfar*[6] and makes no effort to conceal this relationship either from her husband or from fellow villagers. Tensions between the characters intensify, and the emotional distance between Ivan and the world around him becomes increasingly pronounced.

The climactic events of the film are linked to the arrival of the ritual maskers at Ivan's house at Christmas. This ritual intrusion sets in motion processes that make the collapse of his marriage inevitable, drive the protagonist irrevocably into a world of spectral visions, and culminate in his death.

Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn (1981, dir. Ivan Mykolaichuk)

The screenplay was written by I. Mykolaichuk in collaboration with V. Korotych.[7] The film centres on Mykhailo Rusnak, an elderly émigré who returns from Canada to his native Bukovynian village with his granddaughter Orysia.

Rusnak is gravely ill and almost blind; his journey is a farewell to the homeland and to the people he left many years earlier. This story of return is interwoven with a love story between Orysia and a local dissident, Hryhir Korchak (played by I. Mykolaichuk himself), a man whose life has taken a difficult course. Yet the mutual attraction between the characters runs up against a wall of external awkwardness and the impossibility of open dialogue.

In the film's climactic scene, which depicts the arrival of the ritual maskers in the village, Hryhir, concealed behind a mask, finally confesses his love to Orysia, thus giving both himself and his beloved a chance for hope and renewal, while Rusnak recognises and accepts that the life he has lived can no longer be changed. In the film's finale, Mykhailo Rusnak returns to Canada alone.

Folkloric and ethnographic context

Ritual maskers in the winter calendar of the Ukrainian Carpathians

In the winter calendar of the Ukrainian Carpathians, masks are used in various forms of ritual house-to-house rounds and are not rigidly tied to a single holiday. Depending on local

tradition, they may appear in Christmas carolling processions (*koliadnyky*[8] in Boykivshchyna, Zakarpattia, etc.) or in *Malanka*[9] ritual house-to-house rounds (Bukovyna, most Hutsul regions), held on 13-14 January—the feast days of St. Basil and St. Melania.

Both Parajanov and Mykolaichuk employ masks associated with the *Malanka* ritual[10] in the climactic scenes of their films. *Malanka*, as a ritual round, allows the mask to exercise its communicative and transgressive functions most fully. Scholars of Carpathian Yuletide traditions note that *Malanka* creates a model of "inverted reality," in which participants, hidden behind masks, are able to speak and act in ways that would not be permissible in everyday life (Kylymnyk 1993; Kurochkin 1995). In this way, the *Malanka* ritual most completely realises the function of carnival inversion, enabling laughter, parody, critique, and frankness that are tabooed in ordinary social interaction.





The dual nature of the traditional mask

Masking practices in the winter calendar combine ancient conceptions of the year's cycle, elements of Christian ritual, and local social functions of the holiday. The social function of ritual masquerading—the temporary suspension of hierarchies, the permission to parody, criticize, and speak frankly—constitutes only one layer of its significance. Equally important is the sacred-cosmological aspect of the Christmas season processions, linked to the perception of the Yuletide period as a turning point in the year, a time of instability and transition, when the boundaries between worlds become permeable.

Folkloristic and mythological studies have repeatedly emphasized that it is precisely during this winter calendrical turning point that a kind of corridor opens up between the world of the living and the otherworldly realm. Vladimir Propp connected Yuletide rounds with beliefs in the temporary return of foreign or other beings—the souls of the dead, ancestors, or inhabitants of the other world—whose incursion into human space becomes possible only at moments of calendrical transition. In his observations, the winter solstice is conceived as a time when chthonic forces and the spirits of ancestors are activated (Propp 1963).

In Carpathian tradition, this conception finds expression in the imagery of ritual maskers. Figures of demons, wild men, and animals personify the intrusion of the otherworld, which simultaneously requires ritual appeasement and subsequent expulsion. As Oleksandr Kurochkin (1995) notes, such figures embody the ambivalent power of the other world, both dangerous and necessary at the same time.

The social dimension of masking practices manifests in the creation of a distinct ritual space, in which it becomes possible to articulate what remains suppressed in ordinary communication. These rituals temporarily suspend social prohibitions and allow latent tensions within the community to surface. Scholars emphasize that in this space, speech and action that would be impossible in everyday life are permitted—including confessions, mockery, critique, and the expression of desires (Kligman 1988; Creed 2011).

This logic aligns closely with Victor Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, used to describe transitional states in which familiar social structures are temporarily dissolved and participants find themselves between stable social orders (Turner 1969). In the masking practices of the winter calendar, this liminal situation is ritualized and collective: the breaking of norms is not perceived as deviance but as an expected element of the transitional time. It is precisely in this way that social inversion and temporary freedom of expression do not destroy order but rather create the conditions for its subsequent restoration.

Thus, the Christmas season processions of ritual maskers in Carpathian tradition should be understood as a multilayered phenomenon, in which social inversion is combined with

the sacred logic of passage between worlds. Within this complex, the mask functions both as a means of temporary social transformation and as a sign of otherness, linked to the liminal state of time and space. It is precisely this dual—social and cosmological—nature of the Yuletide masquerade that proves crucial for its later cinematic reinterpretation.

The mask simultaneously conceals and reveals. By depriving a person of individual recognizability, it creates conditions for the articulation of that which remains unspoken in everyday communication. In traditional rural culture, where the direct expression of strong emotions—love, jealousy, erotic desire, resentment—is often socially restricted, the mask provides a sanctioned channel for expressing these tensions. It is precisely this duality—the interplay of freedom and regulation—that makes the mask a stable cultural mechanism rather than a chaotic expression of "folk carnival" (Bakhtin 1984).

