

## Andrei Tarkovsky: Critical Notes on a Bestiary

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This study aims to illustrate how the issue of animals and animalism is dealt with in Andrej Tarkovsky's films. In particular, it is Tarkovsky's idea of time, as a non-symbolic dimension, which recognises the impossibility of a distinction between mankind and animals. It is precisely this impossibility which allows us to isolate the 'animal issue' in the filmography of the Russian director and to study it in its manifold metamorphoses, whilst preventing us from taking on Tarkovsky's bestiary in its entirety and following the alphabetical order which is usually typical of any cataloguing. Tarkovsky's bestiary is a modern one, in which the ancient allegorical tension associated with animals changes sign and dissolves in favour of a borderland where, in lieu of beasts in their purest form, crossbreeding and transformations between humans and animals can be found. Both are connected through an ancient story which, in our opinion, finds an interesting balance precisely in the films of the Russian director.

**Keywords:** long takes, bestiary, animals, borderland

### Some Premises

"Is it possible, at moments we can't imagine, a horse can add its sufferings together ... and turn them into grief? What use is grief ... to a horse?" (Shaffer, 1974)

We will attempt to demonstrate that Andrei Tarkovsky's cinema problematizes the figure of the animal and the concept of animality relying on both a long span of time for which the long shot is an absolutely indispensable condition for the requirements of visual and narrative expression, and on the central role of figures, such as the dog or the horse, which he uses to interrogate man thereby producing a radical fracture through the core of every anthropocentric conception that considers itself pure or *other* with respect to the dimension of the animal. Tarkovsky believes the horse to be the quintessence of natural harmony: As we will see, Alexander, in *The Sacrifice* (1986), is the only one able to transform his sufferings into "moral grief", exactly like Peter Shaffer's *Equus*; this is the very reason that the Russian film-maker replaces the flesh-and-blood animal with a "mechanical horse", mailman Otto's bicycle.

*The Sacrifice* opens and closes with the same scene; but the beginning and end of the film, which are almost identical, are in fact framed in different shots. The camera contemplates a tree, starting from the roots to reach the tips of the branches: It first identifies it as the tree in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Adoration of the Magi*, then later works its way up the dry tree planted by Alexander and Little Man. This element of style—which may already be found in *Andrei Rublev* (1966), when the young bell-caster Boriska scans the natural progression that begins at the roots and rises up along the tree all the way to the leaves, before leading back down to the ground—is the "movement of life" in Tarkovsky's universe, a circle of inspiration that can be only

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be experienced in earth and water. Indeed, Alexander watches his house burn down lying on the wet earth, a vital element that returns some of the heat of the flames he is contemplating. The encounter between earth, water, fire, and humanity is a source of wellbeing. Alexander undoubtedly experiences his only moments of joy in the relationship between earth and body, sustained and disturbed by the catastrophe.

Tarkovsky's images consist of the meetings and intersections between a multitude of signs, events, and processes with which the director communicates the moral foundations of his personal vision of the world: The highest value of spiritual experiences, for the film-maker, lies in and is represented by the earth, mud, matter, and clay. This scale of correspondence between spirit and matter, understood as a metaphor of the impossible distinction between man and animal, inspires all Tarkovsky's characters<sup>1</sup> and increasingly configures animality as a model of engagement intrinsic to man, rather than as his negation or negativity. However, more than any other, it is the parable of the garden, as the main character in *The Sacrifice*, describes it to the witch Maria that illustrates the dryness of the earth when man shapes it and deprives it of the animality that is its essence. To please his sick mother who is now close to death, Alexander transforms nature into a garden, working at it very hard and recreating the space in his own image, thereby imposing his will on the vegetation that little by little becomes more codified. When he completes his work, the young man contemplates the garden that he has shaped: The beauty has gone and been replaced by the ravages of man. While spurred by love and the desire to "improve" nature's work, Alexander's action is inevitably revealed as an act of violence that demonstrates how useless any coherent organization of the passing of time will ever be. Time has its own independence, and any attempt at circumscribing it simply reduces it to something in which man lives his daily life; whereas "being inside time", for Tarkovsky, means to be aware of its existence, even when there is no specific sequence in its configuration. The garden is not improved by Alexander's work, and he himself is content to give easily understandable form to those moments in the life of nature that, if one knows how to "listen", actually suggest their own form.

