

Religious Themes in Recent Soviet Cinema

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Like Soviet literature, Soviet cinema has in recent decades exhibited a persistent interest in religious themes, though this has usually been expressed in Aesopian fashion. The reason for the often elliptical and coded articulation of this interest has been the rigorous Soviet censorship. Lenin, as is well known, once termed the cinema "the most important art", because of its potential to reach a mass audience, and the Soviet authorities have traditionally subjected film to extremely close scrutiny. During the long Brezhnev years, films which raised serious questions about their possible political or ideational effect on viewers were placed on the shelf.¹

Instead of combing through Soviet cinema over the past thirty years for evidence of religious leanings, I have decided to concentrate on two distinguished modern filmmakers who, unlike other Soviet directors, have had the opportunity to make their religious commitment explicit: the late Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-86) and Andrei Konchalovsky (b. 1937). A number of other Soviet filmmakers also appear to have a keen interest in religious themes. One could cite, for example, the names of the late Vasili Shukshin (1929-74); the late Larisa Shepitko (1938-79); Elem Klimov (b. 1933), the recently-elected first secretary of the filmmakers' union; Rolan Bykov (b. 1929), director of the acclaimed *Scarecrow* (*Chuchelo*) (1984); and Georgian film-maker Tengiz Abuladze (b. 1924), whose remarkable *Repentance* (*Monanieba*) (1984) took Moscow by storm when released in 1987. Since these individuals did not have the opportunity to work in the West, however, the extent of their religious commitment remains problematic. It is politically impossible, even under the Gorbachev leadership, for a writer or film-maker to admit to being religious. Hence even writers like the eminent Kirghiz novelist Chingiz Aitmatov and directors like Abuladze, who are clearly focused on religious themes, must, in interviews with Soviet and Western journalists, profess to being unbelievers.²

¹ For a useful study of the Soviet film industry before its recent restructuring, see Val S. Golovskoy with John Rumberg, *Behind the Soviet Screen* (Ann Arbor, 1986).

² Chingiz Aitmatov termed himself an atheist in an interview appearing in *Literaturnaya*

Andrei Tarkovsky

Andrei Tarkovsky died of cancer in Paris in late December 1986. In a career spanning twenty years in the Soviet Union, he received permission to make only five feature-length films. He also was able to make two films in the West, *Nostalghia* (1983) in Italy, and *Sacrifice (Offret)* (1986) in Sweden. Despite this fairly slender list of accomplishments, Tarkovsky is considered by many Western film critics to be a modern master of the cinema. Studies on him are beginning to proliferate in European languages.³

Born in 1932, Tarkovsky was raised by his mother, a cultured woman who worked as a corrector at a Moscow printing press. His father, the well-known poet Arseni Tarkovsky, left his mother when Andrei was a boy. Mark Le Fanu believes that Tarkovsky was raised by his mother in an atmosphere permeated with Christianity:

In the 1920s a number of intellectuals went back to religion . . . It was not so much a clandestine allegiance in the sense of a secret following of observances . . . more a matter of general cultural sympathy. In addition, backing up the Tarkovsky Christianity and informing it was the always available presence in the household of the Russian literary classics in handed down editions, along with old-fashioned art albums of painters like Leonardo and Michelangelo. If none of these books was Orthodox Christian in the strict theological sense, they none the less breathed an ethical language informed by classical Christianity. And to be open to their influence provided, during Andrei's childhood, at least the glimpse of an alternative to the official state socialism imparted at school.⁴

Kovacs and Szilagyi write, in a similar vein, that Tarkovsky was "consciously attached to the Russian cultural tradition, of which Orthodox thought is an organic part."⁵

Thus while it is doubtful that Tarkovsky gained much of an understanding of the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church or of its

gazeta of 13 August 1986. Along with writers Viktor Astaf'yev and Vasil' Bykov, he was assailed for "God-seeking" in an article by doctor of philosophical sciences I. Kryvelev which appeared in *Komsomolskaya pravda* of 20 July 1986. Abuladze answered a question from a Western reporter about religious symbols in his film *Repentance* by stating "If kindness, beauty, and truth are to be considered the attributes of religion, then my works are indeed religious." (Cited in Roland Eggleston, "Tengiz Abuladze Talks about *Repentance*," *Radio Liberty Research*, RL 289/87, 21 July 1987, p. 3.)

³Two studies to appear in 1987 were by the British film critic Mark Le Fanu, *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky* (London, 1987), and by the Hungarian critics Balint Andras Kovacs and Akos Szilagyi, *Les Mondes d'Andrei Tarkovsky* (Lausanne, 1987).

⁴Le Fanu, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵Kovacs and Szilagyi, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

theology — books on theology, including the writings of the Church Fathers, would have been unavailable, though Tarkovsky was able to read the Bible — he seems to have been raised in an attitude of sympathy toward a church which was being harshly persecuted, indeed almost annihilated, during his boyhood. His presumed lack of any systematic training or formation in Orthodox theology — religious education has been proscribed in the USSR since the 1920s — would, on the other hand, contribute to his adopting beliefs which could in no sense be reconciled with the teachings of the Orthodox Church. As we shall see, like Lev Tolstoy and a number of cultural figures of the Silver Age*, Tarkovsky should be considered a kind of Orthodox heretic.

