

Andrei Tarkovsky

by Tim Young

A recent day school at the Dukes Cinema in Lancaster was devoted to the life and work of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. Here we reproduce a lecture by the cinema's education officer Tim Young.

"Film is a great high art-form which I simply use for confession. It is an art which is my way of life, not some genre or other created for someone's entertainment." - Andrei Tarkovsky

Andrei Tarkovsky was born on April 4 1932 and spent his early childhood in Moscow, with various interim periods spent in the more rural areas around Zavrazhe and Yurievets on the Volga, periods he idealised in his representation of nature and the Russian countryside in virtually all of his eight films. His father, a recognised poet (whose works Tarkovsky liberally quotes from at length in some of his films) left the family when Andrei was five. The theme of the absent father is a recurring element in Tarkovsky's film work. His mother was a student and enthusiastic defender of literature, art and music, who instilled a great reverence for such pursuits in her son. Tarkovsky's canon of great artists who epitomise his conception of the role and aesthetic of the artist's vocation remains virtually unchanged throughout his life: the music of Bach, the painting and drawing of Leonardo and the classic tradition of Russian literature as typified by the work of Dostoevsky influence, to a greater or lesser extent, his films and underpin his outlook on life and artistic awareness.

From 1941-43 he was evacuated to the rural surrounds of Yurievets, where his love of the Russian rural idyll, epitomised by the idealised Russian dacha or country retreat, increases and develops. His experience of the war is one shared by the majority of Russian children of his age and class: Russian history of the war and post-war periods and its relation to his own generation's identity as individuals is a central aspect of Tarkovsky's artistic schema, rendered most startlingly to Russians in his 1974 film 'Mirror' ('Zerkalo'), which, even to critics not especially fond of his work, is recognised as one of the finest works of art of the late twentieth century, let alone one of the great late modernist films of its era.

In 1954, he enrolled at the famous and prestigious VGIK Film School in Moscow, under the tutelage of the great Russian director Mikhail Romm. He graduated seven years later with the production of his feature 'The Steamroller and the Violin'. The rigorous discipline, training and artistic pursuit encouraged by VGIK is probably the most beneficial environment the idealistic and increasingly fervent Tarkovsky could have been trained in: it was essential to his conception of the filmmaker as an artist of the highest order, ranked with the great painters, writers and composers of both the past and the contemporary period.

His subsequent film work is outlined below. In terms of his biography however, it suffices to say that after completing his second mature film, 'Andrei Roublev' ('Andrei Rublyov', filmed during 1966 -71), Tarkovsky's highly developed sense of individualist idealism, couched in often overtly religious terms, was much frowned-upon by the monolithic socialism prevalent in the USSR throughout his life. This made it increasingly difficult for him to work, although he did produce exactly the films he

wanted, but at great personal cost in terms of stress and bureaucratic conflict. Tarkovsky eventually left for the West in 1983 while working on the Italian set of 'Nostalgia' ('Nostalgia', 1983). His abandonment of his son in order to do this agonised him greatly and he died of lung cancer in Paris on December 29 1986 shortly after completing 'Sacrifice' ('Offret').

The Films...

'Ivan's Childhood' ('Ivanovo Detstvo', 1962)

This first film was essentially of a genre much in vogue in Soviet cinema at the time, namely a war film extolling the sacrifice of Russians during the Second World War. What Tarkovsky actually produced was an extremely poetic and visually elaborate version of a rather mediocre novel telling of a young teenage scout working on the Eastern front in 1943. Using highly formal techniques, including the virtuoso creation of four remarkably poetic dream sequences (which portray beautifully the nostalgia for childhood), baroque and expressionist lighting, framing of images in a highly painterly way and stunning portrayals of nature and the Russian landscape, he produced a film that won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1962. It alerted the West to a new era of Russian filmmaking, which is considered to be the first flowering in Russian film (along with 'Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors' in 1964 by fellow director Sergei Paradjanov) of the so-called 'thaw' period (1958-65) in Soviet culture under the more open leadership of Krushchev. After this auspicious debut, work and life become a much more complicated affair for Tarkovsky.

'Andrei Roublev' ('Andrei Rublyov', 1966 -71)

The Tarkovsky title that most lay film fans associate with the director and which is almost certainly his most popular outside of the Soviet Union/Russian Federation. Over eight episodes, significant elements of the life of 15th century religious painter Andrei Roublev are portrayed, showing his reactions to the violent times he lived in and the effects of this upon his ethos as an artist. The narrative is fragmented and great complexity characterises the movement of time and events, even within individual episodes. Very slow and meditative, it also has some remarkably violent killings and maimings depicted by the Tatar invasions of the time. The final sepia image of white horses drinking from a river in a gentle haze of summer rain is not only archetypal Tarkovsky image-making but central to his love of the world as it could be if art and truth prevailed over war and stupidity. Portentous words like "masterpiece" are simply too hard to avoid, and for all the reasons outlined above it took Tarkovsky five years to get his final cut accepted by the authorities and distribution at home and in the West, where unfortunately, critics took an all too literate reading of the film and assumed Tarkovsky was a political dissident. What he in fact was, in dissident terms, was a religious and artistic maverick obsessed with the beauty of images.

