
Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky
Written by Andrei Tarkovsky
Produced by Anna-Lena Wibom & Svenska Filminstitutet
Cinematography Sven Nykvist
Film Editing Michal Leszczyński & Andrei Tarkovsky

Cast
Erland Josephson…Alexander
Susan Fleetwood…Adelaide
Allan Edwall…Otto
Guðrún Gísladóttir…Maria
Sven Wollter…Victor
Valérie Mairesse…Julia
Filippa Franzén…Marta
Tommy Kjellqvist…Gosson
Per Källman…Ambulansförare
Tommy Nordahl…Ambulansförare

Andrei Tarkovsky (b. April 4, 1932 in Zavrazhe, Yurevetskiy rayon, Ivanovskaya Promyslennaya oblast, RSFSR, USSR [now Ivanovskaya oblast, Russia]—d. December 29, 1986, age 54, in Paris, France) is perhaps the most famous Soviet filmmaker since Sergei M. Eisenstein. Tarkovsky, son of poet Arseniy Tarkovsky, studied music and Arabic in Moscow before enrolling in the Soviet film school V.G.I.K. He shot to international attention with his first feature, Ivan's Childhood (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. However, it was shown at the 1969 Cannes Film Festival at four o’clock in the morning on the last day—in order to prevent it from winning a prize—but it won one nonetheless, and was eventually distributed abroad partly to enable the authorities to save face. Solaris (1972), had an easier ride, being acclaimed by many in Europe and North America 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 The Mirror (1975), a dense, personal web of autobiographical memories with a radically innovative plot structure. Stalker (1979) had to be completely reshot on a dramatically reduced budget after an accident in the laboratory destroyed the first version, and after Nostalgia (1983), shot in Italy (with official approval), Tarkovsky defected to Europe. His last film, Sacrifice (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 lung cancer at the end of the year. His output was small, but powerful. He wrote for nearly all the films he directed, wearing dual hats on Offret (Sacrifice, 1986, scenario), Voyage in Time (1983, TV Movie documentary), Nostalgia (1983), The First Day (1979), Stalker (1979, screenplay), The Mirror (1975), Solaris (1972, screenplay), Andrei Rublev (1966), Ivan's Childhood (1962, [uncredited as writer]), The Steamroller and the Violin (1961), There Will Be No Leave Today (1951), The Killers (1956, Short, screenplay).

Sven Nykvist (b. December 3, 1922 in Moheda, Kronobergs län, Sweden—d. September 20, 2006, age 83, in Stockholm, Stockholms län, Sweden) as considered by many in the industry to be one of the world’s greatest cinematographers. Nykvist prided himself on the simplicity and naturalness of his lighting.

**Erland Josephson** (b. June 15, 1923 in Stockholm, Stockholms län, Sweden—d. February 25, 2012, age 88, in Stockholm, Stockholms län, Sweden) is a distinguished Swedish actor best known for his work with Ingmar Bergman. Josephson's relationship with Bergman, a long-time friend, began in the late 1930s when they first worked together in the theater. Although he was in several motion pictures in the late 1940s and early 50s, including a bit part in Bergman's *The Man With an Umbrella* (1946), Josephson confined himself to the stage during the first part of his career. After appearing in Bergman's *The Magician* (1958) in support of Max von Sydow, Josephson did not make another movie until the late '60s, when he was cast in Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf* (1968). However, during this time he did collaborate on two screenplays with Bergman (using the joint pseudonym of Buntel Eriksson), Alf Kjellin's *The Pleasure Garden* (1961) and Bergman's own *Now About These Women* (1964). In 1966, Josephson succeeded Bergman as creative director of the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, a post he held until 1975. He also succeeded Max Von Sydow as Bergman's favorite male lead in the 1970s, which brought him global fame. After co-starring with Von Sydow and Liv Ullmann in *The Passion of Anna* (1969), he had major roles in *The Touch* (1971), *Cries & Whispers* (1972), *Scenes From a Marriage* (a television mini-series edited into a film in 1973), and *Face to Face* (1976). François Truffaut, in his guise as a film critic, wrote in 1958: "Bergman's preeminent strength is the direction he gives his actors. He entrusts the principal roles in his films to the five or six actors he loves best, never type-casting them. They are completely different from one film to the next, often playing diametrically opposite roles." In Bergman's films of the 1970s, Erland Josephson engendered the neurotic, post-war 20th century man: aloof, introspective, and self-centered. Josephson did not appear in a non-Swedish film until 1977, when he starred as Friedrich Nietzsche in Italian director Liliana Cavani's *Beyond Good and Evil*. He continued to work in international cinema in the 1980s and '90s, appearing in Franco Brusati's *To Forget Venice* (1980), Dusan Makavejev's *Montenegro* (1981), Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), István Szabó's *Hanussen* (1988), and Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991). His most
memorable non-Bergman roles were in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, *Nostalgia* (1983) and *Sacrifice* (1986). Behind the camera, Josephson co-directed *One and One*, a 1978 full-length film, with fellow Bergman collaborator Ingrid Thulin and Sven Nykvist, and directed the full-length *Marmalade Revolution* (1980). Was offered Richard Dreyfuss's role in *Jaws 2* (1978), but turned it down with the words: "I'd rather have intellectual battles with 'Liv Ullman', than fighting with some shark." Erland Josephson also is an accomplished writer: He has written screenplays for Swedish films, as well as dramas, novels, and poetry.

