

Tarkovsky's Trinity, and the Room which Fulfils one's Innermost Desire

A Lecture by [D. P. Armstrong](#) which was given to the University of Essex Russian Summer Course 19 July 2001.

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[I recognize how indebted I am to various articles on Tarkovsky for parts of this talk. These include "The Long Take that Kills" by Benjamin Halligan, "Andrei Tarkovsky – Master of the Cinematic Image" by Stuart C. Hancock (Mars Hill Review) and "Andrei Tarkovsky's Nostalgia for the Light".]

Ladies and Gentlemen, I expect at this time the last thing you want from me is a heavy lecture, but I promise you that my intention is to introduce you to, or remind you of, something that will give relief to your souls. What I propose to talk to you about today goes to the heart of why you came on this course, why we have all chosen here to be involved in a study of Russia. I hope here to concentrate on a fragment of the uniqueness of Russia – what people call its soul – and the contribution to humanity of one of her greatest artists, I will say, amongst a greatness of artists.



Tarkovsky made films, but to say that he was a movie director is to insult him; to say that he was a film-maker is to underestimate him, and even the French word used for artists of the cinema – *auteur* – falls short of the truth. Film commentators tell us that there is a language of film, a grammar; if this is so, then Tarkovsky is one of the few poets of the cinema, and more than that: he is far and away its best. You perhaps here begin to get the impression that Tarkovsky is the antithesis of the Western movie director, whose concerns are narrative drive, the manipulation of audiences through skilful editing, the setting up of dilemmas and the resolution of them, the entertainment of the masses; and indeed you would be right, for Tarkovsky is concerned with none of these. But he is also the antithesis of the Russian director whose influence was the greatest on present-day Hollywood – Eisenstein, whose intercutting of disparate images according to dialectical materialism, such as in the famous Odessa Steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* – that is, forcing meaning where none was apparent before – has been carried through to the modern blockbuster or crime thriller – as anybody who has seen Steven Soderburgh's *The Limey* will confirm. Another anathema for Tarkovsky in this attempt to organize images through montage – besides the question of meaning – was the fracturing of time itself which it engendered. "Eisenstein", said Tarkovsky, "has made thought a despot", and elsewhere he said: "The allotted function of art is not, as is often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as an example; the aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good". To achieve this it was important for Tarkovsky that the audience participated in an empathic experience with the film-maker, and this he achieved by the use of the prolonged take. To give you a flavour of Tarkovsky's style, here is a sequence from *Nostalgia*, in which a Russian poet in Italy visits the house of a madman notorious for having incarcerated his family for seven years. [\[Clip from Nostalgia\]](#)

Now Hollywood is no stranger to the long take, but its effect on the sterile, superficial narrative typical of that town is to slow things down and irritate an audience which does not want to think but to be entertained, as anyone who has seen Hitchcock's *Rope* or *Under Capricorn* can testify. The effect of the Tarkovskian long take is to make one think, to meditate, to contemplate one's own life, and in this sense the films are truly interactive. The camera stops, dwells, and often waits for the viewer to look into their own heart, perhaps for similar memories to the ones portrayed on screen, as memory for Tarkovsky was of prime importance.



You may have wondered why this lecture is called "Tarkovsky's Trinity". What "trinity"? Tarkovsky made seven films. He estimated himself, by the way, that he could have made twenty, if it hadn't been for "those idiots" – the Soviet film authorities, or more precisely Mosfilm, who checked him at every turn. Are there three films which could be selected as this trinity? His first one, *Ivan's Childhood*, made in 1962, was his most conventional, being about a young scout in the war

against Germany. It included many elements of social realism, yet mingled with these are indications of themes of family fragmentation and conscience, which were to repeat as motifs in his later work. Perhaps we can point to his *Solaris* ten years later, a science fiction story of a psychologist sent to investigate a devastated space station orbiting an oceanic planet which seems to control the minds of the cosmonauts serving there [[Clip from Solaris](#)]. Or there is his deeply personal document *Mirror* [[Clip from Mirror](#)], or his two films made in exile, *Nostalgia* – some of which we have just seen – or his final film, *The Sacrifice*, a tribute to Ingmar Bergman, about a journalist who is prepared to lose everything he has in order, he thinks, to avert a world war. But none of these, I would argue – although some are “typical” Tarkovsky and acknowledged works of genius - captures entirely the essence of the director and his philosophy.

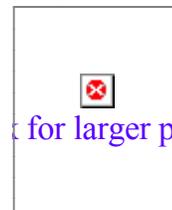


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This leaves us with two films. After the international success of *Ivan's Childhood* Tarkovsky acquired – for the first and only time – an epic budget, with which he made the three hour episodic *Andrei Rublev*. This story of great icon painter and his struggles in mediæval Russia mesmerized Western audiences, but appalled the Soviet authorities, who realized that Tarkovsky was more interested in Rublev's crises of conscience than in the celebration of socialism, and promptly banned it for five years. Tarkovsky's shadowing of Rublev through the ups and downs of his faith shows how closely he identified with him. The most famous example of this is perhaps when a boy pretends to be able to cast a great church bell, and succeeds in the task through sheer blind faith – an incident which renews Rublev's own faith and starts him painting again [[Clip from Andrei Rublev](#)]. Although Rublev learned technique from the great Greek icon painter Theophanes he did what the Russians are peculiarly good at – taking something foreign and making it their own. Rublev's most famous icon – *Troitsa*, generally translated as “Holy Trinity”, takes a Byzantine composition regularly followed by icon painters for some 600 years and does something quite remarkable with it. [[Hand round copy of Troitsa](#)]. The subject is from the story of Abraham, who, while sitting under the oak of Mamre, sees three strangers approaching. He invites them to a meal, which his wife Sarah cooks. During the meal the strangers – who are in fact God and two angels - predict that Sarah – who was very old – was going to be pregnant, which causes Sarah to laugh, a fact she denies. Abraham then accompanies God to beg for the lives of the people of Sodom before the destruction of the Cities of the Plain. The Byzantine version of this theme was noted for its often elaborate detail – a servant killing a fatted calf, Sarah laughing behind the door, and so forth – but in a truly revolutionary move Rublev stripped away all detail from the composition until its bare meaning was exposed: the three angels, who prefigured the Holy Trinity of the New Testament, the very pivot of Orthodox Christian faith.



