

# Andrei Tarkovsky

# TARKOVSKY

The Steamroller and the Violin

Tempo di Viaggio

Ivan's Childhood

Boris Godunov

The Sacrifice

Nostalgia

Stalker

Mirror

Solaris

Hamlet

The Killers

Andrei Rublev

Sculpting in Time

There Will Be No Leave Today



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**ANDREI TARKOVSKY**

Sean Martin

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# Andrei Tarkovsky

Sean Martin

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*My discovery of Tarkovsky's first film was like a miracle. Suddenly, I found myself standing at the door of 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.*

Ingmar Bergman



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## Introduction

This book is intended to serve as a short overview of Tarkovsky's work for those unfamiliar with it, or as a stimulus to go back and rewatch the films for those already acquainted with them.

My aim has been to discuss all aspects of Tarkovsky's work, from his full-length films to the lesser-known works for television, radio and stage. Tarkovsky saw himself primarily as a poet and it is a poetic sensibility that pervades all his work, regardless of medium. There are problems, however, in attempting to write about Tarkovsky at all. As Natasha Synessios wrote, 'Most of us still visit the cinema for entertainment, or escapism, not for spiritual sustenance, for revelations and benedictions. Yet those of us who are "Tarkovsky-marked" experience his films in just such religious terms. Analysis is not usually conducive to this type of experience, yet through it one hopes to unravel something of the mysterious and ineffable process of creation.'<sup>1</sup> My approach has therefore been only partially concerned with analysis, as I feel that the inherent mystery of Tarkovsky's films speaks for itself, and the films are, ultimately, not solvable. They are films that change as we do.

Tarkovsky's films could be seen to move through three phases, concentrating successively on History, the Family and a final, more philosophical phase, which I have labelled the

Triptych. Obviously, these distinctions are somewhat arbitrary: *The Sacrifice*, for instance – the third part of the Triptych – could also be seen as a portrait of a dysfunctional family, while *Mirror* is as much about history as it is the family. Others may be inclined to feel that Tarkovsky's work falls neatly into two sections, with *Mirror* marking the end of the first period, or still others may feel that his work is one homogenous whole.

In giving a production history and brief discussion of each film – intended more to provoke reflection rather than to try to explain what the films mean – I have also added sections on the autobiographical elements of each. Tarkovsky's life and work are inextricably entwined. As Peter Green observed, the subjects of his films – childhood, war, a yearning for belief, the complexities of family life, nostalgia for home, exile and death – are also 'stations in his own life. There is a rare congruence between subject and object that goes beyond the usual autobiographical parallels artists draw in their work.'<sup>2</sup>

Of course, no book, including this one, can replace seeing the actual films, preferably on the big screen, and it is my hope that, if this book inspires the reader to go back to Tarkovsky's films and to watch them with both an open and an active mind, then it will have served its purpose. Natasha Synessios's words about *Mirror* are valid for the whole of Tarkovsky's work: 'when all is said and done, this film works on the heart and soul, not the mind; it is with them, first and foremost, that we must approach it.'<sup>3</sup>

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## Life and Times

Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–86) was a part of the generation of Soviet filmmakers that emerged during the Khrushchev Thaw years, which also saw the emergence of such directors as Otar Iosseliani, Sergei Parajanov and Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky. Tarkovsky made only seven full-length films, yet this slender oeuvre has established him as the most important and well-known Russian director since Eisenstein. Although Tarkovsky's reputation continues to grow, especially in North America, where initial critical reaction was decidedly cooler than in Europe,<sup>4</sup> his genius was recognised within his own lifetime by Jean-Paul Sartre, who championed Tarkovsky's first feature, *Ivan's Childhood*, and Ingmar Bergman, who regarded Tarkovsky as 'the greatest of them all'.<sup>5</sup> Tarkovsky's work has been admired by directors as diverse as Bergman, Victor Erice, Terry Gilliam, Peter Greenaway, Krzysztof Kieślowski and Lars von Trier. In its Ten Best Films of All Time poll in 1982, *Sight and Sound* critics voted Tarkovsky's second feature, *Andrei Rublev*, as runner-up, a remarkable achievement since the film had only been released in the UK in 1973, making it the youngest film on the list by far.