In 1956, at the beginning of the Khrushchev “thaw”, Tarkovsky enrolled at the All-Union Institute of Cinematography in Moscow (known by the acronym VGIK), where he was a student in the workshop of the outstanding pedagogue, Mikhail Romm (d. 1971), director of the anti-Stalinist film *Ordinary Fascism (Obyknovenny Fashizm)*. Romm insisted that all his students immerse themselves in 19th century Russian classical literature and in the films of modern European masters like Bergman and Fellini. At VGIK, Tarkovsky met and began to collaborate with another exceptionally talented student, Andrei Konchalovsky, son of a leading Soviet literary bureaucrat Sergei Mikhalkov. (Konchalovsky took his mother’s surname after a philosophical argument with his father.) Both Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky shared a strong interest in religion and a nuanced but deep-seated Russian patriotism.

In 1962, Tarkovsky brought out his first full-length film, *Ivan’s Childhood (Ivanovo detstvo)*, which recounted the fate of a twelve-year-old boy who joins the partisans in a struggle against the Nazi invaders. The scenario for the film was written by Konchalovsky. With this film, it was clear that a major cinematic talent had appeared. “Remember this name: Andrei Tarkovsky”, Romm told a gathering of viewers in early 1962.⁶ Later in the same year, *Ivan’s Childhood* was awarded the Golden Lion Prize at the Venice International Film Festival.

After this initial success, Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky decided to attack an extremely complex subject, a film devoted to Andrei Rublyov, Russia’s greatest icon painter and a locally venerated saint of the Russian Church. In scope, the film was conceived of as the most

*The “Silver Age” is the name used to describe the period of intense artistic, musical and literary creativity and theological philosophical searching amongst the Russian intelligentsia at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries — *Ed.*

⁶See N.Zorkaya, “Zametki k portretu Andrey Tarkovskogo,” in V.Fomin (compiler), *Kinopanorama*, vypusk 2 – y (Moscow, 1977), p. 144.

artistically ambitious historical film to be made in the USSR since Eisenstein's two-part *Ivan the Terrible* (*Ivan Grozny*).

Before beginning work on the scenario, Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky studied the architecture, iconography, and written texts of the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the period upon which the film was to focus. They consulted Soviet medieval specialists, who encouraged them in their project. One of the planned aims of the film, Tarkovsky later recalled, "was to reconstruct for a modern audience the real world of the fifteenth century, that is, to present the world in such a way that costume, speech, life-style and architecture would not give the audience any feeling of relic, of antiquarian rarity."⁷ Architectural monuments from the period were introduced into the film: the prologue, for example, was filmed at the famous church of Pokrov on the Nerl, while other episodes were filmed in the medieval towns of Vladimir and Suzdal', and at the Andronikov Monastery in Moscow.

By the time that this ambitious film had been completed, it was 1966, and Khrushchev had been ousted from power. The new political leadership under Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin was engaged in rolling back the liberalisations of the Khrushchev period, and *Andrei Rublyov*, with its unorthodox themes and stylistic experimentation, landed on the shelf for a period of five and a half years. Indeed the film might never have been released in the USSR were it not for keen Western interest in it. When it was shown *hors concours* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969, *Andrei Rublyov* garnered the International Critics' Prize. Two years later it was released in the Soviet Union.

The intense difficulties which Tarkovsky experienced in gaining the release of *Andrei Rublyov* were a foretaste of problems to come. His next film, *Solaris* (*Solyaris*) (1972), which is based on a novel by Polish science fiction author Stanislaw Lem, confused many Soviet viewers and was attacked by critics when it first came out because of its experimental style; today, however, it is considered to be one of the most easily understood of Tarkovsky's films. The religious themes of conscience and atonement for past sins are central to this film.

In 1972 Filipy Yermash, an authoritarian bureaucrat, was made Chairman of the powerful State Committee for the Cinema (known by the acronym Goskino). Yermash seems to have conceived a loathing for Tarkovsky and his strange, nonconformist films. If it had been up to Yermash, Tarkovsky's career as a Soviet film-maker would presumably have ended in 1972.

In order to gain permission to make his last two Soviet films, *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo*) (1974) and *Stalker* (1979), Tarkovsky had to appeal to the presidiums of two party congresses. Following its appearance,

⁷Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (London, 1986), p.78.

The Mirror was unanimously attacked and excoriated at a joint session of Goskino and the Filmmakers' Union convoked at the initiative of Tarkovsky's nemesis, Yermash. As he has revealed in a volume of reflections on the cinema, entitled *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky seriously considered giving up directing at this time but decided to persevere because of favourable letters from viewers.⁸

Tarkovsky's last film made in the USSR, *Stalker*, was shown at the Cannes Film Festival over heated Soviet objections. It had become clear to Tarkovsky that, in light of the rigid conservatism of the late Brezhnev period, his chances of making additional films in the USSR were remote. He therefore asked for permission, which was eventually granted, to travel to Italy to make a film entitled *Nostalgia*. When this film was entered at the Cannes Film Festival, another Tarkovsky nemesis, conservative film-maker and bureaucrat Sergei Bondarchuk, had himself made a member of the jury and exerted himself energetically to ensure that the film would not receive a major award (it did receive a special jury prize).

