Andrei Tarkovsky’s Poetics of Cinema

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To Mike and Grace

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INTRODUCTION

KEEP AWAKE

> In our profession everything depends on the extent of how interesting you make your narration.
> —Andrei Tarkovsky[1]

The seed of this book was planted in September of 2001, and a brief but wonderful time when my local cinémathèque exhibited a season of films by the late Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. Although I was already vaguely familiar with a couple of Tarkovsky's films (and on this basis would claim my utmost appreciation of the director and his vision whenever such an opinion appeared profitable) it was not until seeing his entire oeuvre as a body of work that my interest became something more akin to infatuation. In these seven feature length films, and particularly in the latter four, Tarkovsky provided me with something no other filmmaker had at that point. His films validated something in me. They awakened, or perhaps reawakened, a creative sense of reality that had been locked away, shut off from the outside world. This incredible gift, it struck me at the time, must be the very reason for the existence of art: the cultivation of boundless human creativity.

With the energy of these wholly positive feelings I decided to concern myself with formulating an explanation as to how Tarkovsky's films provoked such a response. How was it that these films communicated something that others did not? The provisional answer, as I saw it at the time, had not so much to do with any specific element in Tarkovsky's films (with their vivid imagery, metaphysical themes or esoteric aspects, for example) as to do with the way these elements interrelated; that is to say, with film form. These were narrative films, but narratives that seemed to be constructed in a different way to the narratives of other films. They appeared to use a different language, a language that seemed more appropriate to the perceptible aesthetic qualities of cinema. It was the key to Tarkovsky's cinematic language that I, however naively, endeavored to discover.

The perspective I am adopting in this study may seem, like its subject, somewhat old fashioned. This is a book about Tarkovsky's later films. It embarks on a detailed analytical discussion of four narrative works (*Mirror*, *Stalker*, *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice*) by posing relatively modest theoretical questions. How do these films function as narratives? How are they similar to each other and to the films of other directors? And how are they different? In proposing answers to these questions, I will be concerned with describing the narrational dynamics of Tarkovsky's later films and proceed from these observations to consider Tarkovsky's mature filmmaking approach as a systemised poetics of narrative composition. Through detailed formal analyses of these four films, I hope to provide more substantial intellectual foundations for the discussion of Tarkovsky's mature artistic achievements than currently exist. Fundamentally, I want to treat these films as narratives. For this study, before his status as a prophet, mystic or film theorist, the name Andrei Tarkovsky denotes a narrative artist, a filmmaker who over the course of his life engaged with the poetic possibilities of a young and relatively unexplored art form and in doing so developed an approach to film narration that fulfils a unique and important position in film history.

Problems with Tarkovsky

Despite the plaudits that Tarkovsky's films have received, many film scholars, particularly in the West, have found themselves at odds to know just how to approach Tarkovsky's cinema within an intellectual framework. Tarkovsky's films, especially the later ones, often come across as wilfully obscure, difficult, baffling, esoteric, even pre-modern. They seem to exhibit few outward signs of the mathematical precision and geometry of form so evident in the definably modernist works of Ozu Yasujiro, Robert Bresson, Jacques Tati and Sergei Eisenstein (all films that have in the past served as exemplary subjects for the kind of analytical approach I am adopting in this study).[2] Compared with the work of these earlier filmmakers, Tarkovsky's films can appear loose and impressionistic, intuitively constructed without explicit recourse to any systematic rules or guiding formal principles. Some scholars have even suggested that Tarkovsky's films bypass intellectual cognition altogether. David S. Miall, for example, argues that the films present "scenes whose significance one can feel but not explain",[3] while the Soviet critic Maya Turovskaya suggests that Tarkovsky attempted to "beam his message directly to the [brain's] right hemisphere, thereby evading control of the later established, now dominant, left hemisphere".[4]

Observing the apparently intuitive and even pre-logical qualities of Tarkovsky's cinema, critics have often been reluctant to describe the films with analytical precision. While no one denies the ravishing and exotic beauty of Tarkovsky's imagery (though Fredric Jameson has suggested an ideologically suspect intent lies behind it),[5] many have found difficulty in explaining the specific attributes of the director's approach to filmmaking. Few have noted any points of interest, for example, in the narrative links that Tarkovsky established between each of his lovingly composed shots. This being so, in the field of film poetics and formal analysis Tarkovsky has remained a largely ignored figure, relegated to a rung well below his true division. Evidence of this neglect may be recognised in the fact that in all of David Bordwell's published studies Tarkovsky has received less than a page of attention.[6] At best, for poeticians, Tarkovsky has been regarded as a filmmaker of sensual genius with only marginal theoretical interest, an artist of the immediate rather than of the whole.

This prevalent idea of Tarkovsky's work being somehow exempt from, beyond or below detailed and concrete analytical description is paralleled and to a large degree underpinned by the mythologizing that has accumulated around this unusually aristocratic filmmaker. As a Russian artistic genius par excellence whose problematic relationship with Communist Party and Goskino officials led him to choose European exile over a life with his family in the Soviet Union,[7] Tarkovsky has been treated as an ideological martyr for the late 20th century, a symbol of defiance against Soviet repression and a prophet of the totalitarian state's downfall. His early death from cancer in 1986, only four years into his European exile, has served to bolster this aura of martyrdom. With only seven feature films completed in twenty-five years, what Tarkovsky might have done has become almost more important than what he did do, and in the desperate search for more material critics have frequently turned to the director's less than reliable writings and public statements as a source for further discussion. This in turn has created further problems, for when approached as a theorist of his own work, and of cinema in general, Tarkovsky sits less than comfortably within the discursive norms of contemporary film scholarship.

