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Evgeny Tsymbal is a documentary filmmaker, writer, and film historian. He began his career at Mosfilm Studios in Moscow in the 1970s where he worked as an assistant director to Andrei Tarkovsky, Nikita Mikhalkov, Larisa Shepitko, and Eldar Ryazanov, among others. After completing Eldar Ryazanov’s filmmaking course, he embarked on his own directorial journey with a variety of short films, and achieved critical acclaim with the BAFTA-winning short Defense Council Sedov (46 mins). He crossed over to the sphere of documentary filmmaking with works such as Roads of Commonwealth (1995), Ways of Agricultural Reform (1995), Homeland (1996), In Memory: Alexander Kaidanovsky (1996), 1001 Stories About Cinema: Vladimir Naumov (1998), the award-winning Stalker’s Dreams (1998), Ordinary Bolshevism (1999), and Dziga and his Brothers (2002). In addition to directing, he has continued his work as a scriptwriter, historian, and critic, publishing articles in journals such as Sight and Sound, New Statesman, Premier, Chaplin, Iskusstvo kino, Museum, Science Fiction Film & Television, and Russian Literature.

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Introduction: Refocus on Tarkovsky

Sergey Toymentsev

Throughout his career the renowned Russian auteur Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–86) created only seven feature-length films, or seven and a half, to use Maya Turovskya’s expression, if we include his 1961 diploma short *The Steamroller and the Violin*. All of his features won prestigious awards at international film festivals and have gained cult status among cineastes, often being mentioned in various kinds of ranking polls and charts dedicated to the “best films ever made.” The British Film Institute, for example, honored three of Tarkovsky’s films in its “50 Greatest Films of All Time” poll conducted for the film magazine *Sight & Sound* in 2012: *Andrei Rublev* (1966) is ranked at No. 26, *Mirror* (1974) at No. 19, and *Stalker* (1979) at No. 29. In fact, rumor has it that the Russian director supposedly knew that he was going to make only seven features. In his essay-film *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevitch* (1999), Chris Marker makes a reference to a spiritualist séance at which the soul of Boris Pasternak allegedly informed the filmmaker he would make only seven films—“but good ones.” Improbable and supernatural as this legend may seem, Pasternak’s prophecy is well documented in Tarkovsky’s diary, where he repeatedly recalls it at moments of self-doubt and loss of confidence.

Despite being a relatively small body of work, Tarkovsky’s films—famous for languid pacing, excessively long takes, dreamlike imagery, spiritual depth, and philosophical allegories—have had a profound influence on world cinema. On the one hand, by having revolutionized the aesthetic possibilities of the cinematic medium, he is widely considered one of the progenitors of slow cinema, alongside other auteurs such as Béla Tarr, Theo Angelopoulos, and Tsai Ming-liang, among others; while numerous critically acclaimed directors—Lars von Trier, Alejandro G. Iñárritu, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, and many more—openly admit his substantial influence on their work. On the other hand, the
“cultlike veneration and imitation” of Tarkovskian stylistic features and artistic ideals have produced a phenomenon called “the Tarkovsky syndrome,” or Tarkovshchina, which stands for unnecessary intellectualization, messianic self-aggrandizement, and elitism in film, mostly evident in the Russian cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Having become an integral part of global cultural heritage, his films are now regularly screened in repertory cinemas all over the world, just as his treatise Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema (1986) has been translated into multiple languages. The cult of Tarkovsky peaked especially in post-Soviet Russia, where the director has been exalted into a national hero whom countless hagiographic memoirs, semi-fictional biographies, and laudatory documentaries almost unanimously herald him as prophet, visionary, and martyr. Furthermore, in 2017 Russian philanthropists set up a monument to the director in Suzdal (Figure I.1), where his Andrei Rublev was shot in 1965, in addition to the 2009 monument at the entrance to the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, where Tarkovsky stands in the company of his no less legendary schoolmates, Vasily Shukshin and Gennady Shpalikov (Figure I.2).

Figure I.1 Monument to Andrei Tarkovsky and Andrei Rublev’s characters in Suzdal.
The aim of this volume is to move beyond this kind of fascination with the Russian master and take a more level-headed approach to his career by balancing cinephilic enthusiasm with academic expertise. Tarkovsky’s cinema has always attracted film scholars because of the philosophical depth and aesthetic appeal of his films. As Birgit Beumers rightly points out, there is an “over-emphasis in scholarship” on Tarkovsky at the expense of other Russian filmmakers who are no less worthy of attention. At the same time, despite the impressive scope of Tarkovsky criticism written in, or translated into, English—sixteen monographs and two collections of essays—most monographic studies, with the exception of Nariman Skakov’s The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time (2012), which actively engages with cultural theory, are methodologically limited to film history and formalist analysis. Although all of them have done an excellent job at placing Tarkovsky’s films into their biographical, historical, and cultural contexts by extensively commenting on their production history as well as overall narrative and symbolic structure, such studies nevertheless fail to capture the rich complexity of his work, while being heavily descriptive and undertheorized.