**Susan Fleetwood** (b. September 21, 1944 in St. Andrews, Scotland—d. September 29, 1995, age 51, in Salisbury, England) was an actress, known in America for *Sacrifice* (1986), *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985). Daughter of John Joseph Kells Fleetwood, an officer in the RAF, and the sister of Mick Fleetwood, one of the co-founders and drummer of Fleetwood Mac, she was educated at sixteen different schools, including Egypt and Norway, and at the Convent of the Nativity in Kent when her family finally resettled in England. A formidable British classical actress trained for the stage at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, she won the school's coveted Bancroft Gold Medal in 1964. After RADA she, along with Terry Hands, formed the Liverpool Everyman Company (1964). At the Everyman, between 1965 and 1967, she played Lady Percy in *Henry IV*; Gwendolyn in *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Alison in *Look Back in Anger*; Liz in *Fando and Lis*; Margaret in *The Great God Brown*; Chorus Leader in *Murder in the Cathedral*; the Woman in *The Four Seasons*; and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*. She also succeeded Judi Dench as Portia in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1972 production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Back with the RSC in 1980 she came into her own - rather improbably perhaps - as Rosalind in Hands's staging of *As You Like It*. Never one to let any shortcomings stop her (she was uncommonly tall for an actress), Fleetwood also suffered from a mild form of dyslexia and her lines in scripts were often color-coded to make it easier for her to read. She is quoted as saying she had never read an entire book (though insisted that reading plays was “just work”). At the end of her life, during which she struggled with a long bout of cancer, she wrote in one of her last correspondences that she’d actually read a book—Isabel Allende’s *The House of Spirits*—and enjoyed it. “Perhaps I’ll get a real taste for it,” she wrote, “and completely overcome my dyslexia.” A smattering of her additional acting roles includes: *Chandler & Co* (1995, TV Series), *Wycliffe* (1994, TV Series), *Mystery!: Cadfael* (1994, TV Series), *Aldeyn Mysteries* (1993, TV Series), *Performance* (1992, TV Series), *The Krays* (1990), *Dream Demon* (1988), *Bergerac* (1988, TV Series), *White Mischief* (1987), *The Blue Dress* (1983, TV Movie), *Heat and Dust* (1983), and *Hamlet* (1970, TV Movie)

**Allan Edwall** (b. August 25, 1924 in Rödön, Jämtlands län, Sweden—d. February 7, 1997, age 72, in Stockholm, Stockholms län, Sweden) was a Swedish actor, director, author, composer and singer, best-known outside Sweden for the small roles he played in some of Ingmar Bergman's films, such as *Fanny and Alexander* (1982),, the son of photographer Mattias Edwall, was born into a working class home where his parents were both communists. From 1949-1952 he attended Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre School. Through the years he has acted in more than 400 parts in theater, film, television and radio. He found his largest audience in the Scandinavian countries for playing lovable characters in several of the film and TV adaptations of the children's stories by Astrid Lindgren. He was also a director, an author, a composer and a singer, for which he sang his own songs often attacking the injustices in our society. As a director, his 1984 film *Åke and His World* was entered into the 14th Moscow International Film Festival. From 1986 and for the remaining years he ran his own theater, Teater Brunnsgatan Fyra, in Stockholm, where he did everything by himself, from acting to selling tickets. After his death, Erland Josephson was quoted as saying "He was odd. But, damn it, he managed to be odd in a universal way!” Some of Edwall’s other acting credits include, *Duo jag* (1991, TV Movie), *The Brothers Lionheart* (1977), *Mondays with Fanny* (1977), *Games of Love and Loneliness* (1977), *Elvis! Elvis!* (1976), *The New Land* (1972), *The Emigrants* (1971), *All These Women* (1964), *Winter Light* (1963), *The Virgin Spring* (1960), *Girls Without Rooms* (1956), *Resan till dej* (1953).

**ANDREI TARKOVSKY**, from *World Film Directors, V. II.*


Russian director, born in Lavrazh, Ivanova district, Soviet Union. He is the 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). The latter, which won a prize at the New York Film Festival, is about the friendship that develops between the tough driver of a steamroller and a frail boy violinist who as a consequence is drawn out of his comfortable but claustrophobic little world into one that is wider and more challenging. The story is told very delicately and imaginatively through the eyes of the child, with a “masterly use of soft lighting and ...subtle gradations of atmosphere.” The photography is Vadim Yusov, a fellow-student who has been Tarkovsky’s cameraman on all his films, and the script is the work of Andrei Mikhailovich-Konchalovsky, another of Tarkovsky’s contemporaries at VGIK and himself among the most promising of the young Soviet directors.
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 detstvo* (*Ivan’s Childhood*, 1962). Ivan, played by Kolya Buryayev, is an orphan working with a group of partisans during the Second World War. We first see this twelve-year-old waif returning from a scouting expedition, crossing no-man’s-land, peering through mist and barbed wire, studying the swiftly flowing river that he has to cross to get back to his own side. His parents have been killed, his village has been destroyed, he has escaped from a Nazi concentration camp, and he lives only for revenge. He does not live long: years later in Berlin after the victory, his comrades find a folder recording his capture and fate.

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 same sort of story has been told hundreds of times before, but Ivor Montague, pointing out that this is generally true of Tarkovsky’s plots, goes on: “It is how they are presented that becomes a commentary on man, his experience and the universe….The tragedy here, however, is much worse because more inescapable. Ivan’s fate is sealed before ever the film begins….From the moment we see the wide-eyed creature in the mist, the contrast between the skinny, hungry, sometimes blubbering boy and the expert spy, professional, authoritative, competent, indispensable, the two bound into a single being—a soldier who had known torture and triumph alike, a child on whom grown men depend—we know he cannot survive….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.” *Ivanovo detstvo* won fifteen awards at international film festivals, including the Golden Lion at Venice and the Grand Prize in San Francisco.

It was followed by *Andrei Rublev*, a film about the medieval monk who became the greatest of all icon painters. Tarkovsky wrote the film in collaboration with Mikhailov-Konchalovsky and shot it in black and white, except for the coda in which Rublev’s icons are displayed in all their richness. Completed in 1966 and shown at Cannes in 1969, it was not released in Russia until 1971, by which time it had acquired an enormous underground reputation. It is not clear why the film was shelved for so long—the religious-philosophical issues that may have worried the Soviet censors remain intact at the center of the picture, while the criticism that it “does not correspond to historical truth” (the excuse for its withdrawal from the 1971 Belgrade Festival) is unconvincing, since almost nothing is known of the life of the real Andrei Rublev. Although Walter Goodman has pointed out that “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-Tatar rule.”

