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National College of Art and Design

Fine Art (Painting)

**ROBERT BRESSON AND ANDREI TARKOVSKY**

**A Comparative Study**

by

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## **Introduction**

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## STATEMENT OF INTENT

I propose to examine and compare the work of Robert Bresson and Andrei Tarkovsky, paying particular attention to the role that religious belief plays in shaping the style and form of each director's films. Following this, and in taking a closer look at the particular films in question, I propose to examine how the resultant style functions in relation to the director's original spiritual concerns and in relation to its place in contemporary society and contemporary art criticism.

## ART AND RELIGION - A SHARED OPINION

*My discovery of Tarkovsky's first film was like a miracle. Suddenly, I found myself standing at the door to a room the keys of which had, until then, never been given to me. It was a room I had always wanted to enter and where he was moving freely and fully at ease. I felt encouraged and stimulated: someone was expressing what I had always wanted to say without knowing how.*

*Tarkovsky is for me the greatest, the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of film, as it captures life as a reflection, life as a dream.<sup>1</sup>*

The above quote by Ingmar Bergman has been a common response to the Russian film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986). Thomas Rothschild sees Bergman's admiration as excessive. For him it serves only to illustrate the questionable dedication and devotion Tarkovsky has received worldwide.

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<sup>1</sup> Sight and Sound, Autumn 1986, advertisement for the release of Tarkovsky's *'The Sacrifice'*.

In his article 'Glaube, Demut, Hoffnung (Hoffnung?)'<sup>2</sup>, Rothschild addresses attention to the 'superlatives' by which Tarkovsky was described:

*To discuss Tarkovsky is hardly possible. People admire him and want to adequately express their opinions, or, one wishes to remain silent. The true fans wish, through the magic or bewitching of dedication, not to use words or analysis to discuss him.*

(Rothschild, 1983 p.59).

The director's reputation rests on only seven completed films and one short made while in college. The first, which he directed in 1962, 'Ivanovo Detstevo' (Ivan's Childhood), was the study of lost innocence and childhood set in a climate of war and despair. It was completed by Tarkovsky within two years of graduating, from the Moscow Film School. The film won the Golden Lion award at The Venice Film Festival and immediately established Tarkovsky in the world of international cinema.

With the completion of his second film 'Andrei Roublev' (1966), at the age of thirty-four Tarkovsky began to evolve a personal language of visual imagery to express his continuous concern with what Peter Green describes as a 'winding quest', i.e. the quest for the ideal (Green, The Winding Quest, 1993). What also became apparent early on in Tarkovsky's career were his strong Christian beliefs and the unpopular conception that art and religion are inseparable. This notion coupled with his own search for meaning was the inspirational springboard from which

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<sup>2</sup> The title of Thomas Rothschild's article translates into English as 'Faith, Humility, Hope (Hope?)' and appeared in Medium in 1983.

he launched his films, all concerned with the individual's quest for understanding and all coloured with a vocabulary of idiosyncratic images and 'talismanic' motifs that have become known as 'Tarkovskian'.

In the film world, the nearest Tarkovsky came to having an idol came in the form of French cinematographer Robert Bresson (1907 - ):

*... film directors can be divided into two main categories, those who strive to imitate the world about them and those who create their own world. Those who create their own world are usually the poets. They are Bresson above all, Dovzhenko, Mozoguchi, Bergman, Bruneul, Kurosawa.*  
(Tarkovsky's lecture, Leszcylowsky, 1986).

Tarkovsky reaffirms the above opinion while addressing a quality in Bresson's methods which was of great importance to Tarkovsky himself.

*I now know two directors who worked with rigid self-imposed constraints to help them create a true form for the realisation of their idea: early Dovzenko (Earth) and Bresson (The Diary of a Country Priest). But Bresson is perhaps the only man in cinema to have achieved the perfect fusion of the finished work with a concept theoretically formulated beforehand. I know of no other artist as consistent as he is in this respect.*  
(Tarkovsky's lecture, Leszcylowsky, 1986).

Born in 1907, Bresson was twenty-five years older than Tarkovsky. His career has produced thirteen films in all. His most recent was 'L'Argent' of 1983. The austere quality of Bresson's introspective gaze runs through all his films from his first, made in 1943, 'Les Anges du Peché' (The Angels of the Street), through to his most successful films: 'Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne' (Diary of a Country Priest, 1950) and 'Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé', (A Man Escaped, 1956). Like



Tarkovsky the subtext of his films is always concerned with the virtues of earth and a quest for redemption.

What connects Tarkovsky and Bresson is their common belief that art and religious faith should be interconnected. Film itself becomes a transitional state, a means towards pure spirituality. Their ambition is that in viewing a film a sense of transcendence can be experienced. To this end, critical analysis of the films will show that formal devices are purposefully employed. Although both directors believed in a relationship between art and religion and both saw it as their duty to express their own spirituality, the products of their efforts remain quite different. In this thesis I propose to examine the route each director has taken in attempting to express and induce transcendence. In doing so I hope to highlight the areas where concerns are shared and the many ways in which they differ. To do this I will look at each director's output individually in chapters two and three. Chapter one will concern itself with the writings of Susan Sontag and Paul Schrader, both of whom have outlined Bresson's method of expressing 'the Spiritual'. The criteria set out by Sontag and Schrader are, I believe, relevant to the filming technique of Tarkovsky.

Finally, in chapter four I propose to address Fredric Jameson's criticism of religious content in contemporary film. His particular criticism of the role that religious subtexts play is addressed to Tarkovsky whom he accuses of artistic pretentiousness. Because I propose a comparison between



Bresson's and Tarkovsky's insistence on the compatibility of religion and art, I feel that Jameson's criticism is of consequence to a reading of the work of both directors.

## **Chapter 1**

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### **‘THE TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE’**

*Art is born and takes hold wherever there is a timeless, insatiable longing for the spiritual, for the ideal; that longing which draws people to art.*

Andrei Tarkovsky.

*Your film's beauty will not be in the images (postcardism) but in the ineffable that they will emanate.*

Robert Bresson.

In his book *'Transcendental Style in Film'*, Paul Schrader puts forward the suggestion that there exists in cinema a style that enables an approach to the transcendent. Through examination of the films of director's Ozu, Dreyer and Bresson, Schrader develops a definition of this 'Transcendental Style'. It is, for him, similar to the style outlined by Sontag in her essay *'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson'*. Differences occur in the choice of word: 'spiritual' or 'transcendental'. Where Sontag refers to subject matter being 'spiritual', Schrader refers to it as being 'transcendental'. Both are agreed that within the work of Bresson there exists a formalised style which employs precise temporal means to direct the viewer towards reflection upon matters spiritual.

For Sontag, art that invokes reflection (by which she means spiritual reflection) is dependant upon a balance between opposing reactions; a pull towards emotional involvement must be mediated by elements that promote distance and perhaps impartiality (Sontag, 1982, p.123). The emotional involvement should be postponed through form. This she sees as a development of Brecht's 'Alienation Effect', where the viewer (through means developed by the director) is emotionally uninvolved, for a while at least. Brecht's theory is that, in the absence of visceral response, intellectual thought and reflection could flourish. For Sontag this 'Alienation Effect' is the key element in work that wishes to express the Spiritual. For her "*The master of the reflective mode is Robert Bresson.*" (Sontag, 1982, p. 121).



Sontag's criteria for Bresson's art being 'reflective' are as follows:

1. That the viewer's emotions are disciplined by the film yet at the same time the viewer may be perfectly aware of the strong emotion within the film itself:

*... to induce a certain tranquillity in the spectator, a state of spiritual balance that is itself the subject of the film.*

(Sontag, 1982, p. 124).

2. That the form of the work is present "*in an emphatic way*". If the viewer is aware of the form of the film then this will forestall emotional response:

*... awareness of form does two things simultaneously: it gives a sensuous pleasure independent of the 'content' and it invites the use of intelligence.*

(Sontag, 1982, p. 123).

3. The absence of suspense, achieved by including a narration which jumps the gun and arrests our imagination, disciplines our emotive response. As well as flouting suspense and thus traditional modes of narrative within film (in particular *film noir*), the narration serves to return our concentration to the relevant action. This returns us to Brecht's 'Alienation Effect', as he would often display placards during his plays, informing the audience of the forthcoming events.

4. A rejection of the visual and a renunciation of the 'beautiful'. The result is an austere aestheticism, where empty rooms, uninteresting faces and simple costume acquire an appeal of their own independent of 'beauty' as defined by traditional film-making.

For Schrader, the characteristics of what he calls a 'Transcendental Style' are similar to Sontag's. He too lays stress on the presence of form of which we can be aware.

*Spiritual sentiments have often led to formalism. The liturgy, mass, hymns, prayers and incantations are all formalistic methods designed to express the Transcendent.*

(Schrader, 1972, p. 60).

For Bresson, the style and form of the film was of the utmost importance. Each film on an immediate level is representational of a narrative usually centred on a common theme of confinement/imprisonment and liberty/freewill and the meanings associated with those notions and the consequences of both profound religious vocation and crime or acts of evil. Beyond that the form of the film-making itself allows for other levels of interpretation.

*The subject of a film is only a pretext. Form much more than content touches a viewer and elevates him.*

(Schrader, 1972, p. 61).

In the case of Jameson's reading of Tarkovsky's 'Stalker', it is the emphatic presence of form that is objectionable for him (Jameson, 1992, pp. 87-113). The critical reading is of Tarkovsky's form which he found to be obsolete in the mid 80's.

My contention is that Tarkovsky and Bresson had, despite differing aesthetics, similar ends, so I find Jameson's polemic applicable to both. This (as I have indicated in the Introduction) I will address in chapter four.

The differences occurring between the texts of Sontag and Schrader are in the area of semantics. It is quite obvious that referring to something as having a 'Transcendental Style' is invitation to argument. The term is ill defined and carries varying connotations. In the introduction to his book, Schrader defines at length his use of the term. We begin with the truism that by definition the transcendent is beyond normal sense experience. Its opposite, and that being transcended, is the immanent. The problem lies beyond this simple definition when we talk of something as being 'transcendental' in art.

It was Tarkovsky's and Bresson's quest to reach through cinematic means and personal technique, a representation of the ineffable. Both directors developed in their art, a form designed to employ the temporal, kinaesthetic faculties to record the equally temporal nature of reality but in a manner so as to transcend the commonplace signification of objects. I should, therefore, move towards a definition of what I consider as the 'spiritual' or 'transcendental' art that both directors aimed to create.



The transcendent can mean the Ideal, The Holy or God. Transcendence as an act can be seen as a religious enactment. Schrader points out that some people could interpret art that is referred to as 'transcendental' or 'spiritual' as being the product of God, as God can be referred to as the 'Holy Spirit' or the 'Transcendent'. An example of what is believed by many to be the creation of God is nature, our natural environment. Schrader also lists the Scriptures but whether or not these can be seen as God's creation, is a theological argument between differing religions (Schrader, 1972, p. 60). The aforementioned 'Sacred Art' which informs the receiver about the 'Transcendent' as opposed to referring to its existence is not the subject of my study and to suggest that either Tarkovsky or Bresson was capable of the creation of 'Sacred Art' is certainly not my contention.

For the purposes of this thesis 'transcendental' or 'spiritual' art refers to art created by humans to express their belief in the existence of the Ideal. This is attempted through relaying in narrative, human experience of transcendence or by manipulating technique to induce in the viewer an experience of meditation, - the experience of transcendence itself.

As noted Sontag and Schrader believe that there exists a stylistic form suggestive of the 'Spiritual' or 'Transcendent' - God. This form is chronicled in their perceptive analyses of Bresson's work. Vladamir Petric, Mark le Fanu and Jonathan Rosenbaum also propose, in relation



to Tarkovsky, the existence of such a style but unlike Sontag and Schrader, they avoid defining the elements of a particular form. The writings of all aforementioned critics are concerned with the director's expression of his own moral vision and how it is inextricably bound up in their own sense of form and technique. Between Bresson and Tarkovsky the technique differs, as does the moral vision and personal faith. In the following chapters I will attempt to elucidate a sense of each director's spirituality and his attempts to induce in the viewer an experience of meditation.

## **Chapter 2**

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### **THE STYLISTICS OF ROBERT BRESSON**

*The film will gradually free itself from the tyranny of the visual, of the image for its own sake, of the immediate and concrete anecdote, to become a means of writing as supple and subtle as the written word.*

Alexandre Astruc.

*It is beneath the image's representational aspect where numerous layers of ineffable transcendental signification can be found.*

Vladimir Petric.

With the release of Bresson's third film '*Diary of a Country Priest*', in 1951, André Bazin noted the development of a very sophisticated style of film-making:

*While the instantaneous success of Le Journal is undeniable, the aesthetic principles on which it is based are nevertheless the most paradoxical, maybe the most complex, ever manifest in a sound film.*

(Bazin, 1967, p. 125).

The aesthetic principles which Bazin refers to are the product of Bresson's method of pruning and simplifying. In his adaptation of Bernano's original novel, Bresson strips away minor characters and reduces our affinity with the main characters, limiting our time with them. The novel noted by Bazin to be rich in visual imagery is in stark contrast to the aesthetics of Bresson's screen, the novel is:

*rich in picturesque evocations, solid, concrete, strikingly visual. For example: 'The Count went out - his excuse the rain. With every step the water oozed from his long boots. The three or four rabbits he had shot were lumped together in the bottom of his game bag in a horrible looking little pile of bloodstained mud and grey hair. He had hung the string bag on the wall and as he talked to me I saw fixed on me, through the intertwining cords a still limpid and gentle eye.*

(Bazin, 1967, pp. 127-128).

Bazin suggests the above prose is something straight out of a Renoir film. It could just as easily be a vivid description of a Tarkovsky image. It is a paragraph taken from the original Bernano's prose - the same novel that Bresson claims to remain faithful to. If he had relayed the book as read,

the film would have been quite different, certainly not characteristic of his style. Bresson models the narrative of the book to his own ends (as does Tarkovsky). However, where Tarkovsky invents additional occurrences and scenarios, Bresson ruthlessly pares down the original text to what he perceives as the bare essentials. The passage above, which cries out for visualisation, is disregarded by Bresson. In stripping the film of the detail relevant to the novel, Bresson searches for what he believes is the essence of the story itself. In *'The Diary of a Country Priest'* we follow the (self-imposed) alienation of a young Roman Catholic Priest. The priest in a quest for divine communion starves himself of food except for some bread soaked in wine and refuses to see his parishioners. The imagery is sparse, devoid of unnecessary decoration or distraction and the characters themselves are for the most part seen in solitary conditions. The priest's undermining of his own health is played out slowly and emphatically. We, as viewers are somewhat rewarded at the end as the priest is seen to attain grace before death. Having watched the film, reward in any form is welcomed as Bresson has tested our endurance, frustrating our (conventional) expectations of entertainment and escapism. We are denied melodrama, spectacle and comic diversion. In addition we are presented with an almost amateur-like acting, insisted upon by Bresson in defiance of traditional acting and its potential to stir emotions within the viewer. It is the stifling of our emotions that is the design of all of Bresson's films. So we see that although Bresson claims to be faithful to the story, he, in fact, is faithful only to his own predetermined form. The



result of this is comparable to Brecht's desire to arrest our imagination, disciplining our emotive response in order to encourage reflection.

