

Article

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***A Cinema Prayer and Tarkovsky's Idea of Cinema***

Andrei Tarkovsky

Besides being a phenomenal Russian director, Andrei Tarkovsky was also an original thinker and theorist. Since the birth of cinema, many ideas, theories, and technical rules and procedures almost settled until for the first time, the famous five of the French New Wave era broke many ideas to further redefine them. Tarkovsky arrived in the scene almost in the early sixties and further reconceived and redefined many well-established ideas and theories with much-refined sensibilities to develop the cinematic art even more. His original thoughts, perceptions, interpretations, and perspective gave the discourse such dimensions that it turned out to be very invigorating and refreshingly thought-provoking. What is cinema means to him? 'It is about a Man. No, not the particular man whose voice we hear from behind the screen, played by Innokentiy Smoktunovsky.<sup>1</sup> It's a film about you, your father, your grandfather, about someone who will live after you and who is still 'you'. About a Man who lives on the earth, is a part of the earth and the earth is a part of him, about the fact that a man is answerable for his life both to the past and to the future.

You have to watch this film simply and listen to the music of Bach and the poems of Arseniy Tarkovsky; watch it as one watches the stars, or the sea, as one admires a landscape. There is no mathematical logic here, for it cannot explain what man is or what is the meaning of his life.<sup>2</sup> Then what about cinema's relation with other art forms which precedes cinema? Many argued at least in early years after cinema began its glorious journey that cinema encompasses elements of all the art forms and as such it is a composite art form. That cinema is a composite art is an idea that is still prevalent and acknowledged by many theorists until this day. But Tarkovsky puts forward his idea little differently when he writes: 'Trying to adapt the features of other art forms to the screen will always deprive the film of what is distinctively cinematic, and make it harder to handle the material in a way that makes use of the powerful resources of cinema as an art in its own right. But above all such a procedure sets up a barrier between the author of the film and life. Methods established by the older art forms interpose themselves. It specifically prevents

life from being recreated in the cinema as a person feels it and sees it: in other words, authentically.<sup>23</sup> He again remarks, ‘Cinema is said to be a composite art, based on the involvement of a number of neighbour art forms: drama, prose, acting, painting, music. ...In fact, the ‘involvement’ of these art forms can, as it turns out, impinge so heavily on cinema as to reduce it to a kind of mishmash, or— at best —to a mere semblance of harmony in which the heart of cinema is not to be found, because it is precisely in those condi-



Andrei Tarkovsky

tions that it ceases to exist. It has to be made clear once and for all that, if cinema is an art it cannot simply be an amalgam of the principles of other, contiguous art forms: only having done that can we turn to the question of the allegedly composite nature of the film. A meld of literary thought and painterly form will not be a cinematic image: it can only produce a more or less empty or pretentious hybrid.<sup>24</sup> I believe, this brief foreword as envisaged here is an imperative because of Tarkovsky’s these watershed remarks, which will inevitably help us understand better some of the core issues that surface in the documentary we will discuss hereunder. Because while film art has for long been considered as a composite art form having influences of or rather integrated elements from all the remaining art forms it was Tarkovsky who advocated that despite having those influences, film art is indeed a distinctive, axiomatic and separate medium or art form. What sets off this re-examination now here is a film, based on the connoisseur himself, titled *Andrei Tarkovsky: a Cinema Prayer* directed by his son by compiling live footages on his life and works.

