Andrei Tarkovsky. (4 April 1932, Zavrazhe, Ivono, Russia—28 December 1986, Paris lung cancer). Bio from IMDB: “The most famous Soviet film-maker since Sergei M. Eisenstein, Andrei Tarkovsky (the son of noted poet Arseniy Tarkovsky) studied music and Arabic in Moscow before enrolling in the Soviet film school VGIK. He shot to international attention with his first feature, Ivanovo detsvo (1962), which won the top prize at the Venice Film Festival. This resulted in high expectations for his second feature Andrei Rublyov (1969), which was banned by the Soviet authorities until 1971. It was shown at the 1969 Cannes Film Festival at 4 o’clock in the morning on the last day, in order to prevent it winning a prize - but it won one nonetheless, and was eventually distributed abroad partly to enable the authorities to save face. Solyaris (1972), had an easier ride, being acclaimed by many in the West as the Soviet answer to Kubrick's 2001 (though Tarkovsky himself was never too fond of it), but he ran into official trouble again with Zerkalo (1975), a dense, personal web of autobiographical memories with a radically innovative plot structure. Stalker (1979) had to be completely reshotted on a dramatically reduced budget after an accident in the laboratory destroyed the first version, and after Nostalghia (1983), shot in Italy (with official approval), Tarkovsky defected to the West. His last film, Offset (1986) was shot in Sweden with many of Ingmar Bergman's regular collaborators, and won an almost unprecedented four prizes at the Cannes Film Festival. He died of cancer at the end of the year.”


Son of the distinguished poet Arseniy Tarkovsky and the former Maria Ivanova Vishnyakova. Tarkovsky studied under Mikhail Romm at VGIK, the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow. In the course of his studies he made two short films, There Will Be No Leave Today (1959), and his diploma piece, Katok i skripka (The Steamroller and the Violin, 1960).

Tarkovsky graduated in 1960 and has been a Mosfilm director ever since. The harsh poetry of his unique vision emerged fully in his first feature film, Ivanovo detsvo (Ivan’s Childhood, 1962).

A sense of almost unendurable tension is built up by the camerawork and editing, in which the grim reality of the present is intercut with flashbacks, so that war and childhood, war and nature, are constantly contrasted. . . . “The film is not disfigured by the unnaturally cheery or the conventionally hysterical. With one blow it annuls a whole cinémathèque of the war films of all lands. [Ivor Montague]

“Komsomolskaya Pravda, the newspaper of the Communist youth organization, criticized. . . Tarkovsky, a devout Christian, for depicting Rublev, a much-revered fifteenth-century monk, as a suffering, self-questioning artist rather than a native genius who helped bring about a Russian renaissance in the final decades of Mongolian-Tartar rule.”

Tarkovsky has said, “I do not understand historical films which have no relevance for the present. For me the most important thing is to use historical material to express Man’s ideas and to create contemporary characters.” And in fact, although Andrei Rublev was
beautifully shot on location in the cities where Rublev worked, and period details are meticulously observed, the film’s significance far transcends its localized historical setting. It is a universal political parable, in which the major responses to war, disorder, and oppression are richly dramatized. It is also a meditation on the responsibility of the artist, and one of obvious relevance to Tarkovsky’s own situation in the Soviet Union. . . . Nigel Andrew’s conviction that Andrei Rublev was “the one indisputable Russian masterpiece of the last decade.”

Ivor Montague writes: “I do not think that anyone can ‘enjoy’ Tarkovsky’s films. They are too tense, too agonizing, at their best too spellbinding . . . . Remember, he comes of a generation that, in the years he was the age of the boy in his first feature, was losing in its homeland twenty million dead. But when one has seen any one of his films once, one wants to see it again and yet again; thoughts chase after another like hares in March.”

In July 1984, he defected to the West, saying that his application to Moscow for permission to extend his stay abroad had gone unanswered, and that he would not be allowed to make films upon his return to Russia. Discussing his past difficulties with the regime, Tarkovsky said: “I have worked for twenty-four years in the Soviet Union, for the state organization on which all movie activity depends, and I have produced only six films. I can say that in those twenty-four years I have been unemployed for eighteen.” He remained in Western Europe.