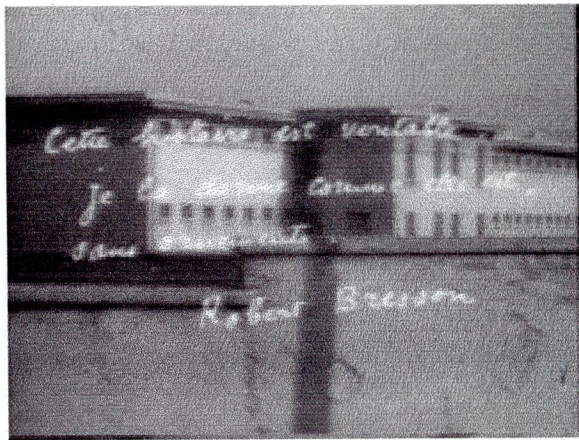
Bresson claims honesty to original facts within the narrative. In the case of *'A Man Escaped'* an introduction screen title reads: "*This story actually happened. I set it down without embellishments.*"<sup>1</sup> A screen title before *'The Trial of Joan of Arc'* reads: "*These are the authentic texts.*" However, in search of a way to preach his belief, Bresson has made full use of his artistic licence in adapting the original texts. In realising his form, Bresson fulfils the criteria as defined by Sontag and Schrader. The latter analyses Bresson's adaptation and presentation under the separated sub-headings of: plot, acting, editing and soundtrack. Connecting all of the above is visual imagery. The visual image relies on each of Schrader's sub-headings.

## **BRESSON'S VISUAL IMAGERY**

There are many other directors who, although their particular films are dissimilar, use repeated imagery throughout their career. Iconography is of immense importance for Tarkovsky who created his own vocabulary of images, immediately recognisable.

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration No. 1, p 17.



1. "This story actually happened. I set it down without embellishments"  
(Bresson, 'A Man Escaped', 1956 )



2. Title screen  
(Bresson, 'A Man Escaped', 1956 )



3. Alternative title  
(Bresson, 'A Man Escaped', 1956 )



Similarly, it is relatively easy to identify a Bresson image. From early films such as *'Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne'*, written by Jean Cocteau, we are introduced to stark minimal interiors. If we follow his career we notice that Bresson's interiors continue to be devoid of decoration, elaboration or in short, distraction. In following the path between *'Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne'* to his 1983 film *'L'Argent'* it is noticeable that Bresson began describing space, not to represent a screen character's social status, but to focus our attention on a particular event and its possible consequences. This purposeful reduction of decoration developed after *'Les Dammes du Bois de Boulogne'*.

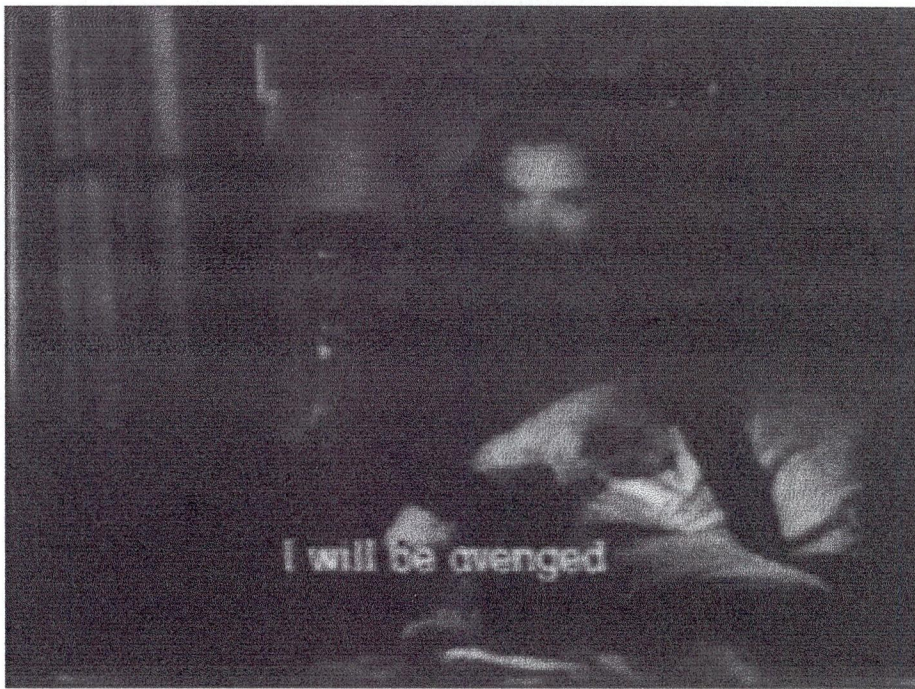
The film itself follows the event and consequences of one woman's attempts to exact revenge on a lover whom she suspects of infidelity. We begin the film where this woman, Hélène, played by Maria Casares, is visited by her lover. Both partners arrange to end their relationship. He is convinced she is happy with such an arrangement, - however, as he leaves, Bresson closes up on Maria's expression as she hisses "*Je me vengerai*".<sup>2</sup> The scene is dramatic. Casares articulates Cocteau's words with theatrical intensity.

In exacting her revenge upon her wayward lover, she reacquaints herself with an old friend and her mother. The friend is a prostitute,<sup>3</sup> while the

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<sup>2</sup> Illustration No. 4, p.19.

<sup>3</sup> Illustration No. 5, p 19.



4. 'Je me vengerai' (Bresson 'Les Dames', 1945).



5. Agnès - The Dancer (Bresson 'Les Dames', 1945).



mother is depicted as somewhat of a manager - a pimp. Casares persuades them to abandon their sordid way of life, to change and join her in Paris. For them she arranges a simple apartment close to the Bois de Boulogne. Casares' plan (which is subsequently perfectly executed) is to introduce the dancer to her ex lover in the hope that he will fall in love with her. It is hoped that revenge will be sought with the disgrace that her ex-lover will suffer upon discovering the dancer's history. They are introduced and he falls in love.

She is wealthy and her surrounds are decorated to represent her as such. Her apartment, the entrance to which we never see, is filled with ornaments, art objects and symbols of wealth.<sup>4</sup> The apartment now inhabited by the dancer and her mother is in sharp contrast to H  lene's. It is empty, simple, devoid of any distraction. The mother and daughter are poor, having given up wealth in search of virtue. The mother is also seen to have only a sofa as a bed.<sup>5</sup> Bresson also records much of the action on the staircase to the entrance of their apartment. The tale ends with Casares' ex lover marrying the dancer.<sup>6</sup> On their wedding day revenge is sought and her past is publicised. This being all too much for the frail and by now quite ill dancer, she collapses. However, her new husband's love is strong enough to overcome the social stigma that is now upon them. The message is crystal clear; upon repenting, Agn  s, the dancer, is

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<sup>4</sup> Illustration No. 6, p.21.

<sup>5</sup> Illustration No. 7, p.21.

<sup>6</sup> Illustration No. 8, p.22.



6. H  lene's apartment (Bresson *'Les Dames'*, 1945).



5. Agn  s's apartment (Bresson *'Les Dames'*, 1945).





8. The marriage  
(Bresson, *Les Dames*, 1945).

rewarded by the promise of devotion from her new husband.<sup>7</sup> As I will examine in the final chapter, it is Bresson's habit to present a clear moral within the final sequence of each film. It is always one which emphasises a Christian dictum.

The rooms of the dancer and her mother are stark and minimal, they are representative of Bresson's austere aesthetics. However, in this film they are used to signify the poverty of the inhabitants. In later films similar austerity would become the environs of all characters. With this early film we are also introduced to the strong influence of Bresson's chosen Roman Catholic faith. The message of '*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*' is that forgiveness is obtainable upon a willingness to repent. Bresson wants us to meditate upon confinement, solitude and pessimism after which he presents us with the possibility of attainable grace and redemption.

After '*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*' Bresson's attempts to express his chosen religion and involve us, the viewers, in contemplation intensify. He no longer relies on narrative alone to induce such concentration. As we have seen, in '*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*' poverty was expressed by stark, empty rooms and wealth was expressed by carefully placing and recording the trappings of wealth. After this film, or more precisely after '*Diary of a Country Priest*', Bresson avoids the

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<sup>7</sup> Illustrations Nos. 9 and 10, p.24 .





9. Final sequence (Bresson *Les Dames*', 1945).



10. Fin (Bresson *Les Dames*', 1945).

commonsense signification of objects. If, for the sake of my argument, he was making '*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*' again, Bresson would perhaps design all the interiors similar to those of the dancer. The aim, as in a Beckett play, is to minimise distraction. It is an example of how Bresson manipulated the phenomenology that is the nature of recording on celluloid, to focus attention on the ontology of his investigations. For Sontag, stark interiors and the absence of particular objects of significance (e.g. the trappings of wealth) "*induce a certain tranquillity in the spectator.*" (Sontag, 1982, p. 123).

Bresson's characters (after '*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*') are stripped of significant surrounds or objects that suggest particular position in society. In so doing their actions alone are of importance and because we are denied the ability to locate the characters in a particular social structure, we are denied possible reason or justification for their actions. The ability to do so would distract from the relationship Bresson establishes between action and consequence. Once again we are reminded of the Catholic understanding that all men and women are equal and that the consequence of action, such as the transgressions of '*The Pickpocket*' or those witnessed in '*L'Argent*' are outside the jurisdiction of any particular class system.

As well as focusing our concentration by stripping away decoration, Bresson alienates us and our instinctive desire to sympathise, perhaps



empathise with protagonists. If we are alienated, as Brecht proposed we should be, then we can concentrate on what Bresson sees as the relevant action.<sup>8</sup> Brecht *"utilizes techniques that force the viewer to observe the artificiality of the very production he or she is watching."* (Gaggi, 1989, p. 37). The intention is that the viewer regards the art work critically and intellectually. Although this was also Bresson's intention, his reasons differed from Brecht's. Brecht was a Marxist and his conscious effort was to *"create a rational, communist theatre."* (Gaggi, 1989, p. 39). Art, for Brecht had a social engagement in the creation of a communist society. Bresson believed that the role of his art was in the creation of a Roman Catholic society. This is explored further in the final chapter. In a sense if we chose to watch, then we are at the mercy of Bresson's style and consequently his religious beliefs. His visual imagery denies us fanciful and personal interpretations.

## **BRESSON'S CAMERA WORK**

Complementing the austere aesthetics of Bresson's stark interiors is his camera work. It is radical in its rejection of traditional methods and it

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<sup>8</sup> Brecht's intentions are similar to those of the Russian Constructivists who adopted the Cubist subversion of illusionism and a rejection of traditional Western mimetic art. Through the emphatic presence of form (bright, well lit sets, musicians on stage, placards displaying events as they occur or before they occur, et cetera). The art becomes self-referential in addition to being concerned with social and political discourse (Gaggi, 1989, p. 40). Brecht and the Russian Constructivists adopted much of the Cubist formal innovation despite differing ideals. Similarly, Bresson adopted much of Brecht's formalism to preach different concerns.

Vladimir Petric also draws a comparison between the *"estranged"* image in a Tarkovsky film and the Russian Constructivists' attempts to render their images oblique in order to suppress *"dramatic"* meaning of the event. (Petric, 1989, p.29).

makes demands on us, the viewers. It is carefully carried out so as to emphasise the cold factuality of the environs depicted. His camera work denies the beautiful image as it draws attention to itself and not to the inner drama. However, rejection of beauty for this end may not be the only solution as I will contend in the following chapter on the imagery and corresponding camera work of Tarkovsky. Bresson spoke of 'screens' that distanced the viewer from contemplation of the event - for him the beautiful image was a 'screen'. (Schrader, 1972, p. 64).

Bresson's camera is for ever at odds with his on-screen action, yet each decision has a purpose, to invoke a sense of transcendence. Schrader reminds us:

*A tracking shot is a moral judgement, Jean-Luc Godard once remarked, and so, for that matter is any camera shot. Any possible shot - high angle, close-up, pan - conveys a certain attitude towards a character, a 'screen' which simplifies and interprets the character. Camera angles and pictorial composition, like music, are extremely insidious screens; they can undermine a scene without the viewers being aware of it. A slow zoom-out or a vertical composition can substantially alter the meaning of the action of a scene.*

(Schrader, 1972, pp. 70-71).

Neither Bresson nor Tarkovsky is afraid to include long, static shots which are non-expressive and nullifying. Neither are they afraid to slow down tracking shots to slower than real time, if not in real time itself. Our emotional involvement is once again postponed if not altogether denied. In a different essay entitled '*The Aesthetics of Silence*', Sontag refers to



the consequence of a stare which is the result when watching the films of either director:

*Traditional art invites a look. Art that is silent engenders a stare. Silent art allows - at least in principle - no release from attention, because there has never in principle, been any soliciting of it. A stare is perhaps as far from history, as close to eternity, as contemporary art can get.*

(Sontag, 1982, p. 191).

In an essay describing how Bresson's '*Diary of a Country Priest*' changed his life, Phillip Lopate recalls his initial reaction to the slow tracking technique common to both directors.

*There was a solitary chapel scene, ending in one of those strange, short dollies that Bresson was so fond of, a movement of almost clumsy longing toward the priest at the altar, as though the camera itself were taking communion. Suddenly I had the impression that the film had stopped; rather that time had stopped. All forward motion was arrested, and I was staring into 'eternity'. Now I am not the kind of person readily given to mystical experiences, but at that moment I had a sensation of delicious temporal freedom. What I 'saw' was not a presence exactly, but a prolongation, a dilation, as though I might step into the image and walk around it at my leisure.*

(Lopate, 1991, pp. 26-27).

The camera work alone often results in the shift of the viewer's attention from the representational to the spiritual. Tarkovsky's employment of slow, if not static, shots is similar, - a strong comparison between both directors approaches. Bresson's camera work, like Tarkovsky's, results in our gaze becoming an intensive stare. Again our attention is focused and we are induced to meditate.

In 'A Man Escaped' we are repeatedly shown, in detail, close up shots of Fontaine's method of escape. The actions are everyday, made extraordinary by prolonging our attention. In a Bresson film attempts to explore possible meditation and concentration are made through such prolonged close ups. Fontaine's voice tells us of his plan to tear bed cloth and wrap wire around it. To develop a narrative in terms of plot an illustration of this narration is no longer required. If an illustration exists then it is perhaps to express the physical involvement, its time on screen is now surely shortened - not in a Bresson film. In addition to the extended time allocated to the mundane, the experience is doubled by a voice narrating to us the exact action on screen. Unlike traditional narration, as in the first available edition of Ridley Scott's 'Blade Runner' (1982), we are not informed of events not on screen. We know only what exists in Bresson's frame and we are continually reminded of it. All this results in the viewer looking beyond the action's commonplace signification. It is a perfect illustration of the flouting of suspense and drama, similar to that which Brecht advocated by displaying telling placards during his plays.

Bresson saw his recording of the everyday as an attempt to transcend traditional realism:

*I want to and, indeed, do make myself as much of a realist as possible using only the raw material taken from real life. But I end up with a final realism that is not simply realism.*

(Bresson's quote, Schrader, 1992, p. 63).