Scholars’ considerable aversion or indifference to theory and their concomitant immersion in the analysis of narrative motifs and cinematic techniques became a rather consistent feature of the field that could be traced from the earliest to more recent literature on the subject. Maya Turovskaya, for example,
admits from the start in her pioneering book-length study *Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry* (1989) that her “book was written . . . straight from the heart,” that is, from her first-hand knowledge of Soviet film industry as well as personal conversations with the director. Her perspective of a “knowledgeable insider,” however, masks a lack of theoretical sophistication in her perceptive readings of the films. Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie’s *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (1994) is acclaimed as the highest standard in the field due to its encyclopedic scope and rigorous research, yet it almost never refers to any film theory (with the exception of “post-theoretical” David Bordwell and Noël Carroll), just as it downgrades Tarkovsky’s own aesthetic views as anachronistic. Johnson and Petrie’s skepticism regarding theoretical abstractions is especially evident in their critical assessment of previous studies of the filmmaker by European critics (e.g. Guy Gauthier, András Bálint Kovács, and Antoine de Baecque), whose contributions they condemn as “high-blown philosophical analyses . . . [written] in that cloudy, pompous, pseudo-poetic style that has now infiltrated from its natural home in France into what was once plain English prose.” Contrary to the philosophical (or poststructuralist) approach to film, which is, according to Johnson and Petrie, often based on “flimsy evidence,” “downright inaccuracies,” “factual mistakes,” and “grandiose philosophical constructs,” they emphasize instead the importance of paying attention to the narrative and aesthetic details of Tarkovsky’s films as well as their cultural and historical contextualization.

Robert Bird’s *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* (2008) continues to abstain from theoretical interventions in his detailed hermeneutical analysis of the director’s visual aesthetics which he laboriously maintains at the level of neutral phenomenological description. As he states, the main focus of his book is “Tarkovsky’s sense of cinematic pitch, rather than any discursive ‘meaning’ of his films;” hence, much attention is given to the representational devices of the cinematic medium from the viewer’s perspective as well as the director’s statements about cinema as art, the aspects which were left out in Johnson and Petrie’s study. While considering Tarkovsky as a “great practitioner” rather than a “great thinker” or a “philosophical filmmaker” (following Alexei German’s observation), Bird admirably succeeds in justifying the aesthetic autonomy of his films from his mystical and religious inclinations. Still, he appears far too cautious to avoid “sealing Tarkovsky’s films with the glue of theory” by briefly mentioning a number of theorists (e.g. Bergson, Deleuze, Lacan) without fully engaging with their ideas.

The anti-theoretical (or post-theoretical) stance in Tarkovsky studies reached its full momentum in Thomas Redwood’s *Andrei Tarkovsky’s Poetics of Cinema* (2010), methodologically informed by the analytical discourse of such post-theorists as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, namely their notion of “parametric narration” in art cinema driven by its commitment to
style rather than plot development. In his neo-formalist study, Redwood outrightly dismisses the worth of any “overarching” film theory for his project (“be it ontological, phenomenological, psychological, theological, ‘cultural’ or whatever”) and concentrates exclusively on the interplay of subtle stylistic strategies and devices that constitute “the internal narrational dynamics of Tarkovsky’s films.” Even though Redwood’s analytical rigor does feel like a breath of fresh air in Tarkovsky criticism preoccupied with religious and spiritualist problematic{s}, it is hard not to notice that the focus of his study is indeed “strictly and conscientiously limited,” just as his perspective on the subject is “somewhat old fashioned.” He never allows his references to other fields—such as art criticism, musicology, psychoanalysis, or philosophy—to evolve into a mutually productive interdisciplinary engagement which Tarkovsky’s work actively suggests.

The growing corpus of Tarkovsky scholarship also includes two collections of essays that follow the same tendency described above. Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson and Thorkell Á. Óttarsson’s *Through the Mirror* (2006) is largely dedicated to mystical and theological themes, and includes only two out of thirteen contributions that approach the filmmaker from theoretical perspectives (e.g. Bazin and Deleuze); whereas twenty essays in Nathan Dunne’s *Tarkovsky* (2008) discuss mostly aesthetic, thematic, and historical aspects of his oeuvre. As one reviewer described Dunne’s volume, “the book is definitely ‘post-theory’: although some authors invoke a few philosophers, from Heidegger and Benjamin to Deleuze and Derrida, these references . . . do not evolve into a sustained theoretically informed analysis.” At the same time, Tarkovsky scholarship is being continuously enriched by journal articles and various collections’ chapters from film scholars specializing in feminism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, diaspora studies, urban studies, and film-philosophy, thus leaving their interpretative trace on the reception of his work. The purpose of this volume is therefore to reinforce the latter tendency by placing Tarkovsky in a more interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse context without, however, underestimating the value of previous achievements in the field.