Incensed at such treatment on the part of the Soviet film establishment, Tarkovsky announced at a press conference held in Italy in July 1984 that he and his wife would not be returning to the USSR. During the press conference, he detailed the harassment to which he had been subjected since 1967, when *Andrei Rublyov* had been shelved.⁹ The Soviet authorities retaliated by holding Tarkovsky's teenage son, Andrei, "hostage". Frantic, Tarkovsky and his wife and their friends and well-wishers elicited letters on young Andrei's behalf from the Prime Ministers of Italy and Sweden and the President of France. Finally, in January 1986 Tarkovsky's son was permitted to come to the West, but by this time his father had contracted the cancer that would take his life in a year's time. Tarkovsky is said to have believed that his becoming ill with this disease was due in part to the brutal treatment accorded him and his family by the Soviet authorities.¹⁰

Tarkovsky's last film, *Sacrifice*, which was made in Sweden, won four awards at the Cannes Film Festival. It was moving tribute by the juries to the dying filmmaker.

In the last year of his life, Tarkovsky saw the political pendulum in the Soviet Union swing unexpectedly in his direction, for the first time since the early 1960s. His tormentors Filip Yermash and Sergei Bondarchuk were ousted from positions of power, and an admirer, Elem Klimov, became First Secretary of the Filmmakers' Union. Soon

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁹ See "Beseda s A. A. Tarkovskim i ego zhenoi Larisoi," *Radio Svoboda*, RS 159/84, 27 July 1984.

¹⁰ Le Fanu, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

Tarkovsky's films were being widely shown in the USSR, and overtures were made to him to return to the homeland. The dying Tarkovsky spurned these last-minute approaches. As he told émigré novelist Vladimir Maximov:

They want to give the impression they did not smother me for twenty years . . . that I will be so touched by their concern that I will rush into their embrace. No, they will not get that from me. Like the singer Shalyapin, I will return neither alive nor dead, and I hope that my children turn out to be stronger than Shalyapin's who returned.¹¹

Michael Leszczyłowski, a friend and collaborator of Tarkovsky's, has published an interesting memoir devoted to the filmmaker's last year. He notes in particular Tarkovsky's absorption in the Old Testament books of Job and Ecclesiastes.¹² Tarkovsky's funeral was held at the St Serge Russian Orthodox church in Paris.

Andrei Konchalovsky

Andrei Konchalovsky was born in 1937, the year of Stalin's "great terror", and in an act of considerable courage was baptised by his mother, a believing Orthodox Christian. Like Tarkovsky, Konchalovsky inherited strong artistic genes. His father is a poet and dramatist, his mother, a writer of children's stories. His maternal grandfather (whose surname he took) was a well-known painter, while his great-grandfather was the renowned Russian painter Vasili Surikov. His brother Nikita (b. 1945) is a leading director and actor.

After having studied music at the Moscow Conservatory, Konchalovsky enrolled at VGIK and, like Tarkovsky, became a member of Mikhail Romm's workshop. In 1962, he completed a short, entitled *The Boy and the Pigeon* (*Mal'chik i golub'*), which won the grand prize at the Venice International Film Festival for Children. He then, as has been mentioned, wrote the script for Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* and coauthored the script for *Andrei Rublyov*. Striking out on his own, he brought out a remarkable first full-length film in 1965, *The First Teacher* (*Pervy uchitel'*), based on a work by Chingiz Aitmatov. The film dealt with the conflict between Bolshevism and tradition (a conflict he would also treat in his 1979 film *Siberiade* (*Sibiriyada*)).

¹¹Cited in Mikhail Lemkhin, "Vremya shlo k nemu navstrechu . . .", *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 8 May 1987.

¹²Michael Leszczyłowski, "A Year with Andrei," *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1987, pp. 283-84.

Like Tarkovsky's talent, Konchalovsky's was noted by Western film critics. Thus in the late 1960s the distinguished French critic Michel Ciment singled out Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky, as well as Georgian director Otar Ioselyani (b. 1934), as the most promising filmmakers of their generation in the Soviet Union.¹³

In 1967, Konchalovsky completed his second full-length film *The Story of Asya Klyachina, Who Loved but Did Not Marry* (*Istoriya Asi Klyachinoi, kotoraya lyubila, da ne vyshla zamuzh*), later renamed *Asya's Happiness* (*Asino schast'e*), the story of a village girl who is made pregnant by a young man who refuses to marry her. The film aroused the ire of the authorities because of its unvarnished depiction of life on a Russian *kolkhoz* and its broaching of taboo themes. Konchalovsky commented in a 1986 interview: "The characters in the film spoke about Stalin, the gulags, the concentration camps. It was 1967, on the eve of the invasion of Czechoslovakia. They called me a CIA agent."¹⁴ The film was placed on the shelf, where it remained until its release in December 1987.

After this depressing episode, Konchalovsky retreated into the Russian classics. In 1969 he brought out *Nest of Gentry* (*Dvoryanskoye gnezdo*), based on a novel by Ivan Turgenev, and in 1971 *Uncle Vanya* (*Dyadya Vanya*), based on the famous play by Chekhov. The Turgenev film, in particular, received a hostile reception from Soviet critics who perceived religio-nationalist tendencies in it.

