CHAPTER NINE

Autobiography, memory and identity: the films of Andrei Tarkovskii

'Truth is in memory. He who has no memory has no life.'

(Rasputin, 1990, II, 351)

With the political imperative so dominant in Russian cinema of the Soviet period, the persistence of a personal, private sphere may seem incongruous. Sergei Eisenstein, perhaps the greatest film director in the Soviet Union, was interested above all in the 'big' themes of history, revolution and social progress. Andrei Tarkovskii, who can easily claim second place (and some would say first), has, more than any other Russian film-maker, empowered the personal, investing his images and symbols – although he himself would deny that they were as such – with an individual and intensely private significance that nevertheless spoke to millions of his fellow Russians. After all, his films are about those essentials that everyone has in common:

> *In all my pictures the theme of roots was always of great importance: links with family house, childhood, country, Earth. I always felt it important to establish that I myself belong to a particular tradition, culture, circle of people or ideas.*
>
> *(Tarkovsky, 1991, p. 193)*

Although his films concern themselves with issues dealt with in separate chapters in this book – the war, images of women, history and politics – it seems entirely appropriate to discuss them all collectively as the work of Russia's greatest *auteur* director.

Tarkovskii's favourite device is the mirror: the individual reflects his times and the times reflect upon the individual. After the release of *Mirror* (1974), which did not have much public discussion other than hostile criticism in the official media, Tarkovskii records how he received mail from people across the country, generally positive. He quotes a woman from Gorkii: 'Thank you

Oleg Iankovskii and Ignat Daniltsev in Mirror *(Andrei Tarkovskii, 1974)*

for *Mirror*. My childhood was like that . . . Only how did you know about it?' This reciprocation spurs him on:

> *One surely couldn't hope for greater acknowledgement of what one is doing. My most fervent wish has always been to be able to speak out in my films, to say everything with total sincerity and without imposing my own point of view on others. But if the vision of the world that has gone into the film turns out to be one that other people recognise as a part of themselves that up till now has never been given expression, what better motivation could there be for one's work?*
>
> *(Tarkovsky, 1991, p. 12)*

In other words, in a totalitarian culture the private assumes a social function, as it provides the forum for discussion and debate that could not be publicly envisaged.

Tarkovskii's films are autobiographical not only in that they are about his own life and ideas about art, but also because they are part of a peculiar Russian cultural tradition. It is generally accepted that autobiography traces not only the development of a creative consciousness, but also the interaction of that individual with the times. In Russia, however, the autobiography has assumed an additional function: it offers a comment on the times and shows how the life of the individual encapsulates and even symbolises the fate of a whole nation. We can trace this theme back to Alexander Herzen and his monumental *Past and Thoughts* (1852–69) and Maxim Gorkii's trilogy *My Childhood; My Apprenticeship; My Universities* (1913–23), which is acknowledged as a classic of the genre. Also, not for nothing does Anna Akhmatova claim in her epic poem *Requiem* (1935–40) to represent all the grieving women of Russia whose husbands have been devoured by the Gulag:

О них вспоминаю всегда и везде,
О них не забуду и в новой беде,
И если зажмут мой измученный рот,
Которым кричит стомильонный народ,
Пусть так же они поминают меня
В канун моего погребального дня.

(Of them I recall always and everywhere,
Of them I will not forget even in my new woe,
Even if they gag my tortured mouth,
Through which a hundred million people cry,
Let them then so remember me,
On the eve of my funeral.)

(Akhmatova, 1998, III, 29)[1]

Andrei Tarkovskii was born in 1932 and his childhood coincided with the war. His childhood is one of the major motifs in *Mirror*. In 1951 he finished his schooling and enrolled in university to study Arabic. He gave up, however, after one year and, after a period of time working with geologists in Siberia, was accepted in 1954 to study under the director Mikhail Romm in the State Cinematography Institute in Moscow. His graduation film, *The Steamroller and the Violin*, was made in 1960, and this was followed in 1962 by his first feature film, *Ivan's Childhood*. In the next two decades, up to his death in 1986, Tarkovskii made another six feature films. *Andrei Rublev* was made in 1966, but only released in the USSR in 1971, followed by *Solaris* in 1972, *Mirror* in 1975 and *Stalker*, his last film made in the Soviet Union in 1979. He travelled to Italy several times between 1979 and 1983 to make *Nostalgia* (1983) and a documentary, *Time of Travels* (1982). In 1985 he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and he died in December 1986, shortly after the completion (in Sweden) and release of his last film, *The Sacrifice*.

Ivan's Childhood depicts the war through the eyes of a child, the orphaned Ivan Bondarev, and is part of a tradition exemplified by Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985). Moreover, it can more readily be seen as a remake of – and riposte to – Vasilii Pronin's 1946 socialist realist *Son of the Regiment*, based on the novella of the same name by Valentin Kataev. In Pronin's film Vania is a young orphan boy nicknamed 'little shepherd' by the regiment that adopts him. He becomes not only their mascot, but the adopted son of Captain Enakiev, who lost his son at approximately the same age as Vania is now. Enakiev is killed in action and this event serves as Vania's rite of passage as he is accepted as an officer cadet and is finally seen as part of the victory parade on Red Square.

