

## FILM-PHILOSOPHY

## Review

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Robert Bird (2004) *Andrei Rublev*  
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Robert Bird's *Andrei Rublev* carries out the commendable yet risky endeavour of introducing the eponymous film by Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky to a wider Western audience. Bird's task is commendable insofar as the author succeeds in creating a multifaceted narrative about the film, its protagonist, production, and reception that is unprecedented in thoroughness and rigour of research. In addition to the existing western sources on Tarkovsky, the book employs sources from Russian scholarship and thus exposes its readers to the film's original reception in the USSR. Nevertheless, as Bird admits, in writing about Tarkovsky and *Andrei Rublev* (1969), one faces the risk of following in the steps of the existing commentary which indulges in ideological arguments, "artistic, religious, or personal" (11) and overlooks this film's "multivalent textures" and rich complexity. As the result, Bird contends that most of the criticism about *Andrei Rublev* fails to acknowledge the fact that "it is a breathtaking movie before it is anything else" (11) and it is this flaw in Tarkovsky scholarship that he is determined to remedy in this book.

The structure of Bird's book is inspired by Tarkovsky. In a description of the volume's framework and goals, Bird quotes Tarkovsky saying, "[narrative about the film] has to burn up in the viewer's eye before it yields its own inner truth" (7). The arrangement and focus of every chapter in the book clearly suggests that narrative should be viewed broadly as both a narrative analysis of each episode in the film and as a narrative reconstruction of

multiple historical and cultural frameworks from which the film emanates. The structure of the book seems to recreate the traditional text-centered universe that encloses the film-text in multiple contexts, starting with the broadest, a history of medieval Russia, and following with a story about the production of the film, then reception, and ultimately focusing on the shape of the plot and interpretation of the film-text per se. From the first words of the epigraph and throughout the introduction, Bird invites us on a journey that a priori will end with our own unique understanding of the truth encrypted in the book and film narratives.

Bird's introduction gathers intriguing details about the film and informs the reader of the film's difficulty. We find out that *Rublev's* fervent admirers consider the film to be the "Bible" of films (7) and that its director's image is one of a "suffering artist" (7) under Soviet bureaucracy. The introduction also describes *Rublev* as a film that presents a "strident" challenge "to our [viewers'] complacent preconceptions" (7). Bird's exposition of this almost three-hour long film with a confusing plot and its main character keeping a vow of silence for the greater part of the film suggests that this "most Russian of films" is almost impossible to watch. Such an impression brings to mind the criticism coming from some viewers, including the notable personalities of the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the film director Andrei Konchalovsky who were dissatisfied with the film. While Bird announces that his purpose in the book is to counter such one-sided criticism, the excessive emphasis on the film's difficulty in that it "seems to repel any attempt at viewer 'identification'" (10) may create the opposite effect.

Chapter one, "From Rublev to 'Rublev'", offers an elegantly written and detailed historical sketch of medieval Russia. We learn about the life of Andrei Rublev, the famous monk icon painter; the introduction of Christianity in Russia; the Mongol-Tatar occupation; the princes' feuds; and the consolidation of early Russian lands around Moscow. This engaging and vibrant historical background of the film, however, may also be a limitation because it creates an expectation that this background will smooth the film's narrative inconsistencies, which is not quite the case — the historical sketch often creates additional problems. For example, Bird focuses on the discrepancy between historical archaeological facts and such elements of the film as the presence of the run-down cathedral at Andronikov Monastery and Daniil's unexplained absence from the final scene. Such analysis testifies to Bird's intimate knowledge of the relevant historical facts, but it

may also distract the reader from the film as a self-contained reality that does not have to agree completely with history.

While chapter one deals with the historical background, chapter two, "The Via Crucis of Andrei Rublev", deals with the history of the film's production. It describes how the film's title transforms from *The Passion According to Andrei* to the succinct *Andrei Rublev* and narrates the tortuous path from the initial idea through to the writing of the screenplay and the subsequent production. The position in which Tarkovsky found himself after returning to Moscow from Venice is unclear, and his collaboration with the Soviet film officials frustrating. Despite the prize that his first film, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), won in Venice and the relative freedom that this prize secured for the director in choosing what theme to choose next, Tarkovsky still had to ensure the viability of the project through a collaboration with Konchalovsky and by arranging a publication of the film's screenplay in *Iskusstvo Kino*, an influential periodical on cinema. In addition, the budget that the film received was substantially lower than some other films (Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* (1968), for instance). We further learn from this chapter that Tarkovsky chose many of the actors for the film from non-professionals (quite like Bresson). Among these are Ogorodnikova, Glazkov and Burliaev. Iurii Nikulin, a famous Soviet clown and comedy actor, adds a surprising facet to his repertoire by playing the role of a monk whose tragic death through torture never fails to shock.