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The film consists of ten loosely connected episodes covering the most prolific years of the painter’s life, 1400-1425. Russia had not still been freed from the yoke of the Tartars, and the world Rublev knew was a brutal one of feudal violence and casual cruelty. The church itself was engaged in a ruthless campaign against the vestiges of paganism. The film dramatizes the conflict in the artist between revulsion and compassion toward the suffering around him. In one episode Rublev is invited by the venerable icon painter Theophanes the Greek to assist him in painting a new church, and we see that their professional rivalries are colored by religious differences. Against the traditional icon-painter’s emphasis on original sin, Rublev assets his belief in the human being as the dwelling-house of God—a belief increasingly threatened by his own disgust at the horrors he sees around him.

Later, as he paints new murals for the cathedral, the Tatars and their Russian allies raid the town. They batter in the doors of the cathedral and slaughter everyone who has taken refuge there. Rublev, with his murals wrecked, at last takes violent action to protect a deaf-mute girl. He saves her life but cannot save her sanity, and she is born away by the Tartars. Taking a vow of silence, Rublev resolves to paint no more. His wanderings take him to a devastated village. The prince’s guard arrives, seeking a craftsman capable of casting for their master’s glory one of those gigantic bells that were considered the mystical voices of Russia. The village bell-founder has died of plague, but his son Boriska boasts that he knows the secret of casting. In fact, his only secret is a half-crazy belief that the task can be accomplished, but he drives everyone relentlessly until the new bell is triumphantly rung. This achievement restores Rublev’s faith in humanity and art, and he goes on to affirm that faith in the paintings that form the dazzling color montage at the end of the film.

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,
though Andrei Rublev was beautifully shot on locations in which 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 human 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. David Thomson praised the film for its portrayal of a world that is “as teeming a hell on earth as a Breughel—and quite as vivid and authentic,” but dismissed Tarkovsky’s thesis as “threadbare.” This was not the view of most critics, many of whom shared Nigel Andrew’s conviction that Andrei Rublev was “the one indisputable Russian masterpiece of the last decade.”

Tarkovsky’s screenplay for Solaris (1971) was adapted from a science fiction novel by the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem—one that concentrates not on gadgetry but on psychology. Scientists in a space station circling a remote planet find themselves subjected to an agonizing process of self-exploration, for the planet’s strange ocean has the capacity to punish intruders by materializing people and episodes out of their past lives, forcing them to relive their most painful mistakes and sins. Penelope Houston called this film “Russia’s answer to 2001, not in its display of space hardware but in the speculative quality of its ideas,” and Gavin Millar praised it as “an absorbing inquiry into the cause of love and the links between time, memory, and identity.” This “very beautiful and mysterious film” received the Special Jury Prize at Cannes.

The film (unlike the book) opens in a Russian country estate with lakes and gardens like a Turgenev setting, where the astronaut-psychologist Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) is visiting his parents. From there we follow this rather stolid hero on his journey to the space station hovering above Solaris. The arrival has been widely described as masterly—the space station, seemingly derelict, is in fact inhabited by two scientists, each of whom is insanely absorbed in his own resurrected tragedy. Kelvin is himself soon confronted by his wife Hari (Natalya Bondarchuk), long dead by suicide, but now apparently alive again. Faced with the woman he has already failed, Kelvin at first tries to exorcise her. But since she is alive in his mind, from whence Solaris has conjured her, he can no more destroy her than he can help her. Tarkovsky himself has explained that “the point is the value of each piece of our behavior, the significance of each of our acts, even the least noticed. Nothing once completed can be changed….The irreversibility of human experience is what gives our life, our deeds, their meaning and individuality.”

It might be argued that this is also the theme of Zerkalo (The Mirror/A White, White Day, 1975). This controversial film is presented as a work of autobiography, showing Tarkovsky himself at different ages up to and including the present, but concentrating on his boyhood during the Stalinist terror in Peredelkino, the artists’ village near Moscow. Tarkovsky’s mother is portrayed by several actresses as she was at various ages, and his father’s poems play an important role in tying together a film of great complexity. It is, as Herbert Marshall wrote, “many-layered, jumping back and forth in space and time, from objective to subjective visualisations.” The material it draws upon ranges from the director’s memories and dreams to newsreels of the Spanish Civil War and the Soviet-Chinese confrontations on the Ussuri river. It cuts without warning from black and white to color, from passages with background music to others with none.

Herbert Marshall sees the film as “a kind of inverted mirror reflection of Ivan’s Childhood, that being an objective biography of a boy in the Stalin days.” Marshall finds it often puzzling and enigmatic—“several films intertwined.” In Russia, where its indictment of Stalinism caused great anxiety, it was harshly attacked by party critics as an elitist film. Even the veteran director Sergei Gerasimov, who recognized it as “an attempt to analyze the human spirit” by “a man of very serious talent,” complained that “it starts from a subjective evaluation of the surrounding world, and this inevitably limits the circle of its viewers.” It was released in Russia in 1975 but relegated to the “third category,” which means that only a few prints were made for showing in third-class cinemas and workers’ clubs, thus denying the filmmakers any financial reward.

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 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 one another like hares in March. David Thomson is one of a minority who think Tarkovsky is overrated—"the grandeur of Tarkovsky’s films should not conceal the gulf between his eye for poetic compositions and any really searching study of people or society." But for the young Ukrainian director Sergei Parajdanov “Tarkovsky is a phenomenon...amazing, unrepeatable, inimitable and beautiful….First of all, I did not know how to do anything and I would not have done anything at all if there had not been Ivan’s Childhood….I consider Tarkovsky the Number One film director of the USSR….He is a genius.”

