



September 2022

ReFocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky

Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran

Charles Burnett Graduate School of Global Cinema, rebecca.vmc@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Ver Straten-McSparran, Rebecca (2022) "ReFocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 2, Article 8.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.02.08>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss2/8>

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ReFocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky

Abstract

This is a book review of Sergei Toymentsev, ed., *ReFocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

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Author Notes

Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran is an author/scholar and founder of The Charles Burnett Graduate School of Global Cinema, opening in fall 2024. She consults for productions, independent filmmakers, and film programs. A former director of LA Film Studies Center, her Ph.D. in theological aesthetics is from King's College London.

Toymontsev, Sergei, ed., *ReFocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

Outside of a religious perspective, film critic Kartina Richardson writes about the deadly and the holy in cinema. The deadly is conventional cinema that makes us comfortable and allows our self-protective covering to remain intact, revealing no truth. The holy is cinema that seeks to make visible the invisible and desires to understand the spiritual and philosophical. It “peels” us, unsettles us, will not leave us alone but instead requires searching for those buried coherences that take us deeper within and beyond. The truly holy requires us to pay attention, to struggle to grasp hold of it. It is difficult. It may be disturbing.

For Richardson, the holiest filmmaker is the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–1986). Tarkovsky altered the landscape of filmmaking through his complex films and is considered the greatest artist in cinema by many accounts. His method of sculpting time and space created a new form of cinematic poetry, making his work pivotal in the film world. As a film painter, he presses into the liminal regions of worlds seen and unseen, using every day, ordinary images: a woman washing her hair, coins spilling in mud, a meadow of grass bending with the invisible breath of wind. Ingmar Bergman, the famous Swedish director, said of him, “Tarkovsky for me is the greatest [director], the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of film as it captures life as a reflection, life as a dream.”¹

Sergey Toymentsev's edited collection of fifteen essays on Tarkovsky seeks to dispel such reverence for the filmmaker by addressing what he perceives is a lack of serious theoretical scholarship on Tarkovsky's work. Scholars lean instead toward a "methodological narrowness of Anglophone auteur studies on the one hand and Russophone hagiographic zeal on the other" (6). Toymentsev argues that most studies are confined to film history and formalist analysis, centering on theological themes, narrative motifs, cinematic techniques, aesthetics, or historical studies. Theoretical approaches, such as feminism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, diaspora studies, film-philosophy, etc., are primarily limited to journal articles and collections. Although this book is similar, Toymentsev intends to fortify such theoretical approaches by positioning a variety of non-theological methodological perspectives and interdisciplinary analyses in a context that is not theologically inflected.

The book's fifteen chapters provide an excellent way to dip one's toe into critical theory (Lacan, Bergson, Deleuze, Lyotard, Žižek, Merleau-Ponty, Aristotle, and Bloom, among others). At first glance, they may not appear to fit Tarkovsky's aura as a spiritual filmmaker, but they bring new light to his oeuvre and challenge received views.

Although the three chapters in Part I "Background," are biographical, they engage Tarkovsky's biography through a theoretical lens. In "Tarkovsky's Childhood: Between Trauma and Myth," Evgeniy Tsymbal employs André Green's

psychoanalytic framework to investigate how the director's complicated relationship with his mother influenced his artistic drive. Green's "dead mother complex" occurs when a mother's grief fundamentally alters her relationship with her child. While she continues caring for the child, she cannot love him. Following Tarkovsky's father's desertion, his mother never remarried, was tough and emotionally withdrawn, yet exhibited a self-denying devotion for her children. For Tsymbal, Tarkovsky sought to overcome this brokenness by youthful defiance of his mother's authority, which in adulthood alienated him, along with his determined independence and devotion to art's spiritual revelation. Tsymbal suggests that by Tarkovsky forming his characters into martyrs with transcendental yearnings, rejected by society, and defined by the theme of sacrifice, he transforms his private suffering into the "romantic myth of an artist-savior" (27). She quotes his sister, "[Our mother] seemed to purposefully choose the hardest paths for herself" (19).² She "prioritized spiritual life over everything else" (19).³ Yet Tsymbal ignores the similarities between Tarkovsky's and his mother's sense of martyrdom and their twin impulses of choosing the hardest path, fierce independence, relentless work, and spiritual life. It is sometimes the case that theory does not accord with all of the movements of life.

