

Andrei Arsen'evich Tarkovskii (1932-86)'s film *Andrei Rublëv* (1964, 1966-69)

Screenplay: Tarkovskii's full text screenplay resembles a novel, more than a mere sequence or dialogue and a set of camera shots. The screenplay is available in Kitty Hunter Blair's English translation as *Andrei Tarkovsky, Andrei Rublëv*, London, Faber & Faber, 1991. Tarkovsky and Alexander Mikhalkov-Konchalovskii turned this text into a shooting script in 1964.

Score: Viacheslav Ovchinnikov

'My most fervent wish has always been to speak out in my films, to say everything with total sincerity and without imposing my point of view on others. But if the vision of the world that has gone into the film turns out to be one that other people recognise as part of themselves that up till now has never been given expression, what better motivation could there be for one's work?'

'I think what a person normally goes to the cinema for is *time*; for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person's experience.'

Andrey Tarkovsky [& Olga Surkova], *Запечатленное время*,
ed. & trans. Kitty Hunter Blair as *Sculpting in Time*,
New York, Knopf, 1987, pp. 12, 63; (German ed., as *Die Versiegelte Zeit*).

This extraordinary film made during the Brezhnev-ite so-called period of Soviet 'stagnation (*zastoi* застой)' after the fall of Khrushchëv in 1962.

The film's subject is ostensibly the spiritual life of Old Russia (but really his contemporary late-Soviet Russia). Issues raised in the film complement issues raised in Fr Georges Florovsky's essay, 'The Problem of Old Russian Culture', *Slavic Review*, 21(1) March 1962, pp. 1-15.

Tarkovsky's 'Old Russia' is seen through the silent observations of the person widely seen as Russia's great painter of icons, **Andrei Rublëv** (ca 1365–1430, played by Anatolii Solonitsyn (1934-82)). The film places the silent painter in his times and in his circle:

- his painter mentor, **Daniil** (played by Nikolai Grin'ko), and fellow icon painters:
- **Theofanes the Greek** (1330s – ca 1410) is (mis-?)portrayed as a man who just sees icon painting as a craft and who disdains Rus'. (He is played by Ivan Lapikov). Theofanes's *Transfiguration* (Преображение 1403) is now in the

Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow:

<http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/show/image/id/546>. We know Theofanes came (was sent?) to north Russia from Constantinople in the 1370s to paint icons and by the dawn of the C15th his talent was so renowned in Muscovy that he was invited by Grand Prince Vasillii I Dmitr'evich (b. 1371, r. 1389-1425) to paint the key icons and to superintend the icon painting (1403-05) in the new *Cathedral of the Annunciation* (Благовещенский собор, or *Blagoveschenskii sobor* 1403) in the Moscow Kremlin. The young master, Andrei Rublëv painted the icons which feature left and right on the second (Miniature Religious Feast Day) tier, left and right, above the door, astride Theofanes's Deisis, in this Cathedral which served as the Grand Princely family's private chapel.

- **Kirill** (something of an secularising intellectual, but one who is seen by Tarkovsky to lack real wisdom and who can't seem to actually do anything useful – this is the classic Slavophile critique of the Westernising intelligentsia) and
- an untutored mad-person who has a deep spirituality, a female '**Holy Fool** (*Iurodivyi* Юродивый, played by the director's wife, Irma Rausch-Tarkovskaia)'

By the later C15th and early C16th, three key sources confirm the view of Andrei Rublëv's contemporaries and of the generations who followed on immediately that Rublëv was seen as the greatest of all Russian painters of icons: the evidence is drawn from Metropolitan Makary's 'Hundred Chapters (*Stoglav* Стоглав)', a centralising church reform document of 1551, the earlier testimony of a pro-princely leader of the Orthodox church, Joseph of Volokolamsk (1439-1515), and an entry in an official chronicle added to Patriarch Nikon's compilation in the mid-C17th.¹

Thereafter, however, most of Rublëv's work was painted over, only re-discovered in the 1920s by Pavel' Aleksandrovich Florenskii (1882-1943; he died in the GULag).