Turning once again to science fiction with social and psychological underpinnings, Tarkovsky made Stalker (1979), which was loosely adapted from a 1973 novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. The setting of the novel had been North America, but Tarkovsky transferred the story to a gulag-like industrial wasteland that, although the actual locale is never specified, is clearly meant to be in the Soviet Union (the film
was shot on location in Estonia). The story unfolds in a mysterious realm known only as the “Zone,” where there is a “Room” in which one’s wishes or fantasies are fulfilled. However, the hazardous zone can be traversed only with the aid of a “stalker,” who illegally guides travelers through the forbidden area.

Tarkovsky’s first film to be made largely outside of the Soviet Union was Nostalgia (Nostalghia, 1983). Filmed near the Vignoni thermal baths in the Tuscan hills, Nostalghia is about exile, in part, and chronicles the life of a Russian who has gone to Italy to study the life of a Russian who lived there in the seventeenth century. “Gortchakov (Oleg Yanovsky),” wrote Vincent Canby in his New York Times review, “does very little research and a lot of musing, which often takes the form of lovely flashbacks [and] fantasies …Loveliness, I’m afraid, is really what this movie is all about….Tarkovsky may well be a film poet but he’s a film poet with a tiny vocabulary. The same images, eventually boring, keep recurring in film after film—shots of damp landscapes, marshes, hills in fog and abandoned buildings with roofs that leak.”

Although critical of Tarkovsky, Yvette Biro in the Village Voice was more open to the film’s beauty. “Nostalghia,” she wrote, “is sumptuously—sickeningly, as mentioned in the film itself—beautiful, but partly for that very reason, suffers from disproportion and embarrassingly loses its way in the desperate hunt for beauty.” John Coleman asked in the New Statesman “whether the difficulty of [Tarkovsky’s] work is justified by its rewards, whether all the enigmatic angst on display here is much more than the exteriorisation of a private depression...those mists, those pools, above all that obsessive driving rain…..? The film won a special prize at Cannes.

Later in 1983 Tarkovsky directed a production of Boris Gudonov at Covent Garden in London. Then 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 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/Sacrificatio (The Sacrifice, 1987), was filmed on location on Gotland, in the Baltic, with cinematography by Sven Nykvist. 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 awakens 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 the film is one that to my mind is 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.”

Sacrifice was produced by Svensk Filminstitutet with additional funds from Swedish and American television and from a French company. A visually beautiful, slow, and intensely personal work, it is also extraordinarily resistant to any purposes but its own: it could not possibly be exploited for either commercial or propagandistic ends.

A few months after Sacrifice opened at the New York Film Festival, Tarkovsky died in Paris of lung cancer. He had been married twice. He had a son by his first marriage to Trina Rausch, and one by his 1970 marriage to Larissa Tegorkina.


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 recognize as part of themselves that up till now has never been given expression, what better motivation could there be for one’s work. . . .

The completion of Ivan’s Childhood marked the end of one cycle of my life, and of a process that I saw as a kind of self-determination.

It was made up of study at the Institute of Cinematography. Work on a short film for my diploma, and the eight months’ work on my first feature film.

I could now assess the experience of Ivan’s Childhood, accept the need to work out clearly, albeit
temporarily, my own position in the aesthetics of cinema, and set myself problems which might be solved in the course of making my next film: in all of this I saw a pledge of my advance into new ground. The work could all have been done in my head. But there is a danger I not having to reach final conclusions: it’s all too easy to be satisfied with glimmers of intuition, rather than sound, coherent meaning.

The wish to avoid expending my reflections in such a way made it easier for me to take up pencil and paper.

What attracted me to Bogomolov’s short story, Ivan?

I have to say at the outset that not all prose can be transferred to the screen.

Some works have a wholeness, and are endowed with a precise and original literary image; characters are drawn in unfathomable depths, the composition has an extraordinary capacity for enchantment, and the book is indivisible; through the pages comes the astonishing, unique personality of the author: books like that are masterpieces, and only someone who is actually indifferent both to fine prose and to the cinema can conceive the urge to screen them.

It is all the more important to emphasize this point now, when the time has come for literature to be separated, once and for all, from cinema.

Other prose works are made by ideas, by clarity and firmness of structure, by originality of theme, such writing seems not to be concerned with the aesthetic development of the thought it contains. I think Bogomolov’s Ivan is in this category.

Purely artistically, I derived little joy from the detached, detailed, leisurely narrative with its lyrical digressions to bring out the character of the hero, Lieutenant Galtsev. Bogomolov attaches great importance to the accuracy of his record of army life and to the fact that he was, or tried to appear, a witness of all that happened in his story.

All this made it easier for me to see the work as prose that could readily be screened. Moreover, screening might give it that aesthetic intensity of feeling which would transform the idea of the story into a truth endorsed by life.

After I had read it, Bogomolov’s tale stuck in my mind, indeed, certain things in it impressed me deeply.

First there was the fate of the hero, which we follow right up to his death. Of course many other plots have been constructed in this way, but it is by no means always the case. As it is with Ivan, that the denouement is inherent in the conception and comes about through its own inner necessity.

Here the hero’s death has a particular significance. At the point where, with other authors, there would have been a comforting follow-up, this story ends. Nothing follows. Usually in such situations an author will reward his hero for his military exploits. All that is hard and cruel recedes into the past. It turns out to have been merely a painful stage of his life.

In Bogomolov’s story, this stage, cut off by death, becomes the final and only one. Within it is concentrated the entire content of Ivan’s life, its tragic motive power. There is no room for anything else: that was the startling fact that made one unexpectedly and acutely aware of the monstrousness of war.

The next thing that struck me was the fact that this austere war tale was not about violent military clashes, or the ins and outs or reversals at the front. Accounts of exploit were missing. The stuff of the narrative was not the heroics of reconnaissance operations, but the interval between two missions. The author had charged this interval with a disturbing, pent-up intensity reminiscent of the cramped tension of a coiled spring that has been lightened to the limit.

