

Tarkovsky and Levinas:
Cuts, Mirrors, Triangulations
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Faces

In 'Meaning and Sense' (1964), Emmanuel Levinas tries, as he so often does, to explain why the 'face' that is such a loaded term in his writings is not the kind of face that we may think that we know:

The Other (*Autrui*) who manifests himself in a face [*dans le visage*] as it were breaks through his own plastic essence, like a being who opens the window on which its own visage was already taking form [*où sa figure pourtant se dessinait déjà*]. His presence consists in divesting himself of the form which does already manifest him. His manifestation is a surplus over the inevitable paralysis of manifestation. This is what the formula 'the face speaks' [*le visage parle*] expresses. The manifestation of a face is the first disclosure. Speaking is before anything else this way of coming from behind one's appearance, behind one's form, an openness in the openness [*une ouverture dans l'ouverture*] (Levinas 1996a, 53; 1964, 144–145).

The image that Levinas uses in the first sentence could be called cinematic: it describes a mobile visual effect, where what we think that we have seen (the face on the window) is revealed to have been a misperception that is now replaced by something else. If we wished to reproduce this effect in the visual arts, painting would not do (except perhaps for some kinds of *trompe l'œil*): there has to be movement, process, a before and an after. Levinas was distrustful of images of any kind (a point to which we shall return) – but that does not mean that he refrained from using them.

In the middle of Andrei Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice* (1986), the hero, Alexander, is found at night in his room, in a moment of extraordinary crisis. He, his family, and perhaps the whole world seem about to be engulfed in nuclear catastrophe.

He feels overwhelmingly responsible but helpless. He is possibly mad. He wakes, and then:

- 1:18:30 Close up of Alexander's face in deep shadow.¹
- 1:18:40 Light steals across Alexander's face.
- 1:18:42 A view, from the back, of a dark figure climbing off a bicycle.
- 1:18:44 The figure faces the camera, in medium shot, silhouetted against the sky (this is summer in Sweden, and the sky is not completely dark).
- 1:18:53 The dark face looms forward, into close up, then is suddenly revealed to be a reflection in a window, as the face of the character in question, Otto, moves in from left screen, meeting its dark double in the glass.

Otto is the local postman, a reader of Nietzsche, and a collector of accounts of paranormal phenomena: a highly suspect character, affable and generous (he has earlier come bearing a huge, framed eighteenth-century map of Europe on his rickety bicycle, as a birthday gift for Alexander), but haunted, and in various ways potentially unreliable (he falls to the floor at one point, in a brief but inexplicable fit). The scene continues:

- 1:18:58 A shadowy figure in medium shot, reflected in the glass covering a print of Leonardo's *Adoration of the Magi*.
- 1:19:01 The dark reflection recedes from the print, into the light, and reveals itself to be a rear view of Alexander.
- 1:19:05 The sound of Otto tapping at the window.

¹ The timings here and, later in the essay, for *Mirror* and *Nostalghia*, refer to the DVD versions produced by Artificial Eye that are currently available in the UK (ART 026 DVD, ART 020 DVD and ART 033 DVD, respectively). Different prints, DVDs and videos of Tarkovsky's films vary considerably in length and quality.

- 1:19:12 Medium shot, from the front, of Alexander walking forwards, through the room, in half-light.
- 1:19:15 A door-frame comes into view, and we realise that we are seeing Alexander through glass.
- 1:19:17 A glass door now fills the frame. From left to right: Alexander's face looking out; the dark reflection of Otto's face in the glass; quarter-view of Otto's face looking in through the glass at Alexander. They begin to converse, through the glass.

It transpires that Otto has divined Alexander's sense of responsibility for the fate of the world around him, and supports it, proposing a way of making everything right again. This is benevolent, but the proposed solution, that Alexander should immediately seek out and sleep with a woman who works as servant in his house but is reputed to be a witch, is bizarre and as apparently gratuitous as Alexander's own paranoiac conviction of his responsibility for the impending geo-political disaster (he is, after all, not a politician but a critic and a former actor). Full of doubts, Alexander sets off in the middle of the night on Otto's bicycle, almost gives up the project but then perseveres, finds the 'witch', and apparently follows Otto's instructions. The apocalypse is indeed averted or postponed. Perhaps Otto's supernatural strategy has worked, or perhaps the happy turn of events has quite other (more rational) causes, and both Alexander and Otto are insane. The film leaves all of this undecided. Tarkovsky offers many suggestions to the effect that we can control our destinies, or that we cannot; that we can work constructively and altruistically with others, or that we cannot; that we know the other and are responsible to him or her, or that this is merely as solid as the face on the pane of glass that turns to disclose another face that should be the 'real' one and which surprises and disconcerts and even frightens through its revelation of our earlier misapprehension, but which it would be folly to think of as the end of misapprehension and the return of unambiguous presence.

Time and Fate

Levinas conveys philosophical arguments artistically, in the sense that he goes on reformulating his major concepts, over and over again, finding new words every time, in a process that seems unending: an evasion (as much as this is possible) of fixity and thematisation and (as he puts it above) 'the inevitable paralysis of manifestation'. Levinas's philosophy is, in this sense, a perpetually lost race against time.

In 'Transcendence and Intelligibility' (1984), Levinas elaborates on Bergson's formulation of two kinds of time. First, there is the time of science and watches.

