



Review: Nathan Dunne, ed. (2008) *Tarkovsky*
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London's Black Dog publishing house has produced an extraordinary volume which combines beautifully reproduced stills as well as 'studio shots, lobby cards, posters and other rare ephemera' with a selection of academic essays that range from the theoretical to the biographical. This book is exemplary in making accessible the work of Andrei Tarkovsky without condescending to its audience.

The book is divided into four main sections: Russia and Religion, Art and Nature, Music and Modernity, and Memory and Awakening and in each section there are five essays that address those ideas. In addition there is a complete filmography as well as Tarkovsky's father, Arseny's poetry. Tarkovsky used many of his father's poems in his later films *Mirror* (1974) and *Nostalghia* (1983) thus justifying their inclusion here.

In the introduction, Dunne explains the editorial choices he faced in putting the book together and he notes that, 'the hope is to establish a platform whereby future research on Tarkovsky may be undertaken in a wider interdisciplinary context' (9). It is this level of engagement with Tarkovsky as someone whose art and cinema speaks to more than one discipline that makes this an extremely valuable book. Furthermore, Dunne

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explains that 'much of the impetus of for this volume was born out of a... desire to spy on Tarkovsky, to peer through a side door and encounter a whispered conversation' (9).

The first section, *Russia and Religion*, looks at how Tarkovsky's films began as exemplary forms of Soviet filmmaking practices and at the same time managed to depict and grapple with complex issues of religion and philosophy. Within this section there are essays that address his political views on filmmaking, best expressed in a never before translated letter by Jean- Paul Sartre as well as essays that connect his filmmaking and politics to a broader philosophical project. Sartre's letter is of real interest because in it Sartre argues that Tarkovsky is the embodiment of Soviet values and Marxism using a close reading of his film *Ivan's Childhood* (1962). Sartre's letter was written in defense of Tarkovsky to the more leftist Italian papers.

Andrei Rogatchevi's essay 'Zoya in the Mirror: Leo Arnshtam's Influence on Andrei Tarkovsky' provides a historical background for Tarkovsky's interests in filmmaking by connecting him to Soviet filmmaker Leo Arnshtam (1905-1979). Rogatchevski readily admits that when discussing Tarkovsky's influences it is rare to hear Arnshtam mentioned. However, as he demonstrates in this essay, it becomes difficult to deny that Tarkovsky's poetic style does not owe something to this legendary Russian director who was responsible for the creation of much of the Soviet realist canon of films.

Vlad Stukov's 'Virtualisation of Self and Space in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*' analyses the films and its connections to Tarkovsky's thoughts about the value of the self, science, and a growing distrust of Soviet values. Stukov connects his reading of the film to the romantic notion of the sublime, as articulated by the German philosophers (Kant, Hegel, Heidegger). By drawing on the idea of the sublime, Stukov argues Tarkovsky was able to critique the very dualities and pessimistic qualities of life in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. This strategy according to Stukov provides Tarkovsky with the ability to protect himself from the wrath of the censors and also allows him to further explore his deep interests in time, remembrance and human perception.

'Tarkovsky's Trees' by Gerard Loughlin analyses the instances where trees figure into the pictorial landscape. In Loughlin's reading the trees symbolise two factors of Tarkovsky's personality. That is, they are 'always just themselves and always more than themselves. They are one tree and another at the same time' (82). This notion of duality in the tree he argues adheres to Tarkovsky's difficult acceptance of his religiosity and his

fealty to the Russian state. Thus for Loughlin the trees can be read as visual metaphors for the cross and its implication - that of supreme sacrifice and the divided nature of the human soul.

Alastair Renfrew's essay 'Before learning to Speak: Genre in Tarkovsky's Earlier Features' examines how the various genres of Soviet filmmaking and Tarkovsky's interest in religion fuse together to create his vision of the world. He analyses key moments in *Ivan's Childhood*, *Andrei Rublev (1966)*, and *Solaris (1974)* in order to show how Tarkovsky was able to make films within the Soviet framework that spoke to the audience expectations and at the same time transcend those very expectations. For Renfrew it was the challenge of making these genre films that enabled Tarkovsky to develop into an accomplished filmmaker and artist because he was forced to work within the constraints of that system. Thus in learning the characteristics of Russian filmmaking, he was able to go on and break those rules while crafting his more intimately driven films.