In 1974, Konchalovsky brought out a "rock opera" called *A Lover's Romance* (*Romans o vlyublyonnykh*), which is considered by critics to be his weakest film. Five years later, he rebounded with his most ambitious and, in a number of ways, his best film, *Siberiade*, the last film he was to make in the Soviet Union. Konchalovsky claims that the film was seen by 100 million Soviet viewers before it was taken off the screens by the authorities who feared that he was going to defect to the West. This followed his announcement that he planned to begin making some films abroad. "They took it [*Siberiade*] off the screens right away, because they thought I was going to defect. But I just told them, 'All I want is to live my own life.'"¹⁵

Like Tarkovsky, Konchalovsky appears to have found the waning years of Brezhnev's reign and the brief Andropov and Chernenko interludes impossibly restrictive. He was *de facto* an émigré to the West — he was required to obtain a visa each time he wanted to visit the USSR — while continuing to hold a Soviet passport. After some

¹³See Michel Ciment, "Entretien avec Andrei Konchalovsky," *Positif*, 285 (1984), p. 35.

¹⁴Cited in Dan Yakir, "From Russia to Hollywood," *The Boston Globe*, 11 January 1986.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

initial failures, Konchalovsky succeeded in landing a contract with the Cannon group to bring out four films in English. He completed this assignment very rapidly, with *Maria's Lovers* in 1984, *Runaway Train* in 1985, *Duet for One* in 1986, and *Shy People* in 1987. His stamina and industry have been remarkable. For example, he made *Maria's Lovers* in just 42 days.

While living in Los Angeles in quest of a contract, he became acquainted with actress Shirley Maclaine and entered into a year-and-a-half relationship with her. Maclaine has left an intriguing account of Konchalovsky (whom she refers to under a transparent pseudonym) in her book *Dancing in the Light* (1985). A non-Christian spiritualist, Maclaine devotes considerable space to outlining Konchalovsky's religious views. While her book must be used with caution, it represents an important source for those interested in his thought.¹⁷

In May 1987 Konchalovsky told a Western reporter that the Soviet authorities continued to regard him as "trash on the floor." "I'm not the kind of image they want to project," he said.¹⁸ In late 1987, however, he was rehabilitated, his long-suppressed film *Asya's Happiness* was released, and a major interview with him was published in the 20 January issue of *Literaturnaya gazeta*.

Tarkovsky's Films

From the time that he sought political asylum in Italy, Tarkovsky made it explicitly clear that he had been a religious man from the beginning of his film career. We shall focus here upon the religious themes in three of his films: *Andrei Rublyov*, *Stalker*, and *Sacrifice*.

It was in *Andrei Rublyov* that Tarkovsky's religious interests and sympathies first came clearly to the fore. The central idea of the film, as Tarkovsky repeatedly stated in interviews, is that one's beliefs must be tested against the experience of reality. In the Holy Trinity Monastery of St Sergius, the monk Andrei Rublyov was taught the basic axioms of "love, community, and brotherhood". Once outside the monastery, however,

he (Rublyov) is confronted by a reality that is as unfamiliar and unexpected as it is appalling . . . It is easy to see how ill-equipped Andrei was for this confrontation with life . . . And only after going through the circles of suffering, at one with the fate of his

¹⁶ Michel Ciment, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁷ Shirley Maclaine, *Dancing in the Light* (New York, 1985).

¹⁸ Cited in Rita Kempley, "At Cannes, Films as a Family Affair", *Washington Post*, 17 May 1987.

people, and after losing his faith in an idea of good that could not be reconciled with reality, does Andrei come back to the point from which he started: to the idea of love, good, brotherhood. But now he has experienced for himself the great, sublime truth of that idea as a statement of the aspirations of his tormented people.¹⁹

In the course of Rublyov's spiritual development, it is his dispute with the Byzantine iconographer Feofan (Theophanes) the Greek which is pivotal. Tarkovsky appears to follow such Russian academic specialists as V. N. Lazarev and D. S. Likhachev, both of whom published studies on Rublyov and Feofan in the early- to mid-1960s, in discerning a major difference in emphasis in the icons of the two painters. Lazarev writes that, for Feofan, Christ is "the terrible judge of the world and not the good Saviour", while Rublyov, by contrast, always underlined "the human principle" in Christ.²⁰ And Likhachev observes: "In Rublyov's thematics the motifs of forgiveness and intercession for sinners are strengthened. His work is more lyrical, softer, and more heartfelt than Feofan's. Andrei Rublyov's works exude a restrained and quiet optimism, an inner joy."²¹

Whatever the truth of these judgements — and they may be tinged with an element of Russian chauvinism — they seem to have been wholeheartedly accepted by the young director of *Andrei Rublyov*. The Feofan whom we see in the film indicts the Russian people for living in darkness and predicts that Russians will burn like candles at the Last Judgement. The crucifixion of a Christ figure in the snow — a central scene in the film — is for Feofan the supreme example of the people's betrayal. For Andrei Rublyov, on the other hand, the Russian people have been cruelly deceived, and are capable of regeneration.

