

Andrei Tarkovsky: Cinema's poet

Gabor Karsai

The aesthetics of the Russian film-maker, Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-86), are discussed in the following article. He made seven major films: *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), *Andrei Rublyov* (1966), *Solaris* (1972), *Mirror* (1974), *Stalker* (1979), *Nostalgia* (1983), and *The Sacrifice* (1986). Undoubtedly, all are gems of world cinema. He also wrote a book about his philosophy of art titled *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. In this book he discusses his ideas about art and the artist in general, the factors that distinguish cinema from other arts, the elements of cinema as an art, his aims in filmmaking, the role of the filmmaker and the film viewer, the nature of film imagery, and his own experiences and aesthetical ideas compared to those of his colleagues. He also discusses the particular intention and 'meaning' that lies behind his films.

Tarkovsky's view of the major goal of all art is not surprising, but few people would really find it tenable today, when the work of art is degraded to a saleable commodity thanks to our consumerist culture. According to Tarkovsky, the aim of art 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.'¹ Tarkovsky understood art as a human activity that unifies ethics and spirituality. Art is in a close relationship to religion anyway, but in Tarkovsky's hands it is definitely a religious art. This does not mean, however, that Tarkovsky's art can be exclusively associated with a single religion, although Christianity plays a crucial role in his films. Tarkovsky is an independent religious thinker and artist influenced in many ways by different cultural and religious traditions.

What is important here is that in Tarkovsky's view art has religious functions and purposes. What are they? As Tarkovsky stresses, 'The allotted function of art is not, as is 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.' 'The greatness and ambiguity of art lies in not proving, not explaining and not answering questions [...]. Its influence has to do with moral and ethical upheaval.' Art shapes the spiritual structure of the soul: 'Art must give man hope and faith.'

This view of art is certainly far from contemporary practice. Tarkovsky condemns modern art for not fulfilling the genuine role of art: 'Modern art has taken a wrong turn in abandoning the search for the meaning of existence in order to affirm the value of the individual for its own sake. What purports to be art begins to look like an eccentric occupation for suspect characters who maintain that any personalized action is of intrinsic value simply as a display of self-will. But in artistic creation the personality does not assert itself, it serves another, higher and communal idea.' Tarkovsky painfully realizes that modern man is spiritually impotent, and that 'one of the saddest aspects of our time is the total destruction in people's awareness of all that goes with a conscious sense of the beautiful.'

Modern mass culture, aimed at the 'consumer', the civilization of prosthetics, is crippling people's souls, setting up barriers between man and the crucial questions of his existence, his consciousness of himself as a spiritual being.' Now we can understand, why his films are not for entertainment, not simply to 'kill time'. Tarkovsky refuses the idea of accommodation between art and commerce. Tarkovsky is not affected by the pure 'technocratic' view of cinema. 'Technical questions are important commercially, in terms of the show, but are not central to the problem of cinema, and throw no light on the secret of cinema's unique power to affect us.'

Furthermore, Tarkovsky also rejects the 'intellectualist' view of art. He agrees with Goethe, 'The less accessible a work is to the intellect, the greater it is.' Otherwise the artist imposes his thoughts on his audience. Tendency in art has to be hidden. The ideal of a work of art is thus when it is not calculated, not cerebral, or not formulated intellectually.

The role of artist

The artist has a spiritual or religious role to play. He or she is the moral and spiritual mediator between the divine and the human, acting as a prophet who calls us for the very nature of reality, and for moral action, even transformation. 'Masterpieces [...] are scattered about the world like warning notices in a mine field.' The most important virtues an artist should possess are humility, responsibility, honesty, and sincerity. The artist should be serious, intense, committed, and uncompromising. An artist has a calling, a vocation. It is a necessity for which they have not been given a choice. 'The artist [...] becomes the ideologue, the apologist for his time, the catalyst of predetermined change.' But the talent that has been given is often a source of much pain and suffering. 'True artistic inspiration is always a torment for the artist, almost to the point of endangering his life.' 'The artist cannot express the moral ideal of his time unless he touches all its running sores, unless he suffers and lives these sores himself.'