The second section, Art and Nature, comprises of five essays and questions the nature of Tarkovsky's films relationships to the phenomenological and to the arts such as literature and painting. The first essay by Stephanie Sandler 'The Absent Father, the Stillness of Film: Takovsky, Sokurov and Loss' examines how these two filmmakers employ the idea of the absent father within their work as a metaphor for a larger idea of absence. Sandler's connection of these two filmmakers is fascinating because Tarkovsky is recognized as a cine poet of absence and loss whereas Sokurov is more in tune with exploring larger issues of history. However, Sandler does make a convincing argument for seeing a connection between the two, especially in how they utilise the emotions of lament, remorse, and anger to speak to broader fears of being born and living within the Soviet system.

Of all the essays in this section Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie's seem to speak to the larger fascinations that audiences and scholars harbour for Tarkovsky—that of his constant awareness and play with the realm of painting. Johnson and Petrie examine how Tarkovsky uses painting in his films *Andrei Rublev* and *Solaris* to conduct a discussion about the nature of art and humanity. The film *Rublev* is respected for its ironic portrayal of the famous Russian icon painter, as they both acknowledge. What their discussion of the film does enhance is an understanding of why Tarkovsky chose never to film Rublev at work, nor to show his paintings until the end. In fact, they argue that this was a political decision by

Tarkovsky to craft his film against the standard Hollywood model. Moreover, it allows him in the end to express his reverence for Rublev's art. For them his use of painting is an artistic and philosophical choice because it illuminates the fact that all manner of art and sight is based in limited perception.

Robert Bird's essay 'The Imprinted Image' is the most philosophically focused in the volume. He argues that what truly sets Tarkovsky apart from other filmmakers is his need to imprint the image with time. 'Tarkovsky minted images of a precision and an intensity that...have made possible a re-valuation of the cinema as currency of the real' (207). Bird relies on his interpretation of Tarkovsky's cinema and of course Tarkovsky's own writings about time and cinema in his discussion of the power of the films to capture and preserve the fleeting quality of time. For Bird, like Tarkovsky, cinema's inherent aesthetic value is that it can imprint time (209). Bird cites the instances wherein Tarkovsky places Russian coins within the *mise-en-scene*. It is interesting to think that a director schooled in Marxism and the Soviet system would use the talisman of capitalism itself, that of currency, in order to depict his ideas about time and humanity's relationship to time. Bird's reaction to this strategy seems to lose some idea of the paradox, because he is so deeply invested in arguing that what classifies Tarkovsky as a great filmmaker was his philosophical stance regarding time.

Bird also argues quite effectively that it is Tarkovsky's methods of narration such as the long shot, deep focus, and awkward staging that also call attention to the fact that here is a director struggling to capture presence when there is nothing really there except the interplay between light and shadow. Bird in the end argues that Tarkovsky's films link human consciousness and desires to the corporeal body and the phenomenological.

The third section of the book Music and Modernity focuses on the impact of the art film climate of the 1960s on Tarkovsky's cinema. Also in this section are essays that examine how sound is used by Tarkovsky to express a deeper portrait of the human experience. Bhaskar Sarkar's essay 'Threnody for Modernity' opens this section and sets the tone for the rest of the essays to follow.

Sarkar views Tarkovsky's unique employment of sound in his films as one the primary characteristics of his oeuvre and that of the modernist films being produced for the art house circuit of the 1960s and 1970s. While many of the scholars in this book have stressed the need for patience and concentration at the level of the visual, Sarkar argues

the opposite. He states that 'these failed films impel us to look and listen more attentively for their own logics - a task that might takes its cues from a middle brow, cosmopolitan cinephilia' (236). The reference to 'failed films' within this statement is not Sarkar judging Tarkovsky but was the view expressed by Tarkovsky and the Soviet Union. For these films were supposed to awaken a new classless sensibility and not become entrenched in the loaded realm of 'enlightened' capitalism. However, what did and does occur with viewing these films is a constant struggle for the viewer's attention, their patience, and ultimately their willingness to embrace the difficulties inherent in Tarkovsky's philosophical meditations through his films.

James Quandt's essay 'Tarkovsky and Bresson: Music, Suicide, Apocalypse' argues that the two filmmakers and their films can best be understood as a form of conversation between two friends. 'The two friends shared cardinal themes—spiritual anguish, the search for grace and oblivion, the conflict between faith and the barbarity of the world—and both educed the mystical from the banal, made the ineffable inhere in the everyday' (259). From this thesis Quandt analyses films made by the two men and notes how they each use sound to divert the viewer's attention away from images onscreen because often the sound and image will not match.