In organizing his mother's garden, the hero of *The Sacrifice* understands that he has denied the value of the *epiphany*, i.e., of the phenomenon, in favour of his own abstract *idea* of nature: This will be the reason that will allow him to embrace the inspiration, the *fury*, that will lead to his final sacrifice<sup>2</sup>. In embodying this enthusiasm—the same that makes Leonardo da Vinci, in the *Adoration of the Magi* which we see as the background to the opening credits, rear his horses before the phenomenon of the divine apparition—Alexander sustains the natural movement that characterizes the Florentine master's painting and thus shifts the *fury* from the world of horses to the world of men (Argan, 2000)<sup>3</sup>. This is a reversal that the director builds by firmly

<sup>1</sup> As in *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962), in which the young boy slips into the earth and water in a perfect osmosis, unlike the soldiers who seem clumsy, heavy and noisy; or in *Stalker* (1979), when the Professor, who remains firmest in his belief, lies down on a hard, dry rock, while the Writer, more open to faith, stretches out on the soft damp moss, and finally the Stalker, guided by his faith, lies on the clay, in that perfect communion of earth mixed with water.

<sup>2</sup> The *fury* (also the divine grace granted to a small number of superior spirits, to an *élite*) is the fundamental concept of Neo-Platonic thought.

<sup>3</sup> It was Giulio Carlo Argan who brought Leonardo's *Adoration of the Magi* under the umbrella of the Neo-Platonic concept of *fury*, when he wrote: "The Adoration of the Magi is the most frequently recurring subject in fifteenth-century Florentine painting: in addressing it, Leonardo takes his position with respect to a full-blown tradition, which began with Lorenzo Monaco and continued through Botticelli, who purged the representation of its sacredness and transformed it into a celebration of the family and the erudite court of the Medici family. Leonardo refers specifically to this painting that celebrates the religious piety of the Neo-Platonic circle, interpreting the theme symbolically rather than historically or as a story, and grouping the figures in a circle around the sacred representation rather than having them arrive in procession. Going even further than Botticelli, he eliminates the stable; and mixes the Magi with a crowd of agitated, rushing, gesticulating, prostrate people. Botticelli himself develops the theme as more of an *epiphany*, or a manifestation of the divine, than as an *adoration*; but Leonardo refuses to consider the social aspect of the theme (the tribute of the aristocracy and the intellectuals to God) and goes straight to the philosophical core" (transl. by the author).

denying Eisenstein's theory of montage cinema (Ejzenštejn, 1984)<sup>4</sup>: Tarkovsky's search for the essence in film-making, which is no different, as we will see, from a similar elevated biographical and ethical aspiration—"sin is everything that is not necessary" the director will have Alexander say in *The Sacrifice*—finds that the only possible approach for the concept and practice of editing is the complete spontaneity typical of the manifestations of nature, of life taken in its entirety, not as artificial but as fully realistic.

Tarkovsky's conception of time in cinema is therefore the first manifestation of how the concepts of animality of man's becoming animal and the distinction between man and animal (as well as the identification) are engaged in an ever-dynamic relationship in the flow of continuous movement between them, in the transformation of one into the other, achieving states of pure intensity that can only be ascribed to individual sensibility and artistic personality. The images in Tarkovsky's cinema embody the director's personal insights, his subjective predisposition to unity of time in the scene, which he explicates in the way he lingers on faces, landscapes, and the "rhythm" of nature and of objects. The Russian director's cinematic time absorbs his expressive power beyond the boundaries of time as delimited by his frames: Tarkovsky's conception of long time—as in the long shot of the pre-finale in *Nostalgia* (1983), or at the beginning of *Stalker* and even more in *The Sacrifice*—is a non-symbolic dimension and as such recognizes the impossibility of distinguishing between man and animal.