This approach to the depiction of war was persuasive because of its hidden cinematic potential. It opened up possibilities for recreating in a new way the true atmosphere of war. With its hyper-tense nervous concentration, invisible on the surface of events but making itself felt like a rumbling beneath the ground,

A third thing moved me to the bottom of my heart: the personality of the young boy. He immediately struck me as a character that had been destroyed, shifted off its axis by the war. Something incalculable, indeed, all the attributes of childhood, had gone irretrievably out of his life. And the thing he had acquired, like an evil gift from the war, in place of what had been his now, was concentrated and heightened within him.

His character moved me by its intense dramatic quality, which I found far more convincing than those personalities which are revealed in the gradual process of human development, through situations of conflict and clashes of principle.

In a non-developing, constant state of tension, passions reach the highest possible pitch, and manifest themselves more vividly and convincingly than in the gradual process of change. It is this predilection of mine that makes me so fond of Dostoyevsky. For me the most interesting characters are outwardly static, but inwardly charged with energy by an overriding passion.

Ivan turned out to be a character of this kind. And when I read Bogomolov’s story these things took hold of my imagination. However, that was as far as I could go with the author. The emotional texture of the story was alien to me. Events were related in a deliberately restrained style, almost in the tone of a report. I could not have transferred such a style to the screen, it would have been against my principles.

When a writer and a director have different aesthetic starting points, compromise is impossible. It will destroy the very conception of the film. The film will not happen.

When such a conflict occurs there is only one way out: to transform the literary scenario into a new fabric, which at a certain stage in the making of the film will come to be called the shooting script. And in the course of work on this script, the author of the film (not of the script but of the film) is entitled to
turn the literary scenario this way or that as he wants. All that matters is that his vision should be whole, and that every word of the script should be dear to him and have passed through his own creative experience. For among the piles of written pages, and the actors, and the places chosen for location, and even the most brilliant dialogue, and the artist’s sketches, there stand only one person: the director, and he alone, as the last filter in the creative process of film-making.

Whenever script writer and director are not the same person, therefore, we shall witness an insoluble contradiction—that is, of course, if they are artists of integrity. That is why I saw the content of the story merely as a possible basis, the vital essence of which would have to be interpreted in the light of my own vision of the finished film.

Here we come up against the question of how far a director is entitled to be a screen-writer. Some would categorically deny him the right ever to engage in script-writing at all. Directors given to writing scenarios tend to be sharply criticized, even though it is obvious enough that some writers feel themselves to be further from the cinema than film directors. The implication of such an attitude is therefore somewhat bizarre: all writers are entitled to write screenplays, but no director is. He has meekly to accept the text offered him and cut it up to make it into a shooting script.

But to return to our theme: I find poetic links, the logic of poetry in cinema, extraordinarily pleasing. They seem to me perfectly appropriate to the potential of cinema as the most truthful and poetic of art forms. Certainly I am more at home with them than with traditional theatrical writing which links images through the linear rigidly logical development of the plot. That sort of fussily correct way of linking events usually involves arbitrarily forcing them into sequence in obedience to some abstract notion of order. And even when this is not so, when the plot is governed by the characters, one finds that the links which hold it together rest on a facile interpretation of life’s complexities.

But film material can be joined together in another way, which works above all to lay open the logic of a person’s thought. This is the rationale that will dictate the sequence of events, and the editing which forms them into a whole. The birth and development of thought are subject to laws of their own, and sometimes demand forms of expression which are quite different from the patterns of logical speculation. In my view poetic reasoning is closer to the laws by which thought develops, and thus to life itself, than is the logic of traditional drama. And yet it is the methods of classical drama which have been regarded as the only models, and which for years have defined the form in which dramatic conflict is expressed.

Through poetic connections feeling is heightened and the spectator is made more active. He becomes a participant in the process of discovering life, unsupported by ready-made deductions from the plot or ineluctable pointers by the author. He has at his disposal only what helps to penetrate to the deeper phenomena represented in front of him. Complexities of thought and poetic visions of the world do not have to be thrust into the framework of the patently obvious. The usual logic, that of linear sequentiality, is uncomfortably like the proof of a geometry theorem. As a method it is incomparably less fruitful artistically than the possibilities opened up by associative thinking, which allows for an affective as well as a rational appraisal. And how wrong it is that the cinema makes so little use of the latter mode, which has so much to offer. It possesses an inner power which is concentrated within the image and comes across to the audience in the form of feelings, inducing tension in direct response to the author’s narrative logic.

When less than everything has been said about a subject, you can still think on further. The alternative is for the audience to be presented with a final deduction, for no effort on their part, and that is not what they need. What can it mean to them when they have not shared with the author the misery and joy of bringing an image into being? There is another advantage in our approach. The method whereby the artist obliges the audience to build the separate parts into a whole, and to think on, further than has been stated, is the only one that puts the artist on a par with the author’s narrative logic. When I speak of poetry I am not thinking of it as a genre. Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality. So poetry becomes a philosophy to guide a man throughout his life. Think of the fate and character of an artist like Alexander Grin, who when he was dying of hunger went off into the mountains with a homemade bow and arrow to shoot some sort of game. Relate that incident to the times the man was living in and the correlation will reveal the tragic figure of a dreamer.

Or the fate of Van Gogh.

Think of Prishvin, whose very being emerges in the features of that Russian nature which he described so lovingly.

Think of Mandelstam, think of Pasternak, Chaplin, Dovzhenko, Mizoguchi, and you’ll realize what tremendous emotional power is carried by these exalted figures who soar above the earth, in whom the artist appears not just as an explorer of life, but as one who creates spiritual treasures and that special beauty which is subject only to poetry. Such an artist can discern the lines of the poetic design of being. He is capable of going beyond the limitations of coherent logic, and conveying the deep complexity and truth of the impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life.