And on the other hand, the duration which is pure change and which does not need to search beneath this change for any identical substratum. This is the bursting forth of incessant novelty. The absolute novelty of the new. This is the spirituality of transcendence, which does not amount to an assimilating act of consciousness. The uninterrupted bursting forth [*jaillissement*] of novelties would make sense, precisely beyond knowledge, through its absolute and unforeseeable novelty. 'Most philosophers,' Bergson writes, 'treat the succession of time as a missed coexistence and duration as privation,' as the mobile image of immobile eternity. 'Because of this they do not manage, whatever they do, to represent to themselves the radical novelty of unforeseeability.' Against the consciousness which englobes and organises the system through knowledge and against the tendency to equate and reduce, this is a new mode of intelligibility. Prior to logic, the bursting forth [*jaillissement*] of duration would sketch the horizons of intelligibility. Does not temporality itself announce itself here as a transcendence, as a thinking under which, independently of any experience, the alterity of absolute novelty, the absolute in the etymological sense of the term, would burst forth [*éclaterait*]?' (Levinas 1996a, 154–155; 1996b, 20–21)

Time as, moment to moment, the perpetual unexpected: this is something that might make one suspect that Levinas ought to have preferred film (especially difficult film, resistant to the sensation of full 'comprehension') to painting and other 'still' arts. Levinas concludes this section from 'Transcendence and Intelligibility' by wondering (inconclusively) whether Bergson really stays true to this idea, or falls back (perhaps inevitably?) onto some kind of 'knowledge behind experience' (Levinas 1996a, 155; 1996b, 21). Much the same doubt can be and has been raised about Levinas's own work, indeed he raises it himself; the kind of perpetual openness that is supposed to be the Levinasian ethics is probably not something that can be fully achieved, or at least not something that is fully compatible with a finished text and publication. Levinas's works

are not automatic writing, but the fulfilment of projects that have a certain kind of finitude and thus of failure written into them from the start. But he does his best to mitigate these failures through reformulation, through the difficulty and artful suggestiveness and ambiguity of his writing, and through his always evident perception of philosophy as process, as a thinking rather than the once and for all solution of problems.

The nature of film is such that it is difficult to feel that one takes it in completely; no sooner is one frame mentally captured than it is succeeded – in a process that could be called ‘jaillissement’ – by another. Film moves too fast for even the cinematographer to be in full control of the things that it throws up (over and above the way in which any kind of text may be uncontrollable by its author). Directors and editors can choose to minimise these characteristics of the medium, manipulating both images and audience so as to create a final sense of semiotic order and unambiguous declaration: such, according to a somewhat sweeping and antagonistic Tarkovsky, was the practice of Eisenstein, who ‘makes thought into a despot’ (Tarkovsky 1986, 183). But Tarkovsky himself does his best to accentuate the life of its own that film, with its density and speed, possesses. And often, as in *The Sacrifice*, it is the very profusion and inexhaustibility of the sequence of images and the possible implications and offshoots of narrative that give hope to an otherwise generally bleak set of representations of human existence.

Here, then, there is an obvious starting point for the uneasy project of comparing Levinas with Tarkovsky (or indeed with anyone): both make the most of the resources of their respective media to speak distinctively but with a kind of self-undermining. The saying of the philosophical essay of the moment, and the unrolling of time, both in simulacrum and in the real time of the audience, in film, are both held up as somehow redemptive and transcendent in their resistance to reduction and control.

It is most unlikely that Levinas would have accepted this. Contrary to what I have just argued about film, Levinas felt that all of the arts could be lumped together as sharing the same generally pernicious relationship to life, reality and truth. Alluding to Sartre, in ‘Reality and its Shadow’ (1948), Levinas anticipates the image of the window that I have already quoted. In fact, images, here, are supposed to *be* windows, except that Levinas regards this ‘transparency’ as an obfuscation:

The phenomenology of images insists on their transparency. The intention of one who contemplates an image is said to go directly through the image, as through a

window, into the world it represents, and aims at an *object*. Yet nothing is more mysterious than the term 'world it represents' – since representation expresses just that function of an image that still remains to be determined (Levinas 1989, 134; 1948, 777).

This window differs fundamentally from the one mentioned in 'Meaning and Sense'. The image-as-window in Levinas's understanding of the dominant aesthetic theory is unproblematic and unsurprising; Levinas's later image-of-the-window is about being taken by surprise. The one is a congealing; the other an unfolding. Congealment figures in 'Reality and its Shadow' also as Fate, which 'has no place in life. The conflict between freedom and necessity in human action appears in reflection: when action is already sinking into the past, man discovers the motifs that necessitated it'. In art, on the other hand, '[i]n the instant of a statue, in its eternally suspended future, the tragic, simultaneity of necessity and liberty, can come to pass: the power of freedom congeals into impotence' (Levinas 1989, 138–139; 1948, 783). Art thus forecloses on the active life, and ethical relation, that Levinas's 'face' expresses, and the temporal dimension of, for example, film, apparently does not mitigate this foreclosure:

time, apparently introduced into images by the non-plastic arts such as music, literature, theatre and cinema, does not shatter the fixity of images. That the characters in a book are committed to the infinite repetition of the same acts and the same thoughts is not simply due to the contingent fact of the narrative, which is exterior to those characters. They can be narrated because their being *resembles* itself, doubles itself and immobilizes. Such a fixity is wholly different from that of concepts, which initiates life, offers reality to our powers, to truth, opens a dialectic. By its reflection in a narrative, being has a non-dialectical fixity, stops dialectics and time (Levinas 1989, 139; 1948, 783–784).

