

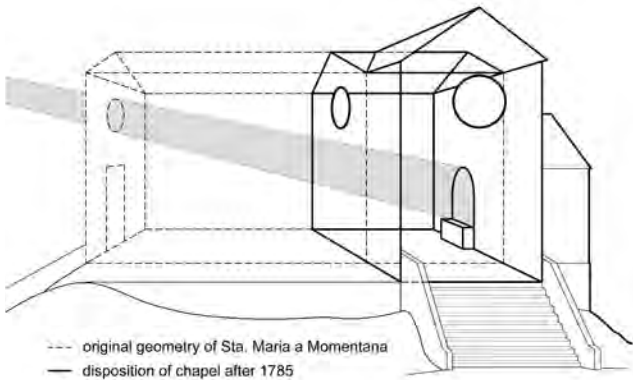


ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S MADONNA DEL PARTO

James Macgillivray

In July of 1984, Andrei Tarkovsky attended a press conference in Milan where he announced to the world that he would not return to the Soviet Union. When a journalist asked him if he would be seeking political exile in Italy, Tarkovsky answered; "I'm telling you a drama. You cannot ask me bureaucratic questions. Which country? I don't know. It's like asking me in which cemetery I wish to bury my children."¹ This laconic announcement came at the end of the drama that began in 1979 when he first chose to go to Italy to film *Nostalgia*. The film itself stands as a testament to his own experience of nostalgia during his exile; in fact Tarkovsky calls the protagonist, Andrei Gorchakov, a "mirror" of himself.²

Gorchakov's exile, like Tarkovsky's, is expressed and manifested in a project: the purpose of his trip to Italy is to research the life of Pavel Sosnovsky, an eighteenth century serf composer whose nostalgia for Russia in Italy drives him to suicide. Sosnovsky's story within the film is a mirror in which Gorchakov can contemplate his own nostalgia. Tarkovsky, in turn, can be said to work through his nostalgia by interrogating and manipulating the character of Gorchakov. Sosnovsky is therefore the diegetic denotation of a generative structure for the work, *Nostalgia*. As such, Sosnovsky is an example of a narrative device known as *mise-en-abyme*, a condition in a work of art where a fragment of the work replicates, in miniature, the entire composition of the work. The *mise-en-abyme* of *Nostalgia* is unique because the symmetry across scales (a story within a story) ultimately points back to Tarkovsky.



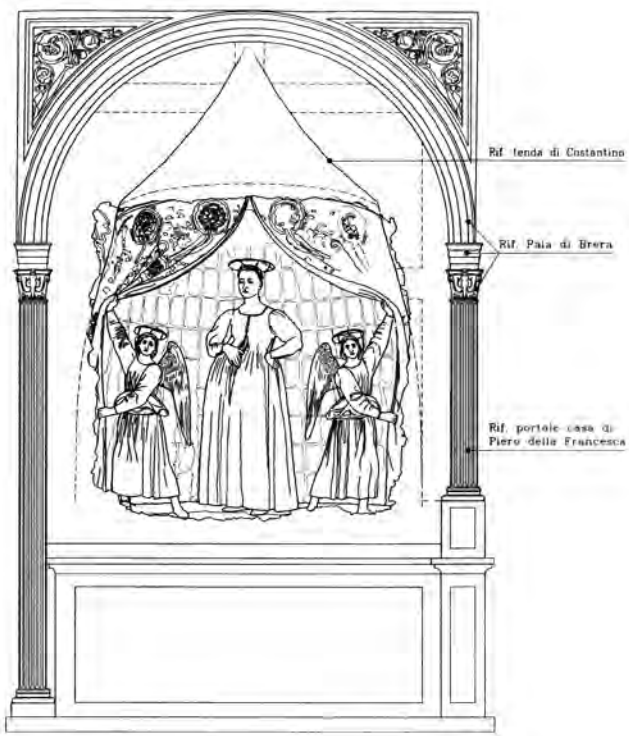
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Still from the penultimate scene in *Nostalghia*, where Andrei Gorchakov successfully carries a candle across St Catherine's pool, completing the wish of Domenico.

Above
Santa Maria in Momentana after destruction of the nave and construction of new entrance.

The making of *Nostalghia*, the nostalgia of Tarkovsky himself, is contained within *Nostalghia*. In *Sculpting in Time*, he says that “the camera was obeying first and foremost my inner state during filming”.³ In this sense, the technical aspect of *Nostalghia* implicates Tarkovsky's inner state just as the behaviour of Gorchakov follows the imperatives of the film's production.