Nathan Dunne's essay 'Tarkovsky and Flaubert: The Sacrifice and Saint Anthony' looks at how Tarkovsky used the literary structures of authors like Flaubert in the writing of his screenplays. To illustrate this claim, Dunne discusses *The Sacrifice* (1986). Dunne makes a more broad based argument that addresses the limitations and problems with discussing film adaptations. In effect, Dunne reads Tarkovsky's film as a loose adaptation of Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, a book that apparently captured the attention of Tarkovsky throughout his life.

Dunne analyses the film, Tarkovsky's script and his use of paintings because as Dunne argues Tarkovsky was never someone who simply wished to adapt one work of art to another but instead sought to create a new form (287). This understanding of Tarkovsky brilliantly engages and enhances one's knowledge of the director and his films, while also providing a larger portrait of Tarkovsky's thoughts on art, religion, and philosophy.

David Miall's essay *Resisting Interpretation* serves as a counterpoint to most of the essays in the volume that focus on Tarkovsky's methods and aesthetics. Miall instead wishes to make sense of Tarkovsky's effectiveness or lack thereof within the role of the viewer and

their understanding. Miall draws upon the ideas of reader response theory and argues for a re-evaluation of the role of the viewer in the production of meaning. He makes this choice, because as he acknowledges, one of the fascinations of Tarkovsky's films is their ability to create an intense level of identification between the viewer and the characters. According to Miall, the power of Tarkovsky's images and sound lies not with the director or the scholar but with each individual viewer who wants to be the child lovingly hugged by their father in *Mirror*.

The last section of essays is entitled Memory and Awakening. This section comprises five essays, which provide a human touch to Tarkovsky because several of the authors worked personally with him on various projects. The first essay by Evgeny Tsymbal 'Sculpting the Stalker: Towards a New Language of Cinema' provides insight into the troubled production of what is generally regarded as Tarkovsky's most difficult film to watch. Tsymbal was one of the cinematographers on the film and in this piece he uses interview material as well as personal recollections to explain how Tarkovsky challenged the expectations of the government, his crew, and his audience in pursuit of a new 'language of cinema.' Tsymbal explains that the film was shot and re-shot as a result of Tarkovsky's growing disenchantment with the Soviet system and his own insecurities as a filmmaker.

Irina Brown's essay 'Tarkovsky in London: The Production of Boris Godunov' is more a production history of the Russian opera on the London stage rather than a sustained analysis of Tarkovsky as an artist. While she does provide some interesting insights as to how Tarkovsky viewed other art forms, much of Brown's essay is spent detailing the minutiae of the production, which would be of interest to someone studying Tarkovsky and his connection to the operatic form, but seems out of place in this volume.

Birgit Menzel's piece 'Tarkovsky in Berlin' acts as an insider's perspective of the complexities, insecurities, and tyrannical nature of the director. This essay focuses on a brief period where Tarkovsky conducted a week-long workshop on filmmaking in March of 1984 for German students who were studying Slavic languages, not film. In her recounting of the events and Tarkovsky's arrogant attitude, Menzel provides another perspective of the filmmaker that has rarely been the subject of attention. His indifference to his audience, she argues was separating his art from their interest.

The last essay of this section 'What Would Tarkovsky Do?' by the Hollywood director Marc Forster demonstrates that Tarkovsky's appeal is larger than that of the art house crowd. In fact, Forster demonstrates a reverence, passion, and frustration with Tarkovsky's craft and his own that illuminates the joys and pitfalls of being a filmmaker. Forster explains that in his own working process he finds himself often asking the question 'what would Tarkovsky do if faced with this situation.' By pondering this question Forster explains that he has been able to challenge himself and Hollywood's own methods because of his own need to make films that are worthy of Tarkovsky. Thus Forster sees his films as mini artistic statement, as did Tarkovsky, rather than as mere products to generate revenue for Hollywood.

Forster's question also speaks to the broader basis of this volume, art, cinema studies, and the influence of Tarkovsky as a filmmaker. By asking this question, Forster seems to echo the sentiments of all the authors in this volume- Tarkovsky was a master artist, a filmmaker and a philosopher of the highest caliber.

This lavishly produced volume with hundreds of pictures does justice to the legacy of one of Russia's greatest filmmakers. In providing critical looks at Tarkovsky's films, methods, and ideas these authors collectively demonstrate a level of passion for Tarkovsky that has sadly been absent for quite some time.