Transcendence is achieved through meditation upon the real, accepting its temporal destiny and allowing it be only itself. Bresson's style records for us the real, attributing to it nothing it doesn't already emanate. Our achieving Transcendence is dependent upon our endurance and tolerance. Our ability to endure is further tested by Bresson's denunciation of traditional acting, his response to it being: "*It is for theatre, a bastard art.*" (Bresson's quote, Schrader, 1972, p. 65).

### **BRESSON'S ACTORS**

Bresson, after '*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*' feared that actors added their own creativity to a film. For Bresson, the only person allowed to be creative was himself as his own spirituality was the muse:

*An actor, even (and above all) a talented actor gives us too simple an image of a human being and, therefore, a false image.*

(Bresson's quote, Schrader, 1972, p. 65).

Bresson's treatment of actors is dissimilar to that of Tarkovsky's. The latter favoured particular actors and worked with them repeatedly.

In '*Diary of a Country Priest*', Bresson forced the actor to suppress his personality, to act in an automatic manner. The effect is related directly to the first and third criteria of Sontag as listed in the introduction. Our emotions are not appealed to. Bresson's validation of spirituality in film is likened to that of Ozu, whose approach to acting was as follows:



*It's very easy, to show emotions in drama: the actors cry or laugh and this conveys sad or happy feelings to the audience. But this is mere explanation. Can we really portray a man's personality and dignity by appealing to emotions? I want to make people feel what life is like without delineating dramatic ups and downs.*

(Ozu's quote, Schrader, 1972, p. 66).

Often the actor or 'model' (as Bresson liked to call them) would not feature on screen, we only hear his/her actions. So why the apparent clumsy approach, why the chest-high camera position, why the fragmentation and confusion?

Schrader points to this as being the most sophisticated element in Bresson's approach. He calls it 'disparity'. It is a sense of incongruity resulting in a confused state, that which Schrader terms 'stasis'. Through the 'disparity' and its resultant 'stasis', form becomes the operative element in Bresson's films. Both 'disparity' and 'stasis' are achieved through a synthesis of the stylistic elements already discussed and our open tolerance and acceptance.

The reason for the 'disparity' and dissonance caused by Bresson's technique is as follows. The fragmentation and confusion is orchestrated to prepare us for the final sequence that contains Bresson's moral didactic. As the film subverts traditional modes of representation and narrative, we are unable to lose ourselves in our emotions. We endure the clumsy style in anticipation of clarity. Bresson's final moral and the

clarity that the particular spiritual message proposes is much more palatable than the confrontation of the preceding 'disparity'. The pretence involved in this style is explored in the final chapter.

Bresson concentrates attention on the everyday - we are on familiar ground. We are not threatened by gravity or profound theology. We can experience the visual and remain unemotional and relaxed. When the act is done, when grace is achieved (usually at the end of the film) Schrader suggests we are placed in a state of 'stasis'. The religious gravity is clearly visible and we have been led through familiar ground towards it. We arrive unsuspecting upon a philosophical question. Through the 'disparity' that is his style we have come to a dead end where we are presented with an answer to the questioning. In '*A Man Escaped*' it is Fontaine's escape, in '*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*' it is forgiveness and in '*L'Argent*' it is repentance. For Schrader the process of viewing is as follows:

*The secret of transcendental style is that it can both prevent a runoff of superficial emotions (through everyday) and simultaneously sustain those same emotions (through disparity). The very detachment of emotion, whether in primitive art or Brecht, intensifies the potential emotional experience.*

(Schrader, 1972, p. 78)

We have essentially been tricked into addressing the nature of achieving transcendence. The weight of Bresson's religious text is thrown upon us as we sit comfortably in familiar surrounds. The 'disparity' and

awkwardness have, therefore, a particular purpose - a very simple one, to bring us towards reflection upon spiritual matters.



## **Chapter 3**

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### **THE STYLISTICS OF ANDREI TARKOVSKY**

*Make visible what, without you, might never have been seen.*

Robert Bresson.

*I always feel perturbed and depressed when I look at such a beautiful scene for the first time - it makes me feel happy and restless at the same time ... I'm afraid I know nothing about it. It seems to me that all you have to do is look and paint.*

'The Idiot', Dostoevsky.

In the preceding chapter, I attempted to isolate some of the stylistics of Bresson's art. In doing so I hoped to illustrate that his form was designed to suggest the 'Spiritual' and to involve the viewer in reflection upon the same.

In this chapter, I will concern myself with some of Tarkovsky's stylistics. They are also governed by the director's spirituality. His agenda, therefore, would seem to correspond with that of Bresson.

Similarities in style occur and they will be seen to be in accordance with Sontag's and Schrader's alleged 'Transcendental Style'. However, differences occur, the most striking being Tarkovsky's acceptance and manipulation of the visual and the beautiful. Tarkovsky also exploits the use of repeated motifs and although he often contradicted himself, on the one hand rejecting metaphor and symbolism and on the other accepting allegory, his motifs are metaphorical in their depiction and subsequent repetition.

### **TARKOVSKY'S CAMERA ACTION**

In immediate relation to the preceding chapter and the particular camera work employed by Bresson for spiritual ends, I begin my analyses of Tarkovsky's stylistics. I return attention now to Sontag's 'stare' and the importance it held for the Bresson viewer.



For Petric, it is through the camera action which Jameson described as being slower than "*real time itself, with a solemnity quite intolerable*" (Jameson, 1992, p. 92) that transcendence is achieved and the spiritual narrative of Tarkovsky's work is released. Such camera action particular to Tarkovsky is typified in '*Stalker*' (1979), the film to which Jameson's above quote was referring.

'*Stalker*' was the last film Tarkovsky was to make in the Soviet Union; he was domiciled in Rome from 1983 until his death in 1986. The original text on which the scenario is based was a science fiction novel by the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky entitled '*The Roadside Picnic*'. Tarkovsky's adaptation is one that sheds the novel's science fiction scaffolding. In the hands of Tarkovsky it has been moulded and trimmed considerably to become the allegorical journey of three men through a mysterious, undefined zone of invisible and unexplainable dangers, in order to reach a place where, it is supposed, wishes can be granted. The tale Tarkovsky is telling us seems to be a moral one. Following the fortunes of three men, we ourselves take part in the journey. The characters are reduced to simply the guide, Stalker, and his two companions, The Scientist and The Writer who have commissioned his service to deliver them safely to the final zone. The individual characters themselves seem almost arbitrary to the plot. We know little other than the discipline they represent. The three even look similar. The two representing reason and language ultimately fail to make the final part of

the journey. They are unable to find within themselves the humility necessary for their desire to bear fruit. For the Stalker it is different. Tarkovsky suggests that the humility of his soul is untainted by knowledge. In keeping with Christian belief he, the pilgrim who has little or no ego yet profound faith is rewarded for his search.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the film we return to The Stalker's family home. We now see that although the final zone was empty, having no manifestation of good fortune, The Stalker's prayers have apparently been answered. His crippled daughter, introduced at the beginning as being soberly resigned to her paralyses, is now mobile albeit because she is being carried on The Stalker's shoulders.<sup>2</sup> This we discover as the camera slowly pulls away from the initial close-up of the daughter alone. Tarkovsky avoids suggestion that The Stalker's prayer or quest is answered in the form of a miracle or an act of God. The solution lies within the person and the measure of his or her own faith. The imagery is austere, reduced and the chromatic rendition, for the most part, is colourless, that is to say black and white or shades of grey. The didactic religious tone within the narrative forms the basis for Jameson's criticism, more of which later.

The response to the film has been varied. Tarkovsky has, in the light of the Chernobyl disaster, earned himself the - perhaps excessive - salute of being seen as a modern-day prophet. When the atomic reactor exploded

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<sup>1</sup> This outline of 'the hero' in Tarkovsky's work could be a derivative of Dostoevsky's hero - a possibility explored in my final chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Illustrations Nos. 11-15, p.38 .





11.



12.



13.



14.



15.

11-15 Stalker carries daughter on shoulders  
(Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 1979).



seven years after the film was made, an inaccessible radioactive zone was created similar in many chilling respects to Tarkovsky's zone. What is most notable about his description of the apocalyptic setting is the sense of time. It appears that for much of the film it is shot in real time. The result is a sense of the film being one long continuous tracking shot where the sequence of events, however slow, occurs as you are watching. One becomes more involved in the experience as with the real time underground movies of directors such as Stan Brackage, Malcolm le Grice or Andy Warhol. However, unlike movies such as Brackage's, *'Mothlight'* (1963) which is filmed in real time and devoid of any conceivable narrative, Tarkovsky's films find a compromise between editing and long, real time (if not slower) tracking shots. Similarly to Bresson's approach, we are suspended for moments in time with undue attention to particulars. The attempt, as explained in Chapter Two is to transcend commonsense signification or to defamiliarise us from the object or the event so that we can search for the possible transcendental meaning. In the words of Petric on *'Stalker'*:

*...through pure cinematic means ... he achieves a kinaesthetic orchestration that is experienced on a sensory - motor level, mostly because of insistent continuous camera movement through space.*

(Petric, 1989, p. 28).

This returns me to Sontag's first criterion for successful 'reflective' art. Similar in style to Bresson's, Tarkovsky's camera work is non-expressive. In *'Solaris'* (1972), Tarkovsky's camera work frustrates traditional



conventions. Like *'Stalker'*, the film is based on a science fiction novel, but the characteristics of that genre are discarded. An example is that, in place of interstellar space travel employing special effects (exemplified in Stanley Kubrick's *'2001 - A Space Odyssey'*, 1968) we are presented with slow panning shots of underwater plants swaying and a lengthy 'hypnotic' sequence that follows a car or an undefined freeway. Both sequences are bound to the earth through recognisable imagery, natural and man-made. The sequences of film have a meditative effect. In his essay on the 'inner space' explored in *'Solaris'*, Jonathan Rosenbaum records the effect.

*To say that these moments effectively 'replace' interstellar travel in the film is to suggest that they provide poetic rather than narrative substitutes - moments of seemingly endless drift that temporarily suspend the narrative flow. All of these camera movements mystically imply a continuous progress towards revelation that never actually arrives at one - a kind of spiritual tease.*

(Rosenbaum, 1990. p. 60).

The above is reminiscent of Lopate's experience of *'Diary of a Country Priest'* but is different in that Lopate claims to have experienced some form of revelation. Rosenbaum has no such experience, although teased towards it.

### **TARKOVSKY'S DREAM IMAGERY**

The list of examples of Tarkovsky's slow, often static and prolonged camera action is exhaustive and cannot be seen independently of the imagery it is recording. Unlike Bresson, Tarkovsky chooses to explore



dreams. Dreams represent one of Tarkovsky's favoured motifs and analysis of his treatment of dreams goes some way to understanding his attempts to represent spirituality, similar to those of Bresson.

In '*Zerkalo*' (Mirror) (1974) and '*Stalker*' as well as '*Nostalghia*' (1983, Tarkovsky's spelling, used throughout), Tarkovsky employs cinematic means to represent daydreams as well as those achieved through sleep. They are filled with personal reference to a past, in the case of '*Mirror*' an autobiographical past. Tarkovsky refers to the atmosphere of such films as an 'oneiric air'. (Petric, 1989, p. 28). As we will discover, Tarkovsky's dream imagery defies psychoanalysis and rejects what Sontag refers to as 'the logic of dreams'.<sup>3</sup>

In representing dreams, Tarkovsky never uses cinematic trickery such as fade-out, screen distortions or sudden movements from colour to monochromatic rendition.<sup>4</sup>

The sequences offer a 'disparity' Schrader found in Bresson's work. While the image looks estranged, inviting and simultaneously threatening, the oblique rendition suppresses the drama. We are subsequently

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<sup>3</sup> In supporting a difference between Robert Bresson and Jean Cocteau, Sontag suggests that Cocteau is drawn to 'the logic of dreams, and to truth of invention over the truth of "real life" - Bresson isn't (Sontag, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Tarkovsky does employ both colour and monochromatic renditions within the same film. The change between media rarely corresponds with a move into dream or out of dream or into memory or out of memory. The reason for such colour change must be found elsewhere. If the decision to change rendition has reason I have been unable to find it. Perhaps the reason lies in another possible subtext of Tarkovsky's work. On this matter I retreat to the safety that is Tarkovsky's ambiguity.

experiencing the film on a similar level to Bresson's. We are invited to search for something beyond the narrative level, and beyond that which is representational.

The dream sequence of *'Mirror'* offers the balance between the ontological quality of filming - the photographic image and the phenomenology that is recorded.<sup>5</sup> We begin by seeing a child waken from a dream. The bed he occupies is one of Tarkovsky's recurring visual motifs.<sup>6</sup> So we are reminded of sleep, but the child is awake - the first contradiction.

Then we join his mother as she is having her hair washed by his father. The imagery would seem usual if it were not for the pictorial distortion<sup>7</sup>, change in tonality, decelerated motion and contradictory surrounds. Behind the female central figure the walls glisten with damp, the plaster is crumbling and as the ceiling falls in with rain we notice that the gas stove is lit. The nightdress blows gently in the breeze.

Within the one frame we are introduced to the four elements. Tarkovsky always concerned himself with the elements and the significance of them as images, reminding us of our temporal existence. In moments of profound faith we are reminded that we are of earth and subject to

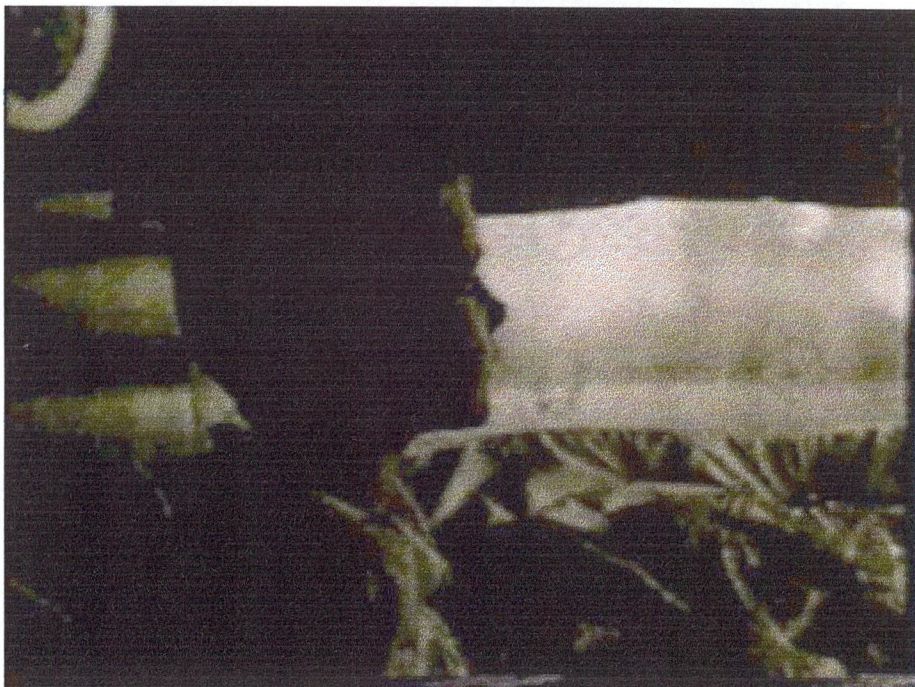
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<sup>5</sup> Illustrations Nos. 16-23, pp.43-46 .