The first scene of the film, Eugenia and Gorchakov's visit to the *Madonna del Parto*, exemplifies *Nostalghia*'s ambiguous agency. Gorchakov, it may be inferred, wants to see the painting because it reminds him of his wife.⁴ Tarkovsky chooses the painting both for its artistic merit and because its context is not well known and therefore allows him greater artistic license when he uses it in the film. By contrast, heavily toured sights like the Campidoglio require a total fidelity in order to be plausible to an international audience. At Piero's fresco he can and does take great liberties manipulating the painting so that it fits properly into the film. Gorchakov goes to the out of the way location for a similar reason: he dislikes tourists.⁵

Yet the question that lies at the heart of the scene remains: why, after travelling hundreds of miles to see the Madonna does Gorchakov not enter the chapel? The answer to this question lies in the relationship between Gorchakov and Tarkovsky. In the first scene of *Nostalghia*, the *Madonna del Parto* is refracted and reflected in the mirrors of the film's *mise-en-abyme*, until it becomes something fundamentally different, both emotionally/ culturally and technically. This scene incorporates two primary artistic manipulations of the *Madonna del Parto* in order to present Tarkovsky's idea of the work. The first manipulation is to move the fresco to a new architectural site and to manipulate the architecture of this new site as a decentralised field condition that brings the painting into the film. The second, and overarching manipulation is to create the ritual of the Cult of the Virgin, a new meaning for the painting itself. It is precisely the extent and breadth of these interventions that exclude Gorchakov from being present in the chapel. As the director, or what he refers to in *Sculpting in Time* as the “demiurge” of the film, Tarkovsky must have felt that his own presence in the scene was too strong to include his stand-in protagonist.⁶ Gorchakov must wait outside.



Reconstructive drawing of original architectural frame the *Madonna del Parto*.

The Madonna del Parto and the Capella di Cimitero

In 1979 Tarkovsky went to Italy and filmed the documentary *Tempo di viaggio* with his soon-to-be collaborator on *Nostalghia*, Tonino Guerra. It follows Tarkovsky and Guerra as they tour Italy in search of locations and make short studies of prospective sets. *Tempo di viaggio* is emblematic of the blurring that occurs between Tarkovsky's inner state and the technical production of *Nostalghia*. At this point in Tarkovsky's plans for the film, Gorchakov was to be an architect. Guerra, who was familiar with such a protagonist through his work on Antonioni's *L'Aventura*, seems to opt for similar sets in *Nostalghia*. With fervent admiration he shows Tarkovsky the Baroque architecture of Lecce and many other famous sights. Yet, Tarkovsky is not satisfied. He states, “The south shore is too beautiful, resort-like and annoying... I want to interfere with people and accidents, feelings, not beauty and architecture.”⁷ Later in the film he rejects not only the architecture but also the spatial sense of Italy. He says, “Italy is a country still without the ability to understand perspective and proportions. They have no sense of depth perception. In the south of Italy, everything is on the same plane and it confuses me.”⁸

When he toured Italy for *Tempo di viaggio* Tarkovsky was searching both for sets and for information about himself, the Russian tourist. In this self-exploratory sense, *Nostalghia* does indeed mirror *Tempo di viaggio*; many of Gorchakov's words are paraphrases of Tarkovsky's dialogues with Guerra. Yet *Tempo di viaggio*, as a stage in the technical planning of *Nostalghia*'s artistic image, is almost wholly discarded by the director; it is a negative image.⁹ Thus, while both films contain the *Madonna del Parto*, *Tempo di viaggio* is forced to show only the painting and none of its surrounding architecture. This is due to the fact that *Nostalghia* will recast the fresco in another church, within a totally different architecture. Tarkovsky must cover his tracks. *The Madonna del Parto* as it existed before Tarkovsky, as it existed in itself, is worth describing here, even if only to accentuate his moves.

The original location of Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* is the *Capella di Cimitero* of *Santa Maria della Momentana* in the town of Monterchi near Arezzo. This church in its entirety was in existence before 1230. It was a simple Romanesque structure facing east with a circular window above the door whose interior dimensions were four meters wide by five meters high.¹⁰ It was also quite a long building, a feature that led Thomas Martone



Piero della Francesca, *Madonna del Parto*, circa 1457.

to conclude that the circular window above the door was a kind of aperture for projecting light on the Madonna.¹¹ This relationship only properly exists with the church's original length, which created enough diffraction and the proper angle for an agreeable effect. In 1785, after an earthquake destroyed two thirds of the nave, Monterchi took the site as a cemetery, subsequently adding an entrance along the south end of the transept.¹²