'Solaris', (1972)

After the travails of 'Andrei Roublev', Tarkovsky turned back to a popular Soviet film genre, science fiction, and adapted writer Stanislaw Lem's novel in a relatively quick production, "relatively" being the operative word in that Soviet productions were lengthy affairs. Solaris, like 'Roublev', had a large budget over which Tarkovsky enjoyed virtual freedom of use. This typifies the situation whereby Tarkovsky could promise one thing to the authorities, collaborate through the arduous pre-production process, get his budget, tear up the script and proceed to make the film he really wanted to make - leaving the difficult and time-consuming issue of clearing censorship

(which he invariably won) until a later date, once he'd completed his first preferred edit. With 'Solaris' he actually played the system so safely that he had the least trouble upon completion of shooting of any of his films (including the ones made in the West).

While 'Solaris' is often considered among the weaker films he produced (and the most unpopular with the director himself) it is still a bravura performance that follows an astronaut tortured by ghosts of his past on a mission to ascertain the exact nature of the crisis on board a far distant research space station near the planet Solaris. Using the conceit that the planet physically manifests the memories of the scientists orbiting the planet, Tarkovsky uses the science fiction narrative as merely an excuse to indulge his exploration of memory and nostalgia through the central character, who has an ex-wife (who committed suicide) lovingly re-materialise before him three times throughout the film.

The shots of the country dacha and its surroundings are probably among the single most beautiful set of images Tarkovsky ever produced. Set against visual and aural quotes from Breughel, Bach and Cervantes, they celebrate the majesty of the natural world as manifest in Tarkovsky's beloved Mother Russia as opposed to the empty, degenerating world of science and the decaying space-station. The film was popular in the West, where it was once again seen as a Soviet response to repression, in this case as a homage to Kubrick's '2001', a film Tarkovsky hated and thought utterly inhuman.

'Mirror' ('Zerkalo', 1974)

This project was dear to Tarkovsky, who nursed it through many years of attempted production as a treatment of memory and history originally called 'A White, White Day'. A formal tour-de-force that is probably the most "modern" film Tarkovsky ever made, in that its structure ranges across three different historical time zones (the 1930s, the Second World War, the 1960s-70s) in its exploration of one man's life and relationships from childhood to death. In this regard it traversed the timescale of Tarkovsky's own life across one of the most turbulent national histories of the middle part of the twentieth century.

Featuring trademark Tarkovsky images (the dacha, dream sequences in sepia film stock, trees, forests, fields, storms) of yet more transcendent beauty mixed with a famous printing-press set evocation of Stalinism and scenes set in contemporary Moscow, the film paraphrases images from Breughel in one winter set-piece prior to a section that brilliantly uses archive footage of Soviet history across the entire period in question. Conflating one man's life and memories into the history of an entire nation, it reveals utterly Tarkovsky's debt to a film maker he never mentions as an influence, but whose presence is everywhere in the structure of his films - Alain Resnais. Resnais' 'Hiroshima Mon Amour' (1959) is almost a prelude to the structures, themes and characters of 'Mirror'.

The film is notoriously difficult to follow on first watching, but does reveal a rigorous structure once analysed. Tarkovsky uses the same brilliant and beautiful actress (Margarita Terekhova) to play both the wife and mother of the protagonist whose memories we are being shown.

'Stalker', (1979)

If 'Andrei Rublev' is the Tarkovsky film most beloved of the general film fan, then 'Stalker' is the film connoisseur's Tarkovsky title of choice. For the third time in his

career Tarkovsky takes a well known novel, adapts it in what appears to the Soviet film bureaucracy a safe and generic fashion (with 'Stalker' we are back in the realm of science-fiction again) but in reality distorts the source material in order to allow an exploration of his favourite personal (and proscribed) themes; here again presenting themselves as a critique of science and materialism, the unnecessary degradation of the beauty of the natural world, the role of the artist and writer in society and the nature of dream and memory. In 'Stalker' we are offered all this through the story of a renegade tracker who leads illegal expeditions into "The Zone", an area of mysterious danger housing an oracle potentially alien in origin.