The book is at its strongest in the final two chapters, where Bird gets down to the actual reading of the film. Chapter three provides a description of each episode of the film. Chapter four discusses a number of artistic texts, from literature, cinema, and painting, which could have influenced the film's form.

In chapter three, "The Shape of the Story", Bird shows the reader how the seemingly "uneventful and confusing" (37) plot transforms into a mosaic of events and images that form Rublev's character and constitute the "elevation of [his] vision over the course of his travails" (38). Chapter three follows the initial breakdown of the film into episodes (the prologue, epilogue and seven episodes) and summarizes each episode's plot. Bird organizes this chapter in a fashion that results in a unified characterisation of the film's protagonist as observer of life around him. Bird stresses that the mode of presenting an artist as an observer agrees with Tarkovsky's goal to break away from the clichéd pattern of narrating an artist's life. According to Bird, Tarkovsky is not interested in showing the icon painter at work, where "an event occurs, the hero observes it. Then the viewer sees him

think it over, and then he expresses his ideas about the event in his works" (37). Tarkovsky is interested in watching Andrei Rublev "simply live" (qtd in Bird, 37); hence the punctured narrative and lack of obvious causality between events in the film. Tarkovsky's unconventional mode of structuring the narrative makes a viewing of the film more difficult, requiring from the viewer an active participation in building an understanding of the film.

Chapter three also touches on the conventions of Tarkovsky's cinematic language, specifically, camera movement. Bird comments on the graceful yet uncompromising effect of camera work in the final shots of the film's prologue as paralyzing the viewer: "Like the camera, the spectator witnesses the collapse both of endeavour and of vision, but is helpless to act" (42). Indeed, Tarkovsky admits that the audience probably does not have any choice when watching a film:

Each frame, each scene or episode is not just a description, but a facsimile of an action, or landscape, or face. Aesthetic norms are therefore wished upon the audience, concrete phenomena are shown unequivocally, and the individual will often set up a resistance to these on the strength of his personal experience. (Tarkovsky: 1986, 178)

Given the dictatorial nature of such camera manipulation vis-à-vis the viewer and the characters, one would expect that Bird should give more time to camera work in the film. For Tarkovsky, camera movement functions as a link between elements of the *mise-en-scène* (it gathers these elements into a meaningful whole and unobtrusively suggests to the viewer what relationships inform the story). Therefore, a careful reading of the camera's behavior in Tarkovsky's films may prove a valuable means for interpretation. In the "Jester" episode, for example, camera work, not dialogue, controls the narrative: a succession of medium shots of Andrei and the jester in the barn (each shot framed) creates a latent confrontation between the monk and the jester. This confrontation will detonate only in the final episode, "The Bell", when the jester in a fit of frenzy attacks Rublev with an axe. Ten years after their first encounter, out of all the people gathered in the barn, the jester will remember Rublev and mistakenly believe that Rublev turned him in to the Prince's soldiers although Rublev had never left the place. The Andrei-jester storyline becomes meaningful only through the effect of camera work in establishing memorable relationships between characters.

Bird's fourth and final chapter identifies cultural and artistic texts that could have possibly influenced the form of *Andrei Rublev* the film. The chapter contains a number of astonishing statements that deserve a separate discussion to reveal their complexity. Among the most direct cinematic influences on Tarkovsky, Bird lists Bresson's *Journal d'un Cure de Campagne* (1951), Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944/1958) and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), Pudovkin's *The Last Days of St. Petersburg* (1927), and Dovzhenko's films. While the ease with which Bird draws parallels between the film *Andrei Rublev* and the films of Tarkovsky's predecessors seems arbitrary at times, Bird's discussion of the "numerous specific borrowings" (67) on the level of frames is innovative in contextualizing the film within Russian/ Soviet cinema. As to the possible influence of Russian painting on the film, Bird draws parallels between certain shots in *Andrei Rublev* and the paintings of Nesterov, Ivanov and Kramskoi. Based on the compositional similarities between certain frames in the film and well-known paintings, Bird claims that by quoting these artists' works Tarkovsky is after the "effect of... recapitulation and, most likely, rejection, of the modern Russian traditions of religious painting" (72). This claim may require more substantiation, for although the similarities between the paintings and the frames in the film are stunning, to assert that Tarkovsky consciously includes these works into *Andrei Rublev* in order to advance an ideological argument against a tradition of painting would require countering a considerable amount of evidence that points to the contrary.