The most important losses to the church are in the fresco itself and a construction that surrounded it. One drawing done by the *Comune di Monterchi* in their 1992 restoration shows that this framing architecture was similar to what Guerra refers to in *Tempo di viaggio* when he says: "In the original, the walls of the church try to engulf the painting." The scheme shows a Romanesque construction that is integrated with both the altar and the wall. In the space between the existing painting and the construction, Piero had painted the curtain in such a way as to be unified with the arch. From the *quattrocento* onward, the painting underwent a thorough transformation. The arched construction was destroyed and parts of the fresco were chipped off in the earthquake. These were restored in the eighteenth century by Constantino and further in 1910 by Domenico Ficalì. Ficalì also detached the fresco from the wall and added a gold frame in place of the arch. Ultimately, in their restoration of March 1992, the *Comune di Monterchi* moved the painting from the church for good. After removing all the painting done by Constantino and Ficalì to the absent parts at the top of the fresco, they installed what remained of Piero's painting in a climate controlled glass case in the Monterchi museum. This essence of the painting, created by restorers and art historians, is objectified. One relates to it as a pure quadrant of extricated wall in which a fragment of the painting remains as if by chance.¹³

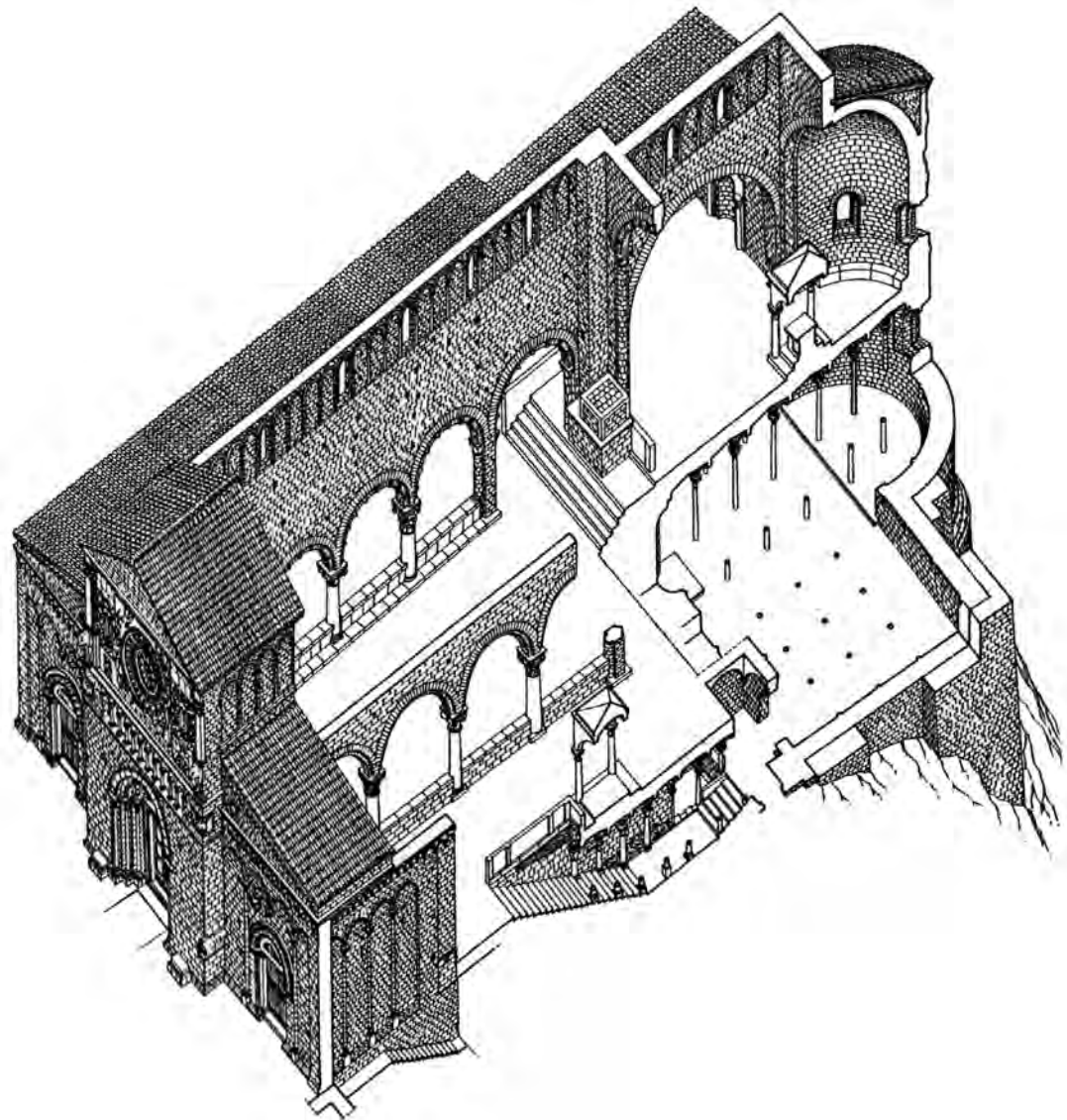
In 1979 Tarkovsky would have seen the fresco for the first time in the sparse, cramped space of the chapel in Monterchi. After Ficalì detached the fresco from the wall in 1910, it would have appeared to Tarkovsky resting crudely against the white walls of the east end of the church. The semi-circular top of the painting still remained from the Romanesque architectural frame but Ficalì's additions and the layers of dirt would have obscured the original. What is it about the *Madonna del Parto* in this state that eventually inspires him to film it? On a more basic level, what does it mean to Tarkovsky to film a painting, and what aesthetic and artistic problems does Tarkovsky see at the intersection of film and art?