His last film Offret/Sacrificio (The Sacrifice, 1986) was filmed on location on Gotland, in the Baltic, with cinematography by Sven Nyquist. Sacrifice tells of an aging intellectual and the act of faith by which he apparently saves the world. Alexander (Erland Josephson), his family, and their friends have gathered at his summer house on a primitive Swedish island to celebrate his birthday. The dinner is a revelation of domestic treachery and spiritual malaise. Exhausted, Alexander has fallen asleep when an unspecified catastrophe—possibly a nuclear accident—occurs. The air grows very cold, and an eerie glow illuminates a landscape transformed to hoarfrost, ooze, and rot. A visiting neighbor, the local postman, tells Alexander that if he spends the night with an island woman, a reputed witch, the world can be saved. Alexander does, and reawakens the next morning to find the landscape restored to its summery beauty. What seems to have been an old man’s nightmare may in fact have been a perilous journey of the spirit, but Alexander cannot tell us—he has lost his reason.

In a 1986 interview, Tarkovsky said of The Sacrifice, “The issue I raise in this film is one that to my mind is the most crucial: the absence in our culture of room for a spiritual existence. We have extended the scope of our material assets and conducted materialistic experiments without taking into account the threat posed by depriving man of his spiritual dimension. Man is suffering but he doesn’t know why. I wanted to show that a man can renew his ties to life by renewing his covenant with himself and with the source of his soul. And one way to recapture moral integrity...is by having the capacity to offer oneself in sacrifice.”

from The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia, Andrew Sarris, Editor, Visible Ink NY 1998 entry by G.C. Macnab
“Tarkovsky is the greatest of them all. He moves with such naturalness in the room of dreams. He doesn’t explain. What should he explain anyhow?” Thus Ingmar Bergman, in his autobiography The Magic Lantern, bows downs before the Russian director while also hinting at what makes Tarkovsky’s work so awkward to critics: it can verge on the inscrutable. Too opaque to yield concrete meaning, it offers itself as sacral art, demanding a rapt, and even religious, response from its audiences.

Watching Tarkovsky’s films, his “sculpture in time,” spectators find themselves on a journey every bit as arduous as that undertaken by the pilgrims who headed toward the Zone. [A realm in his 1979 film The Stalker where all “desires come true.”] The son of a poet, the director treated film as a medium in which he could express himself in the first person. His six years at the Moscow State Film School, during which he received a thorough grounding in film technique from such luminaries as Mikhail Romm, did nothing to disabuse him of the notion that cinema was a “high art.” He felt he could tap the same vein of poetic intimacy that his father sought in lyric verse. The necessary intrusion of camera crews and actors, and the logistical problems of exhibition and distribution, worried him not a jot. Although all his films are self-reflexive, he does not draw attention to the camera for radical Brechtian reasons. He is not trying to subvert bourgeois narrative codes. He is not even assaulting the tenets of Socialist Realism, a doctrine he found every bit as unappealing as Western mass culture aimed at the consumer (although his ex-partner, Konchalovsky, ended up in Hollywood directing Sylvester Stallone vehicles). What his constant use of tracking shots, slow motion, and never-ending pans—indeed his entire visual rhetoric—seems to emphasize is that he is moulding the images. He is a virtuoso, and he wants us to be aware of the fact.

Tarkovsky’s first two feature length projects, Ivan’s Childhood and Andrei Rublev, mark a curious collision between the personal and the political. On one level, the former is a propaganda piece, telling yet again the great Soviet story of the defeat of the Nazi scourge during World War II. But Tarkovsky destabilizes the film with dream sequences. The “big questions” that are ostensibly being addressed turn out to be peripheral: the director is more concerned with the poetic rekindling of childhood than with a triumphal narrative of Russian resilience. Similarly, Rublev, an epic three-hour biography of a medieval icon painter, is, in spite of the specificity and grandeur of its locations, a rigorous account of the role of the artist in society, as applicable to the 1960s as to the 1300s.

from Sculpting in Time, Reflections on the Cinema, Andrei Tarkovsky, University of Texas Press, Austin 2000
There are aspects of human life that can only be faithfully represented through poetry. But this is where directors very often try to use clumsy, conventional gimmickry instead of poetic logic. I’m thinking of the illusionism and extraordinary effects involved in dreams, memories and fantasies. All too often film dreams are made into a collection of old-fashioned filmic tricks, and cease to be a phenomenon of life.
In any case it is perfectly clear that the goal for all art—unless of course it is aimed at the ‘consumer’, like a saleable commodity—is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of his existence. To explain to people the reason for their appearance on this planet; or if not to explain, at least to pose the question.

