

# ‘You can hear the sound of life breathing’

Carlos A. Valle

*‘Why, as we look back, do we see the path of human history punctuated by cataclysms and disasters? What really happened to those civilizations? Why did they run out of breath, lack the will to live, lose the moral strength?’ (Sculpting, 225) asked the great Russian cinema director Andrey Tarkovsky in Sculpting in Time. He died 20 years ago but these questions are still present in a world that mercilessly repeats oppression by hunger, pain and death.*

Tarkovsky not only raised questions but also looked very deeply into these issues and tried to find ways to restore the dignity of life. Because ‘art must give man hope and faith. The more hopeless the world in the artist’s version, the more clearly perhaps must we see the ideal that stands in opposition to it - otherwise life becomes impossible!’ (Sculpting, 192). He is not talking about false promises, of providing entertainment that may help to forget pain and frustration. In an interview, asked what was for him the most important thing for cinema, he asserted: ‘The truth. When an artist abandons his search for the truth it is going to have a disastrous effect in his work. The artist’s aim is truth’ (Diaries, 355).

But what truth? What is the truth that Tarkovsky reveals in his art? Tarkovsky died prematurely at 52, on 28 December 1986. He only produced seven feature films full of endless richness. In every one of these films he looks into crucial unavoidable human problems. We can see his spiritual search and his profound poetry in all of them.

## Controversy and censorship

The difficulties Tarkovsky had to face in his own country to produce his films are well known.. He found himself involved in serious controversies with bureaucrats and ideologists. The five films he produced in the USSR before his exile were surrounded by censorship and jealousy. Two examples illustrate some of the problems he faced.

In the first place, the different political readings on his first feature film, Ivan’s Childhood, by the European left-wing after he received a prize at the Venice Film Festival (1962). These controversies brought him serious political problems that affected his work. Later on difficulties were raised with his second and more ambitious project, Andrey Rublyov. The movie was made between 1964 and 1966 and was realised an immediate success. Nevertheless when he tried to show the film outside of the URSS, it suffered restrictions and obstacles.

After many negotiations and numerous requests the film was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969, but Tarkovsky was barred from competing for a prize. However, Andrey Rublyov was given the FIPRESCI prize of the international critics. Maya Turovskaya recalls that 'Tarkovsky's opponents accused the film of a lack of optimism, a lack of humanism, a failure to show the known resistance to the Tartar yoke... a surfeit of violence and nudity and over-complexity of form' (Turovskaya, 48).

In this context we cannot ignore the paradox emerging in film production at that time. If we take into consideration the five films that Tarkovsky produced in the USSR we have to agree with Pablo Capanna that 'only the State could finance such a poetic and least commercial work that would fill any western producer with fear' (Capanna, 51).

Many times the work of great artists comes up against countless difficulties. Blindness tends to be a response when they reveal the injustices they perceive and propose new ways to overcome them. In these circumstances, in spite of all the pain and rejection they suffer, their creativity tends to increase.

Tarkovsky's work was moving upwards and dangerously. At every step it became clearer to him that the world had arrived at such a ruinous situation that at any time it could suffer an irreversible catastrophe. He was afraid of the modern world that had made the purely material its only basis of life. 'It is clear to everyone that material progress doesn't in itself make people happy, but all the same we go on fanatically multiplying its "achievements"' (Sculpting, 221). For Tarkovsky in this extreme situation the human being has only to do one thing: to reestablish consciousness of their responsibility for their own destiny. To understand what this means and how it is shown in his work we will limit consideration to the last film produced by him in the USSR: *Stalker* (1979).

## The Zone

*Stalker* is based in a short story by Arkadi and Boris Strugatsky - well known Russian writers of science fiction - called *A Roadside Picnic*. The story moves around an area called the Zone. It is a place that had been invaded by some mysterious celestial entity but that now remains as a dirty and abandoned place. The Zone is, at the moment, well guarded and access to it is forbidden and mysterious and strange laws dominate it.

The Zone has become the center of attraction for scientists and adventurers because it is like an enormous rubbish dump where valuable objects might be found. There are those who make of this search a clandestine profession. They are called stalkers, prowlers, and false guides. In the Zone, moreover, it may be possible to find the golden sphere that has the power to fulfil the dreams of those who find it.

The Strugatsky brothers in their discussion with Tarkovsky finally agreed to eliminate the science fiction character of the story. For a start the stalker, 'instead of being some kind of drug dealer or poacher has to be a slave, a believer, a pagan of the Zone' (Diaries, 147). The golden sphere became the room of desires. This essential change imbued the script with new possibilities of dealing with more concrete and familiar interpretations.