One significant problem running through critical discussions of Tarkovsky's films is the consistent unease that many commentators feel towards the high seriousness of the director's artistic ambitions. In stark contrast to the aesthetic playfulness and ideological irony of other post-war art cinema filmmakers (like Federico Fellini, Jean Luc Godard and Raúl Ruiz), Tarkovsky sternly and unapologetically expects his audience to engage soberly with his films as though they were experiencing

something profound and vital for their development as human beings. Where even a master like Ozu described himself as a practitioner of "the minor arts",[8] Tarkovsky's unwavering ambition was to raise cinema to the level of prestige enjoyed by the classical high arts and their great masters, no less than Dante, Leonardo, Shakespeare and Bach. Although such high seriousness can, perhaps, be attributed squarely to the director's national context (Russian filmmakers, as Yuri Tsivian notes, have from the earliest days entertained a desire "to compete with 'high art.'"[9]) in Tarkovsky's cinema such artistic ambition is focussed with an unusual and somewhat discomforting intensity. Tarkovsky was convinced of the artist's (i.e. the filmmaker's) responsibility "to master ultimate truth",[10] "to explain life and the reason for one's appearance on this planet",[11] and throughout his career he castigated "mass-appeal cinema",[12] born as it was "at a fair, in sin, at a marketplace".[13]

Such highfalutin rhetoric causes pangs of unease for most brands of film criticism today, where increasingly the very notion of high art is rejected. The distinguished Marxist and postmodernist theorist Fredric Jameson provides an acute example of this in his book *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, when he writes of the duplicitous pomposity he perceives in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Jameson writes:

> The objection [to *Stalker*] is not so much to the religious content as it is to the artistic pretentiousness. The operation consists in trying to block our resistance in a two-fold way. To forestall aesthetic qualms with religious gravity, while afterthoughts about the religious content are to be chastened by the reminder that this is, after all, high art.[14]

Negative responses like Jameson's are perhaps provoked by Tarkovsky's own apparently hostile resistance to the very idea of an intellectual explication of his films. "Thinking during a film interferes with your experience of it", the director claimed. "Take a watch to pieces. It doesn't work. Similarly with a work of art, there's no way it can be analysed without destroying it".[15] Noticing these anti-intellectual tendencies, the Lacanian film theorist Slavoj Žižek has described Tarkovsky's position as being that of a "Russian religious obscurantist".[16] In choosing this label Žižek, with his own characteristic aloofness, suggests that Tarkovsky's ideological resistance to empirical analysis was a conscientiously adopted brand of reactionary, anti-scientific humanism, popular amongst the Russian intelligentsia since pre-Bolshevik times. (Dostoevsky's Christian "paradoxicalist" philosophy might be seen as an influential example of the obscurantist position.) Like many Soviet artists and intellectuals, Tarkovsky's disdain for Soviet materialist ideology perhaps found

expression through his overt opposition to all facets of intellectual enquiry. The baby of reason was thrown out with the bathwater of mechanised socialism, and logical theoretical inquiry was cast as the shadow of something unhealthy, corrupt and tragic.

Žižek's charge of obscurantism is not easily dismissed. We can indeed observe many examples of a reactionary, anti-intellectual orientation scattered throughout Tarkovsky's films. In *Andrei Roublev* (1966/1971), for example, Kirill and Theophanes the Greek quote one of Tarkovsky's favourite biblical passages, from Ecclesiastes: "He who increases knowledge increases suffering".[17] In *Mirror* Alexei's son Ignat "accidentally" reads aloud the extract, "When asked how the arts and sciences affect people's morals, Rousseau answered, 'negatively'". In the later films the message is even more direct. At the end of *Stalker* the title character collapses on his bedroom floor and bursts into a condemnatory tirade against the writer and scientist's blind intellectualism: "Calling themselves intellectuals those writers and scientists. They don't believe in anything… They've got empty eyes"! Taking this stance even further, in *Nostalghia* the character Domenico shouts at a passive crowd before committing suicide: "What kind of a world is this when it's a mad man who tells you that you should be ashamed of yourselves"? In Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice*, it is the protagonist Alexander who laments his own lifeless intellectualism: "I studied philosophy, the history of religion and aesthetics. And by the time I finished I'd dug myself into a hole".[18]

Tarkovsky's writings and public statements express similar sentiments. Upon his unofficial defection from the USSR the director would go so far as to apply his apparently "obscurantist" stance to Western civilisation in general. In 1984, for instance, he would without hint of hesitation declare that "man has, since the Enlightenment, dealt with things he should have ignored".[19] Undeterred that such an idea might be construed by others in a neo-fascist light, Tarkovsky insisted on the spiritual motivation for his opinions. "The freedom and guarantees given to human beings through Western democracy have somehow made them very, very spiritually weak".[20] Hard to digest in a time where anything and everything is construed in a political terms, Tarkovsky's spiritually oriented ideological position has not been well received. Added to this, his occasionally outrageous attacks on feminism[21] have done little for the reputation of his art.