Without such perception, even a work that purports to be true to life will seem artificially uniform and simplistic. An
artist may achieve an outward illusion, a life-like effect, but that is not at all the same as examining life beneath the surface.

I think in fact that unless there is an organic link between the subjective impressions of the author and his objective representation of reality, he will not achieve even superficial credibility, let alone authenticity and inner truth.

You can play a scene with documentary precision, dress the characters correctly to the point of naturalism, have all the details exactly like real life and the picture that emerges in consequence will still be nowhere near reality, it will seem utterly artificial, that is, not faithful to life, even though artificiality was precisely what the author was trying to avoid….

Of course, my point of view is subjective. But that is how it has to be in art: in his work the artist breaks down reality in the prism of his perception and uses a foreshortening technique of his own to show different sides of reality. In setting great store by the subjective view of the artist and his personal perception of the world, however, I am not making a plea for an arbitrary or anarchic approach. It is a question of world view, of ideals, and moral ends.

Masterpieces are born of the artist’s struggle to express his ethical ideals. Indeed, his concepts and his sensibilities are informed by those ideals. If he loves life, has an overwhelming need to know it, change it, try to make it better,—in short, if he aims to cooperate in enhancing the value of life, then there is no danger in the fact that the picture of reality will have passed through a filter of his subjective concepts, through his states of mind. For his work will always be a spiritual endeavor which aspires to make a man more perfect: an image of the world that captivates us by its harmony of feeling and thought, its nobility and restraint.

As I see it then, if you stand on firm moral ground there is no need to shy away from greater freedom in your choice of means. Moreover, that freedom need not necessarily be restricted to a clear plan which obliges you to choose between certain methods. You also have to be able to trust solutions which present themselves spontaneously. Obviously it is important that these should not put the audience off by being overcomplex. This, however, is not something to be gauged by deliberations about what devices to ban or allow in your film, but through the experience gained by looking at the excesses that found their way into your earlier productions and which have to be eliminated naturally as your work proceeds.

To be honest, in making my first film I had another objective: to establish whether or not I had it in me to be a director. In order to come to a definite conclusion I left the reins slack, as it were. I tried not to hold myself back. If the film turns out well, I thought, then I’ll have the right to work in the cinema. Ivan’s Childhood was therefore specially important. It was my qualifying exam….

It would perhaps be superfluous to mention that from the very start cinema as American-style adventure movie has never held any interest for me. The last thing I want to do is devise attractions. From Ivan’s Childhood to Stalker, I have always tried to avoid outward movement, and have tried to concentrate the action within the classical unities. In this respect even the structure of Andrey Rublyov strikes me today as disjointed and incoherent….

In one form or another all my films have made the point that people are not alone and abandoned in an empty universe, but are linked by countless threads with the past and the future; that as each person lives his life he forges a bond with the whole world, indeed with the whole history of mankind….But the hope that each separate life and every human action has intrinsic meaning makes the responsibility of the individual for the overall course of human life incalculably greater.

In a world where there is a real threat of war capable of annihilating mankind; where social ills exist on a staggering scale; where human suffering cries out to heaven—the way must be found to reach another. Such is the sacred duty of each individual.

I am drawn to the man who is ready to serve a higher cause, unwilling—or even unable—to subscribe to the generally accepted tenets of a worldly ‘morality’; the man who recognises that the meaning of existence lies above all in the fight against the evil within ourselves, so that in the course of a lifetime he may take at least one step towards spiritual perfection. For the only alternative to that way is, alas, the one that leads to spiritual degeneration; and our everyday existence and the general pressure to conform makes it all too easy to take the latter path….


He’s thirty years old. He was born on the shores of the Volga, but his family is from Moscow. A family of poets, of intellectuals, preoccupied with painting and music. Tarkovsky can be classified within the ranks of what we call “the Soviet New Wave.” But how is it that he came to cinema?

“After having studied for a time the problems of Eastern civilization, I spent two years as a worker in Siberia in the field of geological research and then returned to Moscow. There I enrolled in the Moscow Cinematographic Institute where I was the student of Mikhail Romm. I received my diploma in 1961. I had directed two shorts, one of them was The Steamroller and the Violin. In summary it was an exercise in eclecticism before going to work at Mosfilm and directing Ivan’s Childhood.”
PB: *What did you want to express in your first film?*

AT: I wanted to convey all my hatred of war. I chose childhood because it is what contrasts most with war. The film isn’t built upon plot, but rests on the opposition between war and the feelings of the child. This child’s entire family has been killed. When the film begins, he’s in the midst of the war.

PB: *Have you put into the film some part of your own personal experience?*

AT: Truly no, since I was very young during the last war. I therefore translated the feelings that I had experienced because this is a war we are unable to forget.

PB: *What were your shooting conditions?*

AT: I shot four months during the summer of 1961 and devoted nearly two months to editing. The film cost 2.5 million rubles which is a medium-sized budget.

PB: *Can it be said that you are part of the new wave of Soviet filmmakers?*

AT: It’s possible but I hate these schematic definitions.

PB: *I dislike then as much as you but I am trying to situate you in the stream of Soviet production. If you prefer, can you tell me what Russian cinema represents for you? And in what ways do you feel most connected to it?*

AT: There are nowadays in the USSR diverse tendencies which pursue parallel paths without upsetting one another too much, and in terms of this I am able to position myself. For example, there is the “Gerasimov” tendency that looks, above all, for truth in life. This tendency has had a great deal of influence and a large following. Two other tendencies are beginning to define themselves and appear to be more modern. One can trace their origins to the period of the 1930s. But it was only after the Twentieth Congress that they were able to free themselves and to develop, that their locked up energies were able to be released. What then are these two tendencies? On one side, it is “poetic cinema,” illustrated by Chukrai’s *Ballad of a Soldier* and *The Man who Followed the Sun* by Mikhail Kalik, which one could compare to *The Red Balloon* by Lamorisse but which in my opinion is far superior. I believe I could be situated within this tendency of poetic cinema, because I don’t follow a strict narrative development and logical connections. I don’t like looking for justifications for the protagonist’s actions. One of the reasons why I became involved in cinema is because I saw too many films that didn’t correspond to what I expected from cinematic language.