The allotted function of art is not, as often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as example. The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good.

Touched by a masterpiece, a person begins to hear in himself that same call of truth which prompted the artist to his creative act.

Time is said to be irreversible. And this is true enough in the sense that ‘you can’t bring back the past’, as they say. But what exactly is this ‘past’? Is it what has passed? And what does ‘passed’ mean for a person when for each of us the past is the bearer of all that is constant in the reality of the present, of each current moment? In a certain sense the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more resilient than the present. The present slips and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in its recollection. King Solomon’s rings bore the inscription, ‘All will pass’; by contrast, I want to draw attention to how time in its moral implication is in fact turned back. Time cannot vanish without a trace for it is a subjective, spiritual category; and the time we have lived settles in our soul as an experience placed within time.

What is the essence of the director’s work? We could define it as sculpting in time.

Cinema was the first art form to come into being as a result of a technological invention, in answer to a vital need. It was the instrument which humanity had to have in order to increase its mastery over the real world. For the domain of any art form is limited to one aspect of our spiritual and emotional discovery of surrounding reality.

The function of the image, as Gogol said, is to express life itself, not ideas or arguments about life. It does not signify life or symbolise it, but embodies it, expressing its uniqueness.’

The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame.

No one component of a film can have any meaning in isolation: it is the film that is the work of art. We can only talk about its components rather arbitrarily, dividing it up artificially for the sake of theoretical discussion.

Nor can I accept the notion that editing is the main formative element of a film, as the protagonists of ‘montage cinema’, following Kuleshov and Eisenstein, maintained in the twenties, as if a film was made on the editing table.

Art affirms all that is best in man—hope, faith, love, beauty, prayer. . . . What he dreams of and what he hopes for. . . . When someone who doesn’t know how to swim is thrown into the water, instinct tells his body what movements will save him. The artist, too, is driven by a kind of instinct, and his work furthers man’s search for what is eternal, transcendent, divine—often in spite of the sinfulness of the poet himself.

What is art? Is it good or evil? From God or from the devil? From man’s strength or from his weakness? Could it be a pledge of fellowship, an image of social harmony? Might that be its function? Like a declaration of love: the consciousness of our dependence on each other. A confession. An unconscious act that none the less reflects the true meaning of life—love and sacrifice.

Let us look at Leonardo’s portrait of ‘A Young Lady With a Juniper,’ which we used in Mirror for the scene of the father’s brief meeting with his children when he comes home on leave.

There are two things about Leonardo’s images that are arresting. One is the artist’s amazing capacity to examine the object from outside, standing back, looking from above the world—a characteristic of artists like Bach or Tolstoy. And the other, the fact that picture affects us simultaneously in two opposite ways. It is not possible to say what impression the portrait finally makes on us. It is not even possible to say definitely whether we like the woman or not, whether she is appealing or unpleasant. She is at once attractive and repellent. There is something inexpressibly beautiful about her and at the same time repulsive, fiendish. And fiendish not at all in the romantic, alluring sense of the word; rather—beyond good and evil. Charm with a negative sign. It has an element of degeneracy—and of beauty. In Mirror we needed a portrait in order to introduce a timeless element into the moments that are succeeding each other before our eyes, and at the same time to juxtapose the portrait with the heroine, to emphasize in her and in the actress, Margarita Terekhova, the same capacity at once to attract and repel. . . .

If you try to analyze Leonardo’s portrait, separating it into its components, it will not work. At any rate it will explain nothing. For the emotional effect exercised on us by the woman in the picture is powerful precisely because it is impossible to find in her anything that we can definitely prefer, to single out any one detail from the whole, to prefer any one, momentary impression to another, and make it our own, to achieve a balance in the way we look at the image presented to us. And so there opens up before us the possibility of interaction with infinity, for the great function if the artistic image is to be a kind of detector of infinity. . . . towards which our reason and our feelings go soaring, with joyful, thrilling haste.