Of particular significance for this study are Tarkovsky's provocative denials of the relevance of formal analysis (of his films and of art in general) and the influence his position has had on critical commentaries of

his work. As Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie note in the introduction to their long study, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*,

> By means of interviews, talks… and his book *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky succeeded to a remarkable extent in creating a framework that ensured his films would be discussed and understood in terms largely established by him.[22]

One of Tarkovsky's most effective manipulations of his films' critical reception was his consistent emphasis on the irrelevance of logical explanations when approaching an artwork. In *Sculpting in Time*, for example, he explains his understanding of the strict divide between scientific and artistic forms of understanding:

> Understanding in a scientific sense means agreement on a cerebral, logical level; it is an intellectual act akin to the process of proving a theorem.
>
> Understanding an artistic image means an aesthetic acceptance of the beautiful, on an emotional or even supra-emotional level.[23]

The importance Tarkovsky placed on this distinction became all the more stressed towards the end of his life. A year before his death he stated in an interview with Jerzy Illg and Leonard Neuger:

> When I was leaving the Soviet Union, my audience consisted of very young people, 16-17 years old–and they understood me. What does it mean: understood? It means they *accepted* it.[24]

Where earlier Soviet directors like Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin actively encouraged intellectual understandings of their work (promoting and directing theoretical discussion through their writings), Tarkovsky apparently did not want his films to be understood intellectually at all. Taken at his word, he simply wanted his audience to absorb the films, in "the way they would look at the passing landscape through a train window".[25]

It comes as little surprise, then, that the notion of a formal analysis was for Tarkovsky an almost sacrilegious proposal. In February 1981, after a screening of *Stalker* to launch the film's British release, Ian Christie hosted a forum at the National Film Theatre in London to interview the director. When questioned about his attitude towards the critical reception of his work Tarkovsky replied:

> We have forgotten how to relate emotionally to art: we treat it like editors, searching in it for that which the artist has supposedly hidden. It is actually

> much simpler than that, otherwise art would have no meaning. You have to be like a child. Incidentally, children understand my pictures very well and I haven't met a single serious critic yet who stands knee-high to those children when it comes to understanding my films for what they are.[26]

By undertaking formal analyses that would have been an anathema to Tarkovsky, my intention in this study is not to refute the filmmaker's idea that his films are primarily and most importantly emotional aesthetic experiences, to be "accepted" as unique to each spectator. Indeed, as I mentioned at the outset, my own experiences of Tarkovsky's films have always left me profoundly moved, crystallising emotions rarely felt, and that is why I am so interested in them. Nevertheless, I will argue that sheer emotional expression is not the whole story of Tarkovsky's cinema. Tarkovsky's out-and-out nullifications of intellectual inquiry in fact conceal another, definably intellectual artistic agenda.

As we will frequently observe throughout this book, Tarkovsky's statements on his films are often not as straightforward and trustworthy as they first appear. Contrary to the passionate and often naïve sincerity of his public statements and writings, Tarkovsky was a deceiver of sorts, keenly aware of the industrial and critical forces involved in his profession. As he explains surreptitiously in *Sculpting in Time*:

> There are people incapable of lying. Others who lie with inspiration… Only the second category can detect the beat of truth… with an almost geometrical accuracy.[27]

Noticing his deviousness on the film set, many critics have commented on Tarkovsky's use of a strategy popular among Soviet filmmakers. State censorship would be pre-empted with overstatement. Tarkovsky's sister Marina Tarkovskaya usefully reports that during the shooting of *Mirror* Tarkovsky deliberately overextended scenes and included politically contentious and unnecessary dialogue as a means divert the censors' attention from the material he wished to keep in the final cut.[28] I suggest that Tarkovsky's wholesale rejection of intellectual critical discourse might be explained in similar terms. Tarkovsky was far from theoretically ignorant. Evidence suggests that he familiarised himself with a great deal of critical literature, including much film theory. (On the opening page of *Sculpting in Time*, for example, he writes, "Reading and rereading books on the theory of cinema, I came to the conclusion that these did not satisfy me".[29]) Tarkovsky's hostility towards analytical criticism might, therefore, be understood as a consciously employed strategy. As David Bordwell has suggested, "If critics can use the artist's statements as evidence for their

interpretation, artists versed in interpretive procedures can use the critics".[30] In vehemently dismissing the relevance of critical analysis, Tarkovsky's motivation was perhaps to forestall conventional critical interpretations by prompting critics to *watch* his films before trying to explaining them. This motivation would be in keeping with Tarkovsky's general conception of the artist's responsibility. As Natasha Synnesios points out, it was Tarkovsky's belief "that the artist is there to pose questions and not to provide solutions".[31] Or as he put it himself in 1975 at a public forum on *Mirror*, "I am there to do things. You are there to explain things".[32] As I hope to demonstrate in this study, Tarkovsky went out of his way to make this proposition both a considerable and a very rewarding challenge.

Tarkovsky in Context

Until recently, in-depth English language studies of Tarkovsky's films were few and far between. But in the past few years the climate has begun to change. Today we can read not only the early commentaries undertaken by Maya Turovskaya, Mark Le Fanu, Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie and Peter Green, but also the more recent publications of Natasha Synessios, Sean Martin, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein and Robert Bird, as well as the collections edited by Nathan Dunne, Gunnlaugur Jonsson and Thorkell Otarrson.[33] Excepting Synessios' study of one film, *Mirror*, all of these critical texts discuss Tarkovsky's oeuvre as a unified body of work by considering the films in relation to each other, to the life and opinions of the filmmaker and to varying philosophies and theologies that seem to be implicated in the formation of Tarkovsky's artistic vision. Some of these studies are more encyclopaedic and rigorously researched (Johnson and Petrie's lengthy book remains a standout example of research in this regard) while others are more personal and impressionistic (Turovskaya, for example, openly offers her study as a collection of critical responses penned "straight from the heart"[34]). But whether rigorously researched or intuitive, almost all of the lengthy studies we have on Tarkovsky's cinema exhibit a tendency to discuss their subject within an historical and aesthetic vacuum, where the question "what makes these films narrative art"? is subordinated to the more rhetorical notion, "what makes these films Tarkovsky's"? This being so, while the idiosyncratic and autobiographical elements of Tarkovsky's cinema have received a great deal of attention (he is after all one of the most idiosyncratic narrative filmmakers), the formal aspects of the films, the systematic rules according to and against which they function, have been largely overlooked. In short, the films themselves

have not been closely analysed, and because of this oversight some fundamental elements of Tarkovsky's work have been neglected, not least the director's innovative approach to narrative composition.