Tarkovsky's films are slow, dreamlike searches for faith and redemption, and it comes as no surprise to learn that, during his years in the Soviet Union, he was often criticised for

‘mysticism’ and his continued failure to tackle subjects in a style more acceptable to socialist realism. And yet Tarkovsky and his films were very much a product of the Soviet system, which ironically allowed directors a great deal of freedom to express themselves. Before we move on to examine Tarkovsky’s films, writings and works in other media, it is instructive to explore briefly the Soviet film industry as it was when Tarkovsky was working within it and Tarkovsky’s own biography, as both played an important part in making Tarkovsky’s films what they are.

### **Tarkovsky’s Early Years**

Andrei Arsenevich Tarkovsky was born on 4 April 1932 in the village of Zavrazhie, which lies just outside the town of Yurievets on the banks of the Volga in the Ivanovo region about 60 miles north of Moscow. The family were literary: his paternal grandfather, Alexander (1860–1920), was a poet who had been a member of the People’s Freedom Movement, which espoused culture and learning for all; as a result, he was banished by the Tsar for his liberal views. Tarkovsky’s father was the poet Arseny Tarkovsky, who was born in the Ukrainian city of Kirovograd (then Elizavetgrad) in 1907. He attended the Moscow Literary Institute during the late 1920s, where he met Maria Ivanovna Vishnakova. They subsequently married and had two children, Andrei and his sister, Marina (born 1934). Tarkovsky senior had yet to be published and so, to support the family, worked away from home as a translator. The family moved to Moscow in 1935, where Tarkovsky’s mother took a job as a proofreader at the First State Printing House. Tarkovsky’s father left the family in 1937 to live with another woman, although he continued to support his family financially and to visit on birthdays and

other important occasions. Tarkovsky began his schooling in Moscow in 1939, but with the Nazi invasion of Russia two years later, was evacuated with his mother and sister back to Yurievets, where they remained for two years. Although the family were confirmed Muscovites, Tarkovsky's early life in the country, both before the family moved to Moscow and during his time as an evacuee, would leave an indelible impression on him which he would later portray in *Mirror*.

Tarkovsky claimed that his mother groomed him from childhood to be an artist, making sure that he was exposed to art and literature from an early age (though given both Arseny's and Maria Ivanovna's literary predilections, it would have been difficult for the young Tarkovsky to have avoided books and works of art). To further this end, Tarkovsky studied music for seven years, as well as having three years of art lessons at the 1905 Academy.

Tarkovsky seems to have resented his mother's attempts to foster in him a sense that he was an artist-in-waiting, and, as a result, rebelled by hanging out with kids his mother didn't approve of, playing football and acting tough. However, despite his rebelliousness, he did love books, and was apparently only quiet when reading.<sup>6</sup> At school, he was an average pupil, a 'dreamer more than thinker'.<sup>7</sup> It was perhaps his lack of academic aptitude that made Tarkovsky realise that he might indeed become an artist one day, perhaps as a composer, painter or writer. Although as a boy and teenager, the young Tarkovsky 'caused his mother a lot of worry'<sup>8</sup> – in addition to his difficult behaviour, he also suffered from tuberculosis – he was always to write in later life of his high regard for her, although this would seem to be, in part, a retrospective judgment.

His relationship with his father was likewise complex. Tarkovsky detested Antonina, his father's second wife, and

can have only felt something like relief when she died unexpectedly in 1940. Arseny joined the Red Army as a war journalist and was sent to the Front, where he lost a leg. Tarkovsky's memories of the war revolved around waiting for it to end and for his father to come home. When Arseny did return home, as a decorated war hero (he received the Order of the Red Star), he did not rejoin his first family; indeed, he did not even go to meet the young Andrei when he and his sister returned to Moscow from their time as evacuees in Yurievets. But despite this apparent callousness, Tarkovsky held his father in high regard and, as a teenager, seems to have been closer to his father than his mother, spending what time he could with him, discussing books, listening to Arseny read his own poetry and sampling his father's extensive record collection (Bach was to become a favourite). The teenage Tarkovsky seems to have regarded his mother as the more guilty party with regard to the break-up of the marriage, which again may go some way to explain why he would want to spend so much time with his father at this stage of his life.<sup>9</sup>

In 1951, Tarkovsky enrolled in the School of Oriental Languages to study Arabic; he had been interested in the East since an early age (perhaps as a result of hearing stories about his family's supposed origins among the Daghestani nobility during the reign of Ivan the Terrible).<sup>10</sup> However, he did not finish his course due to concussing himself in the gym one day, and he found employment instead on a geological expedition to Siberia, where he spent a year (1953–4) prospecting the remote Turuchansk region for mineral deposits. That Tarkovsky ended up on this expedition may not have been entirely his own doing: his lack of aptitude for serious academic study had been a continuing worry for the family, and it seems that, after the incident in the gym, Tarkovsky's



mother intervened and virtually exiled the would-be director to the East, to prevent him wasting away among Moscow's *stilyaga*, the dandified Russian equivalent of the Beat Generation.