At the same time, the mask does not abolish the social norm but temporarily suspends its operation, turning transgression into an expected and even obligatory element of ritual behaviour. Importantly, the mask does not erase the acting subject entirely; rather, it shifts agency from the individual person to the ritual character. As an embodied ritual figure, the mask allows the participant to distance themselves from their words and actions, perform them within the ritual framework, and then return to normative social conduct. It is precisely this mechanism of mediated expression—the combination of anonymity, ritual role, and temporary freedom—that proves crucial for the subsequent cinematic reinterpretation of the mask in the films of Parajanov and Mykolaichuk.

Ritual Masks as a Destructive Catalyst in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*

Masks appear in Parajanov's film in the seventh segment—*Christmas*. Most of the scenes played out in this segment are absent from Kotsiubynsky's story (Kotsiubynsky 1912). What the viewer sees in this cinematic chapter, from beginning to end, is almost entirely the invention of the screenwriters of *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*—Parajanov and Chendei—including the scenes featuring ritual maskers. So why did Parajanov employ masks, and what cinematic functions does he achieve through them?

The Mask of Death and the Experience of Liminality

The "Christmas" segment opens with ritual maskers passing before us, one by one. Strictly speaking, these are not masked carollers (*koliadnyky*) but *malankari*.[11] The camera sequentially presents close-ups of the masks: gendarmes, a bear, a devil, a Roma woman, a Hutsul, a Turk, a goat, *Dido* (Old Man, Grandpa), *Baba* (Old Woman, Grandma), *Malanka*, and finally, Death with a scythe. On the final mask, the camera lingers for a particularly long time: the viewer has time to examine the eye holes and notice the glimmer of a living gaze behind the mask of Death. This optical gap between the mask and the human eye immediately establishes the key theme of the episode, the theme of liminal existence.

In the next moment, the camera shows what the gaze of the person wearing the Death mask has been fixed upon: it is the grave of Marichka and a roe deer standing by the grave. The image of the animal, which had accompanied the love scenes between Ivan and Marichka as a symbol of purity and natural wholeness, here returns in a different capacity. After Marichka's death, the roe deer appears at her grave immediately following the funeral—as if the soul of

the young woman, who died an unnatural, "unclean" death, has materialized in the form of the animal. Shocked by what he sees, the ritual masker removes the mask, and the viewer realizes that Ivan himself is behind the mask of Death. The protagonist's reaction reveals the profound effect of the vision: the event confronts him with the reality he had tried to distance himself from after Marichka's death, placing him at a point of radical existential instability.

The choice of mask here is not accidental. Death has accompanied Ivan since childhood: the death of his brother and the murder of his father, which occur at the very beginning of the film, and especially the loss of Marichka, shape his fate as a continuous experience of grief. After the death of his beloved, he can no longer fully belong to this world or actively participate in communal life but behaves in many ways like a holy fool: he endures hardship patiently, earns his living without refusing any kind of work, cares for animals, finds consolation in the inanimate, and gradually withdraws from people. He seems to be already partially located in non-being, from which he is temporarily pulled back by his marriage to Palahna. Yet this marriage is not an act of new love but a social necessity ("Ivan must marry… After all, one has to manage the household"[12]), because this is what is expected in the society to which he still formally belongs.

By donning the mask of Death, Ivan does not play at death nor assume a ritual role but simply visually externalizes his inner state: he already half-belongs to another world.

Malanka *Mask as an Instrument of Inversion: From Ritual Blessing to Temptation*

The next scene involving the ritual maskers moves us to the yard of the house where Ivan and Palahna live. The *mise-en-scène* is constructed so that the *malankari*, after performing a ritual dance in the yard, leave the space, while Palahna, having first come out of the house to reward them for their performance, lingers to gather apples scattered in the snow. The unexpected return of one of the ritual maskers, wearing the *Malanka* mask, disrupts the ritual order. He throws onto the snow a bundle representing a swaddled infant, a common attribute of the *Malanka* character, and begins to make advances to Palahna.

Initially, Palahna resists, attempting to free herself from the unwanted embrace. The camera records the struggle and her fall into the snow, but then deliberately breaks the causal chain; the viewer is not shown how the scene concludes.

At the same time, Parajanov introduces a second plane: Ivan stands behind the high snow-covered fence of his house, unmasked but holding a scythe. He may be witnessing the events—or he may see nothing, absorbed in his own thoughts provoked by the vision of the roe deer. The director deliberately leaves this ambiguous, presenting the two spaces simultaneously and placing the responsibility for interpretation on the viewer.

By using the mask as part of a broader system of directorial techniques—parallel editing, separate spatial representation, and the absence of explanatory sound cues—Parajanov creates a situation in which any unambiguous interpretation of the events is undermined: it remains unclear what actually occurred (the viewer does not know what ultimately happened between the masked Yura and Palahna, since the editing deliberately interrupts the scene and provides neither visual nor verbal confirmation); it is unclear what Ivan actually saw; and it is not obvious how to interpret Palahna's reaction, which shows neither terror nor remorse—only bewilderment. In this context, the mask conceals the acting subject: the person behind the mask is temporarily suspended, and responsibility appears to dissolve into the ritual. Ultimately, the marriage bond fractures not because of any factual act of betrayal but because the truth cannot be established; doubt proves more destructive than knowledge.