Son of the Regiment shows the war as a straightforward battle of good and evil, where even the German women are cruel and sadistic. Red Army soldiers are heroes all, as the medals festooning their tunics show. The Russian countryside is bathed in moonlight and heavily romanticised. Tarkovskii's film debunks all these images and the associated heroic symbolism.

Tarkovskii's title is, of course, ironic, as Ivan's childhood has, in effect, ended with him as an orphan. Ivan works on the front line as a spy, gathering information on German troop movements for Captain Kholin of the Red Army. The landscape he works in is blasted and wretched and despite the assumed inevitability of the Soviet victory, there is no upbeat ending. The narrative is also broken up into different strands, the most vivid being Ivan's dreams/memories of a sun-drenched idyllic time before the war, gazing down a well with his mother or gathering apples in a rainstorm.

The film observes the conventions of the war film genre only to a certain extent. The patriotic theme of sacrifice for the Motherland is observed: Kholin is killed, as is the old retainer Katasonych, and we learn at the very end, when

Lieutenant Galtsev finds Ivan's photograph among military files in Berlin, that Ivan has been hanged. The sufferings of the people are paraded before us, as a crazed old peasant mourns the loss of his family in his bombed-out house, with only the stove (a symbol of domesticity and spiritual strength) remaining upright. 'Lord, when will this all end?' he asks.

Similarly, the music of the film – which is sparsely used – is Russian folk music, a clear patriotic motif, right down to the singing of the popular song 'Katiusha' that signifies the end of the war and the Soviet victory. Elsewhere there are church bells – abandoned religious icons are part of the collateral damage littering the landscape – and a gently cascading harp melody signals Ivan's 'return' to his childhood memories/dreams.

Otherwise, this is not a typical Soviet war film. There are no great battles, although this is in line with the trend during the thaw, and we see no Germans other than ghostly figures passing Ivan in the forest at night. War is above all an eerie, almost abstract spectacle, as we see flares burst and bullets sing through the air, bombs tear holes in the earth and trees collapse. There are some startling images, such as a plane that has nose-dived into the ground sticking out upright.

Rather, seeming opposites come together. We are never quite sure whether the sunlit images of childhood we see are Ivan's memories or his dreams. The natural setting of trees, fields and water – we first see Ivan's face through a spider's web in a forest – is grotesquely juxtaposed with a picture of Ivan wading through a flooded wintry forest as he moves between the German and Russian lines. Kholin carries on a romantic liaison with the nurse Masha in a birch forest and their relationship is a symbol of the unity of the country in its war effort: he is from Krasnoiarsk in Siberia, where the artist Surikov lived for a while, as he maintains, she from Peredelkino just outside Moscow, where the writer Alexei Tolstoi, she says, can be seen taking his walks. Fire and water are placed not in opposition, but apposition, as Ivan takes a bath with a fire burning in the background. Water and fire are soon to become among Tarkovskii's favourite images. Contrary to the conventions of the genre, Germans are not demonised, as Ivan reads through some captured art books and dwells particularly on Dürer's disturbing engraving *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* of 1498.

But the film is remarkable above all for its sheer stylistic virtuosity and the director's evocation of images that offer evidence of great cinematic vision and imagination. When Ivan's mother is killed by the well, water splashes on to her body like a grotesque parody of gushing blood, an image that looks forward to one in *Andrei Rublev* when a saw pulsates in rhythm to the cut artery of a dying man. When Ivan collects apples in a storm, the trees are lit up by lightning and rain patters on the apples that are then munched by horses. The horse will also feature in Tarkovskii's later work, as a symbol of both

artistic freedom and apocalyptic death. The final image is of a dead tree on a beach, as Ivan basks in his sun-kissed, carefree childhood, a reminder of the devastated trees of wartime and a future pointer to the end of Ivan's innocence.

After *Ivan's Childhood* Tarkovskii attempted a historical epic, the three-hour *Andrei Rublev*. This film, however, although it observes the conventions of the historical film, is not solely about the life of Russia's most famous icon painter (1360–1430). In films about artists we are accustomed to seeing how great canvases are created, the inspiration behind them and the development of the artist's personality. In Tarkovskii's film we get none of this, we never see him paint, neither do we get to know much about his life. Rather, the director focuses on the interaction of the artist and his repressive, brutal age.