Two recently published studies have laid foundations for a more sophisticated approach to Tarkovsky's cinema by engaging in theoretical discussions of Tarkovsky's aesthetics. In *Film and Dreams*, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein focuses on Tarkovsky's theoretical writings and juxtaposes the director's ideas with a range of complementary and contrasting philosophical frameworks. Emphasising the similarities between Tarkovsky's aesthetic ideas and some of the philosophical concepts represented by Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin and the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, Botz-Bornstein adroitly situates Tarkovsky's aesthetics within a long running ideological programme that might be said to represent, albeit with extreme generality, a counter-materialist stance. Botz-Bornstein illustrates that, as with the purportedly "mystical" philosophies of Plotinus and Benjamin, Tarkovsky's arguments on art and its aesthetic significance resist any notion of philosophical abstraction by insisting on the reality of human experience beyond "everyday" material conditions and by suggesting that art's function is to stimulate the spectator's awareness of these spiritual or "transcendental" spheres of experience. Comparing Tarkovsky's ideas with those of Benjamin, Botz-Bornstein writes:

> Both Tarkovsky and Benjamin negate (conventional, routinised, non-artistic) everyday world without demanding a flight into an illusory, aestheticised, stylised world… They suggest that we "awaken" not in order to enter non-reality but in order to find reality more "real" than before.[35]

This key notion, concerning Tarkovsky's ambition to engage the spectator in a higher level of communication than the kind conventionalised in the everyday world (Tarkovsky writes: "The artist could be said to further communication… on the highest intellectual, emotional, psychological and philosophical level"[36]) will be developed in my analyses by means of a spectator-centred theory of film narration. I will argue that to comprehend the narratives of Tarkovsky's late films the spectator must extend and sometimes break her conventional or habitual perceptual activities (looking and listening, "following" articulations of space and time) in order to recognise narrational cues that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Significantly, Botz-Borstein also clarifies Tarkovsky's aesthetic position by contrasting it with the general theoretical principles of Russian Formalism. Noticing Tarkovsky's unusually intense preoccupation with his own historical and regional context, Botz-Bornstein proposes that Tarkovsky's ideas on the "poetic" formal logic of cinematic

communication represent a theoretical development from earlier formalist notions of *ostranenie*, of the artwork's "making strange" of the world. Botz-Bornstein points out that like his formalist predecessors, Tarkovsky staunchly and categorically refutes any notion of the symbolic function of the discrete filmic element. (In *Sculpting in Time* Tarkovsky writes: "No one component of a film can have meaning in isolation: *it is the film that is the work of art*".[37]) To this extent, Tarkovsky's aesthetics of cinema are shown to accord with the premises set by Formalism, whereby, in Botz-Bornstein's words, "shots are not symbols but signs [and]… an object in a film is not represented but denoted".[38] According to Botz-Bornstein, the point at which Tarkovsky's aesthetic approach differs from, and even improves on, formalist theory is to be located in the director's unique conception of cinematic time. On this point, Botz-Bornstein claims:

> Formalist time exists only as and through the relationships between shots… For Formalists a single shot is static and mechanical because it contains no time. For Tarkovsky, on the other hand, a single shot also has time; it contains, as he says 'a dynamic of mood.'[39]

Referring here to Tarkovsky's suggestion that "time, imprinted in the frame"[40] constitutes cinema's defining characteristic (its "main-formative element"[41]), Botz-Bornstein isolates the pivotal and distinguishing feature of Tarkovsky's cinema, and theory, as being the induction of time as a determining formal element. As I will elaborate later in this introductory chapter, I consider such a wholesale emphasis on the role of "time" in Tarkovsky's films to be an unsatisfactory theoretical explanation of their distinctive qualities.

In an even more recent and analytically detailed study, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema*, Robert Bird endorses a similar thesis to Botz-Bornstein's. For Bird, "[Tarkovsky's] insistence on time as the central category of his films [is] both correct and productive".[42] To develop an understanding of how the director's approach to cinematic time functions as a determining element in the films themselves (a concern that Botz-Bornstein neglects), Bird concentrates on what he calls "Tarkovsky's sense of cinematic pitch, rather than any discursive meaning of the films".[43] Concerned, in other words, with the ontological premises informing Tarkovsky's filmmaking, Bird's study considers the various ways by which Tarkovsky's films involve the spectator in an active perceptual experience of cinema's aesthetic nature. Watching a Tarkovsky film is, for Bird, not primarily a narrational experience, but, more essentially, an experience of the cinematic medium. "My intention", Bird writes, "is to examine what [Tarkovsky's] cinema reveals about the medium".[44] With this

preoccupation established, Bird goes about analysing Tarkovsky's cinema to find more or less concrete examples of the director's meta-narrational, ontological aesthetics of cinematic representation.