The symbolism of details underscores this process: in the following shot, the camera lingers on the swaddled doll left on the snow by the *Malanka* character, with a red apple lying beside it. Together, these form a clear metaphor for temptation. In the next shot, Palahna appears, holding the apple, seemingly contemplating something as she watches the ritual masker. The event has become a temptation for Palahna, revealing for the first time the full depth of her inner dissatisfaction in her marriage. When Ivan appears, Palahna instantly resumes her role as a loving wife, but the viewer understands that the seed of doubt has already fallen on fertile ground, and the first step toward infidelity has been taken.



Khymka as a Structural Mediator: Grotesque as Psychological Mask

At this moment, Khymka—an eccentric old woman with a reputation for uncanny wisdom—enters the episode, her grotesque laughter disrupting the illusion of familial harmony. Although this character does not literally use carnival attributes, Khymka operates within the logic of masked behaviour: her grotesque laughter and eccentric conduct constitute a mode of communication distinct from the everyday. She does not require an artificial mask, since she herself embodies otherness—a mask that is never removed.

Comparison with Kotsiubynsky's (1912) novella allows us to see more clearly how radically Parajanov reconceives this character. In Kotsiubynsky's text, Khymka is a neighbor regarded in the village as a witch and primarily associated with harm to livestock (1912). In the film, however, Khymka becomes a structural through-line, appearing three times (Parajanov 1964, 3, 7-8)—in each instance at a crucial point in the characters' fates, where matters of life's continuation, fertility, and the boundaries between worlds are at stake.

Khymka's first appearance is connected with Marichka: the old woman, while praising the girl, unexpectedly grips her stomach, perceiving a pregnancy. Here, Khymka functions as a bearer of hidden knowledge and as a harbinger of the continuation of the lineage—the possibility of the future, which seems both natural and promised.

Her second appearance occurs in the film section "Christmas": taking in her arms the baby doll discarded by the *Malanka*, Khymka positions herself between Ivan and Palahna and asks them each in turn where their child is. Receiving no answer, she takes the doll with her. The masquerade prop transforms into a prophetic sign: the "future" (the child) is presented—and immediately withdrawn. In the next moment, the camera shows a close-up of the *Malanka* mask. The masked figure slowly removes the mask, revealing the village sorcerer (*molfar*) Yura. He is the person who accosted Palahna, and he is ultimately the one with whom Palahna will betray her husband.

The third and final appearance of Khymka relates to St. George's Day. In the film section "Tomorrow is Spring," which follows "Christmas," Palahna secretly performs a divination ritual to ask God for children with Ivan, but the ritual fails due to another attempt by the *molfar* Yura; at the same time, Ivan, in his yard, is futilely trying to save a dying sheep. It is precisely after this that Khymka appears on the doorstep, and the informed viewer understands that Khymka is not merely a wise woman but a witch, since according to Carpathian beliefs, only witches can violate the boundaries of someone else's household on St. George's Day, causing harm to livestock and taking away fertility.

Khymka utters a short prayer and immediately bursts into grotesque laughter. Her sudden appearance on the doorstep after Palahna's failed ritual and the drama with the dying sheep underscores the gap between human hopes (the desire for the continuation of the lineage and the preservation of life) and the will of the cosmic order: the sacred (prayer) and the "wild" (laughter) merge into a single moment, declaring the futility of struggling against fate. The

bitter irony is reinforced by her name (Khymka is a diminutive of *Yukhimiya*, derived from the Greek *Εὐφήμια*, "pious"): the "pious" wise woman laughs while the characters attempt to hold life together.

Thus, Khymka in Parajanov is neither a villain nor a folkloric "type" but a trickster-figure and resonator, a mediator between worlds and an irrational catalyst of fate. The three appearances of Khymka establish a clear dramaturgical arc: from the promise of continuation (Marichka's pregnancy)—through the demonstration of the absence of the future (the baby doll, first discarded and then taken away in "Christmas")—to the ultimate confirmation of infertility and rupture with the life cycle (St. George's Day, the disrupted ritual, and the dying animal).

The Molfar *under the Mask: The Sacralization of Betrayal*

Particular attention should be paid to the figure of the *molfar* Yura, on whom Parajanov "places" the *Malanka* mask. In Kotsiubynsky's (1912) story, there is no such conflation: Yura is limited to domestic and ethical struggles. In the film, however, he is incorporated into the ritual structure of the winter masquerade and aligned with an archaic mythological layer. As a *molfar*, Yura is connected to the natural elements and forces beyond ordinary human control; as the bearer of the *Malanka* mask—one of the most ambivalent masks of the ritual—he embodies a destructive yet simultaneously vital principle, sanctioned by the ritual. It is precisely this power that ultimately destroys the marriage of Ivan and Palahna.

Funeral Games: The Mask as Enactment and Sign of Final Exclusion

The arrival of the ritual maskers at Christmas in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is not a self-contained episode. Its logic continues and reaches completion in the scene of Ivan's funeral, where Parajanov again introduces masks—this time the masks of *Dido* and *Baba*. It is important to stress that these are no longer *Malanka* masks: they are of a different type and serve a different purpose. In Carpathian tradition, they belong to the funeral games[13]—a ritual accompanying the death of a community member, intended to restore fertility and life energy after loss.