There is a marvellous portrait, entitled 'Philosophers *Filosofy* философы' (*Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow*

<http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/show/image/id/300>) of Florenskii in 1917 in the company of another key figure, Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1871-1944). It is a masterwork of Mikhail Vasil'evich Nesterov (1862-1942). All these people were

¹ Muscovite chronicle entries so mentioning Andrei Rublëv in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are collated and translated into French in Pierre Gonneau's *A l'aube de la Russie moscovite: Serge Radonège et André Roublev: Légendes et images (XIVe – XVIIe siècles)*, Paris, Institut de l'études slaves, 2007, ch. 7, pp. 252-63. (704.9482 G639)

associated with a short-lived and always unofficial religious revival in Russia in the last two decades of the Imperial era, a group quite popular in post-Soviet Russia now. Other associates of this group (Semën Frank, Nikolai Berdiaev and Peter Struve) were also responsible for a sharp critique of what they took to be the selfish values of the liberal and socialist intellectuals then more popular amongst educated people in Russia, the very currents of thought that would soon take the lead in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917-18; I refer to be the 'Landmarks (*Vekhi* Вехи) debates of 1904.

Tarkovskii's film about three painters actually echoes the one icon unequivocally attributed to Andrei Rublëv: ***The Old Testament Trinity (Troitsk Троицк 1425-27)***, http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/_show/image/_id/70, now in the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, but originally painted while the artist was working at the monastery founded by St Sergius of Radonezh, Trinity-St Sergius Monastery (*Troitsk-Sergeev Posad* Троицк-Сергеев Посад) at Zagorsk, on the outskirts of Moscow. The icon refers to the three angels who appeared before Abraham in *Genesis* 18, and also prefigures the Trinity in the New Testament (God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit): when Abraham met different aspects of God, all reconciled by Love, a true fellowship found in a lived faith.

'[U]nless there is an organic link between the subjective impressions of the author and his objective representation of reality, he will not achieve even superficial credibility, let alone authenticity and inner truth. You can play a scene with documentary precision, dress the characters correctly to the point of naturalism, have all the details exactly like real life, and the picture that emerges in consequence will be nowhere near reality, it will seem utterly artificial...'

'Modern mass culture, aimed at the 'consumer', the civilization of prosthetics, is crippling people's souls... '

Andrey Tarkovsky [& Olga Surkova], *Запечатленное время*,
ed. & trans. Kitty Hunter Blair as *Sculpting in Time*,
New York, Knopf, 1987, pp. 21, 42; (German ed., as *Die Versiegelte Zeit*).

Tarkovskii's agenda in the mid-1960s is:

- Tarkovskii wanted to re-voice a religious culture silenced in Soviet Russia.
- Tarkovskii wants you to look closely, and then think for yourself; implicitly contrasting (and rejecting!) his own Communist society of politics of cant and humbug, hectoring posters, political repression and authorised anachronistic lines of thought.

- Tarkovskii's interest is rather in '**contemplative silence**', a religious concept of 'Seeking the Light' (*Matthew*, 6:5, or 17: 2) rather than relying on rhetoric and intellect, or even on ritual or song. This doctrine was favoured at the Trinity-St Sergius' Monastery tradition laid down by St Sergius of Radonezh (d. 1392), who in turn adapted it from the Byzantine tradition of **Hesychasm** (ἡσυχασμός) as promoted by St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). Similar ascetic and silent spiritualities were promoted in the Roman Catholic tradition by Carthusian and Trappist orders of monks. In their *hesychast* Orthodox incarnation, the key idea of God was that He is unknowable and transcendent, but His Divine Energy can still be sensed because it infuses the world. **Hence the need for icons.**
- There is a discernible visual influence on Tarkovskii of paintings like Mikhail Vasil'evich Nesterov's *Silence* (*Molchanie* Молчание, 1903): <http://www.bibliotekar.ru/kNesterov/7.files/image001.jpg>. See too: http://nnm.ru/blogs/argamak2/mihail_vasilevich_nesterov/ for a guide to Nesterov's other art works.
- Tarkovskii wants to focus you (the viewer) on Andrei Rublëv's interest in the power of Love, over and above Intellect and Ritual. He wants you to attend to St Paul in 1 *Corinthians* 13:1 & 13.8 – 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.... Love is eternal. There are inspired messages, but they are temporary; there are gifts of speaking in strange tongues, but they will cease; there is knowledge, but it will pass.'