In a 1969 interview with French film critics, Tarkovsky stated: "... an artist such as Feofan reflects the world; his immediate reaction is to state that the world is badly made, that men are perfidious and cruel, depraved and futile, and that, in consequence, they deserve to expire after death, after the Last Judgement."²² Interestingly, Tarkovsky compares Feofan's vision to that of Franz Kafka.

Rublyov, on the other hand, "does not express (in his icons) the crushing weight of this life, of this universe. In the people of his time he seeks out the grain of hope, of love, of faith." Unlike Feofan,

¹⁹Tarkovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

²⁰V. N. Lazarev, *Feofan Grek i ego shkola* (Moscow, 1961), p. 93. Lazarev has also published *Andrei Rublyov i ego shkola* (Moscow, 1966).

²¹D. S. Likhachev, *Kul'tura Rusi vremeni Andrey Rublyova i Epifaniya Premudrogo* (Moscow, 1962), p. 128.

²²See "Andrei Tarkovsky parle de son film" in the volume *Andrei Roublev* (Paris, 1970), p. 15.

Rublyov senses "both the unification of Russia and a certain progress . . . That is the genius of Rublyov."²³

Andrei Rublyov's truth is, thus, for Tarkovsky, a higher truth, but the iconographer must experience the brutal reality of Feofan's truth in the course of the film. Thus he witnesses the blinding of peasant craftsmen by a Russian prince who does not want them to work for his brother. And he experiences strong sexual temptation at the pagan festival which his fellow monks attempt to keep him from visiting.

Throughout the film, Rublyov, like Tarkovsky himself, has been a religious "liberal". He bristles at painting a traditional icon of the Last Judgement depicting sinners burning in pitch. He rejects St Paul's injunction in Corinthians that women should cover their heads. But this "liberalism" is sorely tested, indeed temporarily overcome, in the episode which shows the sack of Vladimir by a combined force of Tatars and renegade Russians. Townspeople and monks are slaughtered; horses and soldiers break into God's temple; Rublyov's iconostas is set aflame. He is forced to kill a fellow Russian who attempts to rape a female holy fool. Rublyov actually sees the burning pitch of which Feofan had spoken. Feofan's "shade" appears to him. "I told you so", it says.

Stunned and distraught, Rublyov takes a vow of silence and ceases to paint. It would seem that Feofan's bleak vision of humanity has been vindicated. But Andrei recovers his speech after the "Bell" section toward the end of the film in which the boy, Boriska, "a kind of double of Rublyov" in Tarkovsky's words, successfully casts the great bell.

The dispute between Andrei and Feofan is finally resolved in the showing of Rublyov's icons at the conclusion of the film. As Tarkovsky commented:

The rapport between the end in colour and the rest of the film in black and white is for us an expression of the rapport between Rublyov and his life. We enlarged the details on the icons because . . . we wanted to lead the spectator through a contemplation of a succession of details toward a view of the ensemble of the 'Trinity', the highest summit of Rublyov's work.²⁴

The unity in love of the three persons of the Holy Trinity foreshadows the future unity of Russians. The icon of the Trinity is thus the "politics" of the film *Andrei Rublyov*.

Stalker, the last film completed by Tarkovsky in the Soviet Union, is based on a science fiction tale by Arkadi and Boris Strugatsky, entitled *Roadside Picnic (Piknik na obochine)*. Aliens have visited the

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

earth and left behind them a Zone which has unknown and potentially dangerous properties. Because of its unknown characteristics, the Zone is declared off limits. But since it is a forbidden area, bold men seek to visit it. A profession of "stalkers" (from the English verb "to stalk") has grown up, men who earn a living by leading adventurers into the Zone.

The film recounts one such expedition, headed by a stalker and including two men, Scientist and Writer. The travellers pursue a circuitous route to the centre of the Zone, where, it is said, there stands a room in which one's innermost desires can be realised. En route, the travellers ponder the tale — or perhaps it is only a legend — of an individual who allegedly penetrated to the centre of the Zone to ask for the health of his son and returned home to find himself an immensely rich man. The Zone had perceived his true, innermost wish. The man then hanged himself.

The Writer, who does most of the talking in the film, preaches a philosophy of "general animal pragmatism", while the Scientist, who has armed himself with "ampoules" and a small bomb, represents "the alarm of reason for the fate of people like himself".²⁵

In Tarkovsky's view, Stalker is morally superior to his companions. "Stalker," he wrote, "eccentric and on occasion hysterical, is also incorruptible and states unequivocally his own spiritual commitment in the face of a world in which opportunism grows like a malignant tumour."²⁶ In the film, he is called a "holy fool," and critics have fruitfully compared him to such figures as Cervantes' Don Quixote and Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*.

Another ethical model is Stalker's wife, to whom he returns at the end of the journey. Tarkovsky commented:

There before them is a woman who has been through untold miseries because of her husband, and has had a sick child by him; but she continues to love him with the same selfless, unthinking devotion as in her youth. Her love and her devotion are that final miracle which can be set against the unbelief, cynicism, moral vacuum poisoning the modern world, of which both the Writer and the Scientist are victims.²⁷

The film *Stalker* is replete with religious references: there are readings from the Gospel of Luke and from Revelation, and a crown of thorns is introduced at one point.