It is tempting to make a comparison with Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', where the poet presents an artwork within an artwork: the former (the urn) a 'cold pastoral' that appears to mock life and ethics, imaging the hopelessness of human desire in the face of Fate; the latter (the poem) an undecidable text, both sharing the fate and fatefulness of the urn and turning away from it, where congealment is forever held at bay because the reader is empowered to live within and alongside the text, which fosters a thinking (or a dialectics) that partakes of philosophy as much as of Levinas's decorative but stillborn art.

Levinas appears to find art pernicious because it is as though he thinks that art itself, *in* itself, should live: the impossible demand of a frustrated Pygmalion. This is why Rainsford, Dominic Michael (2007) 'Tarkovsky and Levinas: Cuts, Mirrors, Triangulations', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, **127** no. 2: pp. 122–143. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n2/Rainsford.pdf>> ISSN: 1466-4615 online

he laments the condition of the characters within a text (think again of the figures on the surface of Keats's urn). He does not think so much about the reader, or viewer, within whom art realises itself. Art may be, in some respects, in an antithetical relation to life, but the process, in a person, of experiencing art is actually part of life. We find ourselves, as we look or read, *in medias res*; the Fate that Levinas says has no place in life is what occurs when we stop looking or reading.

Comparisons

An inevitable component of the living process of experiencing art is the making of connections and comparisons. But there is always the danger of reduction of difference to the same. If I say that Tarkovsky is like Levinas, am I not simply exploiting the fragments of each of them that I have absorbed, customised and congealed, and is the hybrid that I make from these fragments anything at all like either might actually have been, or is it rather an opportunistic exhibition of what I take, consciously or not, to be me?

Tarkovsky, the producer of a good deal of dogmatic theoretical writing, as well as of open-ended and readerly films, was himself deeply distrustful of seeing one thing in terms of another, and made an effort to problematise the process of moving between languages and cultures. Translation, argues Andrei, the 'hero' of *Nostalghia* (1983), is always misguided. Andrei has a lot more in common with Tarkovsky than just his first name – as *Tempo di viaggio* (1983), the 'documentary' that Tarkovsky produced while working on *Nostalghia*, makes especially clear – but even if we reject this sort of biographical reading entirely, Andrei's remarks (ironically addressed to his translator and guide to Italy) raise an important possibility that echoes throughout Tarkovsky's work: that trying to synthesise, universalise, and speak for or to others is misguided. Alexander, in *The Sacrifice*, explains that he gave up acting just because he was disgusted at the process, the presumption, of impersonating others.

On the other hand, in practice, Tarkovsky takes what he will from other cultures, other arts (Italian painting, German music; he directed *Hamlet* on stage; he admired directors such as Bergman, Bresson, Antonioni, Kurosawa and Mizoguchi), suggesting not only that he holds himself as some kind of exception to the rule of untranslatability, but that he expects his audience to be able to make great leaps, between languages, cultures, arts and genres, too.

Similarly, for all his distrust of art, Levinas uses art constantly: not just in the general polyvalency of language that he makes no effort to oppose – or rather, that he frequently exploits – and not just in ‘cinematic’ moments like the one quoted above, but also, explicitly, in cases like this direct appeal to philosophy as theatre, the conclusion to the fourth section of ‘God and Philosophy’ (1975), ‘Divine Comedy’, where Levinas points out the staged nature of the ‘encounter’ (or non-encounter) between the self and *Autrui* – which is also, of course a holy event (or non-event):

For this formula ‘transcendence to the point of absence’ not to mean the simple explication of an ex-ceptional word [i.e. ‘God’], this word itself has to be put back into the significance of the whole plot of the ethical [*toute l'intrigue éthique*] or back into the divine comedy without which it could not have arisen. That comedy is enacted equivocally between temple and theater [*Comédie dans l'ambiguïté du temple et du théâtre*], but in it the laughter sticks to one’s throat when the neighbor approaches [*à l’approche du prochain*] – that is, when his face, or his forsakenness [*son visage ou ... son délaissement*], draws near (Levinas 1996a, 141; 1992, 115).

It is not just that Tarkovsky and Levinas are alike in contradicting themselves. Both problematise questions of translation, identification and staging, to create tensions and traumas that reveal a kind of impossibility inherent to engagement in the world, but thereby creating space for concepts of responsibility and ethics.

Comparing Levinas with Tarkovsky is a bit like comparing Levinas with Dostoevsky. ‘[S]o great is the affinity between the texts of Dostoevsky and Levinas’, writes Jill Robbins, ‘that Dostoevsky would seem to be the one writer to whom Levinasian ethics (quasi-transcendental and incommensurable with any novelistic “world”) could be “applied.” But would this be a case of applied Levinas or applied Dostoevsky? The question is bound to arise, as it did in the case of Levinas’s intertextual engagement with Rimbaud, Who is reading whom?’ (Robbins 1999, 149). Tarkovsky has often been characterised as the inheritor of a Russian tradition which Dostoevsky exemplifies – indeed, he makes this claim himself (Tarkovsky 1986, 193) – and he spent many years fruitlessly trying to make a film of *The Idiot* (Johnson and Petrie 1994, 250). Had he done so, the result would surely have involved a growth or distortion of what had hitherto seemed Tarkovskian, under the influence of Dostoevsky, just as much as a growth or distortion of what had hitherto been taken to be Dostoevskian, through the selections, emphases, substitutions and interpolations of Tarkovsky. The whole idea of a one-way ‘application’, in such company, seems naive.