From an ethnographic perspective, this is entirely legitimate: erotic scenes involving the *Dido* and *Baba* masks in the deceased's home served an apotropaic purpose—to ensure that death would not interrupt the life cycle either in the deceased's household or in the village where he lived. This makes the question of why Parajanov introduces these masks in this particular way and how their function changes in the cinematic context all the more significant.

The *Dido* and *Baba* masks do not immediately enter the foreground. At first, they are in the background, seemingly "mourning" the deceased, while Ivan's mute friend measures his body with an axe so that he can fashion a coffin. This gesture radically depersonalizes death: Ivan ceases to be a person and becomes an object, measured by the length of the body. The axe—a universal instrument in the film—cuts wood, participates in fights, and now becomes the measure of a person's final resting place. It is not merely a domestic detail but a visual formula of fate, subordinating human life to the mechanics of necessity.

Afterward, the masks come into the foreground. *Baba* holds a candle—a symbol of ritual light and sacred accompaniment for the soul. *Dido* carries a wooden *kotsyuba*—a tool used for removing ashes, moving pots, and retrieving bread from the oven. This object is of fundamental significance. In the context of Carpathian funeral games, the *kotsyuba* was

used to remove soot, which was applied to participants' faces—that is, to create a primal, archaic mask. Soot transformed the living face into one from the shadow world, temporarily removing a person from death's reach.

Nevertheless, although the scene preserves traditional elements of funeral games, their function in the frame changes. The *kotsyuba* in the hands of the *Dido* mask ceases to be a tool for protection from death or part of the playful bodily dynamic; it becomes a sign of Ivan's definitive "sweeping out" from the household space. The object associated with the stove—the heart of the household, the place of warmth, bread, and continuity of life—lies beside the deceased's body and loses its life-giving purpose. There is an inversion of domestic comfort: that which traditionally supports life now accompanies death.

The passage of the masks past Ivan's body, as it lies on the bench, completes this process. The masks do not enliven the space with laughter or erotic play, as tradition prescribes; instead, they participate in a restrained, almost mechanical ritual of farewell. As a result, the mask ceases to function as a protective or neutralizing agent against death and begins to mark its presence. The life-affirming ambivalence of the ritual, characteristic of post-mortem gatherings, is minimized in the cinematic space: the ritual no longer opposes death but accompanies it.

Thus, if in the "Christmas" chapter the masks of the ritual maskers trigger a process of disintegration—further distancing Ivan from the living world, the seduction of Palahna, and the loss of future prospects—then in the funeral episode this process reaches logical completion. The ritual dressing up, which began as a temporary and ritually sanctioned disruption of order, concludes with the hero's definitive exclusion from the life of the community.

In conclusion, the arrival of the ritual maskers in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is neither an ethnographic illustration nor a decorative folkloric element. Parajanov deliberately departs from ethnographic accuracy, combining *Malanka* with a Christmas context to emphasize its symbolic function. The mask becomes a visual instrument of depersonalization, substituting the mechanics of ritual for individual fate. At moments of existential transition—Christmas and death—the ritual masquerade acts as a destructive catalyst, initiating irreversible disintegration: the human being becomes an object of forces beyond their control, and the ritual no longer performs a protective function but merely records the tragic outcome.

Masks as a Means of Communication and Overcoming Silence in *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*

In contrast to *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, where the arrival of the ritual maskers operates as a destructive force, revealing the breakdown of human bonds, in Ivan Mykolaichuk's film the ritual energy of *Malanka* performs the opposite task. Here the mask becomes a medium not only for overcoming personal "silence" and gaining individual freedom, but for establishing a profound emotional communication and restoring social bonds.

The Phenomenon of "Compressed Time" and the Organization of Ritual Space

The scene of the ritual maskers' arrival in *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* is introduced by Mykolaichuk with a deliberate disruption of chronological logic. Mykhailo Rusnak and his

granddaughter Orysia arrive in Bukovyna in the autumn, traveling via the Intourist agency (the Soviet "Foreign Tourist" service). As Canadian citizens, whose movement within the USSR was strictly regulated by the duration of their visas, the length of their stay in the country was closely monitored. The Soviet visa regime would hardly have allowed them to remain until January 13—the day of St. Melania, the traditional date for *Malanka*. However, for the director, this anachronism is not a narrative mistake. Mykolaichuk is not concerned with the external logic of daily life or administrative constraints; what matters to him is the logic of fate. The sacred point at which all the film's narrative threads converge can only be reached within "collapsed" time, where the everyday yields to the purifying ritual.

The disruption of temporal logic also relates to Rusnak himself. For this terminally ill character, returning to his homeland to bid it farewell, linear time loses its determinative role. Within this context, the appearance of *Malanka* at a calendrically impossible moment ceases to be perceived as a breach of plausibility and instead corresponds to a special mode of perception in which past and present coexist.

The visual design of the scene emphasizes the scale of the event: immediately following shots of the first snowfall, the figures of the ritual maskers gradually emerge from the horizon, as if growing out of the earth. They fill the frame entirely, creating the impression of an invasion by otherworldly spirits and transforming the Yuletide event from a local occurrence into a pervasive elemental force. The procession is led by maskers wielding whips, whose sharp, deafening cracks across the silent snowfield fulfil the traditional function of "clearing the way" while, in the cinematic context, producing a tense, almost infernal atmosphere. The maskers do not merely enter the village: they literally seize reality, imposing their own rhythm and logic of presence on the film's protagonists.