Painting and Cinema

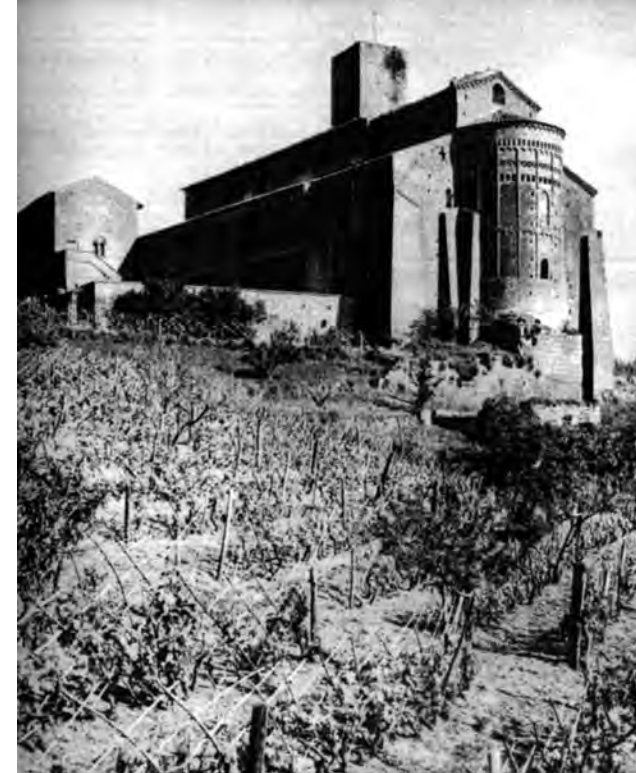
In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky advocates a complete separation between cinema and the other arts: "As it develops, the cinema will, I think, move further away, not only from literature but also from other adjacent art forms, and thus become more and more autonomous."¹⁴ On the dangers of not separating the cinema from the adjacent arts, Tarkovsky states: "One result is that cinema then loses something of its capacity of incarnating reality directly and by its own means, as opposed to transmuting life with the help of literature, painting or theatre.... Trying to adapt the features of other art forms to the screen will always deprive the film of what is distinctively cinematic."¹⁵ This quotation comes as a surprise, not only in light of *Nostalghia* but because Tarkovsky's works invariably represent pictorial art, full frame, in at least one scene.¹⁶ For these works to appear in his films, they must do so in such a way as not to "deprive the film of what is distinctively cinematic".

The conditions for cinematic integrity in the appearance of the Madonna become even more complex when layered with considerations of the integrity of the painted work. Paintings have their own formal conditions that are compromised when depicted in a film. *Comune di Monterchi's* desire to relocate the fresco was known by Tarkovsky at the time of filming *Tempo di viaggio*. "We filmed Piero della Francesca's Madonna of Childbirth in Monterchi", he says in the documentary. "No reproduction can give any idea of how beautiful it is. A cemetery on the borders of Tuscany and Umbria. When they wanted to transfer the Madonna to a museum, the local women protested and insisted on her staying."¹⁷ (Ultimately the fresco was moved to the museum in 1992.) In his journal entry and in his conversations with Guerra in the film, Tarkovsky is clearly in agreement with the local women on the importance of keeping the work in its original site. On this subject Guerra is even more outspoken; while they look at a reproduction of the Madonna in a book, he says: "The reproduction loses a lot. In the original, the walls of the church try to engulf the painting. The dust introduces blue and white shades, especially on her stomach. I don't believe in reproductions, or translations in poetry. Art is always connected to the place in which it was created."