Such feeling is awoken by the completeness of the image: it affects us by this very fact of being impossible to dismember. In isolation each component part will be dead—or perhaps, on the contrary, down to its tiniest elements it will display the same characteristics as the complete, finished work. And these characteristics are produced by the interaction of opposed principles, the meaning of which, as if in communicating vessels, spills over from one into the other: the face of the woman painted by Leonardo is animated by an exalted idea and at the same time might appear perfidious and subject to base passions. It is possible for us to see any number of things in the portrait, and as we try to grasp its essences we shall wander through unending labyrinths and never find the way out. We shall derive deep pleasure from the realisation that we cannot exhaust it, or see to the end of it. A true artistic image gives the beholder a simultaneous experience of the most complex, contradictory, sometimes even mutually exclusive feelings.

It is not possible to catch the moment at which the positive goes over into its opposite, or when the negative starts moving towards the positive. Infinity is germane, inherent in the
very structure of the image... .

I am always sickened when an artist underpins his system of images with deliberate tendentiousness or ideology. I am against his allowing methods to be discernible at all. I often regret some of the shots I have allowed to stay in my own films; they seem to me now to be evidence of compromise and found their way into my films because I was insufficiently singleminded. If it were still possible, I would now happily cut out of Mirror the scene with the cock, even though that scene made a deep impression on many in the audience. But that was because I was playing ‘give-away’ with the audience.

When the exhausted heroine, almost at fainting-point, is making up her mind whether to cut off the cockerel’s head, we shot her in close-up at high speed for the last ninety frames, in a patently unnatural light. Since on the screen it comes out in slow motion, it gives the effect of stretching the time-framework—we are plunging the audience into the heroine’s state, putting a brake on that moment, highlighting it. This is bad, because the shot starts to have a purely literary meaning. We deform the actress’s face independently of her, as it were playing the role for her. We serve up the emotion we want, squeeze it out by our own—director’s—means. Her state becomes too clear, too easily read. And in the interpretation of a character’s state of mind, something must always be left secret.

To quote a more successful example of a similar method, again from Mirror: a few frames of the printing-press scene are also shot in slow motion, but in this case it is barely perceptible. We made a point of doing it very delicately and carefully, so that the audience would not be aware of it straight away, but just have a vague feeling of something strange. We were not trying to underline an idea by using slow motion, but to bring out a state of mind through means other than acting. . . .

In a word, the image is not a certain meaning, expressed by a director, but an entire world reflected as in a drop of water. . . . The function of the image, as Gogol said, is to express life itself, not ideas or arguments about life. It does not dignify life or symbolise it, but embodies it, expressing its uniqueness.

Time, rhythm and editing

Turning now to the film image as such, I immediately want to dispel the widely held idea that it is essentially ‘composite’. This notion seems to me wrong because it implies that cinema is founded on the attributes of kindred art forms and has none specifically its own; and that is to deny that cinema is an art.

The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame. The actual passage of time is also made clear in the characters’ behaviour, the visual treatment and the sound—but these are all accompanying features, the absence of which, theoretically, would in no way affect the existence of the film. One cannot conceive of a cinematic work with no sense of time passing through the shot, but one can easily imagine a film with no actors, music, décor or even editing. The Lumière brothers’ Arrivée d’un Train, already mentioned, was like that. . . .

You will remember that the film has no editing, no acting and no décor. But the rhythm of the movement of time is there within the frame, as the sole organising force of the—quite complex—dramatic development.

No one component of a film can have any meaning in isolation: it is the film that is the work of art. And we can only talk about its components rather arbitrarily, dividing it up artificially for the sake of theoretical discussion.

To refer again to my own experience, I must say that a prodigious amount of work went into editing Mirror. There were some twenty or more variants. I don’t just mean changes in the order of certain shots, but major alterations in the actual structure, in the sequence of the episodes. At moments it looked as if the film could not be edited, which would have meant that inadmissible lapses had occurred during shooting. The film didn’t hold together, it wouldn’t stand up, it fell apart as one watched, it had no unity, no necessary inner connection, no logic. And the, one fine day, when we somehow manages to devise one last, desperate rearrangement—there was the film. The material came to life; the parts started to function reciprocally, as if linked by a bloodstream; and as that last, despairing attempt was projected onto the screen, the film was born before our very eyes. For a long time I couldn’t believe the miracle—the film held together. . . .