It is interesting to note that while Bird's study shares many points of convergence with my own analyses, the interpretations Bird makes remain consistently different to my concerns. Where, for example, my analyses will repeatedly emphasise the narrational function of compositional elements in Tarkovsky's films (that is, the importance of style for the spectator's narrative comprehension), Bird considers the relevance of Tarkovsky's style has for the problem of verisimilitude in cinematic representation. "Tarkovsky", Bird argues, "makes his viewers question the medium by engaging them directly in the composition of the image upon the screen".[45] Likewise, Bird targets a key concern of my analyses when he writes on the significance of spatio-temporal relations in Tarkovsky's films. But where I will consider the significance of spatio-temporal relations for the spectator's accurate narrative comprehension, Bird concentrates on the aesthetic experience of space and time elicited by Tarkovsky's decoupage strategies. He writes:

> [Tarkovsky was] intensely sensitive to the ways in which specific spaces–no less than individual people–elicit distinct responses from us, directing our gaze towards specific possibilities in the world. Spatial framing is a precondition of the event, the irruption of the new from without; it is therefore a stabilisation of time-flows and the condition for their destructive and revelatory manifestation.[46]

Finally, writing about Tarkovsky's core conceptual premise, Bird insightfully pinpoints "the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity that Tarkovsky placed at the centre of his cinematic practice and theory".[47] But where I will show how Tarkovsky's dialectical premise determines the compositional logic of films like *Mirror* and *Nostalghia*, Bird concentrates on the relationship that Tarkovsky's dialectical understanding of filmmaking has with the "paradoxical nature [of cinema], as at once continuity and discontinuity, simultaneous presence and a layering of memory".[48]

In briefly isolating these key points of convergence and difference with Bird's study, my intention is not to suggest the incorrectness of Bird's (or other critics') ideas. Rather, I want to situate my methodological perspective on Tarkovsky's late cinema as an alternative and perhaps more fruitful approach to the study and discussion of narrative film as an art. As a formal (or neo-formal) analysis of the narrational poetics of Tarkovsky's late films, my approach is primarily motivated by the formal studies

undertaken by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Noël Carroll and Edward Branigan, among others. In establishing this theoretical affiliation I am interested in drawing on, and contributing to, the development of a historical poetics of cinema. Historical poetics is a term first adopted by Bordwell to describe a scholarly agenda that addresses "the problem of how certain art works are constructed to have certain effects and uses"[49] and then places these findings in relation to broader historical and cinematic contexts. To define historical poetics in contrast to alternative theoretical approaches (such as Žižek's Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory or Gilles Deleuze's ontological theory) my concern here is not to discuss Tarkovsky's late films for their relationships with an overarching theory of "what cinema is" (be it ontological, phenomenological, psychological, theological, "cultural" or whatever), but rather to recognise and describe the internal narrational dynamics of Tarkovsky's films. Through close formal analysis I want to understand the narrative logic of each of Tarkovsky's late films, and from the findings of these analyses propose a general critical explanation of Tarkovsky's poetics of narrative cinema.

So in this sense my focus in this study is strictly and conscientiously limited. I am analysing and discussing the narratives of only four films. However, as Tom Gunning observes, "analysis of the individual film provides a sort of laboratory for testing the relationship between theory and history".[50] It is my hope that this book will not only provide closer and more precise descriptions of Tarkovsky's late films, but that it will also serve to exemplify how a detailed analysis can of itself produce new concepts relevant for the study of film. The reciprocal value of such an analysis is eloquently expressed by Kristin Thompson when she writes: "When we find films that challenge us that is a sure sign that they warrant analysis, and that the analysis may help to expand or modify the approach".[51]

Although I will elaborate on the theoretical details of my argument at a later stage, my central contention is that Tarkovsky's late films force variations to, and reassessments of, certain theoretical assumptions put forward by formalist scholars (most comprehensively by Bordwell) concerning the relationship between film narration and style. Specifically, I will argue that Tarkovsky's late films contradict the formalist insistence on a distinction between *syuzhet* (or 'narrative') materials and stylistic devices. To justify my case, I will compare Tarkovsky's late films with a mode of narrative cinema that Bordwell and Thompson have called "parametric narration". (They attribute this mode to the films of Bresson, Ozu and Tati among others.) Through this comparison I will illustrate that while Tarkovsky's late films exhibit stylistic devices and strategies that

closely resemble the norms of parametric narration, the narrational functions performed by Tarkovsky's stylistic devices contradict the formalist insistence on the need "to keep *syuzhet* and style conceptually separate".[52] Quite different to parametric narration, in Tarkovsky's late films it is first and foremost through stylistic devices that the spectator can make sense of their narratives.

That is my argument in a nutshell. But before I engage more closely with the theoretical details of my position, let me first outline some of the historical contexts within which Tarkovsky's work has been situated. For as art historian E. H. Gombrich has observed, "We could not study the history of art if every artist had started from scratch to arrive at an independent method of representing the world around him".[53] So it is that to satisfactorily understand Tarkovsky's mature poetics, we must first clarify some of the backgrounds against which the director formulated his approach to filmmaking. For the sake of convenience and brevity, I will limit my overview to three historical contexts. Firstly, I will consider the extent to which Tarkovsky's films bear similarities with the work of other filmmakers (both Soviet and international) and suggest how we might roughly situate and characterise his films in relation to film history. Secondly, Christian theology (and specifically Christian symbolism) will be considered for its influence on Tarkovsky's films. Finally, I will examine the significance of certain aesthetic theories for Tarkovsky's approach, in particular the theory of cinematographic realism associated with André Bazin.