Another trend in Tarkovsky scholarship, which this volume aims to counter, is the incurable idolatry of the director in Russian-language film studies. A considerable number of Tarkovsky scholars in Russia have largely contributed to the field since the early 2000s, yet most of their contributions, despite their scholarly input, are permeated by hagiographic pathos and intensely preoccupied with religious themes and symbols. Igor Evlampiev, for example, approaches the filmmaker as a religious philosopher striving for the Absolute along with other Russian thinkers grounded in the Orthodox Christian tradition, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Lev Shestov. In a similar vein, Nikolai Boldyrev offers several biographical studies of Tarkovsky’s mysticism in connection to Zen Buddhism, German Romanticism, Carlos Castaneda, and
Both authors, however, passionately idolize the director as a spiritual teacher, just as his films are uncritically viewed as incarnations of divine truth. Tarkovsky’s reverent treatment still persists even when scholars focus on more aesthetic subjects of research. Dmitry Salynskii, for example, discusses the filmmaker’s career in terms of St Augustine’s hermeneutical model, in which meaning is hierarchically distributed on literal, allegorical, moral, and eschatological levels, and explains it as a “meta-film” consistently ascending towards the transcendental realm and culminating in his final film *The Sacrifice* where the eschatological dimension manifests itself to the fullest. However rich and ambitious Salynskii’s 570-page opus is, it locks Tarkovsky’s work in the confines of scholastic hermeneutics, while heavily discriminating the material layer in his films. Mikhail Perepelkin examines the filmmaker’s engagement with literature and poetry, but his allegorical perspective often results in decoding cinematic images as the signs of hidden epiphany. Natalia Kononenko’s monograph undertakes a rigorous audiovisual analysis of the soundtrack evolving throughout Tarkovsky’s entire career, yet she ostensibly downplays the role of sound-designers in his films, Eduard Artemiev and Owe Svensson, while crediting the director with “deemiurgie” powers in creating his “sounding world.” Such a scholarly reverence for Tarkovsky in his native country may certainly put off a Western reader accustomed to a more impartial film criticism and could be studied in its own right as a symptom of anti-modern sentiments in the present-day Russian humanities excessively concerned with the issues of spirituality (*dukhovnost’*) and patriotism, and their ideological investment in national cultural politics.

It is against the backdrop of these tendencies in Tarkovsky scholarship—namely the methodological narrowness of Anglophone auteur studies on the one hand and Russophone hagiographic zeal on the other—that this volume hopes to offer new directions and insights for the study of the filmmaker by opening up the field to various interdisciplinary approaches. While refocusing on Tarkovsky through a more theoretical lens (e.g. Green, Lacan, Bergson, Deleuze, Aristotle, Lyotard, Žižek, Merleau-Ponty, Hadot, Kristeva, Bloom, and Sloterdijk, among others), the present work by no means intends to rekindle the theory vs. post-theory debate and advocate the legitimacy of “grand theory” for its own sake. The volume’s emphasis on the theoretical recontextualization of Tarkovsky’s legacy should rather be viewed as yet another endeavor to understand his films in their multifaceted complexity: whereas earlier studies were more grounded in empirical research of the director’s career, the following chapters invite the reader to ponder over these and other findings at a more abstract and conceptual level.

The volume consists of four parts covering biographical, aesthetic, and philosophical aspects of Tarkovsky’s work, as well as tracing his influence on other filmmakers. Part one, entitled “Backgrounds” (chapters one to three),
discusses extra-cinematic factors that influenced Tarkovsky’s cinema, such as his biography and theoretical statements. Evgeny Tsymbal’s chapter focuses on the traumatic events in the director’s childhood that continued to haunt him throughout his life and found their reflection in his films. Unlike scholars who emphasize the importance of Tarkovsky’s trauma of paternal abandonment for interpreting his films, for Tsymbal it is the director’s strained relationship with his mother that defines much of his artistic impulse. Andrei Gornykh’s chapter continues the discussion of Tarkovsky’s life, albeit in later periods, by offering a verbal code of his psychobiography through a close reading of his diary. Unlike earlier biographers whose work is heavily steeped in hagiography, both authors in this section present their arguments in psychoanalytic terms: Tsymbal methodologically relies on André Green’s notion of the dead mother complex, whereas Gornykh’s approach is informed by Lacan’s theory of the Signifier. The section is concluded by Sergey Toymentsev’s analysis of the filmmaker’s writings on film in light of Bergson’s philosophy.