Rublev is not the only artist on show, and when the film begins we see another man taking off in a home-made balloon. Thus, in the very beginning of the film we are presented with a metaphor for the impetus and drive of the creative imagination. The (literally) uplifting experience is short lived, however, as the balloon crashes to earth after a few exhilarating moments in the air, with horses stampeding on the ground. When the balloon falls, the camera turns to a horse thrashing about in pain, a metaphor for thwarted artistic ambition. Other artists in the film are summarily dealt with by the powers that be. Stonemasons are blinded so that they can no longer create images of beauty and a bawdy jester has half his tongue cut out as punishment for singing ditties poking fun at the Grand Prince.

For Andrei, as for the jester, art should give the people, oppressed and brutalised as they are, images that counter the fear in their lives, whereas his teacher Theophanes the Greek insists that the people are ignorant and primitive and should be forever reminded of the Last Judgement. For Theophanes, the purpose of art is to keep people in their place before God and remind them of their subservience to a higher authority. Andrei is unable to paint sinners boiling in pitch and, as the vivid and startling technicolor epilogue makes clear, revels in clear and bright splashes of colour that celebrate the beauty of God's world.

Tarkovskii's film not only shows the trials and tribulations of the artist, but also his triumph. In order to achieve true inner freedom, the artist must sacrifice part or all of himself, in line with Orthodox theology. The artist is a Christ figure, giving of himself so that the people become free and the Saviour we see is a demonstrably Russian Christ, crucified in a wintry landscape on a hillside that seems to run with blood. Images of mock crucifixion abound, as when Andrei is tied up on a post by the pagans whose celebrations he disturbs, and the jester is knocked unconscious by two soldiers, holding him by each arm, who throw him head first against a tree trunk. Andrei takes a vow of silence after killing a man and has his faith in God's world restored by a

miracle: the creation of a huge bell ('a festival for the people') by a young boy with no experience or prior knowledge of how to build one.

Andrei Rublev, however, is more than a parable about the artist, his sufferings and his creativity in repressive times. It is also about Rublev's place in Russian culture and Russia's place in the world. As Rublev and the 'master' bellmaker Boriska create things of beauty for the people and Russia emerges from the dark ages with the victory over the Tartars at Kulikovo in 1380 – significantly, an event of enormous importance in Russian history not even hinted at in the film – so it opens out to the outside world, as Italian ambassadors arrive to inspect the bell at the end of the film.

The problems inherent in making a historical film, especially one based on an individual vision of history that has little to do with the Party's insistence on class antagonism and economic determinism, can be seen in the 'review' of the film by the Party's Central Committee. The film, it announced, had a 'misguided conception', it was 'anti-historical' in that not enough was shown about the people's struggle against the Mongol yoke, there is no mention of the 'high level of culture', the development of manufacturing and industry or the growth of major cities such as Vladimir, Suzdal, Tver and Moscow. In other words, if facts (suitably tailored, of course) were missing, it could not be history: 'The film's ideological erroneousness is not open to doubt' (Fomin, 1998, p. 147), concluded the Party.

Tarkovskii's next film, strange as it may sound, is also very much about earth, roots and belonging. Touted as the Soviet Union's reply to Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Solaris* has the trappings of a science fiction film. It is set on a space station above the planet Solaris, but it features few special effects or dramatic episodes. Rather, outer space is simply the backdrop to a philosophical reflection on man's relationship with the earth, his home and his family. As in *Andrei Rublev*, a central role in man's life and ambitions is assigned to art.

Solaris is also a film about love and emotional contact, about the qualities of human life that can only be experienced and not explained by science or rational thought. Kris Kelvin is a psychologist travelling to the Solaris space station to investigate abnormalities in the crew's behaviour. He finds that one of them (Gibarian) has committed suicide, while the other two (Snout and Sartorius) seem to be mentally unbalanced. The ocean of Solaris is responsible for this disorientation, as it brings to life aspects or characters from the individual's past life or subconscious. Kelvin sees his ex-wife Hari, who committed suicide ten years previously, again by his side. He can return to Earth only when he has confronted his past, his conscience and become whole again.

So although ostensibly a sci-fi rumination on the impact of scientific discovery on human life, *Solaris* is, in fact, an anti-science film, asserting the superiority of art and poetry. Brueghel, Bach, Leonardo da Vinci, Cervantes,

Dostoevskii are all cited in detail throughout the film. Sartorius argues for the need to acquire knowledge in order to dominate nature, echoing official Soviet ideology of 'the greatness of science' (and repeated here). However, his fellow scientist Snout renounces his calling, as he says: 'We don't need other worlds, we need a mirror, man needs man.' The conflict in the film is between the soul and the mind, the spirit and the intellect. Man will destroy what he does not understand, as the scientists on Earth argue for the termination of the Solaris project. Culture provides the link between past and present and it is significant that the only soundtrack in the entire film is Bach's Choral Prelude in F Minor, used sparingly in moments when Kelvin's past comes alive.