<sup>6</sup> Illustrations Nos. 24-26, pp.47-48 .

<sup>7</sup> Pictorial distortion is quite different to the previously mentioned screen distortion. The latter is achieved through technological trickery in the recording process, while the former is the result of the director's 'mise en scene'.



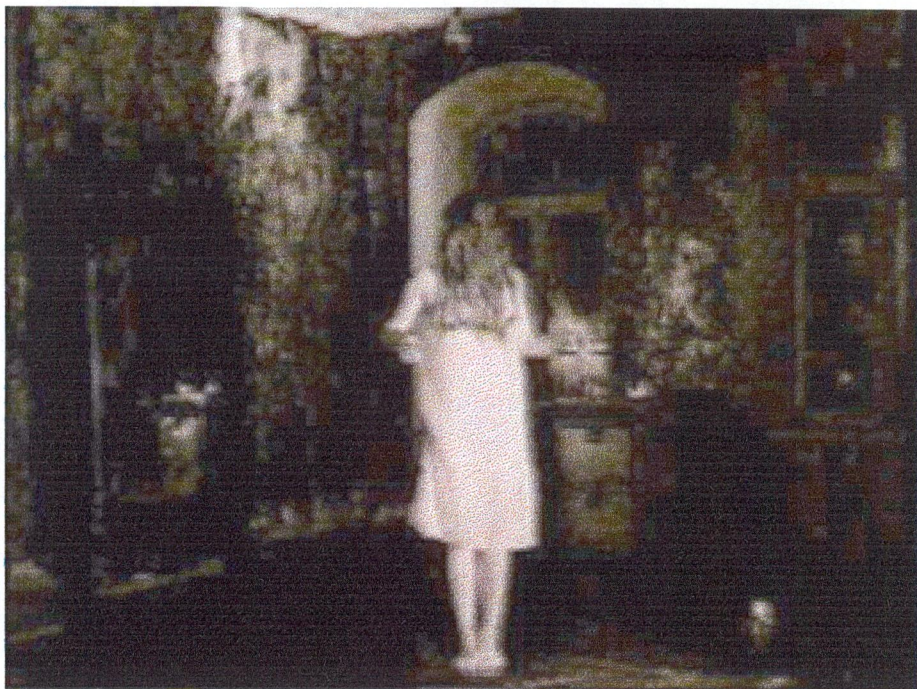


16. Ignat awakes (Tarkovsky *Mirror*, 1974).



17. Ignat's mother washes her hair (Tarkovsky *Mirror*, 1974).



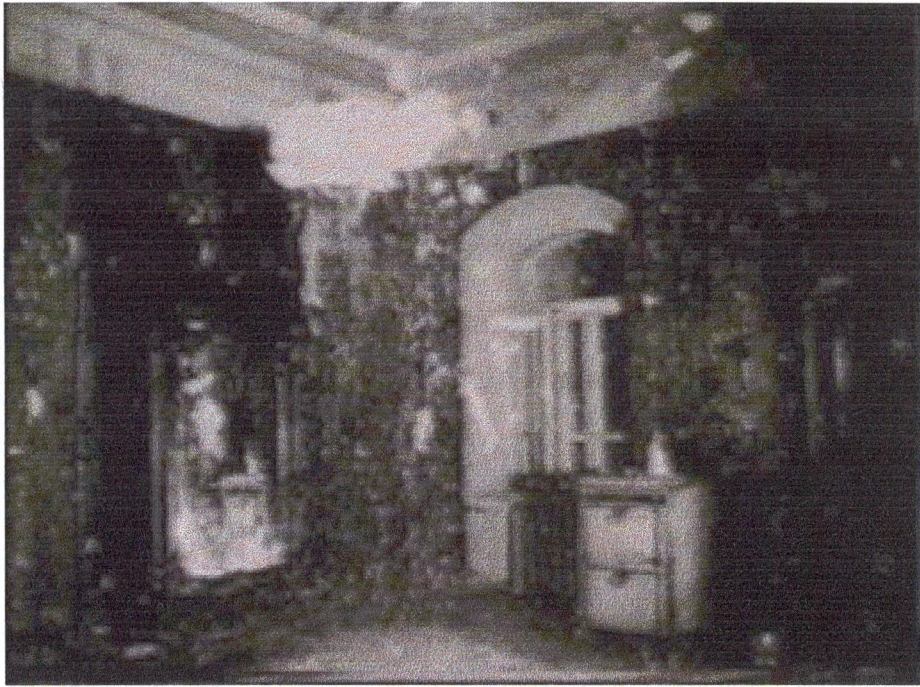


18. Ignat's mother (Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).



19. Crumbling interiors (Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).



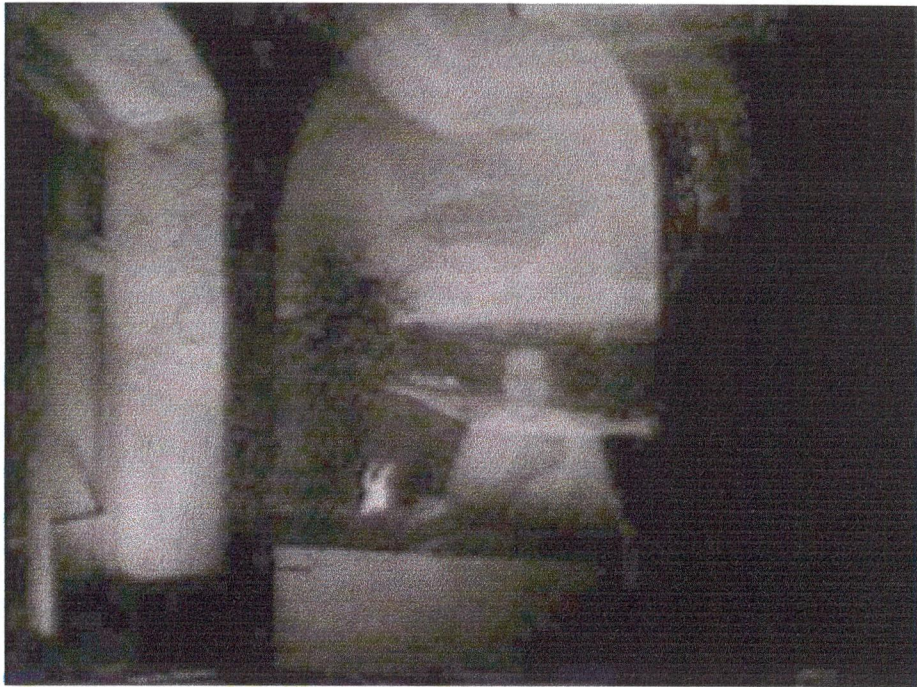


20. Ibid. (Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).

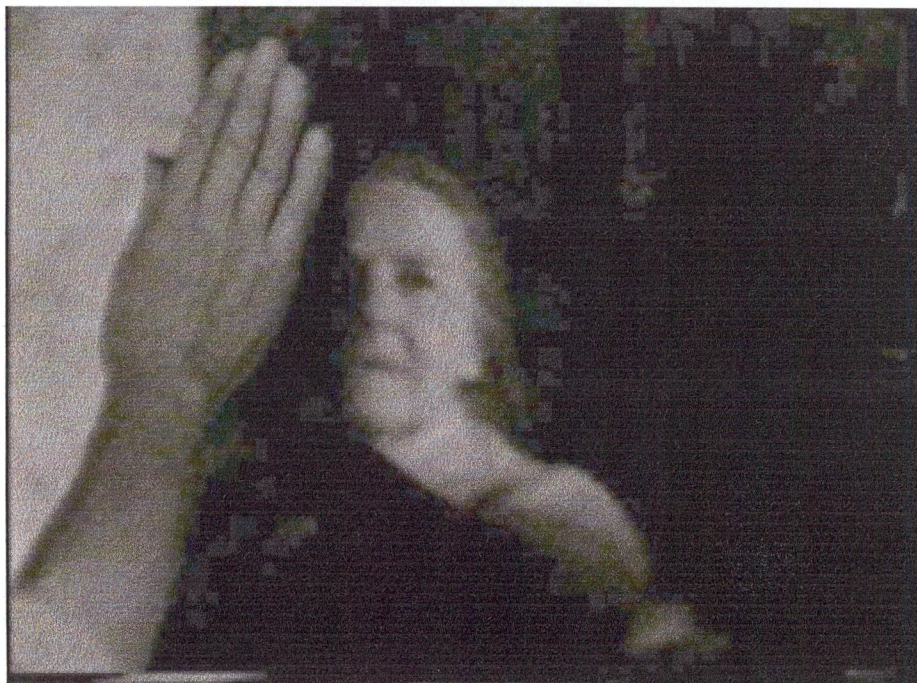


21. Ignat's mother (Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).





22. Ignat's mother approaches painting  
(Tarkovsky *Mirror*, 1974).



23. Reflection of older woman  
(Tarkovsky *Mirror*, 1974).





24. Bed motif  
(Tarkovsky, *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).





25. Bed motif  
(Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).



26. Ignat's bed  
(Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).

transformation, decay - death.

Tarkovsky's own life was to be cut short in 1986 when he died of cancer. His concern was always to find reason in existence in the face of death. The quest for attaining such knowledge is always tempered by physical grounding. The elements offer such physical grounding. In the dream the 'oneric air' and strange almost mystical experience is punctuated by the existence of the elements - reminders of the process of transformation. Architectural structures fall in, decay and damp destroy foundations and rain and fire compete. While this occurs the young female disappears, the room is filled with the elements, their destructive power and her absence. The camera is once again non-expressive and the experience is that of watching a documentary. When we see the female again, she is facing a painting behind glass. The reflection is that of a much older, more weathered woman.

As with Bresson, lengthy tracking shots are not the only source of meditation. An equivalent experience is found in Tarkovsky's stationary shots which abound. The result of these is similar to that explored in Chapter Two. The static shots, however, are very much Tarkovskian as, although the camera doesn't move and neither does the character or group, the rendition may change.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Footnote No. 4, p.41.



In contrast to Bresson's, the imagery is never everyday. We become immersed in scenes of obscurity. Consider the levitation of Ignat's mother in '*Mirror*'<sup>9</sup> or any one of the chambers within the 'zone' in '*Stalker*'. How very far removed from the everyday is the burning cottage surrounded by rain, in '*Mirror*'.<sup>10</sup> What prevents this being mere spectacle is, on the one hand, an often momentary glance as opposed to fully exploiting its strangeness and, on the other hand, its repetition elsewhere in his career. The burning cottage, a memory from his youth, is recreated again at length and great cost in '*Sacrifice*'.<sup>11</sup>

In the same film we see an example of a scene which took immense planning and co-ordination, yet its presence on the screen in terms of time doesn't correspond in a 1:1 ratio. The opening sequence shows a view of a mist-covered lake, surrounded by trees and at the bottom of a hill. We view this from the top of the hill. Whatever instinctive feelings we have about the beauty and resonance of this depiction, they are quickly arrested upon noticing the presence of a white horse (another Tarkovsky motif) far off in the distance. The placement of the horse is no accident, and we know from previous Tarkovsky films that its presence has purpose. The image is short-lived, we could easily have missed it. What

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<sup>9</sup> Illustration No. 27, p. 51 .

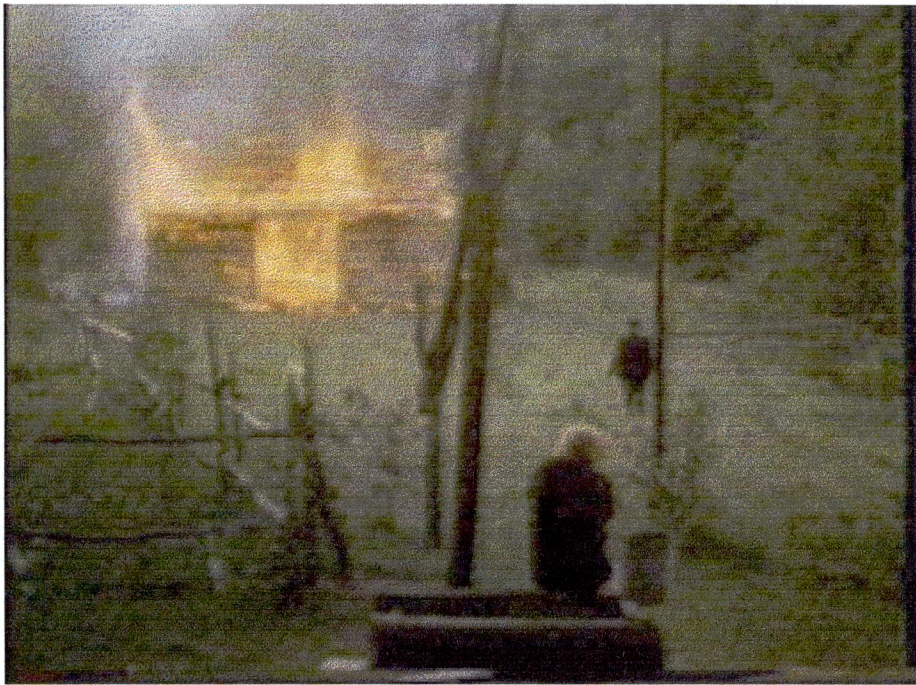
<sup>10</sup> Illustrations Nos. 28-29, p. 52 .

<sup>11</sup> The large house was set ablaze in the final sequence of '*The Sacrifice*'. During filming, however, the cameraman incurred technical difficulty with one of the two cameras. Tarkovsky insisted the house be rebuilt and the sequence be repeated. This was done within three days. The filming of the event by Michal Leszcylowsky in a documentary entitled '*Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky*', shows the extremes Tarkovsky was to go to and the extremes he would push people to for perfection. Ironically the sequence was to be his last due to illness and subsequent death. Illustrations Nos. 30-32, pp. 53-54 .

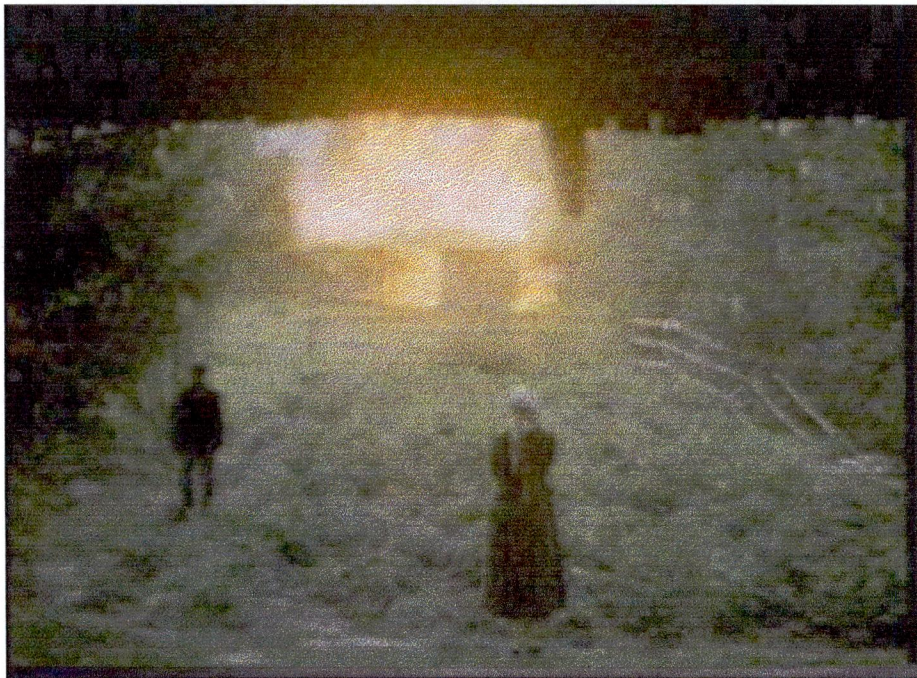


27. Levitation of Ignat's mother  
(Tarkovsky, *'Mirror'*, 1974).





28. Burning cottage in rain  
(Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).



29. Continuation of burning cottage sequence  
(Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).





30. Tarkovsky filming *'The Sacrifice'*  
(Leszcylowski, *'Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky'*, 1986).