It is this impossibility that prevents us from addressing Tarkovsky's bestiary as a whole, using an alphabetical order that is customary in every cataloguing effort, and makes it possible to isolate the "animal problem" in the Russian film-maker's body of work, seeking to focus on its multiform metamorphoses. And because thematic criticism does not exactly indicate a "method", but rather a orientation in the interpretation that would imply a thematization or a repertory on a theme (the bestiary) in one or more works of an author (Andrei Tarkovsky's films), then the analysis that follows, while based on a thematic repertory, will be more than just a lexicographic enquiry.

Understood as a literary form on the theme of animals, the bestiary in Tarkovsky's cinema finds place as a thematic category: The recurrence of animals in his films is portrayed semantically with a prevalent focus on the relationship between man and animal (nature/culture, instinctiveness/rationality, and inferiority/superiority) and on allegorical *topoi* (fierceness, tameness, courage, loyalty, and sacrifice) that characterize a mythopoesic tradition and a very familiar narrative, that of the fairytale. It is no coincidence that, at the two extremes of Tarkovsky's filmography, we find both the adolescent hero of *Ivan's Childhood*, who turns to the camera in the first frame to observe a spider web woven through the branches of a tree—the spider in this case is not the magical and thaumaturgical being that fairytale animals usually are, but one that with the precise and durable surgical thread of his web, from the very beginning imprisons the child, his freedom and his imagination, which later will be constantly threatened with death by the war, and Little Man, the child in *The Sacrifice* who, one step after another, one bucket after another, waters a dry tree that sooner or later will blossom again before his eyes. The action of Little Man, who is not an animal but a child, again embodies the value of moral *exemplum* and the sacred, fantastic, and symbolic role typical of the allegorical tradition of ancient bestiaries: In particular, Little Man, who throughout the film will remain "silent as a clam" following an operation to his vocal cords, has the privilege of taking upon himself the trait that the ancients attributed to fish: He knows the magic spells that can heal vegetable, animal, and human sterility.

<sup>4</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, in his opposition to the "intellectual montage" practiced by Eisenstein, who builds his films so that the sum of frame A plus frame B results in frame C, in his films creates a time—and therefore a montage—that is not imposed to the viewer "from above", and thus allows him to enjoy the film without foregoing his own psychology, his state of mind, his sensitivity and his cultural level.

Therefore, as we were saying, if our greatest fear is determined by the specialized aridity of a possible catalogue of Tarkovsky's animals, Ivan and Little Man allow us to isolate the thread in the plot that will progressively lead to an overview of the entire tapestry, however complex its weave.

Along this path—which is anything but labyrinthine, but is in fact a predetermined and well-charted itinerary—the overarching theme that will guide us is given by the relationship between man and animal. In Tarkovsky's cinema, the closeness of the two domains and the instability of the ontological border between them is such that it can generate an extremely rich array of nuances where they come in contact, and their possible interweaving in the eight films made by the Russian director. This interweaving, as we will see, is synthesized in the character of Alexander, the main character in *The Sacrifice*, the director's film-testament.

### Anthropos and Logos

In Tarkovsky's cinema, the animal, understood as a textual-biological creature, is intrinsically double: His nature in fact lies between reality—all the flesh-and-blood beasts (especially horses, dogs, birds, and flocks of sheep) that may be seen in the director's films, representation, the horses that the hero of *Ivan's Childhood* sees in a book of Durer's engravings, or Bruegel in *Hunters in the Snow* explicitly referred to in one of the sequences that in *Mirror* (Zerkalo, 1974) narrate the story of a child orphaned by the war, and imagination—all the real or imaginary beasts that recur in the dreams of many of Tarkovsky's characters. The animal is therefore a hybrid from the start: He is both man's traveling companion on the planet—just think of the black dog that the Stalker meets in the Zone, or the German shepherd that belongs to Domenico, the madman in *Nostalghia*, and his standard of reference—demonstrated both by the soft worm with the many legs that Eugenia in *Nostalghia* dreams is crawling through her hair, and by the horses in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Adoration of the Magi*, the background for the opening credits of *The Sacrifice*.