The film has its own symmetry. The present can only be experienced if the past is integrated into it and so the beginning and end of the film both depict tentacle-like reeds under water, both a premonition and a reminder of the flowing locks of Hari's hair. So, too, at the end of the film we see the same images as at the beginning: Kelvin's house in the country, his garden and pond, his father and faithful dog. Tarkovskii gives nature human form, the Solaris ocean moves and ripples like a living body and is regarded by the scientists as a brain. Elsewhere visual similes create a natural symmetry: the folds of a duvet move and ripple as if they are composed of water and strips of paper tied to a ventilator rustle like leaves at night. Kelvin can return to Earth only when he has confronted his own conscience and feeling of guilt for Hari's drug overdose. Images of the two women he has loved – Hari and his mother – converge, just as the islands in the Solaris ocean are seen to come together towards the end of the film. But the home Kelvin returns to remains an island, cut off from the rest of humanity.

The unity of mankind is served by art, as Tarkovskii has himself affirmed:

> *Moreover, the great function of art is communication, since mutual understanding is a force to unite people, and the spirit of communion is one of the most important aspects of artistic creativity. Works of art, unlike those of science, have no practical goals in any material sense. Art is a meta-language, with the help of which people try to communicate with one other; to impart information about themselves and assimilate the experience of others. Again, this has nothing to do with practical advantage but with realising the idea of love, the meaning of which is sacrifice: the very antithesis of pragmatism.*
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> *(Tarkovsky, 1991, pp. 39–40)*

Solaris is Tarkovskii's warning of the dangers for humanity when contact between individuals breaks down. It is ironic, of course, that man in the space age has to travel beyond his own planet in order to understand himself and confront his own inner being. Kelvin makes emotional contact with the

planet when Hari is 'resurrected', whereas both Snout and Sartorius seek to make intellectual contact and fail. The very possibility of such contact spurs Gibarian to suicide even before the film starts. The importance of the soul and the danger of pure reason are the twin interlocking concepts at the heart of Tarkovskii's other 'science fiction' film, *Stalker*.

Stalker also features the confrontation of soul and intellect, art and science. The stalker of the title is a man with the ability to negotiate 'the zone', a place supposedly irradiated and made uninhabitable after being visited by extra-terrestrials years before. He is commissioned by two men, the unnamed scientist and writer, to take them through the zone and into its centre, a room where one's deepest wishes can come true. We learn that a previous stalker called Dikobraz ('Porcupine') committed suicide when he encountered the room, as he had understood his innermost desire to see the death of his brother in order to inherit his wealth. The writer hopes for artistic inspiration, the scientist expects the knowledge he gains will enable him to make great discoveries. In the end, we understand that he is preparing to destroy the room, a reminder of the scientists who wish to destroy the Solaris project in the earlier film.

The film's theme, of course, lends itself to various allegorical interpretations. The zone could be one of radiation contamination after a nuclear holocaust, a view supported by the stalker's genetically defective daughter called Martyshka ('Monkey'), who cannot walk but can move objects telekinetically. The 'zone' also is used to denote the territory of a Russian labour camp in the Gulag and, by analogy, the Soviet Union itself. The tortuous efforts of the trio to get through the barbed wire and machine-guns and reach the room can be taken as the difficult path to truth and reason in a totalitarian society. However, the film's virtues are above all in its visual style.

As the three pass through into the zone they leave behind the black and white dreariness of an industrial wasteland and enter a green and vibrant landscape of trees, bushes and fields, scarred by man's hand but nevertheless recognisable as a natural wilderness. As the stalker rests, he has a dream where water flows over artefacts of twentieth-century strife, including cartridge shells, guns, icons, syringes. The stalker is guarded by a mysterious black dog that watches over him as he sleeps. He lies on a tiny island of earth surrounded by water, temporarily cut off from his companions and the rest of humanity – another throwback to the central image of *Solaris*.

The stalker has a profound, emotional feeling for the land and topography of the zone, so much that it often takes him away from the wife who clearly adores him. He breathes in its air and smells and embraces the earth as if his bride. He worships its contours and deeply respects its abilities to confuse and endanger the unwary (although we see nothing of its supposed dangers in the film). He is an embodiment of sheer spirituality, scorning material wealth and

with only the barest of home comforts. The writer at one point pours scorn on him by donning a mock crown of thorns fashioned out of barbed wire. The scientist and the writer remain rationalistic and sceptical and their lack of faith prevents them from gaining any self-knowledge in their encounter with the room. In the end the three go their separate ways, the stalker disappointed that his companions have gained no enlightenment, the other two left cold by the experience, for them it has been a waste of time.