The composition of the procession emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of this intrusion. The frame contains archaic zoomorphic and anthropomorphic masks, characters referencing the contemporary world (such as firefighters), and figures reminiscent of the official Soviet holiday canon, such as Ded Moroz (the Soviet Santa Claus) and Snegurochka (his granddaughter helper). These elements do not form a coherent hierarchy or a unified stylistic whole. Their simultaneous presence demonstrates that in this film *Malanka* is being presented not as a reconstruction of a stable traditional form but as a practice shaped by historical accretions and encompassing heterogeneous elements.

Thus, the anachronism in the *Malanka* scene functions as a narrative device. The compression of time and the occupation of the screen create conditions in which the ritual becomes the dominant mode of reality.

Mixing Eras: Living Tradition under the Grip of Soviet Ideology

Unlike *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, where the director relies on archaic masks, in *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* the masquerade is deliberately eclectic. It incorporates everything: the archaic heritage alongside the official Soviet present.[14]

A deeply ironic detail is the presence among the *malankari* of Ded Moroz and Snegurochka. These figures, introduced into Ukrainian culture during the Soviet period and imposed by the state as a substitute for traditional Christmastime masked figures, appear in Mykolaichuk's frame as foreign elements that the tradition is trying to "digest." Mykolaichuk emphasizes this intrusion visually:

- Ded Moroz's hat bears the year 1981. This detail reads as deliberately absurd and conspicuously modern: it shifts the scene from its ritual context into the realm of contemporary time, referencing the visual language of late-Soviet mass culture rather than

the ritual logic of *Malanka*, which relies on temporal inversion and sacramental anonymity. Ded Moroz looks directly at the camera, offering New Year's greetings to the audience as if performing a formal gesture with no connection to the sacredness of the rite.

• Snegurochka, meanwhile, wears a Hutsul *keptar* (vest) over her standard costume. Here there is no irony—rather, it is a visual testament to how tradition attempts to accommodate externally imposed forms. Tradition does not always resist authority; to survive, it usually absorbs the markers of the new political era, becoming a complex, sometimes awkward, but living conglomerate of meanings.

• In the same sequence, there is a scene in which Orysia's aunt is congratulated on receiving a state award (with Ded Moroz performing the ritual alongside the *malankari*). Considering Mykolaichuk's pro-Ukrainian stance and his complicated relationship with the Soviet system, this episode reads as a necessary gesture toward authority, likely intended to manoeuvre around censorship. Yet the presence of archaic masks—bears, goats, devils, and the like—alongside the bureaucratic Ded Moroz creates an effect of surreal absurdity.

As a result, the official gesture is absorbed into the ritual context. *Malanka* does not collapse under ideological pressure; rather, it transforms ideology itself into a component of the ceremonial performance.

The Mask as the Right to Speak

After the scene introducing the *malankari*, a series of shots follows, depicting the masked figures and their ritual transgressions: they jump into the ice-hole, douse people with cold water, and accost women with kisses, including Orysia. The *malankari* are so numerous, and the masks change so rapidly on screen, that at some point the viewer ceases to distinguish individual figures. The effect is less that of a celebration than of an overwhelming environment in which individuality dissolves into the collective.[15] At the same time, the corporeality of the rite is emphasised, along with its sanctioned license to breach physical distance and social norms. Here, masks do more than conceal faces—they legitimise actions that would otherwise be impossible.

Against this backdrop unfolds a key moment in the film: Orysia encounters a masked figure dressed as a bear, led on a chain by another traditional *Malanka* character, the Gypsy. The Bear moves across the snow on its knees, wearing a shaggy black sheepskin coat turned inside out and tied with straw ropes, and its face is hidden behind what appears to be a boar's muzzle.

In the Carpathian tradition, the bear embodies chthonic power, wild nature, and fertility.[16] During village processions, the bear typically demonstrates aggression, invading spectators' space and "attacking" them. Yet in this scene we see a tamed creature, on a leash and stripped of its usual ritual aggressiveness. The Bear kneels submissively before Orysia and, for the first time, speaks: "I love you!" It then rises and exits the frame. Orysia watches in bewilderment.

The action then shifts to the interior of Orysia's aunt's house, into which she invites Ded Moroz and the accompanying *malankari*. Orysia enters, clearly searching among the masked figures for Hryhir. Yet the abundance of masked individuals complicates recognition. She relies on external cues—height, body build, anthropomorphism of the mask, and the "age" of the character depicted—and confidently removes the mask from a man dressed as the Jew, believing him to be Hryhir. Behind the mask, however, is a completely unfamiliar man.

At that moment, she hears again the phrase "I love you!" and realises that Hryhir is nearby, now wearing a different, zoomorphic mask—the bear mask. Orysia is stunned, and her exclamation— "God! Did you really need a mask to say those three words?!"—summarises

the situation. She perceives the paradox: a confession of deep feeling from the protagonist is only possible within the ritual space, under the cover of a mask. In everyday reality, with its social hierarchies, fears, conventions, and prejudices, these words remain unspoken.

It is significant that female characters respond differently within the masquerade. While Orysia, unmasked, immerses herself in the carnival—first as a curious observer, then attempting to locate Hryhir amid the ritual chaos—her rival remains at a distance, almost hiding behind the *malankari*. The rival avoids direct contact with the masked figures, remaining a passive, wary witness. She refuses to enter Orysia's aunt's house, where the climax of the rite unfolds, which underlines her exclusion from the ritual process already initiating changes in the protagonists' fates.