However, in Tarkovsky's films, as we will see, the beasts are never metaphor or abstraction, and that is why they should be studied on the basis of a rigorously biological order of appearance. So, while the Russian director mediates his narration of reality through cinema—and thus the *oikos* (understood as *habitat* and home) of the animals is mediated by the imagination and by the language of the film—the film-maker however never, or almost never deprives the beasts he shows in his films of their value as subjects. The only exception in our opinion may be found in the film *Nostalghia*. Favouring the language of metaphor (*metapherein* corresponds to the Latin *transfere* meaning to transfer), this film speaks of the animal primarily by virtue of what it represents and thus deprives it of its complex presence. In *Nostalghia*, the animals—in particular, the sparrows that invade the church in which Eugenia goes to admire Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*, Domenico's German shepherd, the flocks of sheep and again the German shepherd who appears in both the final sequence of the film and at the moments when Gorchakov remembers his life with his family—refer to something other than self, meaning that they are significant within the anthropocentric language in relation to the system of human codes. The animals in this film, as if they were the numinous helpers posited by Propp (2009)<sup>5</sup>, are the ones who lead

<sup>5</sup> The Russian scholar Vladimir Propp defines seven preparatory functions in the fairy tale: In general, an initial situation that is usually idyllic leads to a situation of "want" caused by a departure, and in most cases, breaking a rule of prohibition. The antagonist thus arrives with the intent to deceive the victim, who may then become the hero or prompt the main character to come to the rescue. A voluntary or involuntary donor challenges the hero, who succeeds in acquiring a magic object necessary to fight the battle against the antagonist. After defeating him, he returns home pursued by an enemy he is able to escape, to generate the final *happy ending*. In some fairy tales however, this is when the second "movement" as defined by Propp begins, which starts with the repetition of the initial sequence before introducing different functions.

our “heroes” Eugenia and Gorchakov—surveyors who do not know what they are looking for—towards a symbolic truth of which the emblem seems to be, in the last frame<sup>6</sup>, the Russian house inside the cathedral of San Galgano in Tuscany.

To tell the truth in Tarkovsky’s filmography, *Nostalghia* is a borderline case—perhaps because it was a product of his collaboration with Tonino Guerra (in weighing word and image, there is no doubt that for the poet from Santarcangelo di Romagna, the scales are tipped on the side of the word), and as such reflects only a minimal part of his poetics.

In other words, Tarkovsky’s poetics, film after film, reorganize the space of reality with a new and personal perspective, giving it meaning and value not on the basis of chronological linear movement—just think of the temporal incoherence that may be seen in *Andrei Rublev* in particular—but following a process that relies on rhythm to give value not merely to the times and places in which the events take place, but rather to the objects that reside in the space-time zone of the Russian director’s films.

Tarkovsky therefore challenges space and time equally; he uses rhythm as leverage to disrupt the chronology and the classic narration, and to better underline what happens to the characters at the end of their long inner journey. While the passing of time in the frame, for Tarkovsky, is also revealed by the behaviour of the protagonists of his films—it is the reappearance of the church of St. Sergey in Zagorsk in which Andrei Rublev painted his famous *Trinity*, or the return to the café from which the Stalker began his trek into the Zone that make the audience understand that time has gone by, there is no doubt that rhythm is the absolute dominant in Tarkovsky’s cinematic image:

In film, the director reveals his personality primarily through the sense of time, with the *rhythm*, because rhythm colours a work with clear and determined signals of style. Rhythm in a film cannot be invented, it cannot be built with speculative means, it must be created organically to fit the author’s innate feeling for life, in accordance with his experimentation with time. I personally believe that in a frame, time must flow without depending on anything and—if this can be said—of its own volition ... the ideas then fall peaceably into order, without chatter or rhetorical support. (Tarkovskij, 1987, p. 29)