Reflections

Connections and even identification between one person and another, or between one person and another version of that person at another time and another place, between one event or scene and another, are fundamental in Tarkovsky's work, and always the occasion of stress and strain. Repetition, echoing, doubling, reincarnation, and, of course, nostalgia are key terms here. His films are criss-crossed internally, and as an *œuvre*, by networks of connection, so that particular objects and actions – for example, balloons, dogs, dachas, and falling – keep reappearing. It would be easy to see these as symbols, part of a fixed Tarkovskian vocabulary, but he disliked this approach: it suggests that the viewer can put two and two together and find a solution, but '[t]he moment a viewer understands, deciphers, all is over, finished: the illusion of the infinite becomes banality, a commonplace, a truism. The mystery disappears' (from a talk given by Tarkovsky in London in 1984, quoted in Johnson and Petrie 1994, 38). With this in mind, the viewer has to wonder, for example, whether the balloon flight in the prologue to *Andrei Roublev* (1969) has got anything to do with the balloon caught in the tree at the beginning and end of *Solaris* (1972), or those shown in prints on the walls of the dacha in the same film, or with the sublime, and sublimely unexpected, 1930s footage of a Soviet ascent into the stratosphere that suddenly looms onto the screen in *Mirror* (1975). Is the balloon motif in Tarkovsky greater than the sum of its parts, or would thinking this be like the mistake (in Levinasian terms) of seeing a third party as the same as the Other (rather than the Other of the Other as well as of the Self)?

This kind of doubt is thematised in all sorts of ways in Tarkovsky. We are always being asked: Are we seeing the same, or something/someone different? Does anything change? When Hari's simulacrum regenerates itself on the space-station in *Solaris*, is she the same every time (indeed, the same as the original, terrestrial Hari) or does she present Kris with a whole new *dé-visagement* of the Other every time (which he every time fails to respect)? When Otto discusses Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence in *The Sacrifice* (while circling childishly round and round on his bicycle), should we be put on our guard about the idea that the same situation or person can manifest themselves twice? Do Tarkovsky's narratives circulate back upon themselves, in a kind of stasis (consider the echoed situations and motifs at the beginning and end of *Solaris*, *Stalker*,

or *The Sacrifice*), or do they show a progression through which everything is changed forever?

In another rather cinematic moment in 'Meaning and Sense', Levinas declares that '[t]he face is abstract. This abstractness is not, to be sure, like the brute sensible datum of the empiricists. Nor is it an instantaneous cross-section of the time in which time would "cross" eternity. An instant belongs to the world. It is an incision [*coupure*] that does not bleed' (Levinas 1996a, 59; 1964, 151). I take this as meaning that the encounter with the Other is a kind of empty caesura, a contentless interval: the Self and the Same run up against a kind of wall (as opposed to a transparent window) where they are stopped dead; afterwards, they resume where they left off. The essence of the Other does not leak out (like blood): it cannot be mopped up or ingested.

An irony throughout Tarkovsky's films is that the Face appears after its owner is actually or effectively dead: the posthumous understanding and compassion addressed to the protagonist in *Ivan's Childhood*; the ghost of Hari – which Kris relates to, perhaps, better than he ever did to the living prototype; the youthful mother understood and admired in retrospect, in *Mirror*, while her son continues to fail to communicate with her older self or with her 'double', his wife; the other distant wife whose serene, unspeaking face appears in Andrei's dreams and reveries in *Nostalghia*. And aren't both parties as good as dead, as well, in the Levinasian 'encounter'?

When Hari's phantom is cut in *Solaris* it does bleed, but only briefly: then its flesh (or whatever its substance may be) regenerates itself, and its incisions seal themselves up. Likewise the opening in Kris's consciousness that Hari represents seems only temporary. This problematic of difference and sameness plays itself out in the very syntax of Tarkovsky's films, in cuts and mirrorings.

Attraction and Repulsion

Sameness and difference are nowhere more obviously thematised than in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*. Openly autobiographical, even with performing roles for Tarkovsky's mother (apparently as a version of herself) and father (who is not seen, but reads his own poems in voice-over), the film asks the question: Is Alexei a faithful representation of Andrei Tarkovsky? and, more generally, Can the traces of the past be reproduced? Other problematic identifications abound in the film. Alexei's wife, Natalia, closely resembles – he says – his mother. Tarkovsky makes this so, by having both characters

played by the same actress, Margarita Terekhova (albeit with hair down and up, respectively). The young Alexei seems to be exactly reproduced in his son Ignat (again, two roles played by one actor). And yet there is much in the film that suggests a desire to learn, develop, atone, and generally make the future different from the past.