Time itself, running through the shots, had met and linked together.

There are about two hundred shots in Mirror, very few when a film of that length usually has about five hundred; the small number is due to their length.

Although the assembly of the shots is responsible for the structure of a film, it does not, as is generally assumed, create its rhythm.

The distinctive time running through the shots makes the rhythm of the picture; and the rhythm is determined not by the length of the edited pieces, but by the pressure of the time that runs through them. Editing cannot determine rhythm, (in this respect it can only be a feature of style); indeed, time courses through the picture despite editing rather than because of it. The course of time, recorded in the frame, is what the director has to catch in the pieces laid out on the editing table.

Time, imprinted in the frame, dictates the particular editing principle; and the pieces that ‘won’t edit’—that can’t be properly joined—are those which record a radically different kind of time. . . .

How does time make itself felt in a shot? It becomes tangible when you sense something significant, truthful, going on beyond the events on the screen; when you realise, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction, but is a pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame and to infinity; a pointer to life. Like the infinity of the image which we talked of earlier, a film is bigger than it is—at least, if it is a real film. And it always turns out to have more thought, more ideas, than were consciously put there by its author. Just as life, constantly moving and changing, allows everyone to interpret and feel each separate moment in his own way, so too a real picture, faithfully recording on film the time which flows on beyond the edges of the frame, lives within time if time lives within it; this two-way process is a determining factor of cinema.

The film then becomes something beyond its ostensible existence as an exposed and edited roll of film, a story, a plot. Once in contact with the individual who sees it, it separates from its author, starts to live its own life, undergoes changes of form and meaning.

I reject the principles of ‘montage cinema’ because they do not allow the film to continue beyond the edges of the screen: they do not allow the audience to bring personal experience to bear on what is in front of them on film. ‘Montage cinema’
presents the audience with puzzles and riddles, makes them decipher symbols, take pleasure in allegories, appealing all the time to their intellectual experience. Each of these riddles, however, has its own exact, word for word solution; so I feel that Eisenstein prevents the audience from letting their feelings be influence by their own reaction to what they see. When in October he juxtaposes a balalaika with Kerensky, his method has become his aim, in the way that Valéry meant. The construction of the image becomes an end in itself. And the author proceeds to make a total onslaught on the audience, imposing upon them his own attitude to what is happening.

If one compares cinema with such time-based arts as, say, ballet or music, cinema stands out as giving time visible, real form. Once recorded on film, the phenomenon is there, given and immutable, even when the time is intensely subjective. Artists are divided into those who create their own inner world, and those who recreate reality. I undoubtedly belong to the first—but that actually alters nothing: my inner world may be of interest to some, others will be left cold or even irritated by it; the point is that the inner world created by cinematic means always has to be taken as reality, as it were objectively established in the immediacy of the recorded moment.

A piece of music can be played in different ways, can last for varying lengths of time. Here time is simply a condition of certain causes and effects set out in a given order; it has an abstract, philosophical character. Cinema on the other hand is able to record time in outward and visible signs, recognisable to the feelings. And so time becomes the very foundation of cinema: as sound is in music, colour in painting, character in drama.

Rhythm, then, is not the metrical sequence of pieces; what makes it is the time-thrust within the frames. And I am convinced that it is rhythm, and not editing, as people tend to think, that is the main formative element of cinema.

Obviously editing exists in every art form, since material always has to be selected and joined. What is different about cinema editing is that it brings together time, imprinted in the segments of film.

**Scenario and shooting script**

Between the first and last stages of making a film, the director comes up against such a vast number of people and such divergent problems—some of them all but insuperable—that it almost seems as if circumstances have been deliberately calculated to make him forget why it was that he started working on the picture.

I have to say that for me the difficulties connected specifically with the conception of a film have little to do with its initial inspiration; the problem has always been to keep it intact and unadulterated as the stimulus for work and as a symbol of the finished picture. There is always a danger of the original conception degenerating in the turmoil of producing the film, of being deformed and destroyed in the process of its own realisation.

The film’s progress from its conception to its eventual printing is fraught with every kind of hazard. These have to do not only with technical problems, but also with the enormous number of people involved in the process of production. . . .