On the other hand, there is what we in the USSR call the “intellectual cinema” of Mikhail Romm. In spite of the fact that I was his student, I can’t say anything about it because I don’t understand that kind of cinema.

All art, of course, is intellectual, but for me, all the arts, and cinema even more so, must above all be emotional and act upon the heart.

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**“Portrait of a Filmmaker as a Monk-Poet” Laurence Cosse, 1986**

Q: *But this subject [Ivan’s Childhood] is also very close to you. The young Ivan is as old as the young Andrei Tarkovsky during the war.*

T: My childhood was very different from that of Ivan who experienced the war as an adult, and as a combatant. All Russian boys my age, however, had a very difficult life. To say that something links Andrei Tarkovsky to Ivan is to remind us of the community of suffering established between Ivan and all young Russians of this generation.

Q: *When it was presented in Venice in 1962, the film was perceived as a profound reflection on war, on history…*

T: The film was certainly very well received, but it remained completely misunderstood by the critics. Each one interpreted the story, the narrative, the characters of the film, whereas it was the first work of a young director, therefore a poetic work to be understood from my point of view, not from the historical point of view. Sartre, for instance, ardently defended the film against the criticism of the Italian Left, but strictly from a philosophical point of view. As far as I’m concerned that wasn’t a valid defense. I was looking for an artistic not an ideological defense. I’m not a philosopher, I’m an artist. From my point of view, his defense was totally useless. He was trying to evaluate the film using his own philosophical values, and I, Andrei Tarkovsky, artist, was put aside. One spoke only about Sartre, and no longer about the artist.

Q: *Sartre’s interpretation of Ivan’s Childhood—that war produces monsters and devours heroes—isn’t yours?*

T: I don’t dispute the interpretation. I completely agree with this vision: war produces hero-victims. There is no winner in a war. When one wins a war, one loses it at the same time. I do not dispute the interpretation, but the framework of this polemic: ideas, values were stressed, art and the artist were forgotten… …

Q: *Andrei Roublev is a film about the legitimacy of art in a world which is prey to evil. Why create beauty when there is evil everywhere?*

T: The more there is evil in the world, the more we have reasons to create beauty. It is doubtless harder, but it is also more necessary, …

As long as man shall exist, there will be an instinctive tendency for creation. As long as man feel like a man, he will try to create something. Therein lies the link with his Creator. What is creation? What is the use of art? The answer to this question resides in a formula: “art is a prayer.” That says it all. Through art, man expresses his hope. Everything that does not express this hope, whatever is not fundamentally spiritual, has nothing to do with art. Otherwise, in the best of cases it’ll be but
a brilliant intellectual analysis. For instance, the entire Picasso
oeuvre is, for me, based on this intellectual analysis. Picasso
painted the world in the name of his analysis, of his intellectual
reconstruction, and, despite the prestige of his name, I must
confess that I don’t believe he ever reached art.

Q: The only art there is postulates that the world has a
meaning?
T: I repeat, art is a form of prayer. Man lives by his prayer
alone.

Q: Many people saw in Andrei Roublev a message addressed to
the current USSR, for it to recapture the spiritual creativity of
the Russia of old.
T: That’s possible, but that really isn’t
my problem. I’m not sending a message
to the current Russia. Moreover, it’s no
longer my wish to say anything to
Russians. I am no longer interested
in the virtues of these kind of prophetic
stances as “I want to tell my people,”
“I want to tell the world.” I’m not
a prophet. I’m a man to whom God
gave the possibility of being a poet, meaning,
of praying in another manner than the
one used by the faithful in a cathedral. I
cannot and I do not want to say
anything more. If Western people see in
my films a message directed to the
Russian people, that is not my problem,
but a problem that should be solved
between these two people. Personally,
my only concern is to work, only to
work. …

Q: Your faith in God thus fuses with
your faith in art?
T: Art is the capacity to create, it’s the
reflection, the mirror-image of the
Creator’s gesture. We artists only repeat, only imitate that
gesture. Art is one of those precious moments in which we
resemble the Creator. That is why I have never believed in art
which would be independent of the supreme Creator, I don’t
believe in art without God. The raison d’etre of art is a prayer.
It’s my prayer. If this prayer, if my films can bring people to
God, so much the better. My life would then take on its sense,
the essential sense of “serving.” But I would never impose it: to
serve does not mean to conquer.

Q: How can art gravitate toward this objective, “to serve”?*
T: This is where the mystery, like the mystery of Creation,
resides. When one kneels down in front of an icon to pray, one
finds the right words to express one’s love to God, but these
words remain secret, mysterious. Likewise, when an artist finds
characters, stories, it is as if he prayed. He enters into
communion with God in creation, and he finds the right words.
That is where the mystery of Creation comes from. Here, art
takes on the form of a gift. Art can only “serve if it is a gift.

Q: Your films are, therefore, acts of love toward the Creator?
T: I would like to think so. I’m working on it in any case, The
idea for me would be to make this constant gift that Bach alone,
truly, was able to offer God.

“Faith is the Only Thing That Can Save Man.” Charles H.
de Brantes / 1986

Q: Some folks have questioned the intertwining in your work,
especially in The Sacrifice, between Christian motifs, for
example the recitation of the “Our Father,” and ideas more
archaic, more pagan, such as the character of Maria, the
“good witch.” This leads to a certain confusion….Are you or are you
not a Christian filmmaker?
T: I believe that it’s truly not important to know if I subscribe
to certain beliefs, whether pagan,
Catholic, Orthodox, or simply Christian.
The important thing is the work itself. It
seems to me better to judge the work
from a general perspective, and not to be
searching for contradictions which some
wish to see in my work. A work of art
isn’t always a mirror reflection of the
inner world of the artist, particularly
when it comes to the smallest of details.
While it’s true, there exists a certain
logical connection….it’s possible for
there to be an opposition to the personal
beliefs of the artist.