The last film which Tarkovsky managed to complete is perhaps his most difficult to comprehend. Set in a remote area of Sweden,

²⁵M. Zak, "Rezhissura kak iskusstvo", *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1982), p. 96.

²⁶Tarkovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 198.

Sacrifice features a retired man of the theatre, Alexander, his ex-actress wife, two children, and a small circle of friends. The film is darkened by the shadow of imminent nuclear war. Appalled at this prospect, Alexander makes a fervent vow to God:

Lord, deliver us in this terrible hour. Do not let my children die, my friends, my wife . . . I will give You all I possess. I will leave the family I love. I shall destroy my home, give up my son. I shall be silent . . . I shall give up everything that binds me to life, if You will only let everything be as it was before . . .²⁸

The next morning, seeing that nuclear war has been averted, Alexander proceeds to burn down his house and, after a chase, is taken away by men in white suits. His "sacrifice", even of his freedom, is complete.

Such a schematic summary of the film's story line glosses over a non-Christian dimension of *Sacrifice* about which film critics have written a good deal. In addition to uttering the prayer cited above, Alexander also hearkens — though, perhaps, only in a dream — to the voice of the mysterious Otto the Postman, who informs him that if he truly wishes to save the world he must lie with a serving girl from Iceland, a witch who has benign powers, and Alexander follows this advice. When morning arrives, one is therefore entitled to ask "whether it is the Visit to the witch or the Prayer (or neither) that is the cause of their ultimate survival."²⁹ As French critic Michel Chion has pointed out, Tarkovsky in his public pronouncements always underlined the Christian dimension of Alexander's sacrifice, but the elements of what Chion calls "pagan sorcery" are just as real.³⁰ Indeed elements of such "sorcery" make their appearance in the other two Tarkovsky films, *Andrei Rublyov* and *Stalker*, which we have discussed.

Tarkovsky's keen interest in the creative principle which is rooted in the people is noteworthy throughout the film *Andrei Rublyov*. It links up with his non-religious populism and Russian nationalism. Examples are the "flying muzhik" episode which constitutes the film's prologue, the "buffoon" episode, and the "bell" episode toward the end of the picture. The foremost example, however, is the pagan festival which is a centrepiece of the film and the kiss which Andrei receives there from the naked "Mordovian madonna".³¹

Related to this scene is the strange ending of *Stalker* which serves, in my opinion, to undercut the stress placed on self-sacrificial love by the

²⁸Cited from an excellent review of the film by Peter Green, "Apocalypse and Sacrifice", *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1987, p. 112.

²⁹Le Fanu, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

³⁰In *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 392 (1987), p. 37.

³¹Zak, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

figures of Stalker and his wife. Stalker's sickly daughter, the young girl named Monkey, sits at a table and recites a heavily sensual love poem by the poet Tyutchev. Then, through telekinesis, she moves two glasses and a jar to the edge of a table. One glass falls off the edge and shatters. "Pagan sorcery" has made itself felt.

The art of Andrei Tarkovsky — unquestionably a highly gifted filmmaker — points simultaneously toward the Orthodox Christian "millennium" of Russian history and toward the dark pagan enchantment from which Vladimir of Kiev extracted the country in the tenth century. The spiritual ambivalence of Tarkovsky's films takes us back to a similar ambivalence which was prevalent in many cultural works of Russia's Silver Age in the period preceding the Bolshevik Revolution.

Konchalovsky's Films

As we have seen, after coauthoring the scenario of *Andrei Rublyov*, Andrei Konchalovsky struck out on his own and directed a series of distinguished films first in the USSR and then, in the 1980s, in the West. Eventually he and Tarkovsky became critical of one another's films, which is not surprising given their different approaches to filmmaking. Konchalovsky criticised Tarkovsky's films for being "incomprehensible for the majority of viewers in the world and, especially, for Soviet viewers . . ." ³² Tarkovsky, for his part, held that Konchalovsky's films verged upon "mass art". (The two are said, however, to have had a reconciliation shortly before Tarkovsky's death in 1986.)

Siberiade was the last film which Konchalovsky succeeded in making in the Soviet Union. While it has been attacked by some émigré critics who say it is too subservient to the authorities, it is actually quite bold politically, once one traces out its symbolism. ³³ The film sees modern civilisation as engaged in a headlong rush toward catastrophe. (Thematically, it bears certain resemblances to Tarkovsky's film *Sacrifice*.) The isolated western Siberian village of Yelan is shaken to its foundations by the destructive forces eating away at modern man (war, revolution, class hatred, despoliation of the environment). At the end of the film, the oil for which a prospecting team has been searching in a mysterious area known as the "devil's patch" comes gushing out of the ground, catches fire,

³²Gaston Haustrate, "Grand Entretien avec Mikhaïlov Kontchalovski", *Cinéma*, 247-248 (1979), p. 70. Konchalovsky has published a book containing his reflections on the cinema: *Parabola zamysla* (Moscow, 1977).

³³On this aspect of *Siberiade*, see my essay "Two Films for the Soviet Masses" in the collection of my articles *The New Russian Nationalism* (New York, 1985).

and then destroys the village's ancestral graveyard with its Orthodox crosses.