Tarkovsky in Soviet and World Cinema

> It's important to see the work of great masters, and know it well, in order not to start reinventing the bicycle. There aren't many of them, perhaps five.
> —Andrei Tarkovsky[54]

Of all the contentious issues surrounding Tarkovsky, probably most has been made of his persecution at the hands of the Communist Party and Goskino (the USSR's State Committee on Cinema) and the influence this bureaucratic persecution had on his unofficial defection from the Soviet Union in 1984. Speaking to Angus MacKinnon shortly after announcing his decision to remain in western Europe, Tarkovsky explained his version of the events that led up to his defection:

> I cannot understand this… I was of quite considerable use to the state. I was trying to increase the glory of Soviet cinema. But my films never got

> Soviet awards, were never shown at Soviet film festivals… And yet I have never been a dissident … all I wanted to do was make films, and yet I have only been allowed to make five in twenty years.[55]

Confronted with such a limited artistic output from such an obviously inspired creative personality, many critics writing at the time of Tarkovsky's defection unconditionally supported the director's view of himself as an innocent victim of bureaucratic interference and suppression. Credence for this sympathetic opinion was established with particular emphasis given to the exhibition histories of two of Tarkovsky's films (*Andrei Roublev*, which was "shelved" by the Communist Party for six years, and *Mirror*, which was strictly limited in its domestic release and restricted from international competition) and the Soviet government's decision to prevent Tarkovsky's son and mother-in-law from joining the filmmaker and his wife Larissa in western Europe.[56] Compounding this image of injustice is the fact of Tarkovsky's terminal illness and untimely death in 1986, not long after his defection.

As the emotional intensity of Tarkovsky's final years settled into history and the details of his life became more conducive to objective evaluation, critics began to speculate on how unfairly treated Tarkovsky actually was. While there was no denying the fact that his personal life was seriously interfered with by Soviet authorities, it became evident that explaining Tarkovsky's career simply as a case of intensely prejudiced victimisation was inaccurate. After all, Tarkovsky was never imprisoned like his brilliant filmmaker friend Sergei Paradzhanov (who earned a five-year sentence for "crimes stipulated in articles 122 and 211 of the Criminal Code of Ukrainian SSR"[57]) and neither was he made redundant. On the contrary, Tarkovsky was officially employed as a Soviet film director on the very day that he announced his defection. Basing their research on extensive interviews with Tarkovsky's family, friends and peers, Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie were the first Anglo-American scholars to point out that the restrictions Tarkovsky experienced in the Soviet Union were far from unique or unprecedented.[58] Even up to the days of Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnost, long "shelvings" and restricted domestic releases were a commonplace practice in the Soviet film industry. Where the harshest professional restriction that Tarkovsky incurred was the six-year shelving of *Andrei Roublev*, many films made during the 1960s had to wait in their canisters until the 1990s to be exhibited to Russian audiences. When seen in this light, Tarkovsky's apparent persecution by Goskino seems relatively mild treatment, even favourable.

This alternate version of events is especially compelling when we consider the magnanimous support that Tarkovsky received from the

Soviet industry at the outset of his filmmaking career. Where the careers of talented Soviet directors like Alexander Askoldov were halted before they even began (Askoldov's debut feature *The Commissar*, made in 1966, was banned for twenty years, effectively ending his career), Tarkovsky's early time at Mosfilm flourished with an unprecedented degree of institutional support. Indeed, such was Tarkovsky's favour with the bureaucratic apparatus that he earned the less than complimentary moniker "the darling of Goskino" from his peers.[59] The facts surrounding the distribution of Tarkovsky's early films testify to his favoured status. Tarkovsky's diploma film *The Steamroller and the Violin* was exhibited in the United States where it won a student prize in New York. His first feature *Ivan's Childhood* played widely in the Soviet Union and competed at Venice in 1962, where it shared the Golden Lion (the award that established Tarkovsky's name in world cinema). Tarkovsky's second student film *There Will Be No Leave Today* (co-directed with Alexander Gordon) was even screened on Soviet television in 1959. Such exposure for a young filmmaker is unheard of in most countries today, and while overstated there is no doubt a grain of truth in the late British filmmaker Derek Jarman's indignant observation that "if Tarkovsky had been unfortunate enough to have been born in England, he would not have made a single film".[60]

Whether Tarkovsky's career is perceived as having been oppressed (which it was) or auspicious (which it also was), what remains certain is that if Tarkovsky had been born in the Soviet Union ten-years earlier he would almost certainly have not had a career in filmmaking at all. As many critics have noted, coming of age in the late 1950s Tarkovsky belonged to the "Thaw" generation of Soviet artists and intellectuals who began their careers in the wake of the relatively freer socio-cultural policies initiated by Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev. In the words of Mark Le Fanu:

> Stalin's death; the 20th Party Congress; a growing new sense of artistic openness: these are some of the factors surrounding Tarkovsky's emergence—not of course "explaining" it, but maybe helping it to happen.[61]

Most significantly, Tarkovsky's early career was helped by the reforms Khrushchev's party introduced into the state film production mechanisms, Goskino and its individual film studios (the largest being the famous Mosfilm where Tarkovsky worked). Where Stalin's last years had seen Soviet film production drop to just a handful of films each year, "only just enough to keep the few established directors in work",[62] in 1953 the Soviet

film industry underwent large-scale reforms that led to huge increases in the number of films produced. Maya Turovskaya, who worked in the Soviet Union as a young film critic during this the time, notes that "in 1954 forty-five films–at that time an enormous number–were produced. By 1955 it had already leaped to sixty-six".[63]

By the time of his graduation from the VGIK film school in 1960, Tarkovsky entered a Soviet film industry riding on a confidence and vitality not experienced since the mid-1920s. As with the French New Wave, films made by first time Soviet directors were emerging on an almost weekly basis in the late 1950s and early 1960s. And though most disappeared inconspicuously, some jewels in the rough surfaced to achieve significant praise from both Soviet and the more prestigious European festivals. In their overview of the burgeoning Soviet film industry of the late 1950s, Johnson and Petrie point out the effect that these successes had on Tarkovsky's emergence:

> Tarkovsky's early career benefited from the domestic and international successes of predecessors such as Grigory Chukhrai's *Ballad of a Soldier* (*Ballada o soldate*, 1959), Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letyat zhuravli*, 1957) and Sergei Bondarchuk's *Fate of a Man* (*Subda cheloveka*, 1959).[64]

Tackling realist subject matter with enthusiastic stylistic expressivity (especially Kalatazov's Palme d'Or winning *The Cranes are Flying*) these successful films of the late 1950s, resulting from the increase in the state's film production and the relaxation of strict ideological controls, initiated a style of lyrical realism that would characterise Soviet filmmaking for the next decade.