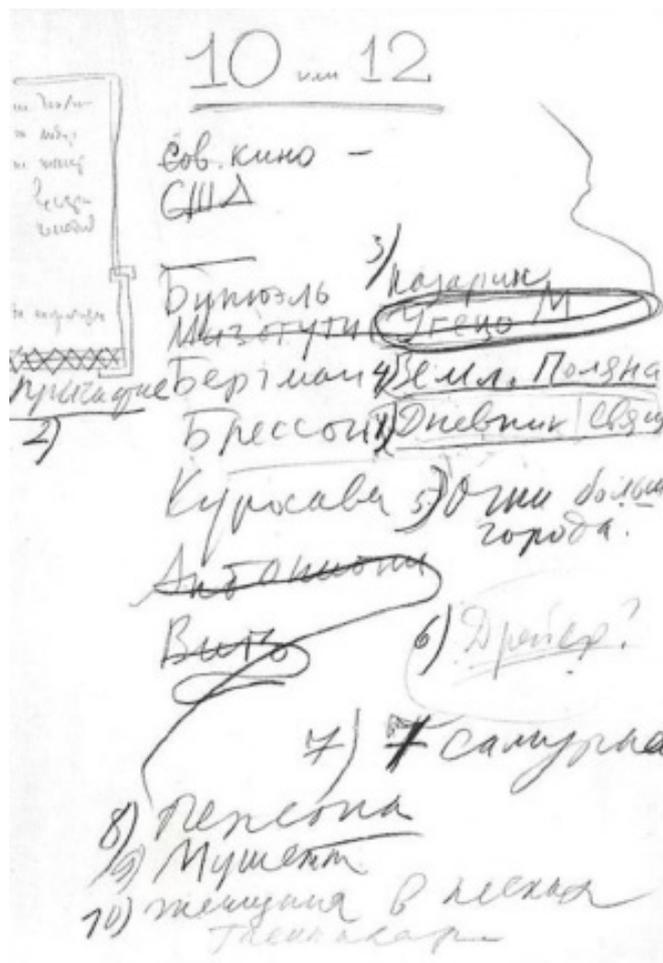
Every film festival offers great opportunities when you come across very memorable, deeply moving, exciting, evocative, and thought-provoking experiences. However, *Andrei Tarkovsky: A Cinema Prayer*, in particular, evoked such rare inquiry and insight about our lives, worldview, nature, and the planet itself that I came back home richer in many aspects from the IFFI, held in Goa in November, 2019. Directed by Andrei A Tarkovsky, son of his illustrious father, late Andrei Arsenyevich Tarkovsky, the narrative of *A Cinema Prayer* is laid with Tarkovsky’s interviews videographed on different occasions, video recording of shooting and footages from his oeuvre of films. Here Tarkovsky, while reminiscing about his childhood, says that he believes children are the connection between us and the extraterrestrial world. Tarkovsky also claims, ‘I don’t know a country with as many talented people as Russia. But something is happening that could destroy a culture — that is, the physical possibility to work.’ After passing out from the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in 1954, Tarkovsky claims things turned favourable in the Soviet Union because censorship had been relaxed post- ‘Khrushchev Thaw’ between the period in the late fifties and early sixties. As cultural restrictions were also eased the authority allowed a limited influx of European and North American literature, films, and music. This enabled Tarkovsky to see films of the Italian neo-realists, French New Wave, and of directors such as Kurosawa, Bunuel, Bergman, Bresson, Mizoguchi, and Andrzej Wajda. Things, however, again got worse once Brezhnev’s succession in 1964 brought ‘Khrushchev’s Thaw’ of relaxed censorship to an end, and hard times back for artists. Widely considered as one of Russia’s greatest film directors, in fact, one of the best cinema has ever known, Tarkovsky could make only seven feature films in his over a decade-long career, navigating through unrelenting pressure from the Soviet authorities to compromise his personal vision. One of his interviews in the film echoes this paradox of a nation that has given rise to geniuses of the caliber of Fyodor Dostoevsky

and Ukraine-born Kazimir Malevich, but made them pay for their power, stifling the expression of anyone having views contrary to state ideology. Remarkably, Tarkovsky's first feature *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) had made him, at thirty, a major director internationally when it won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. However, Soviet authorities were not happy at this feat of a young and promising director, apparently for the film's anti-war connotations. His second feature, *Andrei Rublev*, made in 1969, impressed viewers, but this again infuriated the ever-skeptical Soviet mandarins who held back the film for long five years. For them, the film was hardly earthly or atheistic, who claimed, Tarkovsky was 'ahistorical', anti-Russian, too individualistic and too Western. Despite his 1975-made *The Mirror* being a semi-autobiographical film that randomly incorporated some of his childhood memories, they found flaws in it as well and observed the film fails in reflecting any concerns for the mass cause over the self-adulatory narrative. And these all had been absolutely suffocating and detrimental for a free spirit of an artist in pursuit of aesthetic brilliance and philosophical quest. Deeply disturbed and exasperated, Tarkovsky therefore, went to shoot his sixth film *Nostalgia* in Italy in 1982 and never returned. When *Nostalgia* was completed in 1983 and selected for Cannes competition section, Soviet authority engaged a special operative, the pro-Soviet director Sergei Bondarchuk of *War and Peace* fame, in the jury to undermine the work. However, Soviet authorities lost the plot and shamed by

the Cannes jury by awarding the film with a special jury and Best Director award. Tarkovsky made, again in exile, his last film *Sacrifice* in 1986 produced jointly by France-Sweden. At this point in exile from his native Russia, Tarkovsky did shoot the picture in a typically austere, Bergmanesque Swedish landscape with the Swedish auteur Ingmar Bergman's long time associate and renowned cinematographer, Sven Nykvist. *Sacrifice*, it seems was a kind of tribute to