Here are possible objections to Bird's discerning the influence of paintings on *Andrei Rublev*. Tarkovsky's numerous references to the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, Dürer and Brueghel in other films, as well as Rublev's icons in *Andrei Rublev*, for the most part function as the works of art that they are. Their power to stir an emotional response warrants, in Tarkovsky's opinion, an active engagement with the films. Discussions about these paintings permeate his *Sculpting in Time*, the most notable being the description of Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci*. According to Tarkovsky, the works of Renaissance painters, along with musical scores by Bach, Pergolesi and Purcell, lend cinema depth and a sense of historical distance from the present moment. Tarkovsky believes that such historical relation is important because cinema is the youngest form of artistic expression. Obsessed with the invention of an independent cinematic language, Tarkovsky makes the categorical statement: "I have never understood, for instance, attempts to construct mise-en-scène from a painting. All you will be doing is bringing the painting back to life ... [and]

you will also be killing cinema" (Tarkovsky: 1986, 78). In his reading of the "Festival" episode, however, Bird suggests just that: the director brings to life the paintings of Ivanov, Kramskoi and Nesterov in order to make an ideological argument against modern religious painting.

I believe that the issue of the influence of painting on Tarkovsky's films is highly controversial and requires careful consideration. Although Bird's reading of the scene in "Feast" explicitly contradicts Tarkovsky's view on the use of paintings in cinema, it may still be considered a valid argument for those who doubt Tarkovsky's loyalty to his own principles or consider his aesthetic principles expressed in *Sculpting in Time* as wishful thinking rather than an artist's manifesto; after all, we all live in a post-*death-of-the-author* era. Besides, Tarkovsky scholarship identifies at least two landscapes, one in *Mirror* (1975) and the other in *Andrei Rublev*, as having close compositional resemblance to Brueghel's paintings. Yet given what we know about Tarkovsky's declared attitude toward the use of painting in film, Bird's statement may need much more substantiation.

There is another problem with Bird's inscription of painting in the film. He writes,

Instead of imagining Christ, Rublev imagines himself as Christ, appropriating for the purpose several modern Russian canvases on religious subjects...When he kneels down to pull an onion out of the fire, he copies Christ in a later and more naturalistic canvas by Ivan Kramskoi, Christ in the Wilderness (1872). (73)

The grammar of the passage suggests Rublev the monk's extra-diegetic and anachronistic knowledge of Kramskoi's painting, which begs explanation.

Any discussion about *Andrei Rublev* would be incomplete without evoking Pavel Florenskii, his view of the Orthodox icon and the role icon plays in the film narrative. After Florenskii, Bird's book, much like the film itself, culminates in showing the icon as the key image that marks a distinction between two realms, the visible and the invisible. Bird notes that in the film this effect of co-existence of the two realms emerges from the "proliferation of doors and windows", when the viewer is pushed "through to the other side" (76), and in "reversals of time" (77). The best example of such reversal is the entrancing Crucifixion sequence, embedded in episode two. In this sequence the voiceover by Andrei Rublev combined with Foma's point of view<sup>1</sup> de-centers the narrative

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<sup>1</sup> A narratological note: interestingly, the initial script describes this sequence as a vision of Theophanes. This detail, combined with Rublev's voiceover and Foma's focalisation, transforms the Crucifixion sequence into a synthesis of artistic visions. Bird's assertion that the Crucifixion scene is Foma's vision may be problematic for two reasons: 1) it doesn't account for the fact immediately

and contributes to the impression that this sequence is triggered by what Florenskii calls the unseen realm: "Like the icon, Tarkovsky's world has no privileged centre but is unified by an invisible, off-screen destination, which becomes the real focus of the viewer's attention" (Bird, 76). I would also add that the unseen realm also emerges in two more episodes in the film, Andrei Rublev's vision of Theophanes in the destroyed cathedral and the apparition of the holy fool dressed in white just moments before the bell rings, which parallels Florenskii's description of reversal in time in dreams. Thus, Bird's reading of Florenskian motifs in the film is quite valuable.