Viewed within this national and historical context, Tarkovsky's early career can be understood as participating in a generation of Russian filmmaking described by many critics at the time as representative of a Soviet "New Wave". Today the idea that a "New Wave" occurred in the Soviet cinema in the late 1950s is not widely held. (Tarkovsky contested the term in 1962, when he told Gideon Bachmann that "in terms of a special trend in the USSR, there is no 'New Wave'".[65]) Nevertheless, we can observe a consistency in the work of young Soviet filmmakers during this period. Alongside the directors aforementioned, the early films of Andrei Konchalovsky (Tarkovsky's early collaborator), Larissa Shepitko, Kira Muratova, Elem Klimov and Alexei German all exhibit an interest in coupling unremarkable or "typical" realist subject matter with stylistic expressiveness. Alongside this more-or-less unified group of Tarkovsky's national peers, we should also note the relevance of the Georgian and

Armenian filmmakers like Paradzhanov, Otar Ioseliani and Tengiz Abuladze. With their "admiration for the contingent, the spectacular and the dreamlike",[66] Mark Le Fanu has argued that it is with this southern group of filmmakers that Tarkovsky's closest regional affinities lie (a link perhaps rooted in the importance Tarkovsky placed on his presumed southern ancestry). Certainly, before any other of Tarkovsky's regional contemporaries, we can find in Paradzhanov[67] an eminent filmmaker poet with a deep interest in art's relationship with religious faith and grave concerns about the ramifications of Soviet and other secular materialist ideologies. Paradzhanov himself was unambiguous about the seminal influence that Tarkovsky had on his work after 1962, saying, "I would not have done anything if there had not been *Ivan's Childhood*".[68] In the feverish stylistic exuberance of *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (*Tini zabutykh predkiv*, 1964) and the poetic merging of authorial objectivity and protagonist subjectivity in *The Colour of Pomegranates* (*Nran guyne*, 1968) we can observe this marked influence, and, perhaps, elements that in turn influenced Tarkovsky's later films.

This brief overview of the climate in the Soviet film industry during the late 1950s and early 1960s illustrates that Tarkovsky was far from an anomalous candle burning in an otherwise artistically barren totalitarian wilderness. There were many innovative filmmakers working in the Soviet Union at the time of Tarkovsky's emergence, and many who suffered far more serious restrictions on their careers than he did. But while acknowledging this, we can also recognise that from his earliest days as a professional filmmaker Tarkovsky rightly considered himself to be somewhat unique among his filmmaking peers, not least because of his deep philosophical preoccupation with the problems of cinema. Though many of the films made by his Soviet peers exhibit a comparable "poetic" or "lyrical" sensibility, Tarkovsky distinguished himself very early on in his career as a director not only of unusual artistic talent but also one of considerable intellectual seriousness. As his early interviews and articles illustrate, even by the age of thirty Tarkovsky already had a clear sense of his historical role in cinema and a formulated personal conception of the poetics of his chosen medium. In an interview conducted in 1962, for example, the young Tarkovsky spoke of his interest in respecting "the specific nature of cinema", in developing an alternative to "the literary-theatrical principle of dramatic development" by means of "a method of composition that stems from the psychic condition of the human being".[69] These problems would remain central for Tarkovsky throughout his career, initiating the innovations to narrative film composition that he would apply in his later films.

It is in regards to Tarkovsky's highly developed ideas on cinema and film narration that the theories associated with the Soviet montage movement of the 1920s carry a considerable degree of contextual relevance. While he rarely mentioned the work and writings of Pudovkin, Lev Kuleshov or Dziga Vertov, Tarkovsky explicitly framed his approach to cinema in reference to the early Soviet cinema's pre-eminent filmmaker and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein. Tarkovsky's supervisory lecturer at the VGIK film school, Mikhail Romm, usefully reports that during the 1950s the "Institute of Cinematography… still [based] its course on the curriculum originally worked out by Eisenstein".[70] Eisenstein's early aesthetic corpus was, in other words, the academic norm during Tarkovsky's film education. In light of this it comes as little surprise that the young Tarkovsky, being both erudite and rebellious, engaged with Eisenstein's theoretical authority in a characteristically immoderate way.