Despite being summarily sent away, Tarkovsky thrived in Siberia. He walked many hundreds of miles along the River Kureika, where he spent a lot of time drawing and thinking. It is not recorded how successful he was as an employee of the expedition, but as he didn't get fired, we can assume that he passed muster. But the expedition did not ignite in him the desire to be a geologist. Rather, alone with nature – and himself – for the first lengthy period since his days as an evacuee in Yurievets, he resolved to become a film director. Maya Turovskaya notes that Tarkovsky's 'spiritual baggage was acquired during his none-too-happy childhood and was little affected by subsequent external influences'.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, his year in the Siberian *taiga* would serve as a dramatic baseline for nearly all his subsequent work. Nature is ever present in his films – often celebrated, always mysterious – as is the lone protagonist, struggling to come to terms with his own life and the world around – and within – him.

Upon returning from Siberia, Tarkovsky applied for a place at the prestigious All-Union State Institute of Cinematography, VGIK. That year (1954), there were around 500 applicants for only 15 places. Tarkovsky was among those chosen, and he began studies under the veteran director, Mikhail Romm (1901–71). Romm appeared to be temperamentally at the opposite end of the spectrum to Tarkovsky. He was known chiefly for his films of the 1930s, such as *Lenin in October* (1937) and *Lenin in 1918* (1939), both of which firmly toed the Party line. Given that, and combined with Tarkovsky's less than inspiring academic record up to that time, one could be forgiven for assuming that his time

at VGIK was not to be a success. Yet Romm was a brilliant and unorthodox teacher, and unorthodoxy was precisely what Tarkovsky needed. Romm believed that one could not be taught to be a director, but had to learn to think for oneself and develop an individual voice.

During his time at VGIK, Tarkovsky and his fellow students studied all aspects of filmmaking, watching the classics of Soviet cinema and taking part in workshops in which they would demonstrate their technical ability. This even included acting: Tarkovsky's fellow student and friend, Alexander Gordon, remembers him giving a superb performance as the aging Prince Bolkonsky when Romm got the students to perform scenes from *War and Peace* during their third year at VGIK.<sup>12</sup> Tarkovsky saw many classics from outside the Soviet Union, including *Citizen Kane*, the films of John Ford and William Wyler, and the works of the fathers of the French New Wave, Jean Renoir and Jean Vigo. Tarkovsky developed a personal pantheon that included Bergman, Bunuel, Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, Fellini and Antonioni. The only Soviet director who made it into his pantheon was Dovzhenko, although he was good friends with the Georgian director Sergei Parajanov, whom he regarded as 'a genius in everything'. He also spoke highly of Iosseliani and, on occasion, of Boris Barnet. But above them all was the towering figure of Robert Bresson, whom Tarkovsky regarded as the ultimate film artist.

Whilst at VGIK, Tarkovsky co-directed two shorts, *The Killers* (1956) and *There Will Be No Leave Today* (1959), which are discussed in the 'Student Films' chapter. He also saw *Hamlet* on stage for the first time (the Paul Scofield production). In 1957, he married fellow student, Irma Rausch, with whom he had a son, Arseny (Senka), who was born in 1962.

### Tarkovsky's Professional Career

Tarkovsky's life and career after VGIK are perhaps better known. A year after making *There Will Be No Leave Today*, he completed his studies and made his award-winning diploma film, *The Steamroller and the Violin*, which won first prize at the New York Student Film Festival in 1961. It was an auspicious time for new filmmakers to be emerging in the Soviet Union. The Soviet film industry was undergoing something of a renaissance; the resultant surge in production from the mid-fifties on would bode well for Tarkovsky and his generation. Films such as *The Cranes are Flying* and *The Ballad of a Soldier* caused an international sensation, and Tarkovsky would become the new star in the firmament of this Soviet New Wave.