These statements by the director and his collaborator betray a view on art and context that is strangely missing from *Nostalghia*. Shouldn't the *Madonna del Parto* be filmed in its proper setting and ritualistic context? Furthermore, the obligatory use of a reproduction



Axonometric of San Pietro with sectional cut showing the crypt.



The exterior of San Pietro, facing southeast.

in *Nostalghia* (itself a filmic reproduction) would seem to run counter to both Guerra's and Tarkovsky's statements. Yet in light of the fresco's history one could say that both its site and its cultural and ritualistic meaning have already been weakened if not destroyed, both by neglect and by the Modern concept of art. The narrative of the Madonna's progress through time is one of constant deterioration, ending in reification. It has been removed from its ritualistic context and appropriated by the museum. The extraction of the fresco from the wall (its square shape) provides the most literal illustration of a change in the painting's use; it is as if it has been formatted for reproduction in monographs. When Tarkovsky came to view Piero's Madonna in 1979, most of the painting's ritualistic dimension had already been destroyed, leaving it a plastic object suitable for reproduction in film.⁸

The Move to San Pietro

Given the above, when Tarkovsky returned in 1982 to film the *Madonna del Parto* for *Nostalghia*, he did not use the original in the *Capella di Cimitero* in Monterchi, but a reproduction installed in the crypt of a Romanesque church in Tuscania called San Pietro, some 120 kilometers away.¹⁹ The church dates from 1093 and, as the seat of the diocese, was a thriving religious centre in the Middle Ages. The building is built largely from spolia, cannibalised remains of Roman and Etruscan architecture.²⁰ San Pietro's crypt was the first of what would become a Tuscan typology; the altar is not located in the apse but directly opposite, at the centre of the west wall of the transept. This configuration could be due to the fact that the apse was used for baptisms.

The fresco above the altar depicts the Virgin and the baby Jesus.²¹ It is a relatively large space for a crypt (roughly 90 square meters), providing ample room for the camera work and other considerable spatial needs of the *Madonna del Parto* scene. Other unique features of this crypt are its windows, due to the dramatic change in grade between the entrance and the apse of the church. One window is on either side of the transept, while the third is in the apse concealed behind the Madonna in Tarkovsky's film.

The crypt is perhaps the only setting in which Tarkovsky could have placed his *Madonna del Parto*. The north-south axis of the transept windows, the dark recesses of thickly columned space, the window behind the Madonna through which the birds exit the





Left
The crypt of San Pietro, facing northeast, with view of apse.



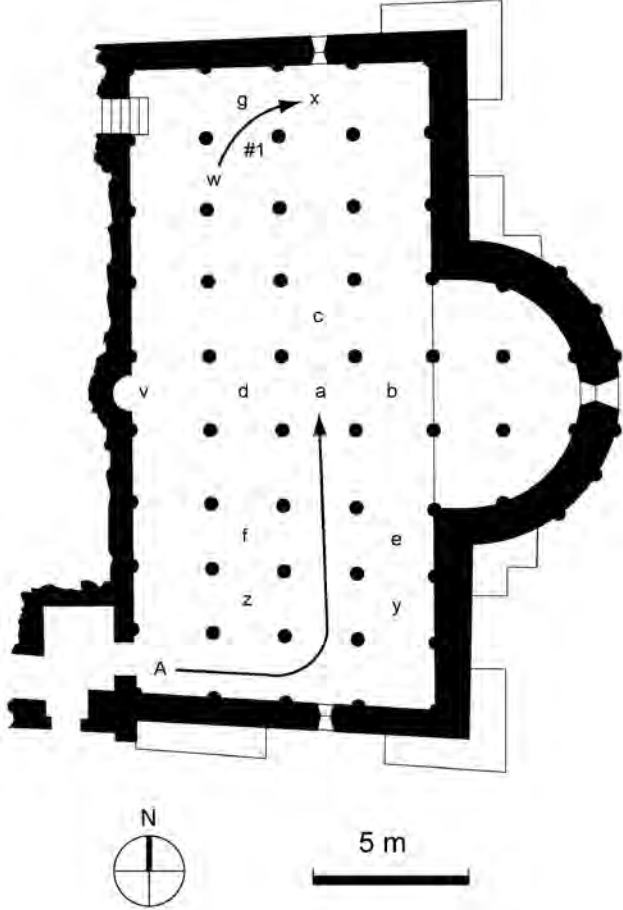
Right
The crypt of San Pietro, facing south, with view of altar on right.

crypt, the potential within this arched matrix for the creation of framing conditions similar to those of Piero’s original fresco—all of these elements create a spatial dimension which he manipulates in order to ‘cinematise’ the fresco. The structural tectonic system of the crypt replicates the compositional structure of the fresco’s original conditions. Furthermore, the structure of the crypt is within the structure of the shot transfers, the structure of editing. This tectonic suture is therefore a backdrop but also a form of registration, a structure inside the film itself. Tarkovsky’s manipulation of the architecture of the crypt makes it contain the meaning of the scene.