In our opinion, the way the director applies what he asserts about rhythm in the cinematic figure to the animals in *Nostalghia*, reveals a bestiary in this film that is mortified, caged, and mummified. It is a bestiary that, “sick with man” (Diolé, 1975) and bemoaning a vital fullness that probably never existed, remains a victim of *logos*, foregoing “time that passes independently of everything” for the anthropocentric pride of the eternal sovereignty of the subject, as conveyed in Tonino Guerra’s screenplay.

Tarkovsky’s bestiary works best when, occupying the border area now devoid of animals in their purest form, it reveals the cross-breeding and metamorphosis between man and animal. In this cross-breeding, the animal, rather than a subject in the sense of a “differentiated perspective onto the world” (Stara, 2006, p. 78), is subject to man’s gaze. Its prerogative, therefore, is to find its significance in the fact that it may be assimilated to man. And so Tarkovsky’s man, far from marginalizing the animal, assimilates it even as he is nourished by it, considering it an overbearing force in the logical discourse and the only bearer of meaning in the world.

<sup>6</sup> The Russian house inside the cathedral of San Galgano is a reconnection that the protagonist—especially in thinking about the story that Gorchakov tells Eugenia about the musician Soshnovsky, who upon his return to Russia and far from having found happiness, had begun to drink too much leading to the extreme decision to take his own life—could never have achieved simply by returning to his native country. In fact, this reconnection takes place thanks to the power of seduction exercised on the Russian poet by the madman Domenico. Therefore, thanks to the power of seduction of the Other than self, Gorchakov is finally able to put an end to the terrible, destructive and agonizing illness that is *nostalghia*.



As we have already observed, the first level of this subjection of man to animals may be found in Tarkovsky's use of time; however, while it is true that the Russian director considers the coordinates of time as the thing that distinguishes cinema from the other arts (Tarkovsky, 1989)<sup>7</sup>, this does not mean that he eschews its spatial nature. Like time, in his films, space too transfers the burden of reconstructing reality on the things that reside within it and so, in our opinion, unconditionally expresses the surrender of any anthropocentric point of view.

This change of perspective, which encourages the radical dehumanization of the image of nature, reorganizes reality by seeking to shift attention from the human to the animal. Tarkovsky's characters are therefore interesting and essential creatures in our bestiary precisely because, by means of this strange inversion of roles and reversal of the parts, they represent a precise and varied typology of animals: In *Ivan's Childhood*, the little soldier makes his way through the swamp that surrounds the trenches like a clever water animal, while Alexander's abstention from speech in *The Sacrifice* and Andrei Rublev's in the eponymous film, lead them away from the human dimension.

Ivan, Andrei Rublev, Alexander, and many more of Tarkovsky's characters contradict the status of animal as defined by elementary biology—the product of crossbreeding or even metamorphosis, yet bring to light not just the absolute triumph of the a-naturalistic *monstrum*, but rather—by choosing to relinquish *logos*<sup>8</sup>—the disturbing impoverishment and degradation of the human. Furthermore, Alexander in *The Sacrifice* and Rublev the monk in the eponymous film, in proposing metamorphosis as the key concept for their decision not to speak, stand at the historic origin of this relationship, but at the same time constitute its potential development into the contemporary age, thus allowing us to focus our attention on the ambiguous intersection between the animals and the human discourse.