Also, when I directed this film,
I was convinced it had to address itself
to all types of audiences.

When I was very young I asked
my father, “Does God exist—yes or no?”
And he answered me brilliantly: “For the
unbeliever, no, for the believer, yes!”
This problem is very important.
I want to say in relation to this
that it’s possible to interpret the film in
different ways. For instance, those who
are interested in various supernatural phenomena will search for
the meaning of the film in the relationship between the postman
and the witch, for them these characters will provide the
principal action. Believers are going to respond most sensitively
to Alexander’s prayer to God, and for them the whole film will
develop around this. And finally a third category of viewers who
don’t believe in anything will imagine that Alexander is a bit
sick, that he’s psychologically unbalanced as a result of war and
fear. Consequently many kinds of viewers will perceive the film
in their own way. My opinion is that it’s necessary to afford the
spectator the freedom to interpret the film according to their
own inner vision of the world, and not from the point of view
that I would impose upon him. For my aim is to show life, to
render an image, the tragic, dramatic image of the soul of
modern man. In conclusion, can you imagine such a film being
directed by a non-believer? I can’t….  
Q: You said that you admired Robert Bresson. But isn’t your
cinema opposed to this? Bresson considerably pare down his
images, and certain essential questions, he only sketches them,
suggests them...
T: In fact, I consider Robert Bresson the best filmmaker in the world. I have only the greatest respect for him. Not counting that, I actually don’t see many resemblances between us. He’s able to cut down a shot in a way that I can’t; it would be for me like killing a living being.

Q: Someone just told me about a friend of theirs who was suicidal. He saw The Sacrifice and sat nearly two hours in rapt attention. He maintains that it revived his will to live.

T: For me this is worth more than any opinion, any review…. The same thing happened to me after Ivan’s Childhood. A criminal locked up in prison wrote me that he’d seen my film. He had experienced an inner transformation, he would no longer kill……

Love is for me the supreme demonstration of mutual understanding, something that the representation of the sexual act can’t express. In that case why not go film bulls atop cows out in the fields. Today everybody thinks it’s censorship if one doesn’t see “love” on the screen. In reality this isn’t love being shown but sex. The sexual act is for every one, for every couple, something unique. When it is put into films, it’s the inverse.

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**Roger Ebert’s review, November 21, 1986**

The old workman gave the younger workman the use of his shop: Andrei Tarkovsky came to Sweden to shoot a movie on the island of Faro, the same island where Ingmar Bergman lives and makes most of his films.

Tarkovsky's film was produced by the Swedish Film Institute, it was photographed by Sven Nykvist, Bergman's cinematographer, and it starred Erland Josephson, who has acted in many Bergman films.

There are moments when the resulting film, "The Sacrifice," looks uncannily like a work by Bergman, and I think that is intentional: Tarkovsky, the visitor, an exile from Russia, was working with Bergman's materials and subjects in much the same way that an itinerant Renaissance painter might briefly stop and submerge himself in the school of a master.

Yet Tarkovsky is a master, too. With Bergman, he is one of the five living filmmakers who have concerned themselves primarily with ultimate issues of human morality (the others are Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray and Robert Bresson). He is the greatest Russian filmmaker since Sergei Eisenstein, and yet he stands outside the Soviet tradition of materialism and dares to say that he is spiritual, that he can "still be summoned by an Inner Voice." These days, it takes more courage for an artist to admit his spiritual beliefs than to deny them.

When Tarkovsky made "The Sacrifice," he knew that he was gravely ill. Now he lies dying in a Paris hospital with a brain tumor. He did not choose a small subject for his final statement. His film is about a man who learns, or dreams, that the bombers have gone on their way to unleash World War III. He offers his own life as a sacrifice, if only his family can be spared.

The movie is not easy to watch, and it is long to sit through. Yet a certain joy shines through the difficulty. Tarkovsky has obviously cut loose from any thought of entertaining the audience and has determined, in his last testament, to say exactly what he wants, in exactly the style he wants.

He uses a great many long shots - both long in duration, and with great distances between the camera and the subjects. Long shots inspire thoughtfulness from the audience. We are not so close that we are required to identify with a character. We stand back, and see everything, and have time to think about it. The movie doesn't hurtle headlong toward its conclusion, taking our agreement for granted. There are spaces between events that are large enough for us to ask ourselves if we would do what the man in the movie is doing.

It is his birthday. He plants a tree, carefully, methodically. There is a belief that it is impossible to plant a tree without thinking of your own lifespan, because in all certainty the tree will be there long after you have gone. As he plants the tree, his small son watches him and then toddles thoughtlessly about on the surface of the planet he does not yet know is a planet.

Some people came to the birthday party: the man's wife, his daughters, some friends and a mailman who apparently is the island's mystic. There is a sense in which he delivers the cosmic mail, bringing news of inner realities. During the party, the news comes that the war has broken out.

All of this is told slowly, in elegantly composed shots, with silences in between. When the characters speak, it is rarely to engage in small talk; the hero has a long monologue about the quality of our lives and the ways we are heedlessly throwing away the futures of our children. When the man begs to make his sacrifice, he does not by ranting and raging to heaven, but by choosing one of his own maids - a humble working woman - as a sort of saintly person who might be able to intervene.
"The Sacrifice" is not the sort of movie most people will choose to see, but those with the imagination to risk it may find it rewarding. Everything depends on the ability to empathize with the man in the movie, and Tarkovsky refuses to reach out with narrative tricks in order to involve us. Some movies work their magic in the minds of the audience; this one stays resolutely on the screen, going about its urgent business and leaving us free to participate only if we want to.

That is the meaning of a sacrifice, isn't it—that it is offered willingly?

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