Once again, we have to take the full range of the cinematic experience of each moment of the film into account, to do justice to Tarkovsky's philosophical suggestiveness. In the film's longest shot (3 minutes and 55 seconds, beginning at 0:33:15), we see Natalia, Alexei's wife, looking at herself in the several mirrors on the walls of the room in which she stands, while apparently conversing with Alexei. Alexei never enters the frame in this scene; we just hear his voice. The only faces that we see are Natalia's and its reflections. Alexei and Natalia rehearse some of the conflicts that have led to their estrangement and separation; their problematic son, Ignat; the possibility (which Alexei mocks) that Natalia has found a new lover. This dimension of the scene is well understood by Johnson and Petrie, who comment that:

the predominant color tone is brown, almost monochrome, and the lighting is harsh, making Natalia look tired and unattractive. The use of real time here (...), the mirrors, the restricted color scheme, and the camera's almost exclusive focus on Natalia in close-up or medium shot create a powerful sense of claustrophobia, echoing the dreariness and repetitiveness of their arguments, marked by Alexei's empty sarcasm and Natalia's weary helplessness (Johnson and Petrie 1994, 126–127).

This fits a dominant contention of Johnson and Petrie's influential book, that women in Tarkovsky's work are fixed, trapped and disempowered. However, this kind of reading imposes a fixity upon a situation that is much more multiple and mobile in the film itself. Another part of the conversation in this scene includes exactly Alexei's assertion that Natalia resembles his mother, and that, therefore, she is a type more than an individual. For the viewer who is aware of the film as an artefact and therefore stands at a partial remove from the narrative content, this is a joke: for indeed, both wife and mother take material form, on screen, in the person of Margarita Terekhova. Johnson and Petrie are perhaps a bit too quick to see Alexei as Andrei; in other words, to take the masculine would-be-controlling discourse, which this scene literally disembodies, as the only viewpoint that the film authorises. Not everyone would find Terekhova unattractive in this scene, but Johnson and Petrie are forced to do so by an interpretative model that also makes them overlook the many ways in which the most powerful presences in this film

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are female, above all in Terekhova's own double performance, but also in the mysterious, apparently imaginary woman (resembling, it seems to me, Anna Akhmatova) who has Ignat read Pushkin to her, and thus stands for the weight and authority of Russian culture, at the heart of the film – or even in the speech therapist whose masterful hypnotic power, in the prologue, implicitly unleashes all that follows.²

To return once again to the 'mirror' scene: the closer it is examined, the more faces and traces flicker into the frame, and the less it becomes possible to fix and congeal any of them. This is a scene, as much perhaps as almost any other in cinema, that asks us to scrutinise a face, even as Natalia stares at herself in various lights and at various angles. We are looking and trying to judge: does Natalia really look like Maria (the mother, who has been the dominant presence in the film so far)? Is Natalia really the woman that Alexei makes her out to be? And is she really fixed (as Johnson and Petrie seem to believe) by Alexei's rhetoric and Tarkovsky's narrative and cinematic manipulation, in seamless collaboration, such that this 'autobiography' is an irresistible act of self-vindicating will, sustained by absolute control and self-presence? We may think, after a few minutes, that we know Natalia's, or Margarita's, face quite well. Then she moves, and the reflection that we have been staring at changes: some of those dark spots are actually on the actress's skin; others are blemishes in the mirror.

As if all this were not enough, Tarkovsky asks that we address this central, hypnotising face on a whole other level of cross-cultural resonance, by juxtaposing Maria/Natalia with a fifteenth-century painting, Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci. Tarkovsky discusses this comparison in *Sculpting in Time*:

There are two things about Leonardo's images that are arresting. One is the artist's amazing capacity to examine the object from outside, standing back, looking from above the world (...). And the other, the fact that the picture affects us simultaneously in two opposite ways. (...) It is not even possible to say definitely whether we like the woman or not, whether she is appealing or unpleasant. She is at once attractive and repellent. (...) It has an element of degeneracy – and of beauty. In *Mirror* we needed the portrait in order to introduce a timeless element into the moments that are succeeding one another before our eyes, and at the same time to juxtapose the portrait with the heroine, to emphasise in her and in the actress, Margarita Terekhova, the same capacity at once to enchant and to repel... (Tarkovsky 1986, 108).

² Levinas has of course attracted at least as much negative critical attention for his formulations of the 'feminine' as Tarkovsky, and this might, in another essay, have provided another fruitful way of confronting one with the other. See, for example, Sandford 2002.

After this, Tarkovsky moves to a more theoretical argument that has some obvious points in common with Levinas on the Face and the Infinite:

the emotional effect exercised on us by the woman in the picture is powerful precisely because it is impossible to find in her anything that we can definitely prefer, to single out any one detail from the whole, to prefer any one, momentary impression to another, and make it our own, to achieve a balance in the way we look at the image presented to us. And so there opens up before us the possibility of interaction with infinity, for the great function of the artistic image is to be a kind of detector of infinity ... towards which our reason and our feelings go soaring, with joyful, thrilling haste (Tarkovsky 1986, 108–109).

This is more straightforward, perhaps more naive, than anything in Levinas. Tarkovsky has an idea of the infinite, transmitted by the image here rather than the face, and he also has the idea of height (and hence transcendence) that matters so much to Levinas. But it sounds as though art, according to Tarkovsky, gives a fairly direct and complete access to the infinite, while in Levinas transcendence of this kind is miraculous but also impossible: the Other has always already gone.

And yet, while Tarkovsky implies that he can sense the infinite in this picture, that is to say its inexhaustibility, he believes that finite aspects of the image will always, in practice, be selected:

It is not possible to catch the moment at which the positive goes over into its opposite, or when the negative starts moving towards the positive. Infinity is germane, inherent in the very structure of the image. In practice, however, a person invariably prefers one thing to another, selects, seeks out his own, sets a work of art in the context of his personal experience. And since everybody has certain tendencies in what he does, and asserts his own truth in great things as in small, as he adapts art to his daily needs he will interpret an artistic image to his own 'advantage' (Tarkovsky 1986, 109).