### Border Areas and Metamorphosis

From Ivan to Alexander, the characters in Andrei Tarkovsky's films, in regretting a vital fullness that perhaps never existed but was a goal to achieve and reclaim, make it possible for us to trace a path that by bringing us face to face with anthropomorphized animals, subverts the very concept of metamorphosis. While the process of metamorphosis reverses the criteria of diversity and likeness, because by joining diversity to equality and vice-versa, it prevents any attempt at classification and taxonomy. And so, by tracking the animal in search of his own identity, Tarkovsky's man originates a hunt that becomes a metaphor for his existential exploration. Hence, the Russian director's bestiary is a modern one, in which the ancient allegorical tension

<sup>7</sup> On the level of time, Tarkovsky's cinema does what painting and sculpture do on the level of space. In this sense, in *Sculpting Time*, the director writes: "What is the essence of the director's work? We could define it as sculpting in time. Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of the features of his finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it—so the film-maker, from a 'lump of time' made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image".

<sup>8</sup> The director is always wary of words: For him, inner searching is silence. Ivan, his first real "hero", is not at all loquacious, and he does not realize that he avoids speaking even as he sleeps, and answers questions with silence rather than speak at length and say nothing. In *Solaris* (Soljaris, 1972), Kris Kelvin is not advised of what is happening in the station and Snaut, who is kindest to him, lets him have his experience even though he knows it is terrifying. The Stalker does not give the slightest information about the Zone, and only the Writer speaks a great deal, though in fact he does do it so much to say, as to exorcise his anxieties. In *The Mirror* Tarkovsky's father expresses himself exclusively with his poetry, and even his mother has little to say: The essential is signified by her face and behaviour. Andrei Rublev, the painter of icons, is the one who takes his inner searching to the extreme in silence: He has vowed to remain mute forever because he has killed a man, and will not break his promise until 15 years later, before the act of creation of a young boy. Rublev's choice is thus the opposite of Alexander's, who chooses in *The Sacrifice* to remain silent so that a child may live and grow.

associated with animals (Pellegrini, 2001)<sup>9</sup> is transformed and dissolves in favour of a border area in which the animals no longer exist in their pure form but as crossbreeding and transformation between man and animal.

Tarkovsky's characters are therefore hybrid creatures: *Imperfect animals* and, that is why, in his films, following the animals' tracks means encountering a strange inversion the parts, a reversal of the role-playing in which the exceptional nature of the object-animal consists in its having a gaze with which it in turn can contemplate man. The black dog that Stalker takes home with him upon his return from the Zone, like the fawn in the opening sequence of *Ivan's Childhood* that stares straight into the child's eyes, highlight this power, the force of the encounter between gazes that establishes an alliance between the two parties. Not coincidentally, Ivan crawls silently and lightly like a fawn through the swamp that separates him from the enemy, while the Stalker, with the skill of a seeing-eye dog, leads the Writer and the Professor into the "Room" that makes wishes come true at the centre of the Zone<sup>10</sup>.

The story that links men and animals is an ancient one that finds an interesting balance in the films of the Russian director. Tarkovsky counters the use of the animal as a metaphor with his intensive use of the long shot: "Like" is no longer interpreted in the sense of similarity, but rather inaugurates an alliance between the two terms of the comparison, a new alphabet in which the movement of the camera—take for example, in the prologue to *Solaris*, the intersections that link Kris Kelvin's slow promenade through his father's estate to the pace of the family's bay horse—would not be temporally indeterminate but would express unstable time, the time of becoming as opposed to other verbal modes that allude to *Chronos*<sup>11</sup>. In Tarkovsky's work, these intersections and metamorphoses are therefore signs of an amplified reality: They work like Deleuze's rhizomes, and for this very reason, may not be classified by means an orderly diagram, such as a tree-diagram or alphabetically like a dictionary.

Deleuze and Guattari's theory is Tarkovskian in that "multiplicity", of which the constituent model is the rhizome, can establish productive connections in almost every direction: For this very reason, allowing interaction and cross-fertilization between man and beast, it reaches beyond any hint of mystery initiation in favour of the amplification of reality. Letting the two philosophers speak for themselves, we discover that the rhizomatic system is composed of lines in perpetual movement, that its nature is threadlike and dynamic, and responds to a universe composed of planes that these lines run through as they create territories and degrees of

<sup>9</sup> As Ernestina Pellegrini observed, the animals anthologized in ancient bestiaries: "were damaged animals and were there to denounce, some more some less, in an alternately direct or oblique manner, some as scapegoats, others as victims or persecuting revenants, the crimes of anthropocentric pride and of the enduring sovereignty of the subject".