Mirror is also about the need for faith and communication, as the film's prologue makes explicit: a boy with a terrible stutter is, through therapy, returned to normal speech: 'I can speak,' he announces proudly and fluently. The film was criticised as 'elitist' by the official media and allowed only a limited release. It is in places esoteric and some knowledge on the viewer's part of Tarkovskii's own childhood and youth, and of contemporary Soviet history, is helpful. Tarkovskii accompanies his personal odyssey with documentary signposts of the times: Russian troops crossing the Sivash river during the war; the explosion of the first atomic bomb in 1945; the Cultural Revolution in China and border clashes between Soviet and Chinese troops in the late 1960s. But it is a film that is accessible to viewers (the previously mentioned woman from Gorkii is a perfect example) not on an intellectual level, but an emotional, even subconscious one, with its themes of childhood, roots and identity. What the director is offering is his own life as a 'mirror' of the age, a reflection of the national experience.

But Tarkovskii is not content here simply to contribute a somewhat self-indulgent if erudite essay on the nature of autobiography. Through his use of images and a multi-layered narrative and the constant interplay of dream and reality, he is reinventing the genre and asserting an individual vision of art and reality fundamentally at odds with the requirements of culture in a totalitarian society.

It is, of course, a profoundly personal film. Not only does it revolve around the director's own childhood, complete with a reconstruction of the rural home he shared with his mother and sister when he was a boy, but it also features his mother playing herself and the poems of his father Arsenii Tarkovskii inserted into the 'text' of the film at several key moments. Margarita Terekhova plays both the wife of the director (here called Alexei) and his mother as she is recalled in the past and Ignat Daniltsev plays both Ignat, Alexei's son in the present, and the young Alexei (Alesha) in one important scene.

The symmetry is not just in the casting, but also in the director's sensuous depiction of his rural childhood. A rustic scene is introduced by the sounds of a dog barking and a distant railway engine. The same sounds occur in the film's finale, set in the same rural location, Tarkovskii's country house. Here nature breathes and moves as air rustles through foliage and sudden gusts of

wind signal the beginning of a storm. At the beginning of the film the doctor, played by Anatolii Solonitsyn, wonders whether nature can 'understand' and 'feel'. There are ghostly images where dream and reality overlap, of Terekhova's zombie-like appearance with her wet hair covering her face and arms outstretched. Water drips from a roof in the foreground as a barn blazes away in the background. We will be reminded of this startling image in the 'present' when, later in the film Ignat lights a fire in the yard outside his feuding parents' apartment during a rainshower.

This symmetry stretches also to the film's thematic motifs. The Leningrad boy Asafev has lost both his parents in the blockade, a mirror image of the Spanish children in newsreel footage about to be separated from their parents in the Spanish Civil War. Terekhova as Alexei's wife Natalia looks through some old photographs and notes how much she resembles Alexei's mother. She looks in the mirror and sees the director's own mother, Mariia Tarkovskaia, staring back at her. Past and present are not so easily separated, as the Spanish exiles feel nostalgia and pain for the homeland they will never see again and Alexei's past and present constantly interrupt each other. His mother's anxious telephone call to him, announcing the death of her former work colleague Elizaveta Pavlovna, abruptly plunges us into her memories of the 1930s, when a supposed typographical error in a state publication could have disastrous consequences for the whole printing house. As the foreman says: 'Some people will work, some people will be afraid.' Tarkovskii uses light and shadow to suggest the evil of the time, the near-hysterical fear it could provoke and the sense of elation when the all clear is given.

The historical past is also relevant today. The quickly disappearing stain on the table from a tea cup reminds Ignat that perhaps he has not read Pushkin's letter to Petr Chaadaev to a ghost. Pushkin's letter (written in October 1836) offers a meditation on Russia's place and role within Europe, as a reply to Chaadaev who believed that the way forward for Russia to become a modern European state was to adopt Roman Catholicism. Pushkin's letter contains a fierce assertion of Russia's strength and 'mission':

> *Of course the schism separated us from the rest of Europe and we took no part in any of the great events which stirred her; but we have had our own mission. It was Russia who contained the Mongol conquest within her vast expanses. The Tartars did not dare cross our western frontiers and so leave us in their rear. They retreated towards their deserts, and Christian civilization was saved. To this end we were obliged to lead a completely separate existence which, while it left us Christian, also made us complete strangers in the Christian world, so that our martyrdom never impinged upon the energetic development of Catholic Europe.*
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> *(Tarkovsky, 1991, p. 195)*

In the more recent past, Tarkovskii's use of newsreel footage suggests that Russia also saved twentieth-century Western Europe and the world from, first, the Nazis and, second, the Chinese, Russian soldiers literally keeping back the tide of screaming Red Guards with interlocked arms. For Tarkovskii, Russia and Europe may be separated by history, but culturally they have much in common, as images of his childhood are accompanied by Bach's organ and choral music and he creates on film a Brueghel landscape out of a scene of children playing on a snowy hillside, with moving figures caught in the foreground and richly detailed background.

The symmetry, and potential unity, ends there, however, for Tarkovskii cannot reconcile some elements in his life and work. His father will not return to his mother, however much he may have dreamed of this, and Alexei will not return to Natalia. Human affairs are not as easily managed as historical patterns or aesthetic criteria.