Talent imposes duties and obligations on the artist and offers very few tangible rewards in return. 'The artist is always a servant and is perpetually trying to pay for the gift that has been given to him as if by a miracle.' The role of the artist is to sacrifice himself for a higher ideal. 'Artistic creation demands of the artist that he "perish utterly", in the full, tragic sense of those words.' The artist, because of his special awareness of his time and of the world in which he lives, is the voice of those who cannot formulate or express their view of reality. The artist expresses the inner needs of society, but he is not accepted or recognized until after his death. Real masterpieces 'range themselves at the sites of possible or impending historical cataclysms, like warning signs at the edge of precipices or quagmires. They define, hyperbolise and transform the dialectical embryo of danger threatening society, and almost always become the herald of a clash between old and new.'

Artists, however, are not superior to other people, only more sensitive and better able to articulate what they perceive. 'The genius [of the artist] is revealed not in the absolute perfection of a work but in absolute fidelity to himself, in commitment to his own passion.' 'Modern man,

however, does not want to make any sacrifice, even though true affirmation of self can only be expressed in sacrifice.'

Importance of the image

Artists uncover reality in a way we have never seen before, thus making us recognize the spiritual, sacred aspect of it. The means by which they fulfil this task are 'images.' As Tarkovsky states, 'What I'm interested in is not symbols, but images. An image has an unlimited number of possible interpretations.' A real image is inexhaustible and unlimited in its meaning. 'Through the image is sustained an awareness of the infinite: the eternal within the finite, the spiritual within matter, the limitless given form.' The essence of an image cannot be described in words, because it always incorporates infinity. 'It can be apprehended through art, which makes infinity tangible. The absolute is only attainable through faith and in the creative art.'

According to Tarkovsky, the image is a glimpse of the truth; it is absolute. 'An artistic discovery occurs each time as a new and unique image of the world, a hieroglyphic of absolute truth. It appears as a revelation, as a momentary, passionate wish to grasp intuitively and at a stroke all the laws of this world - its beauty and ugliness, its compassion and cruelty, its infinity and its limitations.' Again: 'And so, if art carries within it a hieroglyphic of absolute truth, this will always be an image of the world, made manifest in the work once and for all time. [...] These poetic revelations, each one valid and eternal, are evidence of man's capacity to recognize in whose image and likeness he is made, and to voice this recognition.'

Tarkovsky's purpose is thus to penetrate into the depth of reality, somehow to glimpse the unseen. He realizes this purpose in images, creating a unique and fresh poetic language. '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.' If we look at reality as something that is beyond the actual events, as something that always carries a further meaning, the task of a filmmaker is to re-enchant reality by 'unnaturally' emphasizing this further meaning through images, his characters, and through the way the story is formed. 'Art must transcend as well as observe; its role is to bring spiritual vision to bear on reality.'

Poetical reasoning means that Tarkovsky applied an associative method rather than a narrative one in creating his films. This means that he substituted the direct connections between scenes, events and images with a loose structure of associations and images that overlap from time to time, and create a mood that strikes the viewer on an unconscious, emotional level. Tarkovsky concentrates on the internal spiritual development of his characters, although the events and the story of his films are also formed brilliantly. The associative method lends a dreamlike surface to his films, in which the deep meaning of events always remains to a certain extent unattainable.

There are always new possibilities for new associations in interpreting his films, and this is because of the inexhaustible depth of our own experiences. 'The artistic image cannot be one-sided: in order justly to be called truthful, it has to unite within itself dialectically contradictory phenomena.' 'The image is indivisible and elusive, dependent upon our consciousness and on the real world which it seeks to embody.' This effect is enhanced by the fact that his deepest images recur from film to film, always with a slightly different emphasis, and a shift in meaning, thank to the various environments in which they occur. Tarkovsky's images are living organisms, formed by organic processes. As a critic of his films stated, 'While the rhythm of Tarkovsky's films is invariably stately and solemn, the film itself is always brought into being through a changing pulse of rhythms, new motifs flaring up and bursting in unannounced, clashing with other motifs and fading from the screen to boil up again in another part of the stream.'

Time and memory

As the title of Tarkovsky's book, *Sculpting in Time*, suggests, time has a crucial importance in his art. As Tarkovsky states, 'Time is a condition for the existence of our "I".' Time is the dimension in which a human being realizes him- or herself as a personality. 'The time in which a person lives gives him the opportunity of knowing himself as a moral being, engaged in the search for the truth.' 'The human conscience is dependent upon time for its existence.' Tarkovsky is not interested in the concept of time that only includes the possibility of getting something done. He is interested in the inner process that makes us perform a certain action and makes us incarnate in a moral sense. History and evolution are only consequences of time, not Time itself. 'Time is a state: the flame in which lives the salamander of the human soul.'