For Tarkovsky, Eisenstein's films and early theory constituted a useful aesthetic platform against which he established his own filmmaking approach. Johnson and Petrie describe Eisenstein's role for Tarkovsky as that of "a straw man"[71] and this is a relationship that the director himself promotes on numerous occasions in *Sculpting in Time*. For example:

> I am radically opposed to the way Eisenstein used to frame and codify intellectual formula… Of course, Eisenstein wasn't trying to convey his own experience to anyone, he wanted to convey ideas, purely and simply; but for me that sort of cinema is utterly inimical. Moreover Eisenstein's montage dictum, as I see it, contradicts the very basis of the unique process whereby a film affects an audience.[72]

There are many reasons to accept Tarkovsky's description of his radical opposition to Eisenstein. When measured against Eisenstein's intellectual conception of cinema, Tarkovsky's predilection for natural settings, long unedited sequences and his theoretical emphasis on cinematic rhythm being independent of editing (as elaborated in the fifth chapter of *Sculpting in Time*[73]) can be understood as conscientiously adopted antithetical positions to the older Soviet's industrial imagery, rapid early montage style and theoretical notion that cinema's dominant principle arises from "the collision between two shots".[74] Furthermore, Tarkovsky's evolving conception of the implicit uniqueness of each spectator's comprehension of film ("One has to work out a principle which allows for film to affect people individually. The *total* image must become something private"[75]) might also be framed as a staunch contradiction of the ideological aesthetic principle championed by Eisenstein, that "if the mass audience is to be fully persuaded then it must never be confused".[76]

Despite these obvious contrasts, however, it is no doubt significant that the working title of Tarkovsky's book *Sculpting in Time* was "Juxtapositions",[77] for this inconspicuous fact alone leads us to consider the less noticeable similarities between Tarkovsky and Eisenstein. In their recent publications, *Film and Dreams* and *Elements of Cinema*, both Thorsten Botz-Bornstein and Robert Bird have questioned the reliability of Tarkovsky's "anti-Eisensteinian rhetoric"[78] by arguing that Tarkovsky's aesthetics actually share an important degree of common ground with Eisenstein's early theories. Botz-Bornstein notes that "Tarkovsky combats, like Eisenstein, symbolism in the cinema"[79] by stressing that a film can only provoke narrational or ideological implications by means of combined elements and not by means of individual elements. Although the ways in which such combinations are conceived differ radically (for Eisenstein "combination" refers to the juxtaposition of montage elements within or across individual shots, while for Tarkovsky it refers to the combination of elements patterned across the entire work) we can nevertheless recognise a shared conceptual concern with cinematic specificity (the specifics of cinematic communication) at the bases of the two filmmakers' approaches. Robert Bird elaborates on this shared premise when he describes Tarkovsky's aesthetic theories as a development, not a renunciation, of Eisenstein's conception of montage. Bird argues:

> Tarkovsky was in fact advocating a *return* to Eisenstein's emphasis on the rhythm of shot and sequence, which he thought held the key to activating the spectator as participant in the narrative enterprise. His polemic with Eisenstein essentially boils down to the claim that montage can be applied to blocks of longer duration than Eisenstein allowed for.[80]

From Botz-Bornstein's and Bird's perspectives, the cinema of "affect" that Eisenstein called for (engendered by the dialectical clash of two elements and leading to the higher "third" notion) is not repudiated by Tarkovsky. It is subdued and refined. In Tarkovsky's films, dialectical moments are not played out in short sequential bursts, as if in some violent oppositional machine, but rather dispersed throughout the organic compositional texture of the entire work. ("Only the film as a whole", Tarkovsky emphasises in *Sculpting in Time*, "could be said to carry, in a definite sense, an ideological version of reality".)[81] In this, Tarkovsky's approach to the composition of film narratives, though differing from that of Eisenstein (who sought to construct a constant ideological discourse), can be understood as originating from his early engagement with Eisensteinian theory. For both Eisenstein and Tarkovsky, dialectical

patterns of elements create film narratives, be these patterns localised in shot-by-shot sequences or stretched out across the global composition of the entire work. In subsequent chapters I will approach this premise analytically by suggesting that Tarkovsky's patterned arrangements of formal elements provoke the spectator to engage in a narrational process.

The other early Soviet director to hold considerable importance for Tarkovsky was Alexander Dovzhenko. Unlike Eisenstein, Dovzhenko represented for Tarkovsky a true artistic forebear, and throughout his career he would emphasise the Ukrainian filmmaker's deep influence on his own filmmaking approach. Interviewed in 1969, he stated:

> If one absolutely needs to compare me to someone, it should be Dovzhenko. He was the first director for whom the problem of atmosphere was particularly important, and he loved his native land passionately… He made his films as if they were gardens… I would very much like to resemble him in this respect.[82]

Never one to be idle in his admiration for other artists, Tarkovsky would substantiate his desire to emulate Dovzhenko quite literally by sowing a field of buckwheat during the pre-production process of *Mirror* in 1973. The recurring shots of wind rippling through the buckwheat crop in *Mirror* betray a close resemblance to those of the wheat field in Dovzhenko's silent film *Earth* (Dovzhenko, 1928), a film that Tarkovsky held in religious regard and which he would often watch for inspiration before shooting.

Despite this high reverence for Dovzhenko and measured polemic with Eisenstein, Tarkovsky was on the whole ambivalent towards the idea of belonging to a national cinema. (This ambivalence is indicated by a diary entry he made in January of 1974. In answer to the question of his favourite, presumably living, Russian film director Tarkovsky enters a blunt and unhesitant "none".[83]) Rather than a Soviet director, Tarkovsky considered himself more a participant in the history of international cinema, a member of the canon so to speak, and for him this principally meant a relationship with only the uppermost crust. "Cinema", Tarkovsky told Naum Abramov in 1970, "remains an art form which only a small number of directors have actually mastered, and they can be counted on the fingers of one hand".[84]

The constituents of this select handful (an elite and often varying class which Johnson and Petrie appropriately refer to as "Tarkovsky's Pantheon"[85]) were predominantly western European and Japanese directors who first found fame on the international cinema stage in the 1950s, during Tarkovsky's formative years at the VGIK. As Johnson and