Contrasted to the madly accelerating pace of modern civilisation is the lifestyle of the "eternal grandfather", an old man sprung from the Russian lives of saints and fairy tales, who lives surrounded by birds, bees, and a convivial bear. Snatches from the Orthodox church services come to the old man's lips, and he sings pointedly about the Biblical prodigal son while the film's central protagonist, Alyosha Ustuzhanin, is temporarily living under his roof.

Konchalovsky's religious-based view of nature has been underlined by Shirley Maclaine. For him, she writes, "Nature belongs to God. Mankind doesn't understand her mysteries. Nature fights back when she is assaulted." And she adds: "In his view a person's recognition of the laws of nature is in direct ratio to their [sic] understanding of life."³⁴

A second leitmotif which appears in all of Konchalovsky's films is the struggle between good and evil. Shirley Maclaine writes: ". . . the subject that haunted Konchalovsky most of all was the issue of good and evil. He saw it as a black and white dilemma. And he saw both good and evil as forces outside of man — as God and Satan."³⁵ This view, to which Maclaine took repeated and violent exception, struck her as one of the filmmaker's most firmly held convictions.

In espousing this view, Konchalovsky is closer to traditional Orthodox Christianity than Tarkovsky, who appears to have envisaged the divinity as a kind of impersonal Absolute. In the words of Kovacs and Szilagyi:

Tarkovsky's religious ethics are close to those of Tolstoy. But for Tarkovsky God is not the centre of the ethical world. He explained his position in 1978 . . . 'I do not have available a spiritual faculty with which I can apprehend God.' By contrast, he is very preoccupied with the problem of the Absolute in a philosophical sense, all the more so because 'only art is capable of knowing and defining the Absolute.'³⁶

The struggle between good and evil is central to *Siberiade*, as well as to two other films by Konchalovsky that we shall examine: *Maria's Lovers* and *Runaway Train*.

Alyosha, the central figure in *Siberiade*, is an energetic, vital man with a sense of humour. In Konchalovsky's words, "He is well armed to survive in this world."³⁷ But Alyosha sacrifices his life to save a

³⁴ Maclaine, *op. cit.*, pp. 186 and 222.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 242

³⁶ Kovacs and Szilagyi, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁷ In Haustrate, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

fellow worker trapped under a piece of machinery during the fire at the end of the film.

Similarly, in *Maria's Lovers* we are shown two working-class Americans of Slavic origin living in a small town in Pennsylvania in 1946. Ivan Bibic, an uneducated but sensitive man, has been interned in a Japanese POW camp during the war and has witnessed such horrors as a rat eating the head of a fellow American killed by the Japanese. During his imprisonment, he kept himself going by dreaming of his close friend from childhood, Maria Botic, who is from Yugoslavia. Ivan works in a factory, Maria is employed as a nurse. After rejecting a competitor, an army captain, Maria agrees to marry Ivan in a service which is conducted in the local Orthodox church.

Unfortunately, Ivan is impotent, unable to consummate his marriage with the woman of his dreams, though he is able to have sexual relations with a loose woman in town. Maria, who desperately wants a baby, sticks with Ivan despite his torment. Eventually she has a brief liaison with an itinerant singer and roué, in order to conceive a child. She then sends the singer away. Heavily pregnant, she visits Ivan at the meat packing plant where he now works and asks him to come back so that the child can have a father. Ivan refuses. Maria has the child and lives alone.

A fellow worker at the plant takes pity on Maria and urges Ivan to go back to her. So does Ivan's father, who is dying from an illness. Ivan decides to return to her, tells her he will love her baby. They are able to consummate their marriage and forgive one another. (French critic Alain Masson has written that the erotic passages in the film "are justified in the name of virtue . . .").³⁸

When I had an opportunity to chat with Konchalovsky in 1983, he said that for him the essence of Christianity is *agape*. Our century, he said, has seen too much of vengeance. We need more forgiveness.

Runaway Train is adapted from a script by the great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, himself an admirer of 19th century Russian classical literature and, especially, of Dostoyevsky. It recounts the escape of two rough and frequently violent convicts, Manny and Buck, from a high security Alaskan prison. They flee into the Alaskan wilderness, pursued by an avenging warden who has vowed to take Manny's life. They are eventually able to board a modern, computerised, high-speed train (non-passenger), which soon becomes a "runaway" when the engineer suffers a heart attack and jumps off the train, and when the brakes burn out. The racing train (a metaphor for the modern world) carries the two convicts through a violent snowstorm (a metaphor for life). Improbably, the convicts discover a

³⁸ Alain Masson, "Les fragments et le tout", *Positif*, 285 (1974), p. 32.