Much as Tarkovsky's prose self-criticism and self-justification after the fact is eloquent and suggestive (mirroring 'Alexei's' project of self-accounting in *Mirror*), the film itself is much more polysemous, open and hospitable. This is how the comparison of Maria/Natalia with Ginevra de' Benci plays out on the screen:

1:04:00 Alexei, as a boy, among trees, outside his parents' dacha, looks at a book about Leonardo, clumsily, childishly crumpling the sheets of tissue papers

that cover the plates, while he turns the pages. (This is just after the scene of his father returning from the War, failing to greet his wife – from whom he is already estranged – but asking after the children). Alexei's small sister accuses him of stealing the book (perhaps hinting at Tarkovsky's unease over his co-opting of a great, dead artist).

- 1:04:45 The children hear their father's voice, and run off to meet him. The book is left open, showing a Leonardo self-portrait.
- 1:05:27 The children running to the dacha. Maria's complicated expression – sorrow/contempt – as she watches what happens. The father embracing his weeping children, tears in his own eyes, saying nothing. Alexei's reproachful glance. Then (at 1:05:27), the sad Leonardo portrait of Ginevra, with Bach in the background. Possibly, the portrait represents a connection made in Alexei's own mind, since he has just been looking at the book.
- 1:05:42 Match cut from the portrait to a black and white medium shot of Natalia (who does indeed look like Ginevra), who then reproaches Alexei for his infrequent visits to their son Ignat (history obviously repeating itself).
- 1:07:30 Natalia looks at a black and white photograph of herself (oddly with bows in her hair) next to old Maria (Alexei's mother, played by Tarkovsky's mother), both with cheeks leaning on their left hands.
- 1:07:37 Another black and white photo: Natalia looking at Maria; both with sad, hard faces. Natalia concedes that there *is* a resemblance. Alexei says, 'Not at all'.

Are these comparisons and identifications to be trusted, or not? The boy Ignat, arriving with his mother at the empty flat where he will shortly read Pushkin, in some sort of dream or hallucination, to the vanishing woman, reports *déjà vu* (0:43:25). He is already caught up in the family habit of seeing repeats and doublings, making comparisons that may – like the Room in *Stalker* – be gateways to the truth, or simply dead ends.

Sameness again

Each of Tarkovsky's films contains a highly problematised system of comparison. They also invite comparison, constantly, with one another. *Mirror* and *Nostalghia*, for example, can almost be said to have the same title, insofar as both words are to be taken as standing for a whole range of terms that are equally relevant to the dominant structural principles and psychological moods of each film: mirroring, nostalgia, recurrence, doubling, *déjà vu*.

Tarkovsky went to some pains to explain what he meant by 'nostalghia' and how it connects with the autobiographical character of the film: it is 'a complex sentiment, one that mixes the love for your homeland and the melancholy that arises from being far away. (...) I wanted the film to be about the fatal attachment of Russians to their national roots, their past, their culture, their native places, their families and friends' (quoted in Johnson and Petrie 1994, 159). The central male character, Andrei, is even more egregiously marked as a version of Tarkovsky than *Mirror's* Alexei. Indeed Tarkovsky states, in an interview for *Corriere della sera*, that Andrei is 'a mirror image of me, I have never made a film which mirrors my own states of mind with so much violence, and liberates my inner world in such depth. When I saw the finished product I felt uneasy, as when one sees oneself in a mirror' (quoted in Mitchell 1984, 5). '[O]ne of Tarkovsky's finest achievements', as Johnson and Petrie remark, 'was to rescue the image of the mirror from its pedestrian employment in most films and restore something of its ancient magic, mystery, and even terror' (Johnson and Petrie 1994, 225). Johnson and Petrie do not explain quite what they mean by 'terror', but it seems an appropriate term in at least two ways: insofar as mirrors represent the doubling or *déjà vu* whereby the past reasserts itself in the present or whereby the same personality or face expresses two or more different bodies, creating a sense of imprisonment, a closed circle; and in the sense that mirrors as mechanisms for sending the self back to itself, in a way that is self-indulgent but also lonely. This last is more or less the analysis put forward in *Nostalghia* by Eugenia, Andrei's translator and would-be (against her better judgement) lover: who ends up denouncing his insularity in a tirade that is both hysterical (and rich food for the misogynistic reading of Tarkovsky developed by Johnson and Petrie and others) and amply justified, insightful, and a part of the powerful female-gendered critique of masculine self-obsession and melancholy that is the great counter-force of this film, as

of *Mirror*. Nevertheless, Eugenia is something of an egotist (and fashion victim) herself, and especially if we think of Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*, which figures even more largely in this film than Leonardo's painting does in *Mirror*, but which seems primarily to provide a negative comparison – it is what Eugenia is not – then it is hard to say whether these words from Levinas's 'Meaning and Sense' are more unwittingly evocative and diagnostic of *Nostalghia*'s male or its female lead:

Sense as the liturgical orientation of the Work does not arise from need. Need opens upon a world that is *for me*; it returns to itself. Even a sublime need, such as the need for salvation, is still a nostalgia, a longing to go back [*mal de retour*]. A need is return itself, the anxiety of the I for itself, egoism, the original form of identification. It is the assimilating of the world in view of self-coincidence, in view of happiness (Levinas 1996a, 51; 1964, 142).