Suture, Time and the Explosion of Space

In their definitive book, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*, Vida T Johnson and Graham Petrie include a summary of this scene which is worth quoting here because it is typical of most viewers’ impressions:

Eugenia is seen in the pillared and candlelit interior of a church with women in black dresses kneeling in prayer in the background... In a conversation with the elderly sacristan she is politely reproached for lacking faith and is told that a woman is meant to have and raise children, in a spirit of patience and sacrifice. Meanwhile the women have carried a life-size statue of the Virgin through the church and are praying before it;



Plan of San Pietro’s crypt showing figure and camera positions.

Piero della Francesca’s Madonna of Childbirth is visible on the wall behind them. As a woman opens the statue’s robes, a flock of small birds streams out. A series of virtual match-cuts takes us from a close-up of Eugenia’s face to a slow track in to Piero’s Madonna and then, in black and white, to Andrei....²²

In their summary of the scene, Johnson and Petrie delineate the two parts of the action: first Eugenia and the sacristan, then the statue of the virgin and the birds. Their use of the word “meanwhile” to link the two elements as simultaneous agrees with what most people believe they see in the scene. In fact the two elements are not simultaneous in shooting and cannot be since they occur in the same part of the crypt and do not include eachother. The fact that viewers see the two elements as simultaneous reveals a fascinating difference between the experience of space and time in cinema and in architecture. An architectural analysis reveals not only this striking difference between cinema and architecture but also the brilliant ways in which Tarkovsky uses the cinema to explode architectural space. Although Tarkovsky’s art is at work in all the shot exchanges of the scene, it will suffice to show the two most important sequences. These will reference the plan of the crypt.

The first sequence takes place over the first three shots.²³ The first shot begins with Eugenia moving towards point a from the southwest entrance of the crypt on what will be called line A. The camera begins at point W and ends at point X on what will be called track 1. As Eugenia makes her way to point A, the camera comes around for the final framing image along the transept axis. In the final frame of the shot, Eugenia at point a is perfectly framed under the arch looking straight into the camera at point X. Her intent gaze towards the camera imbues the coming shot exchange with the convention of shot-countershot. When she looks directly at the camera and Tarkovsky cuts to the next shot, the viewer expects to see what she is seeing, in other words to cut to a 180 degree change in view. However the next shot is not of the north transept but instead looks east from point A at the apse which was located 90 degrees directly to Eugenia’s right. In this shot exchange Tarkovsky has essentially used the conventions of suture to relocate the apse in the northern end of the transept. The next shot is a sidelong shot of Eugenia at point B taken from point Y as she looks into the apse, reinforcing our perception that in the first shot she was in fact looking at the apse (Figure 10). Over the course of these three shots Tarkovsky has exploded the architectural



space by using a 90 degree distortion of shot-countershot, in effect creating a second apse.

This is not a literal creation of a second apse. After all, the viewer does not come to the conclusion watching the film that this is a crypt with two apses. Nevertheless, the spatial slack created by the suture and the change in the viewer's orientation allows for the physical impossibility of the fourth shot. The importance of this spatial slack lies in the fact that the next shot shows the Cult of the Virgin proceeding to the very space in which Eugenia and the sacristan stand.



The second sequence is that of the sixth and seventh shot in the scene. The sixth follows a shot showing the young woman kneeling before the statue. It resumes the third shot in which Eugenia was seen at point B from the camera position at point Y. Recall that during shots four and five, the space in which we see Eugenia was full of the procession of the Cult of the Virgin. Yet throughout this shot which eventually tracks from point Y to point Z there are no candles, no women and no statue of the Virgin. During the shot, the sacristan moves into the frame at point E and continues walking until he reaches point F. The camera keeps him in the frame the whole time by tracking from point Y to point Z, coming to a rest at Z for the remainder of the shot. In this stationary part of the shot Eugenia re-enters the frame and proceeds from point F to point G. The sacristan follows her until he arrives at point d where he stops and emphatically looks east.



Sequence of the four separate shots where Eugenia is interspersed with scenes of the Cult of the Virgin ritual.