Tarkovskii's Sense of History and of Historical Narrative

- Tarkovskii wants you (the viewer) to re-live the thought-world of a past, but not necessarily to self-identify with it, but rather to observe it through what Tarkovskii called 'today's eyes'. He tries to achieve this with long tracking shots and disconcertingly long (for a film!) silences, broken by sudden intrusions achieved by jerky editing. **There are important analogies here with the role and mission of the historian.**
- Tarkovskii offers no over-arching narration or narrator, no seeming expert, no 'historian'. He called these academic history verities 'canonical completedness' and 'formal and logical schematism', and he disliked them because he thought they killed the wonder and the revelation in a past.
- Tarkovskii reduces almost every scene to its primal elements: earth, wind, fire, water etc., and he isn't too fussed by accuracy of period details. He even uses contemporary language.
- Tarkovskii rejects narrating a story, preferring to present a series of scarcely connected episodes which you the viewer will fill with emotional content.
- Tarkovskii likened his film to a mosaic, each tile examined alone doesn't seem to amount to much, but when you look hard and when you look at the entirety... **Might histories be written in this evocative vein too**, as well as in the argumentative vein of "In this essay, I will argue...?"

'By means of art man takes over reality through a subjective experience. In science man's knowledge of the world makes its way up an endless staircase and is successively replaced by new knowledge, with one discovery often enough being disproved by the next for the sake of a particular objective truth. An artistic discovery occurs each as a new and unique image of the world, a hieroglyph of absolute truth. It appears as a revelation...'

"Time is said to be irreversible. And this is true enough in the sense that 'you can't bring back the past', they say. But what exactly is this 'past'? Is it what has passed? And what does 'passed' mean for a person when for each of us the past is the bearer of all that is constant in the reality of the present.... The present slips and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in recollection.'

Andrey Tarkovsky [& Olga Surkova], *Запечатленное время*,
ed. & trans. Kitty Hunter Blair as *Sculpting in Time*,
New York, Knopf, 1987, pp. 37, 58; (German ed., as *Die Versiegelte Zeit*).

Other characters in different episodes in the film:

Grand Prince [Vasilii I Dmitr'evich, born 1371, reigning 1389-1425]

Boriska, **the son of bell-maker** (founder), played by the same young actor who starred in his first film, *Ivan's Childhood*. He is a kind of metaphor for Soviet-era

bombast and bullshit, but Tarkovskii shows great compassion for his Soviet-like delusions.

Rolan Bykov, a **jester** and folk musician (*skoromokh* скоромох) cruelly wounded by servitors of the Grand Prince.

[Nogaï Turk] **Tatar Khan** [Edigei], based at Astrakhan, a capital at the mouth of the Volga Rr near the Caspian Sea. The Nogaïs were West-Turkic-speaking steppe nomadic pastoralists and warriors who had formed a successor state to the Mongol's Golden Horde, whose old capital of Saraï had been destroyed by another Central-Asian Turkic warrior, Tamberlane. Astrakhan eventually became part of Muscovy in 1556.

Episodes in the Film

Prologue: Balloon flight, filmed at the famous Church of the Holy Veil at Bogoliubovo near Vladimir on the River Nerl (Церковь Покрова на Нерли <http://www.museum.vladimir.ru/arch/bogolub/pokrov?menu=bogolub>), free adaption of an C18th legend about a peasant who flew in Riazan' in 1781 to establish the film's removed 'onlooker (*zritel'* зритель) – look, but don't hasten to conclude' theme.

Episode 1: The Jester (Summer 1400) (*skoromokh* скоромох). Three monks leave Trinity-St Sergius Monastery, but are they really pulling together? Where is the real soul of Russia?

Episode 2: Theofanes the Greek (1405-06), filmed in Suzdal'. The themes are now the artifice and emptiness of intellect in a cruel world (the execution in Red Square in Moscow), and artistic hubris and rivalries; Andrei Rublëv wants to reserve judgment, emphasising faith, but also wanting to be realistic about human failings and the needs of the flesh.

Episode 3: The Holiday (1408). On their way to paint at the Cathedral of the Annunciation at Vladimir', Andrei encounters a pagan bacchanal; did he have sex with the 'witch', Marfa?