To judge by Orysia's reaction, she is surprised by the mask Hryhir has chosen. But why does Mykolaichuk place the bear mask on his hero? In the chaos of *Malanka*, there are characters far more talkative, ironic, and elaborately dressed (and Hryhir himself is ironic and fashionably attired). Yet the director's intent is deeper: in the *Malanka* ritual, the bear embodies primal power; it is a chthonic being endowed with immense strength. For Hryhir, this power translates above all into impenetrability. This *Malanka* character lacks human facial expression; his form is entirely concealed beneath thick animal pelts, and his voice, according to tradition, should be replaced by a bestial roar. By selecting the Bear, Mykolaichuk imposes a "seal of muteness" on the character, creating a maximal physical barrier around him.

We know little about Hryhir—only the sparse words of Orysia's rival, noting that he "twisted but did not break, strained but did not snap."[17] In this context, the mask is less an attribute of strength than a means of protecting his wounded soul from potential rejection or new pain. Until this moment, despite his evident affection for Orysia, Hryhir suffers from painful indecision, hiding his feelings behind jokes and irony. This unspoken tension and his inability to act openly wound Orysia so deeply that, in the scene preceding the *malankari's* appearance, she confesses in despair to her grandfather that she wishes to return home as soon as possible.

Hryhir appears before Orysia in two distinct variations of the same persona. In the first episode, outdoors, he is the "tamed bear": not only is he on a leash, but thick straw ropes, traditionally used to bind sheaves of grain, are wrapped around his torso, running from his back underneath his belly and across his shoulders. In the Carpathian tradition, the use of such straw ropes is deeply symbolic. On the one hand, straw is an archaic emblem of fertility and the future harvest,[18] which the bear, as a chthonic creature, must "sanctify" with its power. On the other hand, the ropes serve as a sign of ritual taming of wild force, restraining the beast. For Hryhir, this dual significance is crucial: the mask and the ropes allow him to perform a gesture of humility and acknowledgment while remaining protected within his defensive shell.

However, in the scene set inside the house, Mykolaichuk employs a different version of the bear mask—more archaic and intimidating. It is now a rough, chthonic visage made of sheepskin, with grotesquely exaggerated animal features and red markings around the mouth. Unlike the outdoor version, there are no straw ropes here: the bear is no longer tamed, but a figure of raw, unformed power. The archaic quality of this portrayal is evident primarily in the mask's form and the material from which it is made. The sheepskin and the deliberately distorted, unrealistic muzzle are intended not to mimic a particular animal but to create a generalized image of a "beyond-this-worldly" being—an ancestral spirit entering the world of the living at a liminal calendar moment.

The paradox is that Hryhir chooses the "mute" role in the *Malanka* precisely in order to

speak. Yet the form of the confession itself is transformed. In the first case, as the "tamed" bear, the confession is made from a position of kneeling and is almost immediately curtailed by his leaving the frame: the hero speaks and disappears, leaving no opportunity for a response. In the second case, in the more archaic mask without straw ropes, Hryhir stands at full height, face-to-face with Orysia. Here, the protection is purely symbolic: the more intimidating the exterior, the safer the vulnerable person inside feels. But the key difference lies in the ending: whereas the outdoor bear-Hryhir escapes, inside the house he remains in the space of dialogue and ultimately removes the mask. Only by transforming into a wild creature within the ritual can the hero summon the courage to overcome his hesitation and finally articulate his feelings in words.

It is the voice, emanating from beneath this layer of material, that becomes the bridge connecting the beast and the human. The voice is the only marker of individuality that cannot be entirely silenced by skins. Recognition occurs at the moment when the archaic form (the mask) collides with intensely personal content (speech): Hryhir's voice disavows his disguise even before the mask is removed.

The switching of masks within a single ritual act contradicts actual practice, where a reveller maintains the costume of the chosen character throughout the entire ritual round from house to house. In the logic of the film, however, this device emphasizes the character's inner movement: Hryhir's identity is not fixed to a single visual form, and the search for a way to confess becomes part of his internal journey. In the world of masks, outward signs are unreliable, and only the voice remains a part of the subject that cannot be fully concealed.

The Mask as a Marker of Farewell

A special place in the scenes involving the ritual maskers is occupied by the figure of Mykhailo Rusnak. Whereas for Hryhir the mask serves as an instrument that opens up a new stage of his life course, for Rusnak, by contrast, it marks its completion. Rusnak is present within the ritual, yet remains outside its existential logic: *Malanka* does not return him to the flow of life but instead operates as a point of final farewell before his return to the solitude of emigration.

The symbolism of this exclusion reaches its peak in the scene with the masked revellers inside the house, when two *Malanka* characters—the Doctor and the *Dido*—sit beside the nearly blind Mykhailo Rusnak. The director's decision to place these particular figures next to the dying hero is deliberate: the Doctor establishes the line of fate, while the *Dido* refers to roots—the world of ancestors. The episode in which the Doctor removes his mask and hands it to Rusnak is entirely devoid of playful spontaneity. Rusnak does not choose this object—he accepts it, and in this gesture one can read a silent acknowledgment of illness and of the proximity of death.