Once again, because of the sacristan's emphatic gaze, the convention of suture imbues the following shot with an expectation of the sacristan's point of view. If the viewer is aware of the simple track that the camera has followed, then the point of view shot should contain the empty apse where Eugenia was at the beginning of shot six. The next shot is filmed from the sacristan's point of view at point D, but it is not an empty apse; it now appears filled with the Cult of the Virgin, resuming the footage of shot five which showed the woman and the statue sidelong in front of the background of the *Madonna del Parto*. How is it then that, by the time the shot cuts, the viewer has forgotten the empty apse at the beginning of the shot? The answer lies in the fact that this shot is the longest one in the scene (2:08 minutes compared to the average of 0:32). Tarkovsky knew that the combined effects of the shot's length, camera movement and the confusing architecture of the crypt were enough to disorient the viewer into thinking that the sacristan's point of view had arrived at an entirely different point.



In church architecture, a grid of columns reinforces one's orientation in space relative to the eastern direction. In Tarkovsky's hands however this grid becomes like a dark wood, confusing the viewer to such an extent that it becomes difficult to recognise the apse for what it is when it is in plain view. In the criticism available on Tarkovsky and in his own writings, *mise-en-scène* and editing are aspects of his art which are under-represented due to the emphasis on his aesthetics and long duration shots. His inventiveness in this respect is strikingly present when unlocked by mapping the scene's production in plan.



Sequence of four separate shots featuring Giordano as Eugenia interspersed with scenes of her discussion with the sacristan and the Cult of the Virgin ritual.

The differences between the architecture in reality and in the film reveal that Tarkovsky was not only manipulating the Madonna but was also drastically altering the crypt of San Pietro, creating another crypt. In opposition to a film that would make architecture legible (ie., one that would explain the architectural object as it really is), Tarkovsky gives the viewer a totally synthetic suture of architectural space. The architecture of the crypt after Tarkovsky must be understood as a field condition; the actual layout of the space is of very little importance. What were once absolutes in the architecture (the apse, the altar, the east) become relative conditions depending upon the contingencies of the camera's field of view. The field condition inherent in the architecture and the visual field of the camera overlap and coincide. Furthermore, the crypt is continuous and semi-differentiated, which allows for the degree of architectural meaning that one sees in Tarkovsky's treatment, but no more. For instance, the strong light that emanates from the apse differentiates the space of each shot, but this differentiation is not powerful enough to seep into the other shots in the scene. It is not powerful enough to create a legible architectural space, only a cinematic one.

The Cult of the Virgin

Tarkovsky's mother died on 5 October 1979, after he had returned to Russia following the filming of *Tempo di viaggio*.²⁵ In his previous film *Mirror*, Tarkovsky had voiced what could be called anti-feminism mainly in relation to his mother: when his ex-wife accuses him of being self-centered, the autobiographical character Alexei says: "I can't help it. I was raised by women." In light of this statement and many of a similar nature, the dedication of *Nostalghia* to his mother is a reference to the basis for his largely anti-feminist film. The words that appear on the screen at the end of *Nostalghia*, "*Dedicato a la memoria di mia madre*", are both a



dedication to Tarkovsky's mother and also a return to the first scene of the *Madonna del Parto*. It echoes the reason that inspired Piero to paint the *Madonna del Parto* in his mother's native village of Monterchi; her death in November of 1459 is believed to be the catalyst for the fresco.²⁶ However, Tarkovsky drastically changes the meaning of the painting itself by a process of ritualisation and fetishisation.

The fresco is an extremely rare work in that it shows the Madonna visibly pregnant. It is one of the only examples, other than vernacular works, of this subject.²⁷ The difference in scale between the Madonna and the angels points to it being a devotional image, and in practice, a comforting one for pregnant women. *Quattrocento* theology held that the Virgin had an incredibly easy birth. St Bernard's *Legenda Aurea* was still in wide circulation in Piero's time. It declared that: "She alone conceived her son without sin and bore him without heaviness, and gave birth to him without pain."²⁸ The desire for the alleviation of pain after conception has been most likely the devotional power of the fresco since it was first painted.²⁹