31. Filming of the final sequence  
(Tarkovsky *'The Sacrifice'*, 1986).



32. Filming of the final sequence  
(Tarkovsky *'The Sacrifice'*, 1986).



we remember, therefore, is not the amazingly picturesque surrounds but the horse and its possible meaning. Immediately we are to think, become involved, and concentrate.

All this camera work and 'mise en scene' is to aid what Tarkovsky calls 'spiritual revelation'. A large part of that 'spiritual revelation' is found in the previously mentioned but heretofore unexplored 'motifs'.

More than any other stylistic attribute, Tarkovsky's motifs offer a really strong link between all his films. To list the motifs themselves would be the subject of a book itself. A motif can become one singular visual symbol - a glass of milk; a white horse; a bed or a sequence of shots - dreams, travel, the elements, sacrifice.

From our own viewing of the films we can come to the conclusion that Tarkovsky very definitely worked to a form. The repetition of a visual imagery tells us this. Each image has a logic for Tarkovsky (however, esoteric and useless for us that might be). This assessment is defended by Maya Turovskaya and her writings on the original screenplays for 'Ivan's Childhood' and 'Andrei Roublev':

*In retrospect, it now seems astonishing that ... the very first version of his own Ivan's Childhood ... proposed to the studio already contained the dream sequences almost exactly as they were finally to appear on the screen.*

(Turovskaya, 1988, p. 94).



In the original draft the motifs were planned and described vividly as they later appeared in the film. The cuckoo's summer call, the rain, the horses chewing apples on the white sand, the well were all planned and carefully conceived. Improvisation with camera and on-site possibilities did not occur. Tarkovsky had a particular agenda to which he was dedicated.

This transference of thought without compromise from the screenplay to the filmic image is tangible witness to the spirituality of Tarkovsky. It expresses, without doubt, that although original source material is from the world of literature, Tarkovsky remained the author of his own productions. This premeditated, perhaps closed, approach leads Petric to propose that the dream imagery and the obscure, irrational particulars (motifs) cannot be subject to psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytical interpretation of the filmed event is suppressed by the unique cinematic experience that is on offer. It is hampered too by the defamiliarisation of the particular that is the result of Tarkovsky's motifs. For Petric the unsatisfactory findings of psychoanalysis are compensated for if one gives themselves up to the 'oneric mood'.

*To experience all this, one should search beyond the shots' narrative meaning, since it is beneath the image's representational aspect where numerous layers of ineffable transcendental signification can be found. Consequently the 'Mirror' and 'Stalker' transcend the Freudian signification of dream images, in that they do not so much function as latent symbolism as they contribute to a subliminal experience of the dream world.*

(Petric, 1989, p. 30).

## TARKOVSKY'S MOTIFS AND DEFAMILIARISATION

As previously noted, Tarkovsky often rejected symbolism and metaphor in relation to individual images. On the one hand we can accept this as Tarkovsky became productive in a post-Stalin era where propaganda had manipulated common symbols and developed a rhetoric of allegory. On the other hand are we to believe that his repeated motif of spilt milk is to transcend the everyday signification? Are we to look beyond the cliché 'no use crying over spilt milk'?<sup>12</sup> Tarkovsky followed Bresson's lead in giving undue and repeated attention to such images as 'spilt milk'. It is my opinion that like Bresson, Tarkovsky's aim is to defamiliarise us with the images so that we look beyond the physical representations.

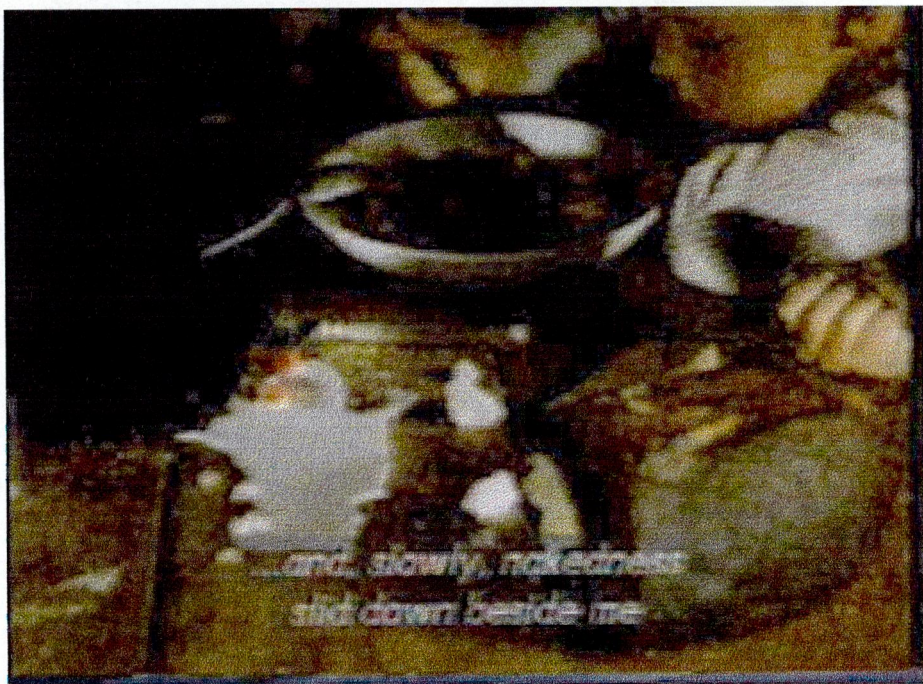
In Wim Wenders' film *'Wings of Desire'* (1987), the tale of guardian angels of no temporal existence who occupy the space around and above Berlin. The main protagonist, Bruno Ganz, has a personal dilemma. He is an angel considering becoming mortal who has no knowledge of the particular (the everyday) and wishes to familiarise himself with such. He proclaims to his partner:

*A passer-by folded her umbrella while it was raining and let herself be drenched. A school boy described to his teacher a fern growing out of the earth and amazed his teacher. A blind woman groped for her watch having sensed my presence.*

*It's great to exist as the spirit, to testify, day-by-day and forever on the spiritual in people's minds, but I do get tired of my spiritual existence, ... I wish I could grow a weight which would bind me to the earth. I wish I could say, at each step, at each gust of wind, 'now'. say 'now' and 'now' and no longer*

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<sup>12</sup> Illustration No. 33, p. 53 .



33. Spilt milk (Tarkovsky, *Mirror*, 1974)



*'forever' and 'for eternity' ... No, I don't have to beget a child or plant a tree, but it would be rather nice to come home after a long day, to feed the cat like Philip Marlowe. To have a fever, blacken my fingers reading the newspaper. For once to find excitement not in the mind but in a meal.*

(Wenders, *'Wings of Desire'*)

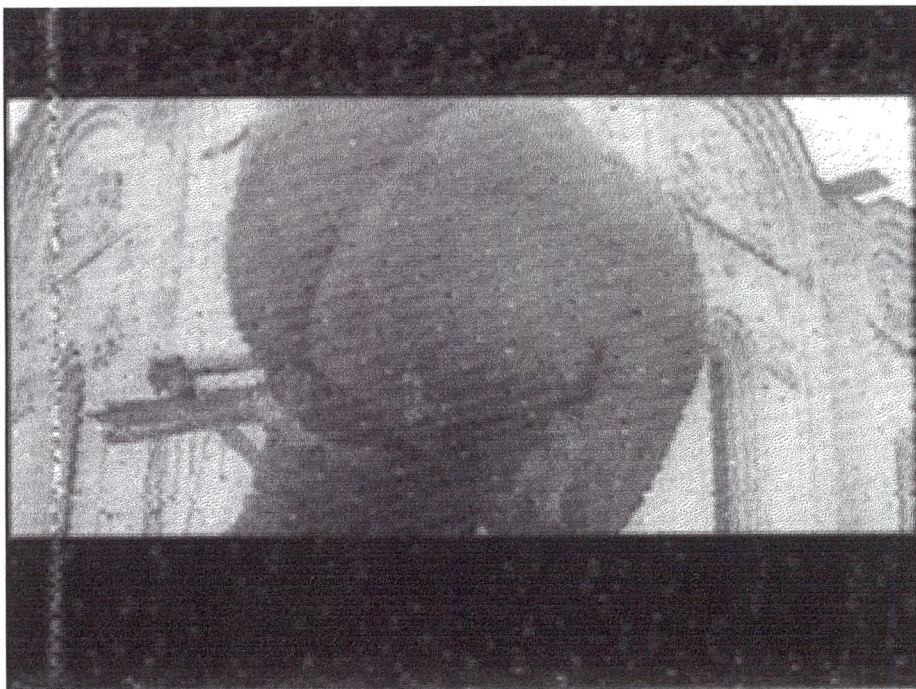
While Bresson exaggerates the 'everyday', Tarkovsky gives excessive attention to his repeated motifs. Both efforts are to remind us of our temporal existence. In realising our limitations we can concentrate on possible transcendence. The desire of Wenders' angel is the opposite. He wishes to experience the particular, to experience physicality.<sup>13</sup>

So how does this defamiliarisation occur? One of Tarkovsky's favoured motifs is that of flight. More often than not, the depiction of flight in film expresses travel (a literal representation Tarkovsky ignored in *'Solaris'*). In the case of Tarkovsky's films, flight is never merely a representation of physical displacement. For Jameson, the balloon flight that opens *'Andrei Roublev'* is intended to suggest a flight from *'the horror and the butchery of earth, the monstrous cruelty of human nature'*.<sup>14</sup> (Jameson, 1992, p. 89). The motif established itself in *'Ivan's Childhood'* where a very rare compromise between original intention on paper and capability on film was sought. The film was to begin with Ivan flying through the trees. It was to be achieved through superimposition but never was. Instead we follow Ivan in a calm idyllic setting, a cuckoo is calling, the boy smiles and laughs as suddenly he is in the trees. We know he has

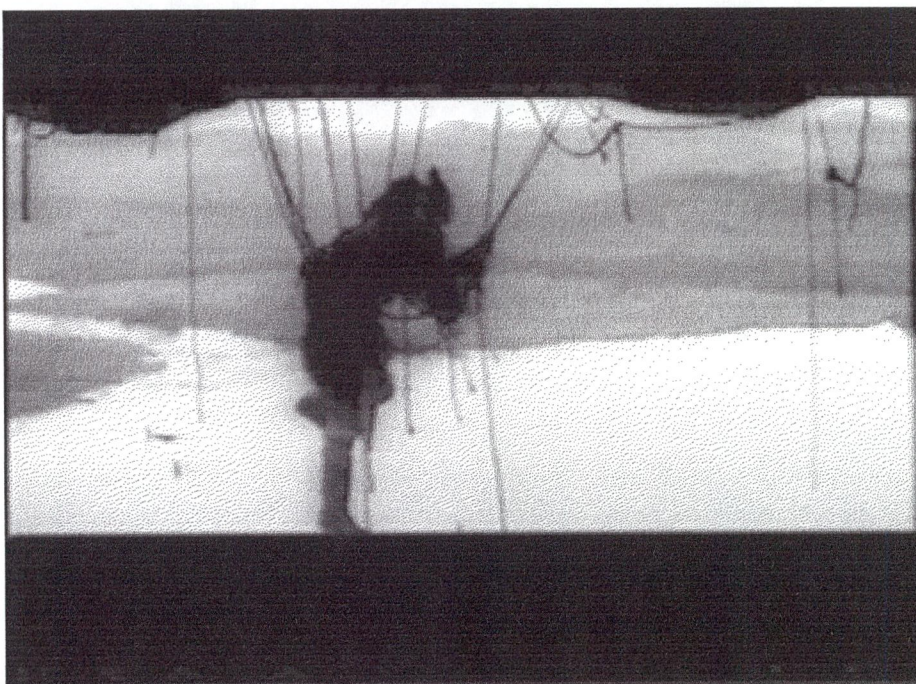
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<sup>13</sup> Wenders dedicated the film to Ozo, Truffaut and Tarkovsky.

<sup>14</sup> Illustrations Nos. 34-39, pp. 60-62 .