Film theory, however, can theologially illuminate texts by applying an unfamiliar scaffolding. The second chapter, "*Trava-Travlya-Trata*," centers on Andrei Tarkovsky's repeated use of a related constellation of words that the author

suggests presents a psychobiographical code that symbolizes and organizes the intrinsic dynamics of his images. Andrei Gornykh's apt use of Lacan's model of signifying chains which determines linking symbolic trajectories to keep the Real (*das Ding*) distanced, links grass (*trava* in Russian), persecution anxiety regarding party authorities (*travlya*), and spending (*trata*) as a cluster of signifiers. Gornykh shows that this trinity of words revolves around the Thing, in this case, the cinematic motif of the house, ultimately an empty space, a black hole with a gravitational pull that is an "eternally absent sought-after object" (33). A common tendency is to attend to Tarkovsky's infinite spaces beyond the screen or the concomitant meaning of slow, sculpted time. However, we must also attend to the dark spaces Gornykh suggests that reveal Tarkovsky's spiritual struggles, which grant him authentic spiritual insight beyond party authorities.

While Sergey Toymentsev is the editor of this quite helpful book, his chapter is the most problematic. He hopes to rescue Tarkovsky's theoretical "musings" from "being dismissed as unembarrassedly Romantic or outdated" by suggesting that Tarkovsky subconsciously reflects Henri Bergson's philosophy. First, given a plethora of continuing work on Tarkovsky, it does not appear to be the case that his writings are being dismissed. Second, the consonance between Gilles Deleuze's theoretical development of Bergson's "time-image" and Tarkovsky's view of time within his films and writings is identified in numerous sources, as are the consonance between Bergson and Tarkovsky alone. For instance,

in Chapter 11 Efir comments on “...the more obvious parallels between Tarkovsky and thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson....” (33). Toymentsev presents a general overview of Tarkovsky’s distinctives, the film-image, time, anti-intellectualism, and correspondence with Bergson’s philosophy in order to tease out theoretical elements. However, the “light” he sheds is less compared to the rest of the essays, and his antagonism toward Romanticism, spirituality, Christianity, and neoformalism diminishes what he does offer. His critique of counterarguments includes incongruencies which do not decimate his argument but certainly weaken its trustworthiness. For instance, his description of neoformalism as a counter-intuitive approach to Tarkovsky’s images reverses neoformalist David Bordwell’s perspective of the relationship between *syuzhet* (roughly “plot”) and style in comparison with Thomas Redwood’s view.⁴ Further, concluding that Tarkovsky is an agnostic since he purportedly writes in his diaries that “knowledge of God or the Universe is but an individualist illusion which can be psychologically explained” (49)⁵ is simply incompatible with the Diaries which frequently erupt into spiritual comment or prayer: “What a joy it is to feel the Presence of the Lord.”⁶ He concludes with a summary of correspondences between Bergson and Tarkovsky: both place intuition over intellectual cognition, psychological duration over chronological time, and past over present. Both emphasize a unity of subjective consciousness (spirit) and objective reality (matter). It should be noted that duration is somewhat different for each, and to say

that both place past over present oversimplifies the case so much that it could be construed as incorrect.

Part II investigates Tarkovsky's film method. In "The Child's Eye View of the War," Sara Pankenier Weld examines Tarkovsky's visual strategy in *Ivan's Childhood* (1962). Weld considers how the film encompasses a child's experience of violence, and through his private subjectivity forces the audience into a humble and vulnerable position. Shots from a low angle underscore the weighty and formidable superstructure Ivan faces. The film's ending depicts the suffering of every child in war, from deprivation and torment to death, resonating in countless ways with the intersection of religion and film.

In the 1960's, filmmakers focused on achieving a documentary sense of truth, from *Cinéma vérité* (US and Europe) to hand-held cameras (Russia). Zdenko Mandušić probes *Andrei Rublev's* (1966) alternative visual strategy of the long take to achieve a sense of direct but detached observation and truthfulness. Instead of being continuously followed by the camera, Rublev becomes an observer, further emphasized by the non-linear narrative. These methods joined with episodic narrative, color palette, and specific props, enabled *Andrei Rublev* to achieve a powerful sense of historical document, validated by the film's citation in serious historical studies.

Donato Totaro takes a different approach to the long take in *Stalker* (1984), the most incisive, insightful, and powerful analysis of *Stalker* I've read, loaded with

theological significance. He analyzes the thematic progression in time of the film's long takes. Beginning in a city filmed in black and white, or "drab time," the guide Stalker takes a cynical Writer and materialist Scientist on a journey to "the Zone," a new reality that Totaro calls "creation time." This altered experience of time decimates their conception of time and space, yet fills them with astonishment and wonder, entirely altering their structures of belief, transformed from cynic and materialist to believers in the paranormal and spiritual. Their new sight slowly infuses the drab city with magic and wonder, affirmed by miraculous changes in Stalker's mutant daughter. It hints at the possibility that what is perceived in the Zone is actually in the world outside, selfless love, faith, and hope, awaiting discovery.