The film was compared with the fields of the vast Soviet prison network in the Gulag Archipelago. It is said that people used to call it 'the Zone' to indicate the fate of those who had disappeared there (Capanna, 65). Nevertheless, Tarkovsky denied that the Zone had a special significance. For him: 'The Zone doesn't symbolise anything, any more than anything else does in my films: the zone is a zone, it's life, and as he makes his way across it a man may break down or he may come through' (Sculpting, 200).

At the beginning of the film *Stalker*, in spite of the pleas of his wife, left her and his little invalid daughter and goes to meet with the Writer and the Scientist - the characters have lost their names - to be their guide in the Zone. Once they have avoided the fierce vigilance that surrounds the Zone they move forward into a land covered in waste and water. It is a picture of a disintegrated world without possibility of been restored. Even so the visitors don't seem to see this as an obstacle to making their most intimate desires real.

*Stalker* recalls the story of another stalker, Diko-óbras, who went to the Zone to ask for his brother to come alive again, who had died because of him. Returning home home Diko-óbras finds out that he has become rich. His most intimate desire has been fulfilled, one that even he was unaware of. He could not stand it and decided to hang himself.

Neither the Writer nor the Scientist seem to represent Science or the Arts, but they raise some scientific and artistic questions and points of view. The Scientist has rational views of every issue and enormous doubts with respect to the mystery surrounding the Zone and the Room. The Writer is more ironic and cynical. He has become sceptical about his profession as a writer. He is convinced that he will fail and very soon nobody will read his books.

These attitudes produces acrimonious dialogue along the way. At one point the Scientist challenges the Writer: 'Why don't you teach me the meaning of life and at the same time how to think?' It is *Stalker* who later on will answer to both of them. 'You were talking about the meaning of life, of our life, the unselfishness of art. Now take music. It is connected least of all with reality. Or, if it is connected, then it's without ideas; it's merely empty, sounds without associations. Nevertheless, music miraculously penetrates your very soul. What chord in us responds to its harmonies transforming it into a source of supreme delight, and uniting us and shattering us?'

Tarkovsky saw art as a way of expressing life creatively, allowing us to get rid of the false security that the materialistic and consumer society offers. Erlan Josephson – the great Swedish actor, from *Nostalghia* and *Sacrifice* - affirmed that Tarkovsky was not a mysterious man but a man who was in contact with mystery. He is one of those who dares to challenge himself to explore unknown ways that put aside scepticism and discouraging rationality.

In a world that tends towards its own destruction Tarkovsky, against all the odds, is convinced that his 'function is to make whoever sees my films aware of his need to love and to give love, and aware that beauty is summoning him' (Sculpting, 200).

When the moment arrives the Writer and the Scientist have the moral strength to enter the Room. The Scientist, who in secret brought with him a bomb, says that he will detonate it because he wants to prevent dictators or 'enlightened' people taking possession of it. But the Stalker prevents him doing so because he says that hope would be destroyed and because he himself would be totally forsaken.

At the end they manage to leave the Zone. Stalker returns to his home and his wife. She was frightened when he left for the Zone but now is happy to receive and console him. She is the one who stresses the importance of love. Looking at the camera he recalls that her mother insisted on avoiding contact with stalkers because they are marked men, "the fools of Go" and this would affect their children. But this was not an obstacle for her and she concludes: 'I was sure I'd be happy with him. I knew there'd be a lot of sorrow but I'd rather know bitter-sweet happiness than a grey, uneventful life.'

## Love offers hope

For Tarkovsky 'In *Stalker* I made some sort of complete statement: namely that human love alone is - miraculously - proof against the blunt assertion that there is no hope for the world. This is our common, and incontrovertibly positive possession.' Nevertheless, perhaps he is moving between what he wanted to be and what sadly is: 'Although we no longer quite know how to love...' (Sculpting, 199)

Is art only a fantasy that tries to make us forget or at least to deny the painful truths that face humanity? If that is so, is what Tarkovsky proposes diluted into an illusory way without end? Must we resign ourselves to believing that we are dealing with mere utopias?

Tarkovsky seems to come up with an answer in his last film, *Sacrifice*. Near the beginning the

principal character, Alexander, and his little boy are watering a dry tree.(1) The boy, because he had been through a throat operation, cannot say a word and is listening quietly to the story his father tells about a Russian monk who watered for years a dry tree until the moment the tree flourished.

In the final scene the little boy is alone again watering the tree and he breaks his silence saying: 'In the beginning was the word. Why Papa?' Because only communication can avoid isolation and break down the barriers of race, religion, gender, opening avenues of genuine encounter.

Tarkovsky knew this very well. 'In a world where there is a real threat of a war capable of annihilating mankind, where social ills exist on a staggering scale, where human suffering cries out to heaven – a way must be found for one person to reach another. Such is the sacred duty of humanity towards its own future, and the personal duty of each individual' (Sculpting, 2006).

Note

1. Although Tarkovsky denied using symbolism in his films, the dry tree is a symbol of faith.

References

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