Part two, entitled “Film Method” (chapters four to eight), examines Tarkovsky’s cinematic techniques, including his treatment of film genre, documentary style, temporality, landscape, and sound. Sara Pankenier Weld’s chapter explores how Ivan’s Childhood (1962) transcends the genre of the Soviet war movie by foregrounding the child’s eye view in multiple cinematic dimensions and thus forces the audience into a subservient and vulnerable position. Zdenko Mandušić’s chapter discusses the director’s engagement with the notion of the objective and documentary representation of reality in the context of post-Stalinist aesthetic debates and its practical implementation in Andrei Rublev. Donato Totaro’s chapter provides a detailed textual analysis of Tarkovsky’s long-take technique in Stalker and its key role in creating the atmosphere of spatial and temporal ambiguity in the film. Yelizaveta Goldfarb Moss focuses on the innovative representation of the Russian landscape in Nostalghia (1983), which underscores its unmasterable infinite spatiality via framing and one-point perspectives. This section concludes with Julia Shpinitskaya’s analysis of the complex nature of Tarkovsky’s sound design that, despite its overall commitment to realist aesthetics, tends towards irrealism in his later films.

Part three, “Theoretical Approaches” (chapters nine to thirteen), discusses Tarkovsky’s work in the contexts of psychoanalytical, philosophical, and other theoretical perspectives. The section opens with Slavoj Žižek’s “The Thing from Inner Space”, which argues for a materialist reading of Tarkovsky’s films that present an encounter with the radical otherness of some impossible and traumatic Thing, an encounter which is devoid of religious and mystical connotations that often accompany commentators’ discussions. Žižek’s chapter was originally published in Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities, but is presented here in its unabridged version. Another psychoanalytic reading of
Tarkovsky’s films is offered in Linda Belau and Ed Cameron’s chapter, which explains the auteur’s spiritual longings as the religious sublimation of his melancholic attachment to the lost object. Tarkovsky’s cinematic materialism, first elaborated by Slavoj Žižek, is further explored in Robert Efird’s chapter, which focuses on Solaris’s chiasmic representation of intersubjective space and time in light of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Anne Eakin Moss argues for the affinity between Pierre Hadot’s philosophy of spiritual practice and Tarkovsky’s films, all of which are characterized by the quixotic seekers of a transcendent aim and cinematic techniques invoking the miraculous. This section concludes with Mikhail Iampolski’s chapter, which focuses on the director’s consistent preoccupation with memory, and delineates his cinematic representation of the past from his attempts to historically reconstruct a period setting in Andrei Rublev, to private and subjective memories and dreams in Solaris and Mirror, and to the impersonal and metaphysical trace in Stalker and Nostalghia.

The fourth and final part of this volume, “Legacy” (chapters fourteen and fifteen), is dedicated to Tarkovsky’s long-standing influence on such prominent auteurs as Andrei Zvyagintsev and Lars von Trier, who are often hailed as the heirs of the Russian master, yet have not received sufficient critical attention in this regard. Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya examines the presence of Tarkovskian thematic and stylistic motifs in a series of Zvyagintsev’s films as well as the latter’s struggle for authorial autonomy from the depersonalizing influence of the inherited tradition. Sergey Toymentsev and Anton Dolin focus on von Trier’s lifelong engagement with the Russian director, which begins in his student short films and continues in more recent features.

While certainly not intending to be exhaustive, this volume provides a wide coverage of topics related to the director’s oeuvre, ranging from the analysis of key biographical events that influenced the genesis of his personality as an artist, to the discussion of his formative influence on other filmmakers. Furthermore, although all chapters are firmly grounded in critical theory, the present work pays equal (or balanced) attention to both empirical (aesthetic and technical) and purely theoretical aspects of his work. Overall, this volume hopes to emphasize the urgency of a more sober appreciation of Tarkovsky’s films as well as inspire further critical inquiry and debate.

NOTES

2. To be exact, at this spiritualist séance, which allegedly took place before Tarkovsky started working on Solaris (1972), Pasternak foretold that the director would make “another four films,” which amounts to six, not seven of his features in total. As we read in his diary’s entry of 27 January 1973, “Boris Leonidovich [Pasternak] was obviously right when he said...
that I would make another four pictures. I’ve made the first—Solaris. That leaves another three.” In an entry of 22 November 1979 he prepares a list of questions to consult with a local psychic, one of which is: “Should I believe what Boris Pasternak told me about making four films?” Finally, in an entry of 21 December 1985 Tarkovsky, already stricken with cancer, worries whether he would manage to complete his last film: “I am getting worse by the day. Boris Leonidovich Pasternak was right when he said I would make another four films. I am thinking back to those spiritualist séances at Roerich’s” (Andrei Tarkovsky, *Time within Time: The Diaries, 1970–1986*, trans. by Kitty Hunter-Blair [London: Faber & Faber, 1994], 66, 210, 349).


9. Ibid., 269, 273, 276.


11. Ibid., 13.


13. Redwood, 12.