"Framing Infinity in Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*," by Yelizaveta Goldfarb Moss, suggests that Tarkovsky brings the vast spaces of Russian landscape juxtaposed with a cathedral, walls, windows, and doors, to illuminate an excess of vision in unrepresentable places, utilizing the philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard. Gorchakov opens Domenico's door in Italy, disclosing a window frame through which a Russian landscape is overflowing into the room. It reveals for Goldfarb Moss the invisible "seeping out from behind the wings," wherein both the visible and invisible are portrayed on the same plane. For Tarkovsky, *Nostalghia* (1983) conveys "the hopelessness of trying to grasp what is boundless" (33).⁷ Goldfarb Moss brings new light to Tarkovsky's nuanced methods of manifesting the power

of the invisible to a materialist culture, central to theological thinking and filmmaking.

Julia Shpinitzkaya offers an astute analysis of a neglected but critical aspect of Tarkovsky's style: sound design. For Tarkovsky, natural sounds heard as music enhance the film's visuals. Electronic music makes this possible, being absorbed into the sound and indistinct, becoming necessary elements of interplay with the image. Sound scholar Michael Chion comments that Tarkovsky's sounds "seem to come from another side as if they're heard by an immaterial ear" (143),⁸ creating a particular contemplative state. For Shpinitzkaya, they are best described by Nelson Goodman's term "irreal," accentuating the presence of parallel renderings of reality that have an equal right to exist concurrently. Tarkovsky's sound designers built sound bridges that pressed material reality to its limits and thus brought together parallel worlds.

Theoretical approaches to Tarkovsky's oeuvre are assessed in Part III. In "Andrei Tarkovsky, or the Thing from Inner Space," Slavoj Žižek advocates for a Lacanian materialist interpretation of confronting the radical otherness of the *Thing-in-itself*. This impossible and traumatic Thing as the id machine is depicted by the planet Solaris or Stalker's Zone where our desires are directly materialized, and we discover the lost object of our inner longings. Unlike most readings, this confrontation has no religious content, comparable to confrontations with uncharted worlds.

Linda Belau and Ed Cameron focus on Tarkovsky's spiritual longings understood as a religious suppression of his symbolic separation from the Thing and his melancholic attachment to it. They employ the theories of melancholia developed by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva to explore Tarkovsky's last three Soviet films.

“The Flesh of Time: *Solaris* and the Chiasmic Image” by Robert Efirm joins Žižek's notion of cinematic materialism with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the flesh as the opening of the “seeing into the visible and of the visible into the seeing” (198).⁹ Efirm presents a quite different lens through which to consider the relation of the material and spiritual. He envisions a mirror-like chiasm, the intersection of two tracts that reflect each other, as the vital place of the intertwining of visible and invisible. *Solaris* (1972) expresses this chiasm in numerous ways, from dream and reality seeping into the space of the other, the enfleshment of the dead Hari, to the transcendental ground of *Solaris* itself as the “joint” through which the process of time finds its form. Tarkovsky renders images intended to make us see beyond their form and concentrates on the material as a way to manifest the spiritual.

In “Cinema as Spiritual Exercise: Tarkovsky and Hadot,” Anne Eakin Moss argues for the affinity between Pierre Hadot's philosophy—joining philosophy and religion through spiritual exercises—and Tarkovsky's spiritual films in their seeking “cosmic consciousness,” e.g., for Tarkovsky, in the sea on the planet *Solaris*. She separately examines his filmmaking and spectatorship as a spiritual

exercise and the mode required of the spectator that could be called “spiritual special effects.” His films reveal the contemporary relevance of Hadot’s ancient spiritual practices through a self-reflexive vision for cinema in current spiritual life.

Mikhail Iampolski explores Tarkovsky’s fascination with memory by demonstrating the unfolding of memory and its progression through trace in his films. In *Andrei Rublev*, Tarkovsky’s direct observation method enabled him to reconstruct Russian history to show Soviet culture that the future is rooted in the past. *Mirror* (1974) brings the past into the present by making subjective memories and dreams central to the plot, as does *Solaris*, even as it is enmeshment of memory and trace, which conceals things. In *Stalker*, trace overcomes memory, but by *Nostalghia*, it fully absorbs memory, illustrated in the Gothic cathedral encompassing the Russian home. *Sacrifice* (1986), Tarkovsky’s last film, shifts beyond traces and concern with death to de-subjectivized memory, and in an apocalypse, the subject disappears altogether.