The mask in Rusnak's hands ceases to be a prop of play and becomes an artifact—a material witness to a world he once knew but has since lost. A telling parallel with Parajanov emerges here: if in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* Ivan dons the mask of Death and is consumed by it, the hero of Mykolaichuk's film remains fully a subject of the unfolding events. Rusnak does not put on the mask; he contemplates it from the side—like a spectator whose own performance has already concluded. The presence of the *Dido* only intensifies the sense of liminality in which the hero exists.

Rusnak's blessing to the masked revellers— "long life and happiness"[19]—does not function as part of a ritual formula, but as a patriarchal benediction for a world in which he himself no longer has a place. He sees his homeland alive and bustling, yet the current passes him by. In

this sense, the *Malanka* becomes for Rusnak not a space for overcoming muteness or a chance of a new beginning, but a curtain separating a life fully lived from the inevitable departure.

Ultimately, within the artistic universe of *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*, the arrival of the *Malanka* revellers becomes a moment of truth, distributing the characters into different existential niches. Mykolaichuk constructs a symmetry of three behavioural strategies within the ritual.

For Hryhir and Orysia, ritual dress offers the possibility of overcoming hesitation and unspoken feelings: words are spoken, distance is reduced, and protective shells are no longer necessary. It is no coincidence that the carnival ends with a shot of masks strewn on the snow—the ritual has fulfilled its purpose. Against this backdrop, Orysia's rival, who distances herself from the ritual and does not enter the house—the space of recognition—emphasizes her exclusion from the process of transformation: she remains in the old temporal order.

For Mykhailo Rusnak, by contrast, the mask becomes a marker of final distance. He neither dons it nor discards it, but holds it in his hands as an artifact symbolizing his departure. If for the younger characters the mask functions as a means of transition into the future, for Mykhailo Rusnak it fixes the rupture with the flow of life: the acquisition of a voice at the beginning of the journey meets, here, the acceptance of silence at its conclusion.

Thus, the behaviour of these characters reveals three strategies of interacting with the carnival. While Hryhir and Orysia participate in the ritual and thereby grow closer to one another, Orysia's rival remains outside the ritual space, and Mykhailo remains within the ritual space without participating in the ritual itself. For him, the masquerade is only a memory.

Conclusion

A comparison of Sergei Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and Ivan Mykolaichuk's *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* allows us to consider Christmas-season mask traditions not as ethnographic markers or decorative elements, but as a cinematic mechanism for reinterpreting tradition and as an artistic device. Here, the mask functions as a medium of extreme states—a tool through which crisis, transition, and the impossibility of direct speech are articulated in the screen space. The use of the *Malanka* ritual is not only a gesture of stylization, but also a method of translating the anthropological logic of the ritual into the structure of cinematic narration, turning film into a space of ritual translation. Crucially, this is not about illustrating tradition, but about embedding its functional mechanisms—ritual alibis, inversion, redistribution of agency, and the limits of permissible expression—into the language of visual dramaturgy and narrative. Yet the similarity of the forms employed highlights a fundamental divergence of function: the ritual, transposed into cinema, is realized along opposite vectors in each film.

In Parajanov's artistic world, Christmas masquerade is integrated into the logic of a cosmological order that surpasses individual will. The mask does not open up the possibility of action or speech; on the contrary, it sets the dissolution of the subject within the automatism of ritual performance. Threshold moments—Christmas and death—trigger ritual renewal of the communal life cycle, yet for Ivan they do not provide the possibility of transition: the ritual functions while excluding him from the renewing world. In this context, the mask does not operate as a ritual alibi but merely visualizes the hero's existential state—from the Mask

of Death, which fixes his liminality, to the *Dido* and *Baba* masks, marking his final rupture with the world of the living. For Ivan, the ritual loses its protective and life-generating ambivalence and becomes a visual language of fate, leaving no space for choice.

In Mykolaichuk's film, the same ritual complex acquires a different significance. Mask and ritual action here constitute a space of communication, allowing the overcoming of social and personal muteness. Temporal anomalies, the eclectic nature of the ritual performance, and the inclusion of heterogeneous historical layers emphasize that tradition is not being presented as a frozen form, but as a living practice capable of absorbing external influences and transforming them into its own ritual language, while the use of masks also acquires a political dimension, signalling resistance to Soviet homogenizing pressures. In the screen space, archaic masked characters coexist with figures referencing modernity and elements of the official Soviet festive canon, without forming a coherent hierarchy. Yet this heterogeneity does not disrupt the ritual logic; on the contrary, it highlights its dynamic character and the ritual's ability to integrate ideologically marked elements. The inclusion of such figures does not displace the archaic layer; they are absorbed into the ritual context, so that the official discourse loses its autonomy and becomes one element among others in the ritual act. In this configuration, ritual dress does not reduce individuality to collective anonymity; rather, it protects its vulnerability, transforming the ritual into a space of personal transition. Within this space, the mask functions as a ritual alibi, temporarily suspending the operation of social sanctions and allowing the utterance of words that would otherwise be impossible, thereby restoring voice and agency to the subject.

Comparison of the two films reveals that cinematic engagement with the same ritual complex can produce radically different patterns of the subject's visibility and expression. The impossibility of linking a mask to a specific subject—a basic condition of masquerade—is preserved in both cases, but in the screen space it functions differently. In Parajanov, this impossibility does not transform into a resource for expression but fixes the distance between ritual order and individual fate. In Mykolaichuk, by contrast, the same impossibility is incorporated into the cinematic logic as a condition enabling the transition from silence to speech. From this perspective, the difference between the films is not at the level of ritual form, but in how cinema distributes the possibility of subject presence within the ritual.