<sup>10</sup> The Stalker, like the black dog he brings home from the zone, is the guide for the Professor and the Writer who accompany him. For this very reason—in a land that has become mysterious and forbidden after the fall of a meteorite that seems to have "contaminated" and deeply transformed it—the Stalker, who is willing to take responsibility for his own and others' fate, ready to believe firmly in what he does and in the "magical" gifts of his territory, is defined as "eagle-eye" by his companions. This is a nickname that, like that of his Master known as "Porcupine", is a clearly ironic comment on the animal-like ways that link him to this mysterious environment. In the Zone, life and nature take their revenge against the destructive fury of man, and only the Stalker's sensibility can help to understand the mechanisms by which it is ruled.

<sup>11</sup> At the origins of Greek thought, the concept of time, understood as the measure of endurance of things that change and as the rhythmic succession of the phases in nature's evolution, is still profoundly influenced by myth and the Orphic tradition, which designate Cronos as the father of all things and describe the "cycles of time" as a wheel of fate in which all beings are eternally reborn. However, time as an inner experience, that cannot be measured by external devices, rebels at the insignificance of the cycles of Nature and at the short-lived future designs of the individual, and becomes an apocalyptic interval that finally reveals the meaning that had remained concealed in its evolution; in revealing it, it inaugurates a dimension of time that is absolute future. This is a sequence of instants that, as Tarkovsky's films demonstrate perfectly, no longer belong to man: Once he has come into contact with these instants, he no longer needs to think of himself in relation to time, a child of time or adapting to it. According to Tarkovsky therefore, men no longer exist before time, because time is not outside them but inside them.

### deterritorialization:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance [...]. The tree imposes the verb “to be”, but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and ... and ... and ...” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 36)

The rhizomatic system thus immediately focuses attention on the mechanism that we have attempted to describe here, the mechanism of “changing nature”, of becoming and metamorphosis. For Tarkovsky’s characters, the encounters with the traces left by the animals, and above with all their eyes, extraneous yet specular, constitute the steps along a path that both defines and demolishes the subject in that—as shown for example by the vows of silence made by the painter Rublev and by Alexander, the main character in *The Sacrifice*—the animals in Tarkovsky’s films always end up speaking about man: Man whose decisions are made to avoid reality, thereby revealing it to be dominated by impoverishment and degradation.

The little soldier Ivan is therefore the starting point for this metamorphosis, which passes through Rublev’s silence, through the almost animal-like sensibility of the Stalker dominated as he is by instinct, and leads to Alexander, in Tarkovsky’s film-testament, whose decision to make the final sacrifice sets the boundary, and more precisely the line where two things, man and animal—as Giorgio Agamben observed—come together:

When the difference is erased and the two terms [man and animal] collapse one into the other—as seems to be happening today—even the difference between being and nothingness, between licit and illicit, the divine and the demonic ceases to exist and, in its place, there appears something to which we are unable to give a name. (Agamben, 2002, p. 29)

The boundary in fact is not just the inflicted or self-inflicted punishment of separation and solitude, it is also the *ligne de partage* or *trait d’union* between an outside and an inside of Being, or between a before and an after History; thus the boundary between man and animal is first and foremost the place in which “something” is born, a “something” of which Alexander in *The Sacrifice* is the ultimate expression.