Addressing Tarkovsky’s legacy in Part IV, Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya offers a comparative analysis of the Russian director Andrei Zvyagintsev’s films and Tarkovsky’s influence on him. Zvyagintsev, a two-time Oscar nominee and winner of the Cannes Film Festival’s Jury Prize (2017), directed *The Return*, *Elena*, *Leviathan*, and *Loveless*. Examining themes and stylistic motifs of Tarkovsky evident in Zvyagintsev’s films, she searches for innovation, that “something deeper,” that distinguishes his oeuvre as he wrestles with the influence of cinematic

pedagogy, authorial autonomy in an inherited tradition, and the depersonalizing of filmmakers' art through State requirements.

Lars von Trier's reverence for Tarkovsky is well known, and if it is not, his dedication of *Antichrist* (2009) to Tarkovsky sealed it. Sergey Toymentsev and Anton Dolin assess this influence in "Von Trier and Tarkovsky: From Antithesis to Counter-sublime." What is surprising about this final chapter is the excellent fit of Harold Bloom's rhetorical matrix of revisionary ratios used as a scaffolding theory to evaluate it. The authors engage Bloom's "early antithetical completion" state to examine Tarkovsky's shaping force through style and theme in von Trier's films, demonstrating that von Trier repeatedly sought to press Tarkovsky's "messianic project" beyond previous borders. The "counter-sublime" is distinguished by von Trier's unattainable but obsessive aspiration to disregard his influence. Additionally, the authors use Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), which delineates European cynicism, to explore von Trier's attacks upon Tarkovsky's spiritual perspective of redemption. They argue that rather than tarnish Tarkovsky's legacy, it grants it a new life in a complex post-secular setting. Most remarkable in this chapter are the plethora of parallels between the two auteurs' films not found elsewhere. It is rich reading indeed.

Although this collection of essays ostensibly explores Andrei Tarkovsky's films through various film theories, it may also be read as a compendium of film theories employing Tarkovsky's films as case studies. Some chapters may be quite

helpful for undergraduates seeking to contextualize critical theory and to compare with spiritual/religious perspectives on Tarkovsky. The essays offer the opportunity for scholars and graduate students in religion and film to engage in particular with psychoanalytical theory, Lacan, Žižek, and Deleuze, theorists avoided by some who are certain they are at odds with religious studies. This book will enrich their research. At times it becomes obvious that the authors must navigate their way around gaps not easily bridged by the materialist—often awkwardly. However, this is to say that some essays nearly beg for a non-materialist approach to complete them.

¹ Kartina Richardson, “The Cinema Deadly & Holy,” *Mirror Motion Picture Commentary* (blog), April 26, 2011, <http://www.mirrorfilm.org/2011/04/26/the-cinema-deadly-holy/>. See also Jan Bielawski and Trond Tronsen, <http://nostalghia.com/>.

² Martina Tarkovskaya, “Interview zhurnalu ‘Bul’var Gordona,” Media-arkiv ‘Andrei Tarkovsky,” 2007, <http://www.tarkovskiy.su/texty/vospominania/MTarkovskaya04.htm>.

³ Marina Tarkovskaya, *Oskolki zerkala* (Moska: Vagrius, 2006), 120.

⁴ Thomas Redwood, *Andrei Tarkovsky’s Poetic Cinema* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 48-50. Toymensev states that David Bordwell’s “style-centered ‘parametric’ cinema shifts the role of narration from the film’s plot to its “decorative” stylistic subtleties,” when in fact Bordwell’s parametric mode requires the conceptual separation of syuzhet (roughly “plot”) and style. That is, film style is a non-narrative device. Conversely, Toymensev states that Thomas Redwood’s neo-formalist study of Tarkovsky’s style requires the narrative autonomy of stylistic devices, when instead Redwood distinguishes his view from Bordwell’s, stating that “stylistic patterns in his late films function as narrational devices.”

⁵ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Martirolog: dnevniki 1970-1986* (Istituto internazionale Andrej Tarkovskij, 2008), 366.

⁶ Andrey Tarkovsky, *Time within Time: The Diaries 1970-1986* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 174.

⁷ Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art* (Austin: University of Texas, 1986, 1987), 203.

⁸ Michael Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1994, 123-4.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 136.