Memory is another notion closely related to time that is as important to Tarkovsky as time. Without time, memory cannot exist. According to Tarkovsky, memory is a spiritual concept. Memory constitutes our very existence, even our personality. 'Bereft of memory, a person becomes the prisoner of an illusory existence.' Time and memory are two sides of a coin. What Tarkovsky is interested in is not the methods of recording time, nor the forms used in art to fix time, but the inner, moral qualities essentially inherent in time. Of course, as an artist, he somehow needs to record time, and the way he records it, its inner, moral qualities, is the feature that makes his art so special and peculiar to him.

The method he uses to record time is very simple: to give a chance for time to be realized in a soul, that is, to let the characters and scenes develop in a way that uncovers the inner, moral qualities of time through their emotions, feelings, thoughts and actions, through the visual treatment and the sound. 'I want time to flow in a dignified and independent way on the screen.' As a critic of Tarkovsky's films said, 'In all Tarkovsky's work, this "individual stream of time" is something which pulsates, moves not smoothly but in jerks, in explosions of meaning...' In Tarkovsky's words, 'The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame.' Time is not a formal feature of Tarkovsky's films, but an inherent density. You do not see it, only feel it. As we only 'feel' time in our real life as well.

The main purpose of Tarkovsky's films is thus to reveal time, its inner, moral qualities in a more concrete and significant way than we feel it in everyday life. That's why memory is so important to him. In our life, it is memory in which the importance of time, and hence, the importance of our life, is actually and directly felt. In our memories we 'meet' time and our life face to face. As Tarkovsky states, 'In a certain sense the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more reliant than the present.' Our very identity is our past, or, as Alfred Whitehead stated, we live in our past.² As we return to our past, says Tarkovsky, 'cause and effect may, in a moral sense, be linked retroactively.'

Cinema as a distinguished art

With cinema a new muse was born, that is, time. 'For the first time in history of the arts, in the history of culture, man found the means to take an impression of time.' 'He acquired a matrix for actual time.' Tarkovsky accepts the view that cinema is a composite art, based on the involvement of a number of neighbouring art forms: drama, prose, acting, painting, and music. But Tarkovsky rejects the idea that cinema would be a mishmash. 'It has to be made clear once and for all that if cinema is an art it cannot simply be an amalgam of the principles of other, contiguous art forms.' The uniqueness of cinema as an art is that it is capable of 'sculpting in time.' As Tarkovsky says, 'Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations: such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art.'

And this is the very reason we go to cinema. We go for 'time lost or spent or not yet had.' We go there 'for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person's experience -- and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer.' According to Tarkovsky, cinema is also to be distinguished from theatre. The laws of movement and the organization of time in a film are completely different from the time laws of theatre. Cinema also differs from prose and poetry. 'Prose and poetry use words by definition, while a film is born of direct observation of life.' 'The cinema image [...] is basically observation of life's facts within time, organised according to the pattern of life itself, and observing its time laws.' This means that an image becomes authentically cinematic when not only does it live within time, but time also lives within it.

According to Tarkovsky, 'No other art can compare with cinema in the force, precision and starkness with which it conveys awareness of facts and aesthetic structures existing and changing within time.' Tarkovsky's purpose in making his films is to reconstruct, recreate life.

Communicating with the audience

Tarkovsky's films offer a very complex structure, which is often difficult to follow, especially to

viewers used to the conventional narrative structures of Western movies. Tarkovsky's films challenge their viewers. It requires hard work from the audience, while an average Western movie usually does not. In order to understand the deeper meaning of Tarkovsky's films, the viewer has to approach them from a point of view different from the one he or she is used to.

The viewer already needs to go through a kind of transformation. Unusual associations and images, complex dialogue, dreams, slow and silent scenes follow each other without sharp boundaries. Tarkovsky's films do not tell you what to think, how to relate to the questions raised. A film is thus a shared work of the artist and its audience. In an average movie the questions set up are clearly and didactically answered so that the viewer does not need to think too much. His or her position is not questioned. The viewer leaves satisfied. Tarkovsky's films are not about satisfaction. His films are about challenge, catharsis, even transformation. The viewer is left in doubt, in ambiguity, and forced to fight for his or her own understanding.

A typical commercial movie gives us what we want by telling us what we already know. It confirms our existence, and makes us happy. Otherwise we would not pay for it. We want to be entertained, which excludes any challenge. If you see a Tarkovsky film, you feel that you want to see it again. It is meant to require multiple viewings, that is, a learning process. Tarkovsky does not do our thinking for us. 'Art is by nature aristocratic, and naturally selective in its effect on the audience.' This does not mean that his films are exclusive. They are accessible to anyone who is prepared to make the effort to enter into communication with them. In this sense, Tarkovsky lets the audience work on the meaning of his films; the viewers are co-creators of his works of art.