The desire to reconcile the irreconcilable lies at the heart of *Nostalgia*, where the writer Gorchakov – another cipher for the director – brings Russia to Italy, but is unable, like the composer Sosnovskii, whose life he is researching, to take Italy back to Russia. The sense of melancholy announced in the title is present from the start of the film. If in *Mirror* Tarkovskii films the Russian countryside of his childhood memories as a living and breathing organism, where the camera – the viewer's eye – ultimately returns to the depths of the primordial forest, the Tuscan countryside of *Nostalgia* is grey and lifeless, enveloped in mists which obscure any sense of visual scale or perspective. Indeed, Gorchakov's memories of his rural Russian home, always in black and white, are full of people, vibrant sounds and heartfelt folk song, whereas this Tuscany is austere, bereft of the beauty with which it is usually associated. Gorchakov himself says half-jokingly that he is tired of 'beautiful landscapes'. Shots of the Italian landscape are accompanied by the metallic grating sounds of a distant buzz saw. The only perspectives we see are in private places, such as in rooms and through doors and windows, but not in the public space.

Almost everything in Italy is superficial and empty, including Gorchakov's beautiful intepreter Eugenia. She speaks little Russian in the film, as Gorchakov insists that she speak Italian to him and she even admits to reading Russian poetry in translation. The poems are by Arsenii Tarkovskii, one of the Soviet Union's foremost poets and the director's father. Gorchakov counters that poetry can only be understood in the original language and this exchange serves as a metonym for the overlying theme, as articulated by these two characters: the West does not understand Russia and Russia cannot be accommodated in the West. Eugenia tries to seduce him, but is unable to understand why she is rejected; to her, all men are just 'pigs'. The director consciously makes fun of her when, in Rome, she is dressed as a solemn office executive (emancipated, in the Western way) and she proudly says that her

Oleg Iankovskii and Erland Josephson in Nostalgia *(Andrei Tarkovskii, 1983)*

boyfriend Vittorio, of an affluent family, is interested in 'spiritual matters' and is leaving with her for a tour of India. Tarkovskii equates her aspirations and lifestyle as the symptom of a materialistic society that has lost sight of true ideals and spiritual values.

It is not just Eugenia who is mocked. Tarkovskii even has a local denigrate Italian music with its 'false sentimental wails', preferring Chinese music. The West is viewed from an alienated and thus negative viewpoint (Tarkovskii's own), so that images of Catholicism have an ironic meaning. Birds fly from the womb of a statue of the Madonna of Childbirth, Gorchakov's Russian wife is called Maria and the Italian girl he speaks to in the half-submerged house is called Angela. But even this 'angel' cannot keep him from his (demon) bottle of vodka.

Yet Russia and Italy merge in Gorchakov's increasingly dislocated consciousness and he begins to confuse images of Eugenia and his wife. As Eugenia and Gorchakov talk in a hotel corridor, a lady with a dog – right out of Chekhov's story set in Yalta – walks past. Another dog, an Alsatian, appears both in Tuscany and in Gorchakov's memories of his home. Bird feathers fall from the sky at the start of the film and one falls again as Gorchakov wakes up after drinking some vodka; in the film's final scene snow falls gently to the

ground and the viewer always wonders what Gorchakov's own 'white feather patch' on his otherwise auburn head 'signifies'. What does bring the two cultures closer together, in Gorchakov's mind, is the character of the recluse Domenico.

The locals think Domenico is mad and we see in flashback the moment when his children were forcibly removed from him. He had kept them and his wife imprisoned in their house for seven years, fearing a nuclear catastrophe and the end of the world. But to Gorchakov he is one of God's 'holy fools' who divines the truth of the world and tries to save it. Before he wanted only to save his family, now he is preparing a sacrifice to save mankind. This martyrdom is the manifestation of a spirituality Gorchakov can understand and identify with, and it is not long before he dreams of looking in a mirror and seeing not his own reflection, but that of Domenico. Gorchakov in Russian thinks (as 'I') the thoughts of Domenico, as he regrets locking his family up for so long. Domenico owns an Alsatian dog identical to the one Gorchakov recalls in his memories of Russia.

The interior of Domenico's house speaks to Gorchakov of a Russian landscape, with mounds of earth resembling hills and trees and the dripping water seen and heard in *Mirror* accompanying their conversation. The fire–water motif of the earlier film again comes into play, as Domenico had tried to carry a lighted candle through the waters of the Bagno Vignoni as an act of faith. Domenico displays the total disregard for material wealth that we saw in the stalker's home.

He sacrifices himself to bring people together, but his words that 'society should be united and not fragmented' are not heeded by the Italian public, standing in isolated and static poses, and they gaze on indifferently as he plunges to the ground ablaze. Only his imbecile surrogate mirror image and his Alsatian affect any pain at the sight, accompanied by the distorted and halting strings of Beethoven's Ode to Joy. At about the same time, when Gorchakov carries the lighted candle across the now dried-up pool, the locals remain totally dispassionate when he falls dead to the ground. This is his sacrifice – but for what?