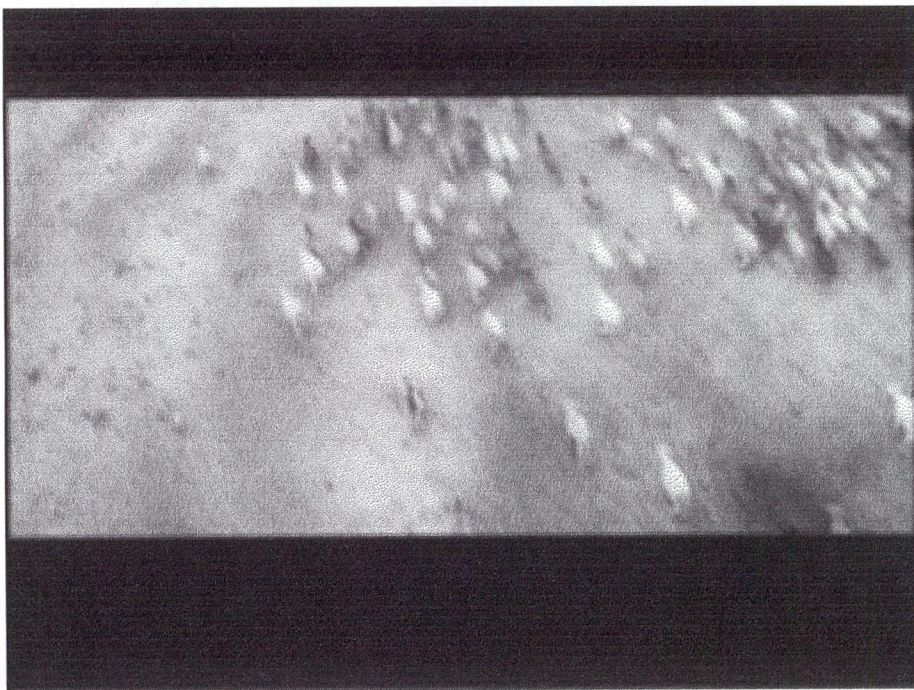


34. Raising the balloon  
(Tarkovsky *'Andrei Roublev,'* 1966).



35. The peasant takes flight  
(Tarkovsky *'Andrei Roublev,'* 1966).



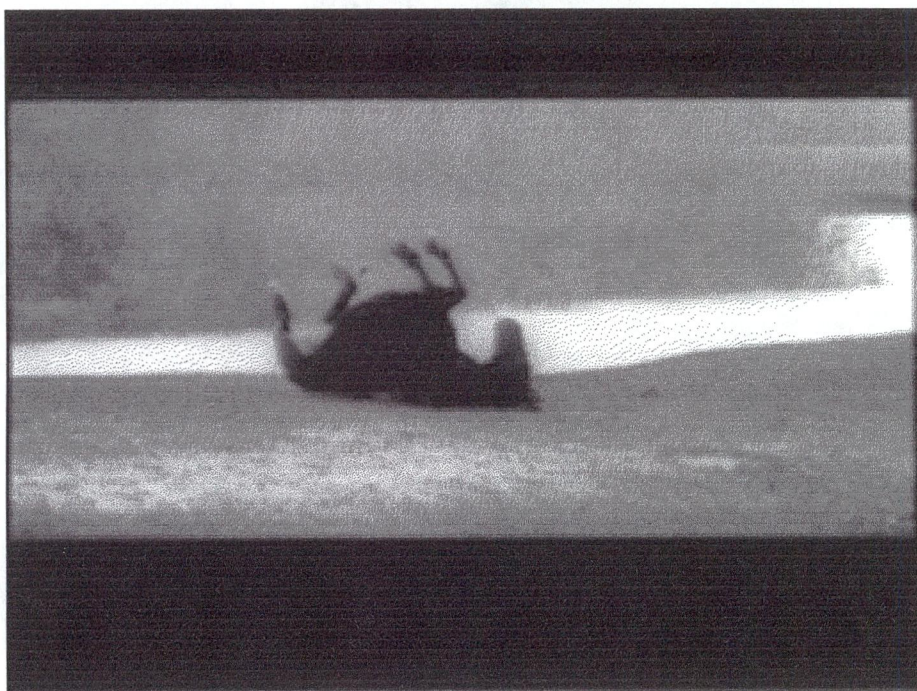


36. Horses below  
(Tarkovsky *'Andrei Roublev,'* 1966).

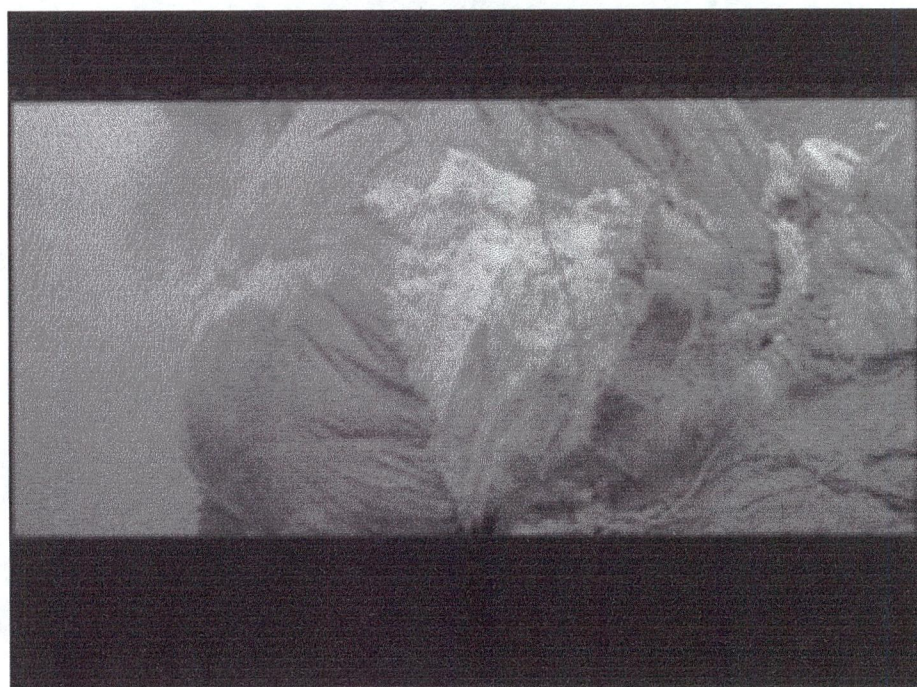


37. The peasant  
(Tarkovsky *'Andrei Roublev,'* 1966).





38. Horse rolling in mud  
(Tarkovsky *'Andrei Roublev,'* 1966).



39. The grounding and deflation of the balloon  
(Tarkovsky *'Andrei Roublev,'* 1966).

escaped the weight of his earth-bound existence - the extent of which we will witness in the film - but we don't know how. Tarkovsky suggests flight but doesn't specify how it is achieved. In an era where scientific development in relation to flight meant that visits to the moon were possible, Tarkovsky remained unimpressed and avoided all temptation to particularise his mysticism.

His efforts to break down symbolism further are elucidated in Maya Turovskaya's account of the aforementioned balloon sequence. Tarkovsky originally considered wings for flight but the possibility of association with Icarus was too strong for him. He invented a clumsy, rope and cloth air balloon, strung together from skins. As the balloon was invented particular to Tarkovsky's vision it is timeless in its originality. Tarkovsky wished to disregard familiarity and 'false romance'. The sequence remains an image of man's potential and his spiritual striving. None of our modern-day associations are called into play.

Similarly, without justification in *'Mirror'* the mother and father float - this time suggestive of levitation.<sup>15</sup> *'Mirror'* also contains passing references to balloon travel as Tarkovsky includes newsreel of a Zeppelin. We are not to see it fly or carry out any of its common functions. We merely see it being checked out before flight.<sup>16</sup> From these examples it is clear that Tarkovsky wishes to transcend our normal interpretation of flight.

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<sup>15</sup> Illustration No. 27, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Illustrations Nos. 40-43, pp. 64-65.



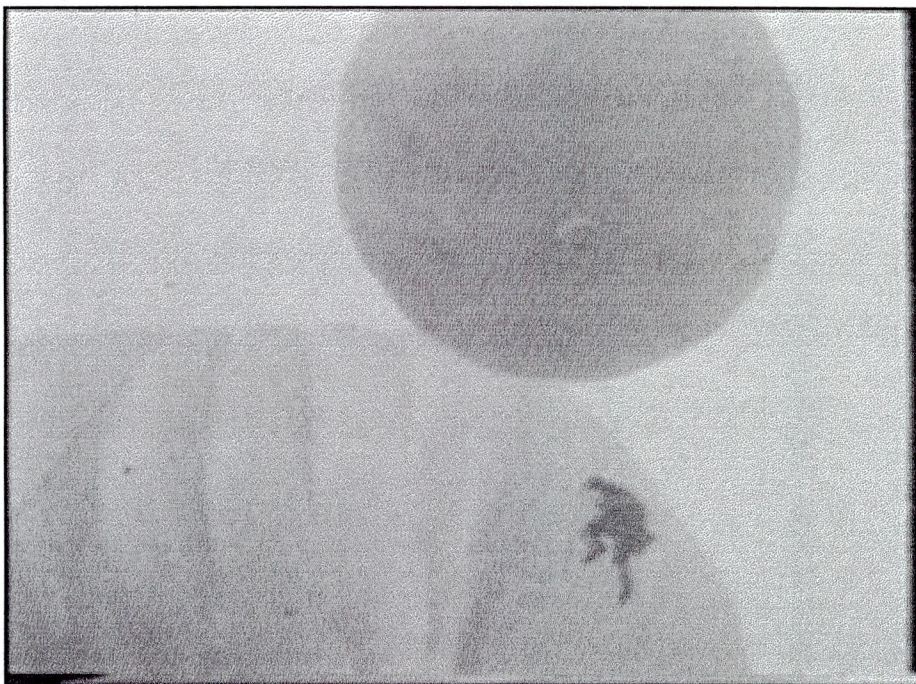


40. Onlooker  
(Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).

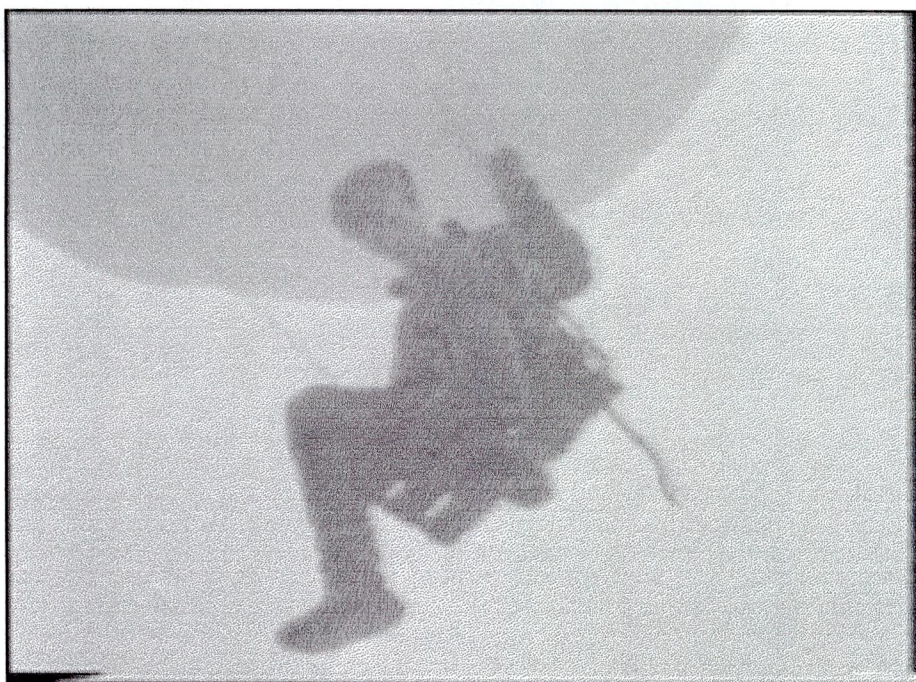


41. Preparing the Zeplin  
(Tarkovsky *'Mirror'*, 1974).





42. Continuation of news footage  
(Tarkovsky *Mirror*, 1974).



43. Continuation of news footage  
(Tarkovsky *Mirror*, 1974).



The personal adaptation and subsequent defamiliarisation in attempts to achieve transcendence, are also evident in the repetition of his church motif. The church is never seen to be the austere place of prayer as Bresson depicts it but rather one of personal sanctity - often physically in ruins. The most memorable depiction is, for me, the final scene of '*Nostalgia*'. This image, taken originally from a Casper David Friedrich painting,<sup>17</sup> mixes reference from German Romantic painting and Tarkovsky's own adaptation of the image of the church as a building that offers sanctity and protection.

The scene depicts the protagonist Andrei resting by the side of a pond with a dog. Behind him is a country home, safe in its surrounding hills. In the pond there is a reflection of something obscure yet architectural.<sup>18</sup> The long slow retraction of the camera reveals that the protagonist, his land and his house are all within the walls of a ruined church.<sup>19</sup> Again the personal imagery postpones familiarity and those wishing to locate the image in a surrealist framework are denied that because (a) the church image belongs to Tarkovsky's vocabulary of motifs and is related more to the church and bell scenes in '*Andrei Roublev*' than to common culture and (b) the scene relates to German Romantic Painting, often surreal in its imagery but not in its intent.

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<sup>17</sup> 'Eldena Ruins' Casper David Friedrich, c. 1836. Illustration No. 43, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Illustration No. 45, p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Illustrations. Nos. 46-47, p. 69.



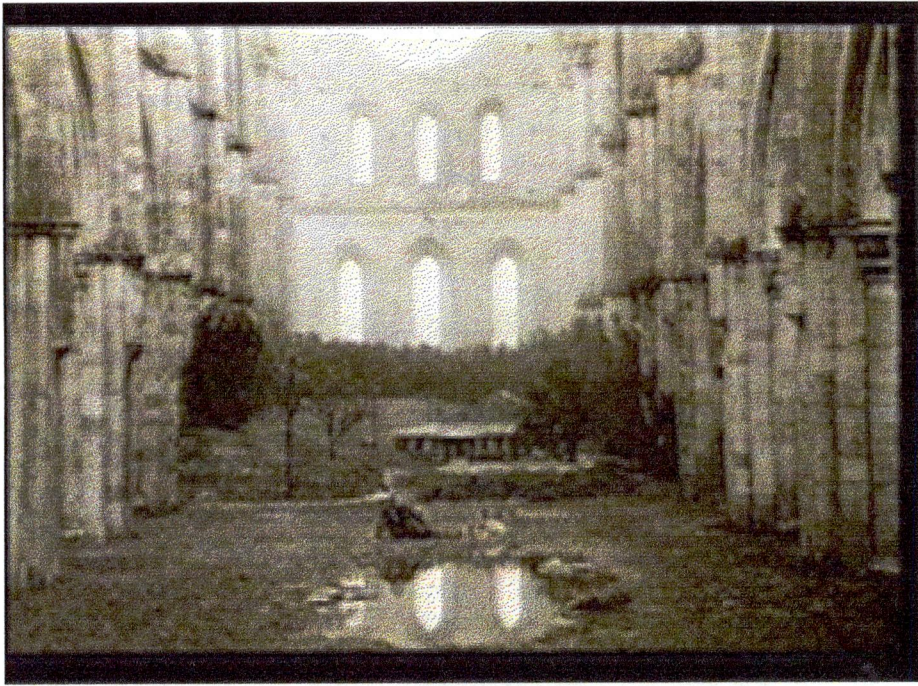


44. *'Eldena Ruins'* Casper David Friedrich, c. 1836.



45. Andrei by pool, final sequence  
(Tarkovsky, *Nostalgia*, 1983).





46. Final sequence  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).



43. Final sequence  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).

Unlike Bresson's reliance on available, everyday imagery, Tarkovsky invents personal iconography, the elements of which are familiar to us. When they are juxtaposed and set up in relationships, familiarity is lost. In the previously described scene, the church and the home are ascribed new meaning because they are seen together, one relying on the other. The new meaning is a spiritual one. The representation of Tarkovsky's motifs results in this defamiliarisation and abandonment of literal interpretation. We, therefore, must look beyond to search for spiritual meaning.

The films, therefore, can be read in a similar manner to those of Bresson, despite the fact that Tarkovsky's suffusion of rich imagery and personal iconography is a polar opposite to Bresson's stark, reduced minimalism.