Artist and audience find themselves in communion, in a 'spiritual bond.' The artist does not impose this relationship upon the audience by forcing them to take part in it, or by manipulating them into a prescribed point of view. The viewer's freedom is guaranteed, and certainly by the difficulty of the film. If one is not capable of grasping anything from it, at least he or she can leave without being influenced. 'The beautiful is hidden from the eyes of those who are not searching for the truth, for whom it is contraindicated. But the profound lack of spirituality of those people who see art and condemn it, the fact that they are neither willing nor ready to consider the meaning and aim of their existence in any higher sense is often masked by the vulgarly simplistic cry, "I don't like it!" "It's boring!" It is not a point that one can argue; but it is like the utterance of a man born blind who is being told about a rainbow. He simply remains deaf to the pain undergone by the artist in order to share with others the truth he has reached.'

Tarkovsky wants the audience to join in the dialogue he is in with reality. The viewer needs to suspend his or her judgment in the beginning, that is, to empty him- or herself in the same way the artist did while creating. 'For an unclouded perception you have to have an outstanding capacity for original, independent, "innocent" judgement.' A film director 'starts to be an artist at the moment when, in his mind or even on film, his own distinctive system of images starts to take shape [...] and the audience are invited to judge it, to share with the director in his most precious and secret dreams.'

Creative transformation

One could raise the question what all this does to process. Let me explain here why Tarkovsky is one of my heroes, and a great contributor to my process understanding of life. As I noted above, Tarkovsky calls for transformation by seeing his films. We cannot leave remaining the same as we were before. We have undergone transformation. The change he would like to bring about in us is not only emotional but also moral. This change must be 'creative' in two senses, and this interpretation provides my understanding of the meaning of 'creative transformation.'

First, it creates a new emotional and moral state in which we are heavily challenged to look at reality from a new perspective thus enhancing our understanding of life. It is also creative so far as it requires our personal involvement and participation in achieving this new understanding. We must be creative in the sense of being active in our joint effort to make sense of reality together with the artist. Of course, all genuine works of art aim at this kind of transformation, and this fact alone would not make Tarkovsky a unique 'process' artist. There are several other features of his art that can jointly make him capable of being interpreted from this perspective. One is the integrative character of his films, and they are integrative in two ways.

First, they integrate the diverse forms of art into one that is more than its components, and second, they integrate various fields of human interest, such as philosophy, religion, social sensitivity and art itself. This integration is of course an artistic synthesis, but full of religious hints, and social calls for changing our behaviour towards different aspects of life. The main purpose of his films in this integration is to find an answer to what salvation is. From our process perspective, Tarkovsky's understanding of salvation is very close to John Cobb's interpretation of Christ as the embodiment of the principle of creative transformation. The creative transformation Tarkovsky calls for is thus not mere aesthetic catharsis or change in our mental dispositions, but real conversion to our genuine mission to be saviours of the world.

Tarkovsky's inner struggle with the notion of salvation goes through several stages each marked by one of his films. His seven films constitute a single, long and developing vision with a progressively changing understanding of life. Strangely enough, each of the earlier stages constitutes a completed, absolute view of life. This fact can only be understood from the perspective of process philosophy. It stresses that each entity is a completed, absolute standpoint of the universe, has value in itself, but only in relation to other entities from which it is constituted. Then, each entity is transcended by future entities that cannot reject the importance of the past entities of which they are constituted. Tarkovsky's films at the same time exemplify Whitehead's principle of process and promote his philosophical ideas in an artistic rendering.

Notes

1. I am aware of the sexist use of language in Tarkovsky's works (films, books, diaries, screenplays) and regret it. I hope, however, that this fact does not detract from the value of his ideas. In this regard I would encourage readers to watch any of his films. Tarkovsky is certainly one of the greatest respecters of women.

2. The English mathematician and idealist philosopher Alfred Whitehead (1861-1947). In his Gifford Lectures of 1929, titled 'Process and Reality', he attempted a metaphysics comprising psychological and physical experience, with events as the ultimate components of reality.

Karsai Gábor studied philosophy, classical philology and indology and is currently doing a PhD in philosophy at Lorán Eötvös University, Budapest, Hungary.