Gorchakov had come to Italy in order to research the life of the Russian serf musician Pavel Sosnovskii, who in the eighteenth century had committed suicide when he returned to Russia. Gorchakov finds his 'mirror' in Domenico, who gives him a spiritual dimension to a soulless society and Gorchakov's death 'mirrors' that of Sosnovskii. We also know that Sosnovskii took to drinking heavily just before he died, an action that Gorchakov emulates. Neither Domenico nor Gorchakov achieves anything other than a symbolic act of sacrifice. Only in death can Gorchakov merge Italy and Russia, as his rural Russian home is gradually embraced by the huge walls of a Catholic cathedral in the final scene.[2]

We should also note here the apparent tension in Tarkovskii's theories and his actual method. In *Sculpting in Time* Tarkovskii consistently rejects any notion of symbolism, yet his films are full of symbols and allegorical narratives. Similarly, he dismisses 'montage cinema' – 'that editing brings together two concepts and thus engenders a new, third one' – as 'incompatible with the nature of cinema' (Tarkovsky, 1991, p. 114). Yet both *Mirror* and especially *Nostalgia* rely heavily not on narrative development, let alone a 'plot', but on the visual and emotional associations aroused in the viewer. This is particularly evident in the intellectual montage where juxtapositions suggest ideas, such as the closing shot of the *izba*-in-cathedral, but also in the images of animals: horses and dogs to suggest death, freedom or loyalty.

Style, therefore, is almost everything. In *Nostalgia* there are several very long takes, culminating in the uninterrupted eight-minute sequence when Gorchakov carries the lighted candle across the pool of Bagno Vignoni. Light and shadow often frame the mise-en-scène, alluding to Gorchakov's split consciousness as he lies in bed in Italy, recollecting Russia. Certain motifs hark back to Tarkovskii's previous films, such as the bicycle lying under water like the many objects viewed in the Stalker's dream or the image of Gorchakov wading waist deep in water, rather like the boy spy in *Ivan's Childhood*. The barking of dogs in the Russian rustic background also reminds us of the beginning and end of *Mirror*.

There is some confusion in Tarkovskii's more important motifs, especially death and suicide. Domenico's suicide is the supreme sacrifice that is meant to save the world; examples of martyrdom are numerous in *Andrei Rublev*. Yet elsewhere suicide is shorn of its positive spiritual dimension, for Dikobraz's suicide in *Stalker* is an act of sheer desperation born of self-disgust. In *Solaris*, Hari overdoses because she thinks Kris no longer loves her and Gibarian kills himself as he is afraid of confronting the inner demons the planet may unleash. The notion of sacrifice, so important in Orthodox religion, reaches its fullest development in Tarkovskii's final film, aptly entitled *The Sacrifice*.

The 'sacrifice' is what Alexander, the central character, must perform in order to save the world. He prays to the Lord, accepting the need to sacrifice his home and his relationship with the boy, Little Man, if it can save his family and friends. This he does, by burning down his beloved home at the end of the film (amid a landscape of puddles and pools that reflect the blaze). Alexander is a former actor who has played Dostoevskii's Prince Myshkin (Tarkovskii made no secret of the fact that he wished to film *The Idiot*), as well as Shakespeare's Richard III. Both of these characters are tragic heroes, doomed and unable to escape their historical destiny. The world, as we become aware, is on the brink of nuclear conflagration and the distant thunderstorm in the early part of the film is a harbinger of the deafening roar of passing jet fighters that will later rock the house.

Erland Josephson in The Sacrifice *(Andrei Tarkovskii, 1986)*

Alexander is another version of the 'holy fool' Domenico in *Nostalgia* and, significantly, is also played by the same actor, Erland Josephson. His monologues are diatribes against the materialism of the modern world and its lack of spirituality. He finds beauty only in art, be it pictures of Russian icons or Leonardo da Vinci's 'Adoration of the Magi', for here there is real 'spirituality'. He is regarded as mentally ill by his friends and family, who, after he has set his house ablaze, finally have him taken away in an ambulance. Yet Alexander, like Domenico, can only be understood on a spiritual, even metaphysical plane, one again informed by Russian Orthodox thought. Alexander is a seer, a man who understands the truth of the world and is pained by what he sees around him. When he hears news of the nuclear standoff that will threaten civilisation, it is his chance to act, it is the moment he has been waiting for all his life. Words are no longer needed, only deeds.

Alexander, like Domenico, neither understands nor is understood by the people around him. His wife Adelaide may be having an affair with the doctor, Victor, and his stepdaughter Marta and housekeeper Julia ignore him. His only human contacts are with the postman Otto, with whom he engages in meaningless pseudo-philosophical debates, Little Man, with whom he plants and waters a dead tree and the 'witch' Maria, the family maid, who can 'heal' his pain with her own body and soul.