### A Dawn of Life Rediscovered Under the Moral Banner of Animality: Alexander’s Sacrifice

In *The Sacrifice*, Alexander, who as a character is the synthesis of Tarkovsky’s earlier ones and the outcome of his predecessors’ “identities”, tries to react—taking responsibility for an individual action (he burns his house and vowing to remain silent gives up the people dearest to him)—to the aphasia of people who are unaware of the universality that surrounds them. With an action that obeys the immediacy of instinct and not the mediation of *logos*, Alexander comes to embody the animality that constitutes a healthy and necessary madness, the excess and exception that counteract the limitations of the regulatory *logos*, and thus confronts man with the moral and intellectual responsibility that comes with thought and its correct use. Just as the structure of time in Proust’s *Recherche* has an oscillating movement that allows the protagonist’s memories, at the end of a series of experiences (such as the flavour of the *madeleine*), to dominate the totality of the story, so Alexander, in *The Sacrifice*, succeeds in fully relinquishing his self, because those who were created in Tarkovsky’s mind before him have left him the perception, the “taste” of the battle they undertook to improve the world. The “heroes” of the Russian director’s films help the spectator rediscover and regain the values that 20th century scientific progress seems to have left behind. And so, while before Alexander the Tarkovskian man needed animals—especially dogs and horses—as the numinous helpers posited by Propp, the protagonist of *The*



*Sacrifice* successfully gives up the compelling habit of reason, and with his holocaust commits a sacred act<sup>12</sup> that liberates man from the dark and unfamiliar zone in which his life has become mired. And because the ancient intellectual in this film considers burning his own home to save his loved ones as an act that seems like absolute animality and total otherness with respect to man, he no longer needs to have animals around to rescue him: He no longer needs the black dog that seems to help the Stalker lead the Professor and the Writer towards the Zone, or the horse that in the final sequence of the film seals Rublev's decision to end his silence, or even the one in *Solaris* that first scares the son of the astronaut Breton who runs away terrified, and then returns in the rhyme sung by Sartorius, and in the form of a drawing in Kelvin's room and in the library of the orbiting station.

Alexander sacrifices himself so that a bond may again be established between man and nature, with full respect for both entities. In Tarkovsky's vision, there is a unity born out of distinction between man and nature, and the only way to become aware of it, in the Russian director's opinion, is to have a sensibility equal to Alexander's. His sacrifice is not a sign of weakness: In his final offering, he gathers all his physical sufferings, transforming them into moral pain just like Peter Shaffer's horse which we started with, and thus becomes the only person capable of celebrating the vivifying power of nature and animality, relying not on an animal but on a bicycle. The bicycle belongs to the mailman Otto, a character who not coincidentally differs from the others in the film, because in various forms, he is always carrying something: The telegram with best wishes, the late-17th century print of Europe, and the bicycle with which he arrives during the fire, are all objects used to move the action forward<sup>13</sup>. The name that the director chooses for the young protagonist of his last film, *Little Man*, highlights Tarkovsky's interest creating spiritually elevated existences. At the end of Tarkovsky's artistic parabola, a ray of hope illuminates humanity: From the flames of Alexander's fire, a Little Man is born, who thanks to individual reason—Alexander's as he chooses to succumb—is granted a childhood that no longer harbours within it the horror of History, and as such becomes the embryo for a positive maturity in the future<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> The very etymology of the word sacrifice, *sacrum facere*, embodies within it the value of Alexander's action.

<sup>13</sup> Otto's bicycle will make it possible for Maria to get ahead of the ambulance and wait for Alexander near the dry tree.

<sup>14</sup> Little Man is thus a figure diametrically opposed to that of Ivan, the main character in Tarkovsky's first feature-length film, because Alexander's sacrifice makes it possible for Little Man to have the childhood that was denied to Ivan, and precluded by the war. Demonstrating that—as we have already emphasized—one need simply compare the final shot in *The Sacrifice* with the almost analogous opening shot of the director's debut film: In *The Sacrifice*, the camera moves up along the slender trunk of a dry tree from the earth towards the terse blue sky. Similarly in *Ivan's Childhood*, the camera moves upwards: Starting by focusing on a fine spider web tangled between the branches of a tree, it rises up to the sky. Ivan is like the spider web on which the camera dwells: He is tangled up in a war that requires him to sacrifice his childhood, just like the spider web entangled in the branches of the tree.

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