Episode 4: The Last Judgment (Spring 1408): must an artist follow every existing canon of representation? Tarkovskii sees Andrei Rublëv as different, as Orthodox in faith, but still humanist in sensitivity; religion must not be dogmatic and it must not hector or chasten: 'Don't scare the faithful'. (Alexander Solzhenitsyn hated this aspect of the film.) Love and Cruelty. So, why is Andrei Rublëv content?

Episode 5: The Raid (Autumn 1408), filmed in Pskov and Vladimir' and possibly referring to the Tatar sack of Vladimir' in 1408. The subject is a headstrong young Rus' prince and the Tatars who are actually manipulating him. Are icons

more than a mere painting? How do you interpret Andrei Rublëv's vow of silence in this cruel world?

Episode 6: Love (Winter 1412): aspects of 'true' community life that go beyond the intellect to embrace love.

Episode 7: The Bell (1423-24), filmed in Suzdal': plague strikes and only the bellfounders' son seems to know what to do; betrayal and failures all round in allegories of Soviet falsities and the Soviet experience; only Andrei Rublëv's tolerance is seen to protect and endure. Yet the Director clearly identifies with Borisovka; maybe making a film is all bluster?

Epilogue: Rublëv's icons are now suddenly seen in colour, but then horses of the apocalypse arrive, only they don't carry devils; we are human, and transcendent beauty is fleeting...

Further Reading

Robert Bird, *Andrei Rublëv*, London, BFI, 'British Film Institute Classics' series, 2004 – a comprehensive review of the film.

Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. Kitty Hunter Blair, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986 – the director's explicit ideas on film in general, and on *Andrei Rublëv* in general are discussed on pp. 78-80.

Andrei Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublëv*, London and Boston, Faber & Faber, 1991 – the screenplay.

Other icons attributed to Andrei Rublëv

<http://sunsite.cs.msu.su/moscow/rublev/rublev.html>

Cathedral of the Annunciation [to the Virgin] Благовещенский Собор, Moscow Kremlin <http://www.kremlin.museum.ru/en/main/museums/annunciation/>

The Entry into Jerusalem (*Vkhod Gospoden' v Ierusalim* Вход Господень в Иерусалим) <http://gorod.tomsk.ru/index-1240116576.php>

The Nativity of Christ (*Rozhdestvo Khristovo* Рождество Христово) <http://gorod.tomsk.ru/index-1240116576.php>

The Transfiguration (*Preobrazhenie Gospodne* Преображение Господне) http://www.msk-guide.ru/foto_1120.htm.

The Baptism of Christ (*Kreshchenie Gospodne* Крещение Господне) <http://gorod.tomsk.ru/index-1240116576.php>

The Annunciation (*Blagoveshchenie* Благовещение) http://img0.liveinternet.ru/images/attach/c/0/38/64/38064185_image001.jpg).

This famous iconostasis is discussed and pictured in situ in Marilyn Minto's essay, 'The Iconostasis: the Spiritual Face of Russia' in *Icons 88: To Celebrate the Millennium of Christianity in Russia and Exhibition of Russian Icons in Ireland*, ed. Sarah

Smyth & Stanford Kingston, Dublin, Veritas Publications and the National Gallery of Ireland, 1988, pp. 98-105, including plan 1 and colour plate v. (704.94820947 I17)

Andronikov Monastery, Zvenigorod, near Moscow

<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/jurnal/culture/spaso-andronikov.htm>

'The Saviour (*Spas Спас*) in the Wood'

http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/_show/image/_id/2595

'Archangel Mikhail'

http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/_show/image/_id/2596.

'St Paul the Apostle'

http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/_show/image/_id/2597.

The Ascension (with Daniil, 1408)

http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/_show/image/_id/2606.

'Phenomena which a man encounters or in which he participates become part of the man himself, a part of his sense of life, a part of his character... We under-estimate the power of the screen image's emotional charge. In cinema it is not necessary to explain.'

Andrey Tarkovsky interviewed in *Советская Экран 17 & 20* (1962) @ 9,
and quoted in Robert Bird, *Andrei Rublev*, London, British Film Institute, 2004, p. 12.