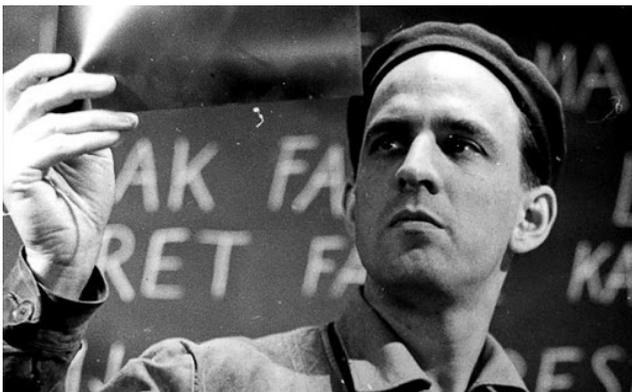
Ingmar Bergman, who had always been very open and appreciative of Tarkovsky's genius and claimed in an undated interview that 'Tarkovsky is for me the greatest, the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of the film, as it captures life as a reflection, life as a dream'. At the same time, Bergman was one of Tarkovsky's highly regarded filmmakers among his predecessors. Tarkovsky could see Bergman's film only after the 'Khrushchev Thaw' period came albeit nearly for a decade after Stalin's demise in 1953.

During this time, he could also see for the first time, the Japanese cinema, Italian New-realist, and French New Wave films besides remarkable works of Bunuel, Bresson, Wajda, and Kurosawa etc. Despite Wajda's film *Ashes and Diamonds* also impressed him; It was, however, Bergman and Bresson who influenced him the most during this phase. In an interview while Tarkovsky confesses that 'I am only interested in the views of two people: one is called Bresson and one called Bergman', he explained on another occasion that when he watched *Wild Strawberries* in 1959, he was immediately fasci-



Andrei-Tarkovsky-Film List

nated by the way Bergman made 'film-confessions' in the film in a deep yet low baritone. Much later, when Tarkovsky compiled a list of his top-10 list of favourite films, *Wild Strawberries* featured along with two more Bergman gems like *Winter Light* and *Persona*, which is indeed an irrefutable testimony to Tarkovsky's passion for Bergman-films. What influenced Tarkovsky hugely by Bergman was his affinity to set up a dialogue with the viewers by exploring the possibilities through visuals, and his endeavour to seek truth through moral anxiety of the vacillating characters. However, we must keep it in mind that what also influenced Tarkovsky hugely were both Russian cultural and literary traditions and its icons like Leo Tolstoy and Feodor Dostoyevsky upon which he developed his distinctive style which invariably carries the very essence of what is Russian and its rich fragrance.



Ingmar Bergman

It must be briefly mentioned that despite being impressed by Bergman's 'film-confessions', Tarkovsky takes a completely different view vis-à-vis god as Bergman's quest for god and a desire for a dialogue contradicts Bergman's own belief of obscurity of god but not god's existence. For Tarkovsky, religion or god is more philosophical as well as meta-physical and that is why he adores god more as an embodiment of unfathomable supernatural power and reflected this essence in some of his films.

Despite Tarkovsky's last film *Sacrifice* received wide acclaim across the globe, his long exile, however, became a very sour fruit to savour any more for Tarkovsky. Many might have believed the exile as a happy

escape, but for a creative genius like Tarkovsky, this reluctant and unwilling absence in his own country became another aspect of his deep tragedy. During his time in exile, his gloom grew as he was besieged by a painful longing for his homeland, not least because his son was still there or not being allowed initially to leave, but he was tormented more by a sense of betrayal from some of his own powerful countrymen. It was like an irony that while people around the world were increasingly clamouring to watch his films and were overwhelmed, he had to remain prohibited in his own country and his own viewers were kept out of reach from his body of work. Tarkovsky questioned in the film, 'how could Russia I am so deeply attached to insist that I am not wanted or needed in my homeland?' While not overtly political, Tarkovsky believed poets, in any medium, are always national, whether or not they want to be, and connecting with a public requires no particular education, just a receptive soul to intuit meaning. He also believed that 'Art is mysterious like a prayer, not a tool for didactic instruction by example, the core of any healthy society'. He said prophetically, 'Often, truly free individuals are to be found in the most politically oppressive places' and undeniably Tarkovsky was one.