It is no exaggeration to say that at every turn the director is beset by the danger of becoming a mere witness, observing the scriptwriter writing, the designer making sets, the actor playing and the editor cutting. That is in fact what happens in highly commercialised productions: the director’s task is merely to coordinate the professional functions of the various members of the team. In a word, it is terribly difficult to insist on an author’s film, when all your efforts are concentrated on not letting the idea be ‘spilt’ until nothing is left of it as you contend with the normal conditions of film-making. One can only hope for a satisfactory outcome if the original conception remains fresh and vivid.

I should say at once that I do not look on scenario as a literary genre. Indeed, the more cinematic a script, the less it can claim literary status in its own right, in the way a play so often can. And we know that in practice no screenplay has ever been on the the level of literature.

I do not understand why anyone with literary talent should ever want to be a script writer—apart, obviously, from mercenary reasons. A writer has to write, and someone who thinks in cinematic images should take up directing. For the idea and purpose of a film, and their realisation, have finally to be the responsibility of the director-author; otherwise he cannot have effective control of the shooting.

When you read a play you can see what it means, even though it may be interpreted differently in different productions; it has its identity from the outset, whereas the identity of a film cannot be discerned from the scenario. The scenario dies in the film. Cinema may take dialogue from literature, but that is all—it bears no essential relation to literature whatsoever. A play becomes part of literature, because the ideas and characters expressed in dialogue constitute its essence: and dialogue is always literary. But in cinema dialogue is merely one of the components of the material fabric of the film. Anything in the scenario that has aspirations to literature, to prose, must as a matter of principle be consistently assimilated and adapted in the course of making the film. The literary element in a film is smelted; it ceases to be literature once the film has been made.

Once the work is done, all that is left is the written transcript, the shooting script, which could not be called literature by any definition. It is more like an account of something seen related to a blind man.

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“For us the story of Rublev is really the story of a ‘taught’ or imposed concept which burns up in the atmosphere of living reality to rise again from the ashes as a fresh and newly discovered truth.” Andrei Tarkovsky

*Andrei Rublev* is the most Russian of films, emblematic of what everyone finds so fascinating and so maddening in the way Russians do things. In the case of *Andrei Rublev* the challenges to our complacent preconceptions are extraordinarily strident. For over three hours, the main protagonist does little more than observe. One of his most drastic actions is to take a sixteen-year-long vow of silence, not an auspicious premise for a movie. Its religious subject matter and flaunting of narrative convention bathe *Andrei Rublev* and its director Andrei Tarkovsky in a rarefied aura of sanctity or sanctimony. It is seen by its fervent admirers as the ‘film of films’, putting it in the same category as the book of books—the Bible. But how can a film which promises so much possibly succeed—while remaining a movie?

For its first viewers, by contrast, *Andrei Rublev* was an eagerly anticipated forbidden fruit and a courageous intervention in contemporary ideological discourse. Its miraculous aura stemmed less from the film itself than from the very improbability of its existence in the atheist USSR, and it was the stubborn
controversy over its release which contributed most to Tarkovsky’s image as a suffering artist. In 1970, after five long years of struggle with the authorities over Andrei Rublev, Tarkovsky began a diary which he entitled ‘The Martyrology’.

While it has ended up deflecting attention from Andrei Rublev as a work of art, the film’s aura of sanctity originated precisely in its aesthetic impact, and the controversy was caused more by Tarkovsky’s startling manner of storytelling than by his ideological position. Tarkovsky’s formal innovations established him as one of the most distinctive young artists in world cinema and as a major threat to the standard artistic discourse in the USSR. While Tarkovsky invariably displayed a pragmatic flexibility in his public statements about his films, the success of Andrei Rublev confirmed his fiercely independent approach to his art. For him, any compromise was a profanation.

Another decisive discovery in Andrei Rublev was the cinematic potential of the Orthodox icon, which would be a mainstay of Tarkovsky’s films right up to the last one, The Sacrifice (1986). One of the ‘synchronicities’ of Solonitsyn’s casting [as Rublev] was his physical similarity to the image of Christ in Rublev’s icon, Saviour in the Wood. The three angels in Rublev’s The Old Testament Trinity provided the pattern for the mysteriously inseparable threesome in Andrei Rublev and Tarkovsky’s later films, Solaris (1972) and Stalker (1979).