As elsewhere in Tarkovskii's work, the style of the film is self-consciously elaborate. The opening shot is over ten minutes long, as it follows Alexander and Little Man planting and watering a dead tree on the coast and then moving inland. The film has little soundtrack, other than flutes, Japanese and Russian folk music heard as if in the distance, but it is framed at the beginning and end by Bach's 'Ebarme Dich' from the St Matthew Passion. There is one long tracking shot, similar to one in *Stalker*, of discarded items in an apocalyptic landscape, with running water, an abandoned and smashed-up car and debris. Most of the film is, indeed, shot indoors and there is hardly any of the perspective through doors and windows that are a feature of, say, *Mirror* or *Nostalgia*.

This sense of enclosed space is heightened when the characters are cut off from the outside world, when the television and telephone no longer work. They begin to confront the truth of their own lives, Adelaide has a nervous fit reminiscent of the one experienced by the stalker's wife and a feeling of approaching doom increases. Otto collapses and seems dead, but then revives, like Hari in *Solaris*. Other motifs suggest a breakdown in human communication, such as a telephone ringing in another room but being unanswered.

Tarkovskii also includes dream sequences, as when Alexander dreams that he flies over the heads of panic-stricken, fleeing people, or when he sleeps with Maria and they are both lifted in the air, like Kris and Hari in their gravity-free 'dance' in *Solaris*. Alexander also dreams of a wintry landscape, with bare trees and sodden earth that is then blasted by heat and fire. Significantly, when he wakes from his last dream he sees himself full length in a mirror, as if for the first time.

Tarkovskii's themes here remain consistent with those of *Stalker*. Man is faced with his own destruction because he has lost his link with nature. Alexander tells Maria how he visited his ageing mother and tidied up her garden, but then cried when he saw that he had taken away its natural beauty and made it artificial. Such, it would seem, is the fate of Europe, as nuclear powers face up to each other. Escape is possible for Viktor, who has been offered a post in Australia (the significance of the name Adelaide is obvious here) and Alexander himself prefers Japanese clothing and music.

But there is hope at the end of this film about despondency and the end of things. Little Man continues to water the tree of life and he closes the film by citing and questioning Genesis: 'In the beginning was the Word. Why is that, papa?' Dialogue and communication can bring about understanding and acceptance, and, as Dostoevskii said: 'Beauty will save the world.'

The films of Andrei Tarkovskii are to be appreciated not only on the level of aesthetic perception, but on a deeper, emotional plane and in the light of Christian ideas of moral duty and commitment. His cinema is fundamentally

at odds with the requirements of an avowedly atheistic and totalitarian state and his achievement remains not only a cinematic one, but also one of moral resistance.

Tarkovskii rejects his times, he is a film-maker researching his own past as a means of understanding the present, using his own memory to gauge the national experience. As a profoundly Russian artist and thinker, he attempts to reconcile seemingly disparate strands, to seek a metaphysical unity of idea and action: 'In the end Tarkovsky demonstrates the need for both word and image in the unique, organic combination that only the cinema can achieve' (Johnson and Petrie, 1994, p. 261).

Filmography

Andrei Rublev, dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1966 (released in USSR 1971)
Ivan's Childhood ('Ivanovo detstvo'), dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1962
Mirror ('Zerkalo'), dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1974
Nostalgia ('Nostalgiia'), dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1983
The Sacrifice ('Zhertvoprinoshenie'), dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1986
Solaris ('Soliaris'), dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1972
Son of the Regiment ('Syn polka'), dir. Vasilii Pronin, 1946
Stalker ('Stalker'), dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1979
The Steamroller and the Violin ('Katok i skripka'), dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1960
Time of Travels ('Vremia puteshestvii'), dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, 1982
2001: A Space Odyssey, dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968

Notes

1. David Wells comments: '[. . .] Akhmatova remained keenly aware of her responsibility as a poet in the long tradition of Russian poetry, to speak out on social, moral and political issues. By the 1930s she felt more than ever that she was one of the few people still able and willing to chronicle the era through which she was living, and to keep alive the literary traditions of the past.' (See Wells, 1996, p. 64.)
2. Tarkovskii himself seemed unsure as to the 'meaning' of this metaphor, rejecting any notion of 'vulgar symbolism': 'I would concede that the final shot of *Nostalgia* has an element of metaphor, when I bring the Russian house inside the Italian cathedral. It is a constructed image which smacks of literariness: a model of the hero's state, of the division within him which prevents him from living as he has up till now. Or perhaps, on the contrary, it is his new wholeness in which the Tuscan hills and the Russian countryside come together indissolubly; he is conscious of them as his own, merged into his being and his blood, but at the same time reality is enjoining him to separate these things by returning to Russia' (Tarkovsky, 1991, pp. 213–16).