Thus, cinematic reinterpretation of Christmas mask traditions in the films under analysis demonstrates how the same ritual complex can be embedded into fundamentally different artistic frameworks. The director does not slavishly reproduce tradition but creatively uses it as artistic material while preserving its deep ritual logic. At the same time, the traditional mask becomes an instrument defining the limits and possibilities of action at moments of maximum tension: it can fix a boundary beyond which the individual loses the possibility of choice, or, conversely, create conditions for the transition from muteness to speech and from lack of choice to its possibility. Cinematic engagement with the ritual allows for multiple levels of interpretation: a viewer familiar with the tradition reads a significantly more complex and nuanced layer of meaning in these scenes, whereas for the uninitiated, the ritual remains primarily an expressive artistic form. In this sense, poetic cinema emerges as a space for translating tradition into the language of film, preserving its semantic complexity and permitting multiple readings within the framework of ritual logic.



NOTES

1. *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is set in the Hutsul region while *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* takes place in Bukovyna.

2. The term *poetic cinema* is used here in the sense of an artistic movement in Soviet cinema of the 1960s–70s, primarily associated with the names of Sergei Parajanov, Yurii Illienko, Leonid Osyka, and Ivan Mykolaichuk. It is characterised by the predominance of a visual–metaphorical language over plot-driven narration and by the active use of folkloric and mythological imagery (see, for example, Briukhovetska 1989; 2001; Pashchenko 2010).

3. See, for example, Verdery (1988, 53, 78-9 n. 42, Romania); Fél and Hofer (1969, 114-5, Hungary).

4. This dynamic of a ritual alibi and the temporary suspension of norms through masking directly aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) foundational theory of carnival and social inversion.

5. See, for example, Kalantar (1998); Steffen (2013); Briukhovetska (2014); First (2015); Jayamanne (2021).

6. A *molfar*, in Hutsul popular beliefs, is a healer and sorcerer endowed with supernatural abilities. He is believed to be capable of influencing natural elements (for example, controlling storms), as well as performing both healing and protective practices (e.g., curing illnesses, protecting fields from hail) and harmful actions (casting spells). For more detail, see Khobzei (2002, 128-30).

7. The involvement of Vitalii Korotych (editor-in-chief of the journal *Vsesvit* and later of *Ogoniok*) as co-author was a forced strategic move: his status in the official Soviet hierarchy served as a necessary "censorship shield" that made it possible to launch the film into production after many years of prohibition and numerous revisions of the screenplay (Briukhovetska 2004, 152-3, 185-6; Harmash 2023, 6:15–6:56).

8. The term *koliadnyky* refers to the participants in Christmas carolling rituals. These rituals involve ceremonial visits to households with songs and ritual wishes for prosperity, which, in some local traditions, also incorporate ritual masking and disguising. The songs performed during these rounds are known as *koliadky* (Christmas carols).

9. *Malanka* is the name of ritual New Year house-to-house rounds associated with the feast of St. Melania; the term also refers to a central ritual character, while participants are called *malankari*. The ritual involves masking and performances marking the transition between the old and new year. The songs performed during these rounds, known as *shchedrivky* (New Year ritual songs), differ from *koliadky* (Christmas carols).

10. According to my field data (Archive of the German Center for Slavic Studies, Düsseldorf), the Malanka processions in the Ukrainian Carpathians are found primarily in Bukovyna, where there are no masked processions on Christmas; in Christmas processions in Bukovyna, participants wear national clothing, not masks and costumes.

11. Parajanov explicitly acknowledged the deliberate nature of such changes, noting that he might "be reproached for certain deviations from ethnographic accuracy," since the Hutsuls do not wear *malanky* (masks) at Christmas (Parajanov 1966, 63).

12. Sergei Parajanov, dir., *Тіні забутих предків* [*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*] (Ukrainian SSR: Dovzhenko Film Studio, 1965), on-screen title, 00:54:14; author's translation.

13. On funeral games in the Carpathian region, see Bogatyrev 1998 for further detail.

14. Regarding the Soviet attitude toward Christmas–New Year processions: "During the Soviet period, when atheism was actively promoted, all forms of Yuletide visiting with explicitly religious themes (such as carrying the *vertep* [portable nativity theatre], going with the star, or the visits of carollers) were prohibited. On the one hand, this led to the decline of the tradition in its original form, as carolling largely disappeared from village streets and moved into private homes, where people, unwilling to abandon a centuries-old custom, continued to carol within the family circle. … On the other hand, carolling came to be perceived as a form of protest against the Soviet regime" (Sadoja 2014, 135). On the ideological pressures surrounding Mykolaichuk's work and the censorship-related difficulties he faced, see, e.g., Briukhovetska 2001; First 2015, 160-201; Yamborko 2023.

15. See above, the section "Malanka Mask as an Instrument of Inversion (p. 168), about an analogous phenomenon in Parajanov's film.

16. Cf. Tolstoy (2004, 3:212-5), also Gura (1997, 159-77).

17. In the figurative idiom of late-Soviet cinema, this can be read as a euphemism for political persecution.

18. Cf. Tolstoy (2012, 5:107-13).

19. Ivan Mykolaichuk, dir., *Така пізня, така тепла осінь* [*Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*] (Ukrainian SSR: Dovzhenko Film Studio, 1981), 01:15:41; author's translation.

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