Rublev’s Trinity is deceptively simple and transparent. The three figures bow to each other in graceful acknowledgment of their shared majesty. Theologians tell us that the angels (based on Genesis 18) prefigure the revelation of the triune God in the New Testament, united in love because their shared nature is love. Artists tell us that space itself, bending obediently around the figures, confirms them as the centre of creation and draws the viewer into their world. Historians treasure Rublev’s image as the jewel which glistened amidst the embers of Russia’s historical bonfire and expressed the nation’s silent spiritual vision. Tarkovsky took inspiration from the icon in all of these respects: in the film’s thematic structure, in its visual composition, and also in his aspiration to give voice to a silenced culture. The central subject of Tarkovsky’s camera is not the threesome of monks, nor even Andrei Rublev himself, but rather the elusive force which holds their world together: compassion, care, vision...

In an essay written during the production of Andrei Rublev, Tarkovsky coined the term ‘imprinted time’ for the invisible medium which unites his films in lieu of a clear linear narrative.

The characters in Andrei Rublev represent various types of spirituality, from the stern but spineless intellectualism of Kirill (brilliantly played by Ivan Lapikov, in a vastly underrated performance) to the pagan revellers’ exuberant carnality, to Rublev’s humanist questioning. Andrei’s point of view is privileged only insofar as he remains a spectator alongside the viewer, immune to the allure of action. We are never quite sure what he sees and how he sees it, and so we can neither be sure that we are seeing properly either. Nonetheless we feel an almost ethical imperative to keep watching. Perhaps this is the key to Tarkovsky’s personal aura: that he encouraged beaten and distracted people to look, both at the world outside and at their inner selves. It reminds us of the original meaning of the word ‘martyr’, the one Tarkovsky may really have had in mind when he began his diary: ‘witness’. Tarkovsky’s films bear witness to his world and posit the spectator as witness.

Tarkovsky boasted of the way his films educate their viewers. After the eventual release of Andrei Rublev in the USSR, he was heartened by numerous phone calls and letters: ‘Of course audiences understand the film perfectly well, as I knew they would’.

Ostensibly Andrei Rublev is the story of Russia’s most renowned icon painter, who died in 1430 and is conjectured to have been born between 1360 and 1370. Rublev’s life coincided with the beginning of the end of Mongol-Tatar domination and the rise of the modern Russian state, in which the upstart city of Moscow was asserting its primacy among its peers... It was Rublev’s name alone which became the standard for traditional Moscow-school icon painting. In 1551, in the face of growing Western influence, the Russian church mandated that icons be painted ‘from the ancient standards, as Greek icon painters painted and as Andrei Rublev painted along with other famous icon painters’. Rublev’s exclusive reputation was confirmed in 1988, when he was canonised as a saint on the occasion of the millennium of Christianity in Russia. Today, one can find Rublev mentioned as Russia’s premier theologian in the medieval period, which underscores the experiential and visual nature of Russian spirituality.

Between 1551 and the twentieth century, Rublev’s work and Russian icon-painting generally, fell into oblivion... The key factor in the rediscovery of the icon, and by extension, of Rublev, was the theological aesthetics of Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) a polymath scientist, philosopher and priest who taught at the Moscow Theological Academy in the Trinity-St Sergius Monastery, where Rublev had created his masterpiece five centuries earlier. Florensky penned a series of essays on the icon immediately following the revolution of 1917. Some of his work was part of the process of converting the Trinity-St Sergius Monastery into a museum, which saved many of its cultural riches from the Soviet government’s anti-religious campaign. On 11 April 1919, Soviet officials presided over the desecration of the relics of St Sergius, an event that was captured on film by the ‘cine-chronicler’ Dziga Vertov. Fearing for the relics, Florensky took part in a plot to hide St Sergius’ skull in the garden of a local house; it was restored to the sarcophagus only after the official reinstatement of the monastery in 1946. Under Stalin, the ideological emphasis shifted from Marxism (and atheism) to official patriotism, and by the mid-1930s some pre-communist personages had been restored to the cultural pantheon, as illustrated by Vladimir Petrov’s 1937 epic, Peter the Great, or Sergei Eisenstein’s 1938 film, Alexander Nevsky. In this context Rublev, whose work had only recently been recovered, was also appropriated for patriotic purposes. One example of this was the mention of Rublev in a 1941 poem by Arsenii Tarkovsky, the director’s father, entitled ‘My Rus, my Russia, Home, Earth, and Mother!’ In 1943, in a bid for national unity, Stalin restored the Church as a national institution, and postwar Soviet culture witnessed a further legitimisation of religious personages as national heroes who has contributed to the rise of the unified Russian state.