## Chapter 4

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### ***'L'ARGENT' AND 'NOSTALGHIA'* BRESSION'S AND TARKOVSKY'S PESSIMISM**

*Surely an anti-foundational era is able to satisfy its aesthetic, philosophical and political needs without the trappings of superstition, and is at last in a position to jettison the baggage of the great monotheisms ...*

Fredric Jameson



The opening quote of this chapter is taken from Fredric Jameson's book of collected essays, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, or more precisely the essay 'On Soviet Magic Realism'. The essay is concerned with Alexander Sokurov's *'Days of Eclipse'* (1988) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *'Stalker'*. Both films are Soviet adaptations of Soviet science fiction novels penned by the Strugatsky brothers. Jameson's essay explores the method of adaptation and finds fault with *'Stalker'* and Tarkovsky's rereading of the original novel - *'Roadside Picnic'*. In contrast, Jameson praises Sokurov and his film for refusing to, in his words, "*cross that thin line that separates Lem or Dick (Strugatsky) from Kafka*". (Jameson, 1992, p. 92). The film's virtue lies in its independence from modernist traditions (still very much alive in Russia, the then Soviet Union). For Jameson, Sokurov makes no pretensions towards a sub-genre of 'high art' or 'art films' for the very reason that such classification doesn't exist in a 'post-modern' era. To favour Kafka over Lem or Dick in the production of art is no longer 'legitimate'. Jameson believes that Tarkovsky attempts to cross this line and so he feels a 'chagrin' when viewing it:

*This novel Tarkovsky made into the most lugubrious religious fable, his cameras and his actors moving, if anything more slowly than real time itself with a solemnity quite intolerable to any but the truest believers (in Tarkovsky, I mean, and I speak as one who has a great deal of tolerance for the longeurs of this auteur) ... the objection 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 after thoughts about the religious content are to be chastened by the reminder that this is, after all, high art ... so that what is objectionable about it is not the art as such, but rather the rehearsal of now tiresome and old fashioned auteurist paradigms.*

(Jameson, 1992, p. 92).

In a similar criticism by Rosenbaum fault is found with the director's decision to address his own spirituality. In the eyes of Rosenbaum, Tarkovsky's films tend to be over-religious, even sanctimonious didacticism:

*But when we come to a spiritual film-maker like Tarkovsky, the question of acceptance or rejection becomes more complicated. I have to confess that as a thinker about spiritual and holy matters, Tarkovsky often strikes me as pretentious, egocentric and downright offensive; ... and his view of piety is generally neither attractive nor inspiring.*

(Rosenbaum, 1990, p. 62).

Both critics feel that it is now unjustifiable in a post-modern (anti-foundational) era for art to have a religious/spiritual narrative. If this is the case then surely such criticism should be addressed to Bresson with equal concern. It is my contention that the gravity of the religious content of Bresson's films outweighs that which is found in Tarkovsky's.

In the preceding chapters I have, in order to examine in formal terms the stylistics of both directors, accepted their belief in the interdependent relationship between art and religion. I move now to take a closer comparative study of two films '*L'Argent*' and '*Nostalghia*' in order to address Jameson's accusation of 'artistic pretentiousness', seen as a result of that interdependent relationship.



In 1983 Tarkovsky and Bresson shared a prize at Cannes for special creative achievement. Bresson's '*L'Argent*' was applauded by most critics and specialist film journals, quickly earning the salutation 'masterpiece' (a praise not too distant from the 'superlatives' noted by Rothschild in my introduction). An example of such was Brian Baxter's review in '*Film and Filming*'.

*It is undoubtedly a masterwork ... a complex view of modern society which will, I believe, be regarded as the single most important film of the decade.*

(Baxter's review, *Le Fanu*, 1984, pp. 51-52).

Based on a story by Tolstoy, it is at once both political and religious. Again Bresson has personalised the original text by reducing imagery and minimising events. The original tale is given a contemporary setting. (Both '*L'Argent*' and '*Nostalghia*' have a contemporary setting). The story follows a sequence of events of escalating evil which occur in a 'domino' fashion. It all begins with two youths passing off a forged note in a small photography shop. In turn the shop passes the forged note, with two more, to an unsuspecting oil-delivery boy. While trying to pay for lunch in a local café, the boy is arrested and charged. Although the court hearing finds him guilty he is allowed to go free. This is of little consolation as he has lost his wife and his job. He turns to crime and is arrested again, this time found guilty of aiding armed robbery and subsequently imprisoned. Simultaneously, the clerk of the same photography shop (who was bribed by the owner to lie in court against the main protagonist) is also involved in escalating crime. In contrast his descent into crime is his own decision.

He is never forced by his condition or external forces to take up crime. For a while they meet in prison. After this, attention is again focused on the main protagonist and his pledge to revenge<sup>1</sup> (as in '*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*', '*Je me vengerai*').<sup>2</sup> The pessimism embodied in the young man (now out of prison) intensifies. His descent into evil reaches its climax in the penultimate sequence. With an axe he slaughters the only woman who has shown him any compassion. The final scene is his timid surrender to the local authorities.<sup>3</sup>

What occurs offscreen to bring about sudden repentance is anybody's guess. In the novel he looks into his victim's eyes and sees shining goodness, which becomes the motor of his conversion. Bresson, with his customary reduction and elliptical editing, leaves the reason open to speculation.

'*Nostalghia*' was Tarkovsky's first film to be made outside Russia. It is set in Italy to which Tarkovsky later defected. On its release it was greeted with much less enthusiasm than '*L'Argent*'. The narrative can be said to be autobiographical or at least suggestive of Tarkovsky's state of mind. The main character, Andrei, is a homesick Russian, who has travelled to Italy in order to research the life of an eighteenth-century Russian composer. Accompanying him is a beautiful Italian interpretress. While in

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration No. 48, p. 76 .

<sup>2</sup> Illustration No. 4, p. 19 .

<sup>3</sup> Illustrations Nos. 49-55, p. 77 .





48. Revenge is promised  
(Bresson, '*L'Argent*', 1983).



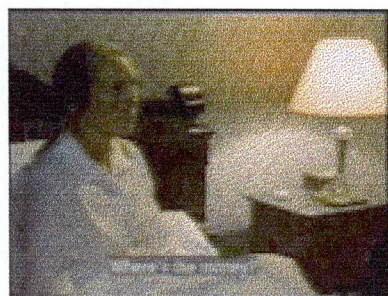
49.



50.



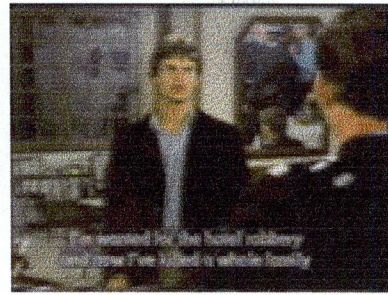
51.



52.



53.



54.



55.

49-55 Final sequence from '*L'Argent*'  
(Bresson, '*L'Argent*', 1983).



Italy he meets Domenico, a social outcast whose hermetic lifestyle and intellectual concerns interest Andrei. Andrei himself is seen to be distraught with a sense of loss and nostalgia while tempted into unfaithfulness by the Italian. Meanwhile Domenico mourns for a past era and is heavily disheartened by modern society and life with the atomic bomb. Domenico's dream is the change of universal values, a return to a point in history from which we may try again. In contrast, Andrei's quest is a personal one - one of reconciliation with his own country and being. Domenico preaches to an audience of vacant fools from a scaffolding around the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius before covering himself in petrol and publicly committing suicide.<sup>4</sup> Previously he has given the, by now, ill Andrei a task. He is to walk the length of the drained sulphur baths with a lit candle, and in so doing realises the hope of salvation and attainable grace.<sup>5</sup> After a long, drawn-out, uninterrupted tracking shot of Andrei walking from one end to the other (twice returning to relight the candle), he reaches the end and collapses.<sup>6</sup>

## ARTISTIC PRETENTIOUSNESS

At a glance both films seem dissimilar. Ironically they share a lot more than a special prize at Cannes. Both films concern themselves with a pessimistic view of modern society and an investigation of that pessimism

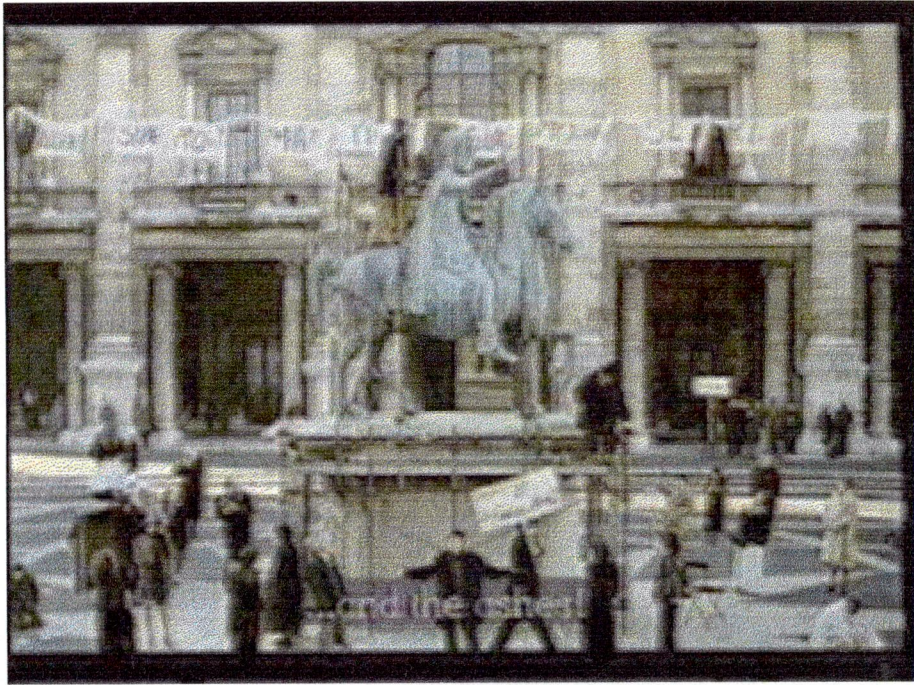
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<sup>4</sup> Illustrations Nos. 56-59, pp. 79-80.

<sup>5</sup> Illustrations Nos. 60-63, pp. 81-82.

<sup>6</sup> In the film we see Andrei overcome by weakness and collapse. In his book *'Sculpting in Time'*, Tarkovsky talks of the death of Andrei upon reaching the end of the baths. Such contradictions, however annoying, are to be found throughout Tarkovsky's writings.





56. Dominico preaches to the fools  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).

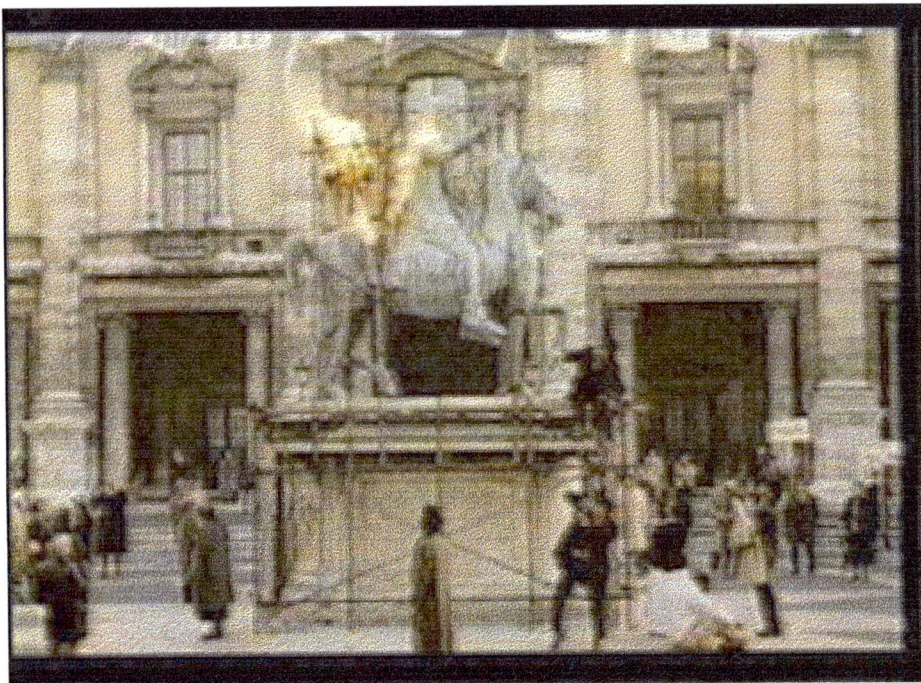


57. Dominico covers himself in petrol  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).



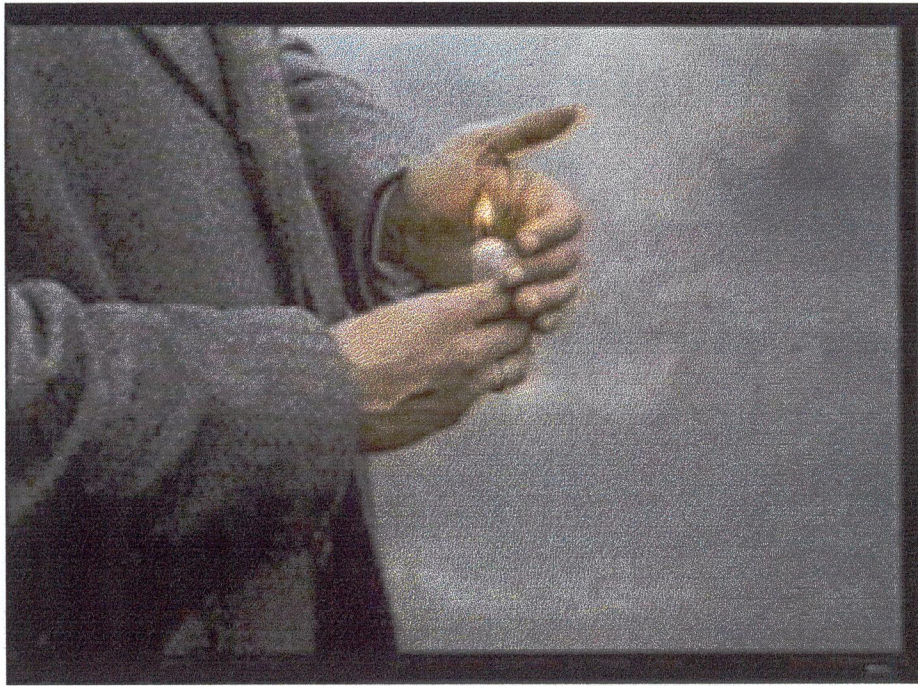


58. Dominico lights the petrol  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).



59. Dominico's suicide  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).





60. Andrei's candle challenge  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).



61. Andrei begins the walk  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).





62. Protecting the flame  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).



63. Andrei completes the challenge and collapses  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).



and its relationship to insanity. Both films continue the stylistic concerns already addressed in my previous chapters and both explore suicide as a solution to disillusionment with the modern condition (or perhaps the post-modern condition!). Most importantly, each film refers to monotheistic belief in the 80's (the anti-foundational era). A closer look at the films would, I believe, acquit Tarkovsky of any accusations of pretentiousness especially in relation to Bresson. For me the key to accepting or rejecting Jameson's criticism is to be found in arriving at a measurement of the 'gravity' of Tarkovsky's religion. I agree with Jameson's suggestion that the form of Tarkovsky's work forestalls our aesthetic qualms, this I have explored in Chapter Three. However, I am not convinced that the religious content is further 'chastened' by a reminder that this is 'high art'. In my opinion, such an accusation is more applicable to Bresson and in particular *'L'Argent'*.

In terms of visual imagery *'L'Argent'* is notably different from Bresson's preceding films. Most notable perhaps is the absence of religious iconography. No reference is made, either verbally or visually, to Christianity. Unlike *'A Man Escaped'*, there is no bible, no crucifix, no image of Christ or the Holy Family, nor are there any specific Roman Catholic 'trappings'. The rosary and the Blessed Virgin Mary are absent so too is any reference to the Scriptures.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of such

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<sup>7</sup> Bresson offered us an alternative title for *'A Man Escaped'*, that being *'The Spirit Breathes Where It Will'*. Taken from the Roman Catholic Translation of the Bible, they are the words of Jesus spoken to Nicodemus in the third chapter of St. John. It illustrates the Catholic dictum that 'heaven helps the man who helps himself'. Illustrations Nos. 2, 3, p. 17.



iconography we are denied Christian or more particularly the Roman Catholic interpretation of the story. We are to believe that Bresson has opted for atheistic existentialism. This to me is a fallacy. The story remains true to Bresson's reading of the Roman Catholic doctrine.