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However, it is not *Andrei Rublev* that I would put forward as the work in which Tarkovsky achieves the cinematic equivalent of Rublev's feat, but his 1979 film *Stalker*. Here, rather than the Byzantine tradition having a kind of Occam's Razor applied to it, it is the genre and conventions of the science fiction novel that are sacrificed. As in *Andrei Rublev*, one of the themes is the disappointment and renewal of faith. To quote Tarkovsky in his book *Sculpting in Time*, “This, too, is what *Stalker* is about: the hero goes through moments of despair when his faith is shaken; but every time he comes to a renewed sense of his vocation to serve people who have lost their hopes and illusions”. But what has Tarkovsky stripped down to make his equivalent of the Rublev composition, and what is his equivalent of the truth thus revealed? To understand that, we should turn to his source material, the Strugatsky Brothers' science-fiction novella *Roadside Picnic*.

This is the story of a zone of the Canadian countryside which appears to have had an alien visitation. It no longer behaves in a way correspondent with conventional physics, and within it lies a variety of strange artefacts, which are plundered and sold by outlaws known as stalkers. The plot focuses particularly on one stalker – Red – and his history over several years, culminating in a journey into the zone with the son of another stalker, who has asked him to find a golden ball said to allow one to fulfil one's innermost desire. The book carries throughout a tone of relentless amorality. People tell Red he is a good man, but he knows and we

know he is anything but. At the end he takes the pride and joy of his supposed friend and uses him as a human shield, sacrificing him to a phenomenon called the Meatgrinder, an atmospheric disturbance which rips the boy to pieces and reduces him to a black blob, in order to reach the golden ball. We never find out what happens when he reaches it.

Now, just as Rublev disposed of the Biblical storyline behind *Troitsa*, so Tarkovsky rid himself of the Brothers Strugatsky's key science-fiction concerns as being unimportant to his central message. To this end it is left open whether it is an act of God – a meteorite – which created the zone. Further, the chilling metaphor at the heart of the novella – and the one which gives it its title – is revealed as Red questions a scientist about the meaning of the alien visitation. The scientist asks him to imagine a roadside picnic, where a car pulls up in the countryside, a group of people get out, pitch a tent, light a stove, have a drink, a dance, discard rubbish, lose things, then get back in their car and drive away. Slowly the animals and insects return from their hiding places and gaze in horror at the scorched ground and debris. A devastating idea, which throws into a quandary our beliefs about conquering or benevolent aliens, but not an idea to interest Tarkovsky, since it makes humankind meaningless in the universe. Similarly, much of the plot is jettisoned or altered, there only being a single stalk in the film. Significantly also stripped away is the protagonist's amorality, Tarkovsky's *Stalker* being, like his Rublev, an intensely moral person. What becomes the central issue in the film is the golden ball which fulfils your innermost desire; this he transforms into a room at the heart of the zone, which, unlike the book, is a clear metaphor for life itself. There are no science-fiction trappings on screen, and we are instead treated to long meditations by an often downward-pointed camera, which picks over the detritus of human vice abandoned by the zone's visitors – the bottle, the syringe, the gun. The true astonishment here lies not in what is seen through special effects, but in what is revealed by dialogue, as in the anecdote that the *Stalker* tells to the writer and scientist he is taking to the room which fulfils one's innermost desire, about another stalker who loses his brother in the Meatgrinder – in Tarkovsky a tunnel, in which people vanish – and breaks the stalker's code by going himself into the room to pray for his brother's life. He gets home, finds he has become a millionaire, and hangs himself. The stalk itself is abortive – the writer and scientist really want things to remain the same – and when they get to the room it rains, as it has been raining outside. For Tarkovsky they seem to represent Russia itself, which, in Rublev's words, "has to endure everything". But it is in the sequences about the *Stalker*'s family - which form a postscript to what you might call the action of the film – where we feel, if we did not feel it before, that the director is in touch with a rare truth about humanity, part of which is a knowledge that in a providential universe what prevents our self-fulfilment is the discrepancy between what we think we want and what we really want. And for genuine insight, for a real understanding of the cosmos and our purpose here – well, this is found in a life lived sparingly, a life, like Tarkovsky's, lived on the edge – a life, like that of all Tarkovsky's heroes, in which one is prepared to suffer.

It is now time for me to end by passing things over to Tarkovsky, except to explain that the *Stalker*'s daughter, Monkey, has, because of the radiation of the zone, been born without legs. Perhaps the *Stalker* has asked in the room for her legs to be restored. [\[First clip from *Stalker*\]](#) In these, the final two sequences of the film, the *Stalker*'s wife, played by Alisa Freindlikh, unexpectedly turns to camera; then we find out what has really happened to Monkey. The poetry she is reading is by Tarkovsky's father. [\[End of *Stalker*\]](#)



[\[Questions\]](#)

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