The book *Andrei Rublev* might be interesting to a wide range of audiences, from non-academic admirers of Tarkovsky's work to film historians, insofar as it contextualises the film and the process of its production in cultural history. It invites us to establish and analyse the relationship between a number of narratives about Andrei Rublev—a sketchy historical account about Rublev in old Russian manuscripts, the story of the oblivion and later resurrection of Rublev as a national hero and saint in Soviet Russia, and finally Tarkovsky's own artistic interpretation of the personage. Bird's volume is valuable both for a scholarly audience and for first-time viewers of Tarkovsky because it offers a look into his laboratory and equips the reader with the clues that will help explain the perforated narrative structure of Tarkovsky's later works.

The book is also a unique source for those interested in exploring the effects of editing on the shape of the film's narrative structure: Bird's volume compares two different edits of the film. In part due to requests of foreign distributors and to the inherently cumbersome narrative structure of the film, Tarkovsky shortened the film by 20 minutes by cutting out thirty-six shots and modifying certain sequences. He later confided in his book *Sculpting in Time* that *Andrei Rublev* only benefited from the re-edit, yet both versions of the film are available for viewing.

Bird's book is valuable, but I consider it an introductory work on *Andrei Rublev*. For more recent and comprehensive description of the film reception in Russia and in the West, readers should explore the book's bibliography and look beyond what is offered in this volume. In constructing his narrative about critical response to *Andrei Rublev*, Bird focuses on Solzhenitsyn and Konchalovsky's unfavorable criticism of Tarkovsky. Such focus

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before the scene camera follows the direction of Andrei's look, which would suggest that Rublev is the focaliser, and 2) Foma stands up and withdraws from the riverbank long before the embedded scene begins, around the time of the start of the conversation between Andrei and Theophanes.

leaves out other, less elaborate, yet more favourable reviews of the film.<sup>2</sup> Solzhenitsyn and Konchalovsky provide Bird with ideological arguments in opposition to which he constructs his own narrative. However, by overshadowing favorable responses to the film, Bird draws a limited picture of the film's reception. Throughout the book, readers will stumble across references to Tarkovsky's "confusing or just plain boring" aesthetic, which makes up the underlying source of the "unease" that "viewers everywhere" revealed in response to the film (33). Although such perceptions of Tarkovsky's films do exist, they are not universal and a more balanced account of the reception of *Andrei Rublev* the film in the USSR and in the West would have aided Bird in showing his readers that Rublev is "a breathtaking movie" (11) with a complex history of reception.

As a book about Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, Bird's volume pioneers the field of Tarkovsky scholarship in that this book focuses on the film that has been allotted only chapters in larger monographs.<sup>3</sup> The book format allows Bird to construct a scrupulous and measured narrative about the film's protagonist and at the same time explain some of the film's complexity by placing it in the context of modern art and early twentieth-century theological philosophy. Bird's work expands the film's cultural and historic background and makes it more accessible for Western viewers. However, the volume could offer a more developed reading of the narrative structure of each episode of the film. The book would also benefit from a more comprehensive description of Tarkovsky's unique cinematic language that is tackled only in passing. While Bird finds fault with previous accounts of *Andrei Rublev* based on the fact that they let the "history of the film's production and release ... [overshadow] the film itself" (36), he re-enacts the same approach by devoting two chapters and most of the introduction to providing context for the film. The decision to devote a considerable amount of space in the book to offering historical contexts disallows making a more elaborate description of the film scenes, substantiating the radical claims about the film's borrowings from other artistic texts, and responding to the director's claims with regard to such readings of his films, but again, the format of the book as an introduction to the film may have not asked for such response.

## Bibliography

<sup>2</sup> Bird's dismissal of Tarkovsky's assertion that the film was understood and well-received by audiences (10) fails to offer a satisfactory explanation as to why Tarkovsky's assertions cannot be taken for their face value.

<sup>3</sup> The only exception is the film script *Andrei Rublev* that was published in a separate volume by Faber and Faber.

Tarkovsky, Andrei (1986) *Sculpting in Time*. Austin: UT Press.