Although, on the face of it, Bresson's Marxist tale is one devoid of the 'trappings of superstition' it is to me more of a 'religious fable' than any of Tarkovsky's films. The nihilism of the protagonist's madness is all at once vanquished by his repentance and conversion. He has seen the error of his ways and in one didactic, elliptical piece of editing we are denied knowledge of what, if anything, has led him to repent. We know not why the protagonist wishes to repent. The film, therefore, is not what it seems, Bresson's cold mechanical phenomenology of the modern city and detached examination of human physiognomy is a clever front to do exactly what Tarkovsky is accused of doing - expressing religious concerns. In experiencing '*L'Argent*' we are tricked into receiving the message that salvation lies in repentance and surrender. It is the style that has tricked us into coming face to face with a Christian moral. In the case of '*L'Argent*', our experience of the atheistic existentialist investigation of the protagonist's nihilism amounts to what is essentially Jameson's experience of '*Stalker*'. That is: (a) We are involved in an investigation of violence which has particular relevance to contemporary culture. This involvement is induced by Bresson for one purpose - to advertise Roman Catholic faith and its offer of salvation upon repentance

and (b) the gravity of the religious content is weighted by the preceding investigation into pessimism.

Jameson's problem with Tarkovsky is that he used his art to present a moral message and that such a message was unacceptable, especially as late in the century as 1979. *'L'Argent'* was released four years later and is, for me, better suited to Jameson's description of *'Stalker'* than *'Stalker'* itself. The form of *'L'Argent'* is primarily a pretence to express not just spiritual concerns but a moral didactic. *'L'Argent'*, in my opinion, is guilty of artistic pretentiousness as throughout its investigation of contemporary pessimism it hides from us Bresson's real concern. In Tarkovsky's films, spirituality is openly discussed, yet remains ambiguous and an investigation of the pessimism felt by the author<sup>8</sup> is never sacrificed to preach Christian redemption. For me a sacrifice of proper investigation in order to preach occurs in *'L'Argent'*.

In contrast, Tarkovsky's morals remain ambiguous. If a moral is to be found it is never as dogmatic as Bresson's, as a result, Tarkovsky's films are never as didactic. The gravity of his issues is not readily identifiable nor is the message as traditional as Bresson's. The nihilism of Domenico is never addressed as he gives in to suicide.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tarkovsky's personal sense of pessimism is chronicled in his diaries - *'Time Within Time'*.

<sup>9</sup> Bresson has previously, fearlessly explored suicide. He has presented it as death with grace in *'Mouchette'* (1967), *'Une Femme Douce'* (1969) and *'Le Diable Probablement'* (1977). Now it would seem he is returning to the Church's condemnation of suicide.



## BRESSON'S AND TARKOVSKY'S HERO

As Bresson's hero is the product of Roman Catholic doctrine, that being someone who, despite the measure of their transgression into evil, is willing to repent and serve penance in order to receive forgiveness and eternal salvation. Tarkovsky's hero is of different stock. Firstly, for Tarkovsky to deal with Christian aspirations as presented by the Church or the Scriptures, would have been impossible in the Communist climate in which he worked.<sup>10</sup> It would seem more plausible that Tarkovsky's hero is a development of Dostoevsky's. The meanderings on meaning and being are personal and never didactic in keeping with those of Tarkovsky's favourite Dostoevsky hero '*The Idiot*'.

*What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero and how the hero appears to himself.*

(Bakhtin, 1984, p. 47).

Mikhail Bakhtin's above description could easily apply to Tarkovsky's *Stalker* or *Domenico*. Tarkovsky's view of Dostoevsky was that he favoured humanism over any particular religious doctrine and that the spirituality within his novels, particularly that of the '*The Idiot*' was a personal one independent of the Church. The pessimism expressed by Tarkovsky is that of the individual and that which is brought about by the events particular to him/her. This is true of Dostoevsky's idiot of which Tarkovsky spoke:

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<sup>10</sup> With '*Nostalgia*' he was outside of those confines but still funded by Mosfilm, so still rigorously confined by communist bureaucracy.

*Many things have been ascribed to Dostoevsky which just aren't true. For example, people everywhere - including Moscow - think of him as a religious writer. But it does not seem to have occurred to them that he was not so much religious as one of the first to express the drama of the man in whom the organ of belief has atrophied. He dealt with the tragedy of the loss of spirituality.*

(Tarkovsky's lecture, Christie, 1990, p. xxii).

An important aspect of Tarkovsky's art here is its autobiographical reference. One cannot decide to view the main protagonist of '*Nostalgia*' as separate from Tarkovsky himself. This is doubled by his also being called Andrei.

The hero of Tarkovsky's films is often himself, and the spirituality expressed is that of personal belief. Tarkovsky never aligned himself with any particular Church or doctrine, finding more reference from literature and the history of painting. Although Tarkovsky did believe in the existence of one God and his films do relate specifically to monotheistic iconography, the belief because of its personal particularity is, I believe, more acceptable than Bresson's. In relation to monotheistic iconography, as already noted, his description of, for example, a church is a personal one. Tarkovsky's image focuses more on the architecture of a church as opposed to the institution it houses. In Bresson's films an image of a church is simply a symbol of faith and the place of communal prayer. There is no intended meaning beyond signification of a particular religion. Religion consequently is not personal and is defined by a particular Church and its set of beliefs. In the case of Bresson, it is the Roman



Catholic Church and Roman Catholic Faith. The protagonist's surrender in the final sequence of *'L'Argent'*<sup>11</sup> is stripped bare of any particularity; there is no sense of personal dilemma or angst, even though he has killed a whole family with an axe. We know nothing of his thought-process. The events are reduced to actions devoid of any particularity. The slaughter of a family is effectively transformed into a symbol - a symbol of evil which exists to oppose the following act of surrender which is also reduced to being a symbol. Bresson's contention, therefore, is that evil (on any scale) can be vanquished by repentance. To me such an assumption, devoid of particularity and place and so presumably relevant to anyone (as all persons are equal in the eyes of his chosen faith) is unacceptable, or at least less acceptable than Tarkovsky's depiction of spiritual struggle.

Tarkovsky particularises Andrei's rite of passage to salvation and attainable grace. In a strange and particular ceremony, that is the carrying of a lit candle from one end of the drained sulphur baths to the other, Andrei's spiritual strength and faith are tested. Le Fanu sees problems with this sequence.<sup>12</sup> It is a perfect example of one of Tarkovsky's possible weak points - *'a target for parody'*. His overt symbolism belongs to an expressionist rhetoric which is no longer a *'feature of serious art in Europe'*. (Le Fanu, 1984, p. 56). The sequence has strenuous symbolism and is perhaps difficult to respond to in its absurdity. It displays, however, Tarkovsky's commitment to the individual

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<sup>11</sup> Illustrations Nos. 49-55, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Illustrations Nos. 60-63, pp. 81-82.

and his/her particular situation which is in contradistinction to Bresson's apologia for Church doctrine. In Tarkovsky's diaries, *'Time Within Time'*, his own spiritual struggle to find grounding outside his homeland is well documented. For him the making of *'Nostalgia'* is a similar test of faith to Andrei's candle 'challenge'. As it is clear that Domenico's madness is a derivation of Dostoevskyan characterisation, it is also clear that Andrei's rite of passage is a filmic representation of Tarkovsky's spiritual struggle with life in exile.

In contrast to Bresson's spirituality which lacks autobiographical reference, let alone reference to any particular being, Tarkovsky's spirituality is, as I have said, more acceptable. In realising Tarkovsky's spiritual message we are not confronted with the doctrine of organised religion. We are, however, led further into understanding Tarkovsky's own personal spirituality. Each religious text or subtext is a continuation of an autobiography which is developed within his films. Whether or not autobiography in art is acceptable, is another argument and is not the subject of this thesis.



## LOCATING BRESSON AND TARKOVSKY IN A HISTORY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART

Jameson's criticism also raises the issue of where one can locate Tarkovsky within a history of twentieth century art. There is little doubt that Bresson was, and in my opinion, still is, a modernist at heart. As I have suggested, his *auteur* style carries with it a didacticism and proposes to offer a solution to worldwide contemporary pessimism. Much has been written by writers as diverse as Bazin to P. Adams Sitney on the 'new wave' modernism that is Bresson's cinema. If we had any doubts about his moral message the protagonist's repentance in '*L'Argent*' would take care of them. Bresson, even in 1983, fulfils the criteria set by Pam Cook for the modernist film-maker in her essay, '*The point of self-expression in avant garde film*'. She defines the position as follows:

*The relationship of the film-maker/producer to her or his work is no longer alienated, but close and intimate, leading to the inscription of the material presence of the film and the presence of the film-maker, in the film itself.*

(Cook, 1988, p. 271).

To locate Tarkovsky is an altogether more difficult task. His tradition and cultural background are very different to the 'democracy' from which the contemporary discourse on post-modernism has come. Kim Levin writes of a period of transition after a realisation that modernism was over. (Levin, 1988, pp. 3-12). It would seem to me that Tarkovsky's art is suitably placed within this nondescript area where art that is 'illusionistic, theatrical, decorative' and 'literary' is acceptable again (Levin, 1988, p. 3). Where modernism rejected autobiography, post-modernism tolerates it.

This is important in realising that Tarkovsky is not rehearsing modernist paradigms. Tarkovsky's work depends upon autobiography and self-reflection. It is distanced from modernist tradition in its subjectivity and refusal to search for scientific reason or logic (logic of dreams). Ambiguity is preferred to purity and clarity. Tarkovsky remains in this area halfway between the modernist ideals of Bresson and the post-modern hybrid world of Beineix's *'Diva'* (1981) or Ridley Scott's *'Blade Runner'*. Although comparisons can be found in the imagery, the failed city (the zone) and in particular the presence of replicants in Tarkovsky's *'Solaris'*, Tarkovsky's world has hope and has a quest. Although the pessimism is investigated it never quite develops into absolute nihilism. In my opinion, neither *'Stalker'* nor *'Nostalghia'* presents us with the pretence that an investigation of pessimism is undertaken to advocate religious concern. That is the pretence of *'L'Argent'*. With Tarkovsky any investigation into pessimism or hope is a result of his personal introspective gaze. In the visual imagery of *'Stalker'* and *'Nostalghia'* the actual physical barriers between interiors and exteriors are broken. We see landscapes indoors and houses inside churches.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Tarkovsky's 'view of piety' is forever merged between the Church on the one hand and his own intellectual questioning on the other. In so doing, Tarkovsky always avoids the weight of widespread religious concern or doctrine. His

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<sup>13</sup> Illustrations Nos. 45-47, pp. 68-69 and Illustrations Nos. 64-65, p. 92.





64. Landscape indoors  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).



65. Closeup  
(Tarkovsky *'Nostalgia'*, 1983).

concern, like that of the protagonist in '*Nostalghia*' is to hold on to 'being' or 'reality' at a time of personal crisis. The crisis is real and particular, not absurd or theoretical as in the apparent existentialism of '*L'Argent*' the events of which are falsified to present an opportunity for the director to preach of the virtues of repentance.

Here lies, for me, the essential difference between '*L'Argent*' and '*Nostalghia*' which reflects the essential difference between Bresson and Tarkovsky. While Bresson advocates Roman Catholic teachings in his films and so is worthy of Jameson's criticism, Tarkovsky is concerned with embarking upon particular and personal investigations.



## Conclusion

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It has been my intention to examine the role that spirituality plays in the work of Andrei Tarkovsky and Bresson. For both directors, spirituality governs and directs the imagery of their films. I have examined how their intention to induce a sense of meditation and possible transcendence has become an integral part of each director's form.

The spirituality of each director differs. Bresson's is the faith of the Roman Catholic Church. Tarkovsky's is less descriptive in its personal autobiographical reference. Bresson's faith in God is also quite different to Tarkovsky's, whose faith lies in that of the individual. Knowledge of each director's faith is important in addressing the debate on the validity of religious belief in art. I have attempted to address this debate with the contention that while religious belief is overtly evident in both directors' work, it is more didactic in the work of Bresson, to the detriment of his art.

It is my opinion that autobiographical reference is acceptable in art. Therefore, Tarkovsky's religious sentiments are more palatable than Bresson's. This I have noted in suggesting that Jameson's criticism of Tarkovsky in relation to artistic pretentiousness, is more suited to Bresson.

The debate that centres on the validity and acceptability of religion in art was of little interest to the director. It can be said that as a result the work of each is outdated, tiring, even esoteric in its non-applicability to



contemporary society. Whether this is so or not, both directors' personal sense of purpose resulted in two distinctive important careers in film. Bresson's and Tarkovsky's portfolio of work remains radical and innovative and certainly influential in the field of film-making, if not beyond.

### **AUTEUR THEORY**

Throughout the thesis I have used the *auteur* theory approach to film criticism. On writing on Tarkovsky, Le Fanu excuses his use of the *auteur* theory:

*The auteur theory is not purely myth: its categories need to be deepened not abolished. In the end some one individual is responsible for the work in question, and (especially in a book about Tarkovsky) I couldn't wish to part from conventional wisdom in believing that it's the director.*

(Le Fanu, 1987, p. 1)

I accept that few films are the product of one person and in the case of Bresson and Tarkovsky, although each director considers himself as the creator of his own work, the resultant films are the product of a collaboration of many different people. The scale of investigation necessary to credit even some individuals who helped shape the films is too large for a thesis this size. I have, therefore, chosen to analyse the work of Bresson and Tarkovsky using the *auteur* theory, placing sole responsibility for the films on the head of each director.

## Abbreviated Filmographies

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**ROBERT BRESSON (1907-)**

- 1934 *Les Affaires Publiques* (no known copies exist)
- 1943 *Les Anges du Peché* (The Angels of the Street)
- 1945 *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne)
- 1950 *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* (Diary of a Country Priest)
- 1956 *Un Condamné a Mort s'est Échappé* (A Man Escaped)
- 1959 *Pickpocket*
- 1962 *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (The Trial of Joan of Arc)
- 1966 *Au Hasard Balthazar* (Balthazar)
- 1967 *Mouchette*
- 1969 *Une Femme Douce*
- 1971 *Quatre Nuits d'un Réveur* (Four Nights of a dreamer)
- 1974 *Lancelot du Luc* (*Le Graal*, Lancelot of the Lake)
- 1977 *Le Diable Probablement*
- 1983 *L'Argent*

**ANDREI TARKOVSKY (1932-1986)**

1960 *Katok i skrypka* (The Steamroller and the Violin)

1962 *Ivanovo Detstvo* (Ivan's Childhood)

1966 *Andrei Roublev*

1972 *Solaris*

1974 *Zerkalo* (Mirror)

1979 *Stalker*

1983 *Nostalghia*

1986 *Offret* (The Sacrifice)



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