Facing nostalgia and all its analogues face on, and thus working to disrupt the syndrome of *mal de retour* even as they evoke and indulge it so vividly, it seems to me that Tarkovsky's films at least partially escape the egoistic identification, or congealment of the world within the limits of the self, the greedy, self-sufficient subject/artist, that Levinas evokes in 'Reality and its Shadow' and elsewhere. This is in part because of the way in which Tarkovsky himself thematises art *within* the films – for instance, the paintings of Leonardo and Piero – as offering a temptation to nostalgia or abstraction that is dangerous in something very like the way that Levinas analyses: tempting the I that is anxious for itself, hungry for identification, desiring the closed circle of a faithful mirror. Otto, in *The Sacrifice*, tells Alexander that Leonardo scares him, and he prefers Piero. Piero's paintings do not in fact appear in *The Sacrifice*: so, the allusion is to the previous film, as if to remind us that Erland Josephson, the actor who plays Alexander (the former actor), also played Domenico, a somewhat similar role (a kind of holy fool who seeks, from what appears to be a position of maximal powerlessness, to save the world), in *Nostalghia*. There is much in Tarkovsky's films and his self-analyses to suggest that Piero and Leonardo might represent two poles of Tarkovsky's self-conception as an artist: warmly humanistic (if monumental) on the one hand, obsessive and forbidding on the other. Throughout Tarkovsky's work there is the desire to find a prototype, or to suggest that everything and everyone is repeated, as though they are just shadows of a transcendental Platonic original, and yet the provision of multiple, mutually-exclusive models – Leonardo or Piero – frustrates this.

Trauma

All of Tarkovsky's films are about learning: exploring the past and making sense of it. But his protagonists (not least those that appear most closely to resemble him) are typically very grudging about this; it is a thankless task. They seem to prefer the oversimplified generalisations to which Tarkovsky himself often succumbs in his critical writing, and therefore function, in a way, as his own critique of his criticism, or his acknowledgement that he does not possess a flawless mirror.

It is often possible to feel that Levinas – also, at times, a very dogmatic writer – does not much want to learn, or believes that doing so – in the sense of actually embracing something that is beyond the self, rather than being chastened and humbled by the revelation, before the Face or the Other or the Infinite, of the self's finitude – is impossible.³ That is in part why he is wary of the creative expression of the other in art: because it seems to hold out a promise of transcendence that cannot be realised. Hence, also, the darkness in Levinas's language when he describes the passing of the Other, which is always traumatic. A 'real trace [*trace authentique*],' according to 'Meaning and Sense':

disturbs the order of the world. It occurs by overprinting [*'en surimpression'*]. Its original signifyingness is sketched out in, for example, the fingerprints [*l'empreinte* (less specific)] left by someone who wanted to wipe away his traces and carry out a perfect crime. He who left traces in wiping out his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left. He disturbed the order in an irreparable way. For he passed absolutely. To be *qua leaving a trace* is to pass, to depart, to absolve oneself (Levinas 1996a, 61–62; 1964, 153).

Is the trace left by the criminal really a persuasive analogy for (or even example of) the trace that Levinas speaks of in general: the trace that we encounter in the Other? On the other hand, the metaphor points to a dark side of the whole Levinasian ethics: the Other as villain and fugitive, whose inaccessibility is the occasion for resentment and sorrow – because he fails to satisfy the nostalgia or desire for identification and reinforcement that Levinas, much as he may deplore it, never suggests that we can escape. 'The Levinasian subject', as Simon Critchley argues, 'is a traumatised self, a subject that is

³ See for example Andrew McGettigan's argument that 'Levinas fears a valorization of alterity that would not orient around the transcendence resulting from "Sacred History" distilled into ideas' (McGettigan 2006, 23).

constituted through a self-relation that is experienced as a lack, where the self is experienced as the inassumable source of what is lacking from the ego – a subject of melancholia, then' (Critchley 1999, 195).

The passing of the Other offers the hint of something antecedent to the self that mirrors and comprehends itself in consciousness: if the Other could be reached, then I would partake of another kind of self that is mine insofar as it is a precondition for my understanding, belief or intuition that the self of consciousness is not all, and that the Other embodies something that I have lost. But, as Levinas asks in 'Substitution':

[h]ow can a jolt, an expulsion outside of the Same, an awakening and tracking down of the Same, the very play of *consciousness*, occur in the stretching out of *essence*? How can this distance with regard to *the self* and nostalgia of the self or retention of the self, according to which every present is a re-presentation, be produced? Must not all the articulations of this movement require the 'rhythm' or the 'pulse' of ipseity? Is not this rhythm in its turn but the disclosure of being to itself, the representation of being by itself, the identity of this 'itself' being without mystery? (Levinas 1996a, 83; 1968, 492)

Responsibility, for Levinas, arises in the coalescence of identity, where a finite self (*Moi*) has to stand for the limitless *an-archie* that precedes it – the realm of a paradoxically unconfined self, or ipseity, that is just as much to do with x, y, and z as it is to do with *Moi* ... where *Moi* could turn out to be anyone. So, the formation of this self means standing as a representative or being sent forward as a hostage. But it is exactly wrong to think that this is a status that can deliberately, heroically, or (in an everyday sense) 'ethically' assumed; it is in fact the ultimate or absolute passivity:

Must we not speak of a responsibility that is not assumed? Far from recognizing itself in the freedom of consciousness losing and rediscovering itself, slackening the order of being so as to reintegrate it in a free responsibility, the responsibility of obsession implies an absolute passivity of a self that has never been able to depart from itself so as to return within its limits and identify itself by recognizing itself in its past; an absolute passivity whose contraction is a movement this side of identity. Responsibility for the other does not wait for [*n'a pas attendu*] the freedom of commitment to the other. Without ever having done anything, I have always been under accusation: I am persecuted. Responsibility is not a return to self but an irremovable and implacable crispation, which the limits of identity cannot contain. In obsession, the self's responsibility is, as it were, a deficit. Its recurrence breaks open the limits of identity, the *principle* of being that lies in me, the intolerable resting in oneself proper to definition (Levinas 1996a, 89; 1968, 499).

Thus, the twin processes of attempted self-definition and of the definition of others that we see Tarkovsky exploring, after his fashion, are, in Levinasian terms, testimony to a reaching after an originary self-ness or commonality, exceeding the self of the individual consciousness. Tarkovsky seems to feel, for example, that by juxtaposing himself with Leonardo or Piero he hints at something general and transcendent that he, although he partakes of it, cannot, in himself, speak for. And yet, again in Levinasian terms, the Tarkovskian search after prototypes and comparisons reveals, and does not assuage, an 'intolerable resting in oneself'.

Domenico, the holy fool of *Nostalghia*, who ends up immolating himself in what may well be a futile gesture, has a mysterious formula (together with a mass of other perplexing props and signs) on the wall of the decayed and inundated chamber where Andrei seeks him out – as if he were an oracle. The formula is '1 + 1 = 1'. Is this a denunciation (as per the rambling oration of his final minutes) of materialist acquisitiveness? Is it a hint at the danger of absorbing the other into the same – such that, even when Andrei has encountered Domenico, Andrei is still just Andrei? Is it, more positively, a testimony to the notion that all conscious selves are always already bound in a mutual responsibility (in Levinasian terms) beyond their comprehension? Perhaps it is all of these. And it raises the question of the value of critical comparison: of Tarkovsky, for example, with Levinas. Can the two be put together, arithmetically, accumulatively? Perhaps the attempt to do so is another symptom of doomed resistance to 'the intolerable resting in oneself'. Such a comparison, it seems to me, like so many of those explored by Tarkovsky, is a triangulation – through which I might seek to hint at an absent, unimaginable third (perhaps something like Levinas's self that is in excess of consciousness), that Tarkovsky and Levinas seem to imply: the commonality that underlies their differences. Inevitably, however, this triangulation does not constitute a breaking free from the same; it is rather an internal structuring of the same, a division and organisation of the same.

Closure and opening

I would like to return to *Mirror*, one last time, and to Tarkovsky's vividly precise enrichments of the abstract ideas of comparison and identification. The whole film can be seen as superbly self-fulfilling, its end answerable to its beginning, like a face flawlessly reflected. Most positively seen, it is one long release of the voice, from the

stammering youth of the opening moments to the boy Alexei's euphoric wordless cry (the last human utterance) in the woods at the end. As if Tarkovsky were to say, I have understood it all, and expressed it all (this story of my life and all the significant presences within it), completely.

And yet, there is another highly significant mirroring, circularity or end-in-the-beginning. In the first scene after the prologue we saw Maria (Alexei's mother) alone outside her dacha, estranged from her husband, but choosing to parry the palpable romantic interest of the eligible doctor who has appeared from nowhere, sat on her fence and broken it, fallen laughing to the ground with her, but who then is allowed to go, walking away across the fields and out of her life, but not without a backward glance, underlined and given an almost supernatural power by a sudden surge of wind that drives across the corn, as he stands there, like the current of time and possibility that is now leaving both of them behind. This scene is echoed by another, at the end of the film, but several years earlier in real time, in exactly the same spot, where Maria lies on the ground outside the dacha with her husband, who asks: Does she want a boy or a girl? Maria doesn't answer, but turns a smile full of sadness and irony directly to the camera. She is partly in character, at this point, and partly exterior to the narrative and complicit with the viewer, as though she, like us, now knows how it will all turn out: and, of course, it is the extraordinary fact of performance art (which Levinas, perhaps, failed to appreciate) that what we are seeing actually *is* the face of someone who is exterior to the artwork (Terekhova, the actress), and who can view the film just as we can, as well as being the face of Maria (which is also, perhaps, the face of Natalia, and even of Ginevra). And the sadness and irony in this face, and the shadows of unfulfilled other lives that carry over from the echoed earlier scene, undercut the self-present clarity that the film, on another level, seems to celebrate.

At least momentarily, Tarkovsky offers something that is not the same but as close (and as remote) as anything that Levinas can do, in words, to convey the opening of the window, the face behind the face, 'this way of coming from behind one's appearance, behind one's form, an openness in the openness' (Levinas 1996a, 53).

Ginevra

Ginevra de' Benci, Leonardo's sitter and Maria/Natalia/Margarita's 'double', was an admired poet. A single line survives, frustrating recognition with spectacular succinctness and force:

I ask your forgiveness, I am a mountain tiger.⁴

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⁴ From the notes on the painting on the website of the National Gallery, Washington, <http://www.nga.gov/>. Accessed 30 May 2007.

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