*A Cinema Prayer* comes out more evocative and authentic because the documentary is endowed with plentiful materials coming straight from Tarkovsky's archives. Besides the poems originally recorded for *The Mirror* but never used, video excerpts and family souvenirs were also beautifully integrated in the narrative. Through insights on his films besides his statements on assorted issues and reflections on his personal and family lives, Tarkovsky comes off as a profoundly accomplished artist enriched with a cavernous vision. As Satyajit Ray called his *Charulata*, 'a flawless film', likewise Tarkovsky believes *Stalker* as his most successful film, where 'the end result matches the initial concept'. Elsewhere, the documentary also echoes such ingenious remarks he made facing the audience, 'It's ridiculous to define Leonardo as a painter, it's ridiculous to define Bach as a

composer, Shakespeare as a playwright, Tolstoy as a novelist' because he believes 'They are all poets, and in that sense, cinema has a poetic domain of its own because there is a part of life, part of the universe, which has not been fully understood by other art forms and genres.' This was how Tarkovsky held the film art many notches higher than the rest of art forms and besides, it is understandable, why he detests any attempt to discuss the similitude of cinema with other art forms.

It is interesting to see that most of the time, Tarkovsky, faces the audience directly via the many audio and filmed interviews he had given to his interviewer. Structured with chapter-titles like Childhood and Youth and Leaving Russia, the documentary reveals little about Tarkovsky's private life and relationships except for the poet father he worshipped, and his mother he adored. We do learn about his beloved childhood garden, how his father left them but soon returned to demand custody of young Andrei. While the Second World War was ravaging Russia, his mother was one who braved to take him out to attend art and music schools noticing his flair in them. Tarkovsky also recalls how the 'Khrushchev Thaw' of the late Fifties and early Sixties gave him the freedom to launch himself as an artist that would have been difficult otherwise. We hear his voice throughout the entire documentary over photos of his real-life, particularly from childhood, merging with scenes from *Stalker*, *Andrei Rublev*, *The Mirror*, *Solaris*, and *Sacrifice*. We see him directing scenes, engaging actors with profound intensity, and, by contrast, repairing the roof of his beloved country house, gazing heavenward. Otherwise, we hear Tarkovsky philosophizing, analyzing, and rhapsodizing. Always looking elegant but never cracking a smile or showing a hint of iron-

ny as he tirelessly talks about art and religion as to how they are interchangeable and dependent on each other. Tarkovsky believes that basically 'the meaning of art is prayer' and that without art, human beings are lost. Moreover, he felt that every artist fulfills the most vital of human activities: service. Thoroughly a romantic who appreciated the natural world throughout his journey, Tarkovsky decried that we have occasionally 'cut nature out of a film.' He rued the fact that movies relentlessly emphasize on human activity while appallingly diminishing the far greater and more sublime properties of nature.

Tarkovsky would have been 88 years today, had he not been died prematurely in mysterious circumstances in a hospital in Paris in 1986, despite suffering from cancer. Having a disturbed course in his entire career attributed to a hostile and oppressive political environment, what is admirable in Tarkovsky's character is his sense of freedom, perseverance, and resilience. Never backpedaled on his convictions or submits to power, pressure or defeat, with only seven films in his oeuvre, he remains unvanquished although Tarkovsky's death was like a death of many possibilities, without which the cinema became poorer for all the times to come.

#### Reference:

1. Innokentiy Smoktunovsky (b. 1925) is a popular Soviet theatre and cinema actor, best known in the West for his Hamlet in Kozintsev's classic 1964 film. He was the narrator of Tarkovsky's *Mirror*.
2. Page 9, *Sculpting in Time* by Andrey Tarkovsky.
3. Page 22, *Ibid*.
4. Page 64, *Ibid*

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