Following one such journey with the eponymous character leading Writer and Professor through the oneiric strangeness of the impossibly lush, verdant and sinister zone, Tarkovsky plays one character off against another through a series of set piece sequences of haunting beauty. Set in a near future post-industrial wasteland (actually just 1979 Ukraine) Tarkovsky eerily presages Soviet Chernobyl culture and contrasts it with the mysterious essence that is The Zone itself, a dream-nature of almost impossible beauty. Bookended by sequences shot on sepia stock, featuring a truly haunting soundtrack by Edward Artemyev and containing the archetypal Tarkovsky sequence (where the three men, exhausted, lie down to sleep in the watery zone, intercut with dream sequences, images of wind across strangely silent rivers, the appearance out of nowhere of a black dog who joins the narrative and the trademark tracking shot across a pool of water underneath which are visible assorted items of cultural and religious detritus), 'Stalker' absolutely gives lie to the pathetic fallacy that Tarkovsky laboured under difficult production conditions. After the virtual completion of the lavish shoot, during which Tarkovsky had fallen out with his designer, his cameraman and actors, he persuaded Mosfilm (his Soviet producers) that there was a fault on his Kodak film stock and got to re-shoot the whole thing again over a further period of expensive months. This is lavish and philosophical filmmaking, unimaginable in the West at the time and impossible now anywhere with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Truly a monolith of a film.

'Nostalgia' ('Nostalghia', 1983)

By this time, Tarkovsky was recognised as some sort mysterious genius in the West, where complete incomprehension as to the nature and processes of Soviet film production prevailed. Managing to get permission for a project about a Russian composer who had worked in Italy in the eighteenth century and died of heartache and homesickness, Tarkovsky came to Italy for the shoot and never went back to the USSR.

The film's production budget was bankrolled by Italian producers RAI, and the Russian scenes shot in green sepia-tone stock cleverly reproduce the eerily credible (and for the obsessive Tarkovsky, perennial) countryside/dacha shots that represent the protagonist's memories of his Russian home.

As he wanders through Tuscany, the protagonist encounters a mystic recluse and seems to find solace for his crippling nostalgia (and ever present waking dreams), but dies in the attempt to carry out a task set him by the recluse. Despite featuring all of Tarkovsky's themes, the film is extremely unpopular and almost reviled by critics due to the obscurity of its theme and the treatment thereof. Once dubbed by Neon magazine as 'Fear and Loathing in Tuscany' and dismissed as the most boring Russian film of all time, it in reality is simply the logical outcome of Tarkovsky's self-imposed

task of finding film art analogous to the process of human memories of the beauty of our natural world and the pain of nostalgia that that brings. If that meant ever longer, ever slower tracking shots across vistas composed like the most beautiful paintings (and Tarkovsky thought that it did) then so be it. If the critics wouldn't follow him (which they didn't) then it was irrelevant; his artistic, moral and religious vocation demanded that he produce films like this.

'Nostalghia' is a film that looks like a permanent twilight, beautiful, achingly gorgeous and exquisite to look at, but also the last gasp of a dying day. A film that knew the likes of itself would never be made again, and Tarkovsky knowing that he was running out of time in the race to capture the definitive images of his obsessions.

'Sacrifice' ('Offret', 1986)

Tarkovsky was now on his own in a relatively unwelcoming environment and scraping funds together for this film was an arduous and unaccustomed process for him. With approximately €1 million raised from the Swedish Film Institute, Channel Four (UK) and other motley investors he shot a remake of Ingmar Bergman's 'Winter Light', a film and a director central to his conception of film art as a psychological struggle for identity and faith in the modern world. The story of a retired theatre director (living, not surprisingly, in a rural coastal retreat on the Baltic Sea) who attempts to save his family and friends from the impending horror of nuclear conflict by making a pact with a god he is unsure even exists, this was considered by critics to be an overblown and philosophically childish work of illogical indulgence.

Using Bergman's director of photography, the extremely talented Sven Nykvist, and featuring actors Erland Josephson (the recluse in 'Nostalghia') and Allan Edwall ('Winter Light') who had traditionally been associated with Bergman, the film is a peculiar, albeit beautifully shot, rumination on the nature of faith and existence in the world of looming nuclear annihilation. The almost ludicrous finale, in which the protagonist burns down his house as a result of his pact with his mysterious saviour, is quite unlike anything else in modern cinema.

While indulgently pandering to his obsessions of religion, dreams, memory and the nature of a meaningful material existence, and utilising images of great beauty, the film is a rehashing of familiar themes at great length and in a manner almost wilfully portentous. Undoubtedly a great film of its era, it pales alongside previous works and points towards an unhappy professional existence had Tarkovsky lived longer and attempted further work in the harsh financial world of art house in Western Europe. The film is again a logical extrapolation of Tarkovsky's film form, in that the number of shots is at an all-time low, and their average length (four minutes) at an all-time high. This meditation on the natural world and its beauty and strangeness on film characterises utterly Tarkovsky's attitude towards film, the world and art...slow, epic and literally earth shattering.

You can contact the Dukes Cinema on 01524 66645.