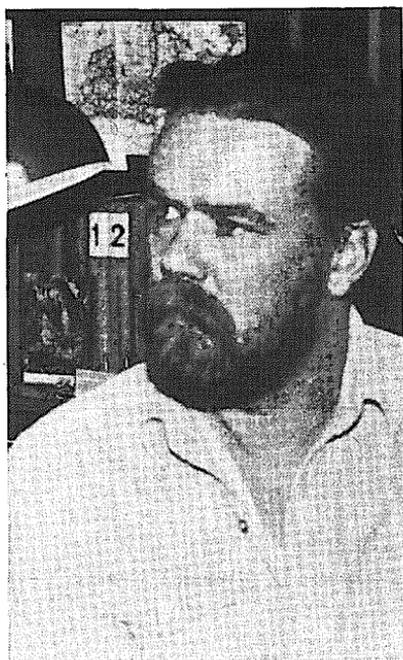


Scenes from Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublyov*.
See article on pp. 210-226.
(Photos © Sovexportfilm,
reproduction courtesy National Film Archive, London)





Dean Modris Plate.
(Photo © Prokla-Media)



Maris Ludviks.
(Photo © Prokla-Media)

Latvian Lutherans.
See article on pp. 237-249.



Juris Rubenis.
(Photo © Prokla-Media).



The consecration of Eriks Mesters as
Archbishop of Latvia, August 1986.
(Photo © Lutheran World Federation)

young woman, Sara, on the train, and she turns out to be deeply religious.

The railway authorities, surrounded by their high-tech computers (and, at one point, watching the lift-off of an Apollo rocket on television) reverse their decision to derail the train when they learn that there are people on board. They then conceive a plan to divert it on to a side rail which, they hope, will preserve the lives of those on board.

The drama in the control room is paralleled by high drama in the train. Manny prevents Buck from raping Sara. But Manny is quite willing to risk Buck's life when he orders him to attempt to reach the engine in order to stop the train. Manny and Buck quarrel and fight. Sara, who values other lives as much as her own, keeps Manny from leaping off the train to certain death. The warden appears on a rope ladder suspended from a helicopter and boards the train, where he is taken captive by Manny. At the end of the film, Manny decouples the car carrying Buck and Sara — thereby saving their lives — while he and the handcuffed warden plunge on through the snowstorm to their inevitable death.

In an interview with Dan Yakir of the *Boston Globe*, Konchalovsky explained that *Runaway Train*

is a film about what it means to win and lose and what it means to be moral, in short what it means to be human. The two characters Manny and Buck find freedom by escaping from prison, but are once again imprisoned aboard this uncontrollable, monstrous creature, the train. The film asks the questions: Is being human a burden or a curse? What price evil? Man can sometimes be worse than a beast — reach the heights of cruelty in order to survive, but he can also be good. He has a choice.³⁹

Referring to the character of Manny, Konchalovsky added: “. . . in most films of this sort, they'd make the protagonist the good guy fighting evil. Here, he is fighting good and evil inside himself. This is a dominant principle in all my films — this exploration of the struggle of human nature.”

Manny is anti-religious, relies on himself and on his own strong will. But he is capable of feeling pity, as well as rage and cruelty. In his fluctuations, he contrasts with the young woman, Sara, who is consistently spiritual.

On several occasions, the film investigates the dynamics and mechanism of prayer. After escaping from prison by plunging through an icy river, Buck, his feet freezing, prays for a pair of boots;

³⁹In Yakir, *op. cit.* On *Runaway Train*, see also Hubert Niogret, “La course dans le paysage”, *Positif*, 303 (1986), pp. 65-66.

he finds a pair at the station before they board the train.

Sara prays that the door to the train's engine will open, permitting them to stop the train. The door stays closed. But the train inexplicably slows down before hurtling over a bridge; if it had gone over at full speed, it would have caused the bridge to collapse. Similarly, Sara decides to sound the train whistle just before an elderly watchman is about to derail the train, not knowing there are people on board. The film examines the subtle way in which providence interacts with human lives.

As this film indicates, Konchalovsky is closer to traditional Russian Orthodoxy than Tarkovsky. Like Tarkovsky, however, he should be regarded as a religious syncretist who combines Orthodox and non-Christian beliefs. Shirley Maclaine notes, for example, that Konchalovsky believes in reincarnation and, while in the Soviet Union, made it a practice to visit mediums and psychics. He even claimed to have experienced an "astral projection". Any Orthodox spiritual director would, of course, warn a believer off such "heretical" beliefs and "pagan" practices.

Like Tarkovsky, Konchalovsky also exhibits a tendency toward nationalism without reference to religion. Shirley Maclaine writes that she was repeatedly struck by Konchalovsky's "religious" belief in the Russian people. In his films made in the West, Konchalovsky consistently shows a generalised populist tendency. Simple people are shown to be superior to educated people. But in the traditional Orthodox Christian view simple people, like educated ones, need to be regenerated. Spontaneous surges of compassion and pity are not enough. One is called upon to reorient one's life permanently.

Towards and Away from Orthodoxy

Andrei Tarkovsky and Andrei Konchalovsky — two of the most talented of modern Russian filmmakers — embody the enduring interest of cultivated Soviet Russians in religious themes. Like the figures of Russia's Silver Age, they point the way out of materialism and a materialistic understanding of man toward a spiritual path which is strongly influenced by the country's religion, Orthodox Christianity. Also like many figures of the Silver Age, however, they lack a detailed and nuanced knowledge of that religion. The insights of Orthodoxy are therefore at times combined with beliefs from other religions and philosophies, resulting in a syncretist system. Their films, therefore, can lead viewers both towards and away from the millennial traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church.