In an earlier version of his script, Tarkovsky's invented ritual was to have been similar to the fresco's use in the *quattrocento*. In May of 1980, he described the ceremony as having occurred after conception: "The pregnant women come crowding here like witches, to ask the Madonna to ensure them a safe delivery."³⁰ Ultimately however, the final scene necessitates a departure from both this early version and its origins. Tarkovsky's idea of the ritual may have changed due to the fact that it is called upon to criticise feminism as one of the Western tenets to which he objected during his years of exile. Utilitarian notions of freedom and the pursuit of happiness are bound up in Eugenia's character and it is on her shoulders that the full weight of Tarkovsky's judgment rests. In the modern age of safe and anesthetic births, a fertility ritual that recognises the connection of pregnancy to mortal risk and suffering is perhaps the only way that Tarkovsky can polemicise his anti-Feminist agenda. Thus the spoken element of the ritual which so forcefully imposes its meaning upon the image of the Madonna's expression, is orchestrated as an indictment both of feminism and of the West as a whole.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the scene, however, is that Tarkovsky's attack on Eugenia's Feminism doesn't rest upon the pious example of the other women or the argument of the sacristan. After all, Eugenia does not leave the *Madonna del Parto*



Dream sequence where Gorchakov conjures an image of his pregnant wife in the hotel room in Bago Vignoni. Tarkovsky uses the image of natural pregnancy as a transition from the Virgin Birth depicted in the *Madonna del Parto*, which is then juxtaposed with the emptiness of Eugenia's womb.

vanquished. Her exchange with the sacristan ends in her favour and her Feminism remains largely unchallenged. However once she has proven her intelligence and freedom in this scene, the film goes on to record her humiliation by placing her in a sexual situation where she has no power. What Eugenia never realises is that her defeat in the pursuit of Gorchakov is predicated upon the basic erotic condition that is set up in the first scene and reinforced throughout the film.

Tarkovsky's concept of male/female polarity is stated succinctly in his diaries: "What is a woman's driving force? Submission, humiliation in the name of love. And a man's? Creation."³¹ Creation for Tarkovsky is always artistic. Furthermore, artistic creation is visualised in images of procreation and conception. In *Sculpting in Time* he writes: "It is like childbirth.... The poet has nothing to be proud of: he is not master of the situation, but a servant."³² Note that, in this instance, not only is the creative force associated with childbirth but also with the female trait of submission. Thus within Tarkovsky's concept of male artistic creation, one may find aspects that are similar to those of pregnancy and childbirth: the work matures as a child does, and the artist during the process of creation experiences the same humility and submission that the woman does in miraculous, selfless love for the man.

The difference, however, is that the source of inception in the artist is not a man, as with women, but similar to the Virgin Mary, it is God. His 'child' is a result of God's calling the same way that Mary's is a Virgin Birth. Real childbirth does not have this origin, but Tarkovsky's use of the *Madonna del Parto* in the opening scene and his subsequent visual equation of Gorchakov's wife with the Madonna, support the fetishisation of her natural pregnancy. The unique power of the *Madonna del Parto* as an image and one of the reasons that Tarkovsky chooses the painting is that it exploits the possibility for a fetishisation of pregnancy; the Virgin Birth makes the transition into the fetish by becoming powerfully visible. The fetish is striking in this instance given its strange association with the miraculous power of the Virgin.

The implications of this fetish for the rest of the film are shattering in regard to Eugenia. Throughout, the correlation between the Madonna and Gorchakov's wife are exhaustively drawn out. Gorchakov's remark to Domenico that his wife is like the *Madonna del Parto* "ma piu nera" goes without saying. Furthermore, Tarkovsky's treatment of Eugenia's costume resonates as the



Madonna del Parto displayed in a glass case in the Monterchi Museum.



Still from *Nostalghia*.

unsettling frustration of the pregnancy fetish. Throughout the film, until the final scene in which she has submitted to Vittorio, Eugenia is seen wearing voluptuous, loose clothing; these clothes connote sensuality to the viewer but to Gorchakov they simply accentuate the emptiness of her womb. In this sense, the film sustains a dramatic irony whereby Eugenia, oblivious to the implications of her encounter with the Madonna and unaware of Gorchakov's dreams of his pregnant wife, remains mystified by Gorchakov's frigidity. This dramatic irony reaches its height when Eugenia mistakenly offers Gorchakov her breast and asks: "Is this what you want?" A sexual encounter without conception is simply not within Gorchakov's erotic imagination. Only in light of the *Madonna del Parto* scene, a scene in which Gorchakov was not even present, does the romantic non-event of *Nostalghia* become intelligible.

Tarkovsky's appropriation of the *Madonna del Parto* within the sexual dimension of the film should therefore be understood as a radical adaptation of the painting's meaning. The Madonna finds itself, as it were, between the mirrors of Tarkovsky and Gorchakov. The nostalgia of the tourist and the relentless self-exploratory drive of Tarkovsky's artistic process darken the fresco behind a veil of projected meanings; it appears en-abyme.