Voznesensky even conscripts Rublev to the cause of communism:

Names and numbers disappear.
Genius changes its clothes.
Genius is the spirit of the nation.
In this sense, Andrei Rublev was Lenin.

Tarkovsky’s response to Voznesensky's syncretism was to give the
role of Efim to the fringe poet Nikolai Glazkov. Glazkov had parodied Voznesensky in a 1962 ditty.

Tarkovsky dwelled more on the film’s innovative narrative structure: “I think this picture will help us to depart from literary discourse, which is still very strong in our cinema. And although the great artist Rublev lived in the fifteenth century, our cine-story about him should be contemporary. After all, the problem of talent, the question of the artist and the nation are not obsolete in our own day. In this work we want to reject a unified plot and narrative. We want the viewer to see Rublev with ‘today’s eyes’.”...In typical fashion, the issue was addressed at the highest levels of the Soviet government.

Tarkovsky’s prickly temperament was both a constant hindrance to his career and a main condition of his success. He strove to control everything, from the tiniest detail in the mise en scène to the weather conditions. The difficulty of such a meticulous approach was multiplied by his characteristic, long-duration tracking shots, which required immaculate choreography in order to produce the necessary ‘rhythm’ while avoiding any anachronistic features in the landscape and conserving precious film stock.

A related decision was the use of black and white for the narrative and colour for the Epilogue displaying Rublev’s icons. In an interview, Tarkovsky claimed that black and white communicated reality, while colour imbued everything with an aura of fictionality. This curious reversal of the usual view of things shows that Tarkovsky understood ‘reality’ in his picture to mean reality as portrayed in accordance with cinematic convention. By extension, although they are Rublev’s only real historical traces and are shown in their current state, the icons are placed beyond the limits of normal filmic reality, and therefore qualify as ‘fiction’. The narrative grounds the icons in a temporal reality, in a life, without which they are impossible incursions of the supernatural into our world. The rare cinema trick sticks outs, as when blood spurts flamboyantly from an arm wound during the sack of Vladimir. But we almost welcome these lapses into obvious cinema convention because they assure us that Tarkovsky acknowledged himself master of his own fiction, not of history or reality as such, and was happiest as storyteller, not as prophet.

Tarkovsky’s desire to achieve both authenticity and distance dictated the use of authentic locations, which was fraught with legal and aesthetic hazards. During the shoot, a small stir was caused by a fire which occurred at the historic Dormition Cathedral in Vladimir; it was awkward that a film advertised as recovering the historical Andrei Rublev might endanger his only surviving frescoes.

There is no consistent point of view for the narration, even when the titular hero is present in the shot. The camera may seem to sympathise with a character for a time, but it invariably switches to another character or takes on a life of its own. There are also few establishing shots to give a sense of the objective space in which the viewer can array events and characters. Instead, the meaning of a shot is liable to remain suspended until the viewer ascribes it to a particular subject and places it precisely in the narrative. The screen acts as a locus of exchange on which the characters’ and viewers’ gazes run like alternating current through the tense, pensive images. The viewer is encouraged to acknowledge a manifold of possible plots and interpretations and to avoid reducing the film to a tighter story. The screen is not a transparent window on objective reality, but the material basis of a narrative form which takes shape only with the viewer’s active participation.

COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:

Nov 8 Peter Yates BULLITT 1968 (35mm)
Nov 15 Woody Allen ANNIE HALL 1977 (35mm)
Nov 22 Rainer Werner Fassbinder MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN/DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN 1979 (35mm)
Nov 29 Terry Gilliam BRAZIL 1985 (35mm)
Nov Dec 6 Luchino Visconti THE LEOPARD/IL GATTOPARDO 1963 (35mm)

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