Tarkovsky shot his first full-length film, *Ivan's Childhood*, in 1961. At the film's first screening in Moscow in March 1962, Mikhail Romm famously declared 'Remember the name: Tarkovsky.'<sup>13</sup> They would prove to be prophetic words: the film won the Golden Lion at Venice later that year and was championed in the West by no less than Jean-Paul Sartre, who praised it as 'Socialist surrealism'.<sup>14</sup> Tarkovsky was instantly recognised in the West as a major director; Ingmar Bergman would later write that his discovery of *Ivan's Childhood* was 'like a miracle' and that '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>15</sup> As Tarkovsky began work on what would become his second feature, *Andrei Rublev*, his standing was at its high-water mark in Moscow. He would never enjoy such a position again in his homeland.

*Andrei Rublev* was to be the beginning of the end for Tarkovsky in the Soviet Union. Although completed in

1966, it was not released until 1971 on the grounds that it was too naturalistic, unpatriotic and, perhaps worst of all in the eyes of the authorities, 'mystical'. The film was first screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969, where it was awarded the FIPRESCI Prize. It was finally released in the West in 1973.

By the time *Andrei Rublev* was released, Tarkovsky had shot his third feature, an adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's novel, *Solaris*. Although the film was part of the seemingly 'safe' genre of science fiction, the shoot was difficult, primarily due to frequent arguments between Tarkovsky and his cameraman, Vadim Yusov, who had shot all of Tarkovsky's films from *The Steamroller and the Violin* onwards. The two men would not work together again, and Tarkovsky asked Georgy Rerberg to shoot his next feature, the autobiographical *Mirror*. *Mirror* is at the heart of Tarkovsky's oeuvre in every way, but was met with official condemnation for being obscure and elitist. Such was the furore surrounding the film, that Tarkovsky briefly considered giving up film-making and also began to toy with the idea of making a film in the West.

The last film Tarkovsky would make in the Soviet Union was another venture into science fiction, *Stalker*. The film, based on a novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, marks a turning point in Tarkovsky's work, towards a more pared down and minimalistic style. The film was completed in 1979 and was shown in Cannes to rapturous reviews in 1980. The Polish director Andrzej Wajda felt that, with *Stalker*, Tarkovsky was 'throwing down the gauntlet'.<sup>16</sup> The film heralds the onset of Tarkovsky's late period, which would be rounded out by his last two features, *Nostalgia* (1983) and *The Sacrifice* (1986).

*Nostalgia* was shot in Italy in the autumn of 1982.

Tarkovsky had first visited the country 20 years earlier, when *Ivan's Childhood* had triumphed at Venice. In the summer of 1976, after the controversy surrounding *Mirror* had left Tarkovsky disillusioned and bitter, he began making notes for what would become *Tempo di Viaggio* (1980), his only documentary. The film was finally shot in the summer of 1979, by which time Tarkovsky and the screenwriter Tonino Guerra, his longtime friend, had had an idea – provisionally entitled ‘The End of the World’ – that would turn into *Nostalgia*.<sup>17</sup> The screenplay was completed in May 1980; Tarkovsky then spent two years in a bureaucratic quagmire before the film could be made. Soviet officials prevented the film from winning the Palme d’Or at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival, a scandal that enraged Tarkovsky and hardened his resolve that he could no longer continue working in the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup>

On 10 July 1984, Tarkovsky announced his intention to remain in the West at a press conference in Milan. He had considered defecting in 1981 during a trip to Sweden, but concern for his wife and son prevented him from proceeding. When he finally did make the decision to remain in the West, his son was still in the Soviet Union, and would not be allowed out until January 1986, by which time Tarkovsky had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. His final film, *The Sacrifice*, won four prizes at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival, including the Grand Prix and the Special Jury Prize. Tarkovsky was too ill to attend, so his son Andrei Jr collected the prizes on his behalf. Tarkovsky seemed to be in remission during the summer of 1986, but the cancer returned. He died in Paris on 29 December 1986.

Tarkovsky did not live long enough to experience *glasnost*, although he predicted that, after his death, he would be rehabilitated in his homeland. His prediction came true: a

major retrospective of his work was held at Dom Kino (the House of Cinema) in the spring of 1987. The following year, the original 205-minute cut of *Andrei Rublev* received its first public screening. An Andrei Tarkovsky Memorial Prize was established in 1989, its first recipient being the legendary animator, Yuri Norstein. In April 1990, Tarkovsky was posthumously awarded the Lenin Prize, the highest form of recognition in the Soviet Union.

### Tarkovsky and the Soviet Context

Tarkovsky made five feature films in the Soviet Union between 1962 and 1979. All of them were seen – at least in Western Europe – as major masterpieces, even one of which would have guaranteed their director a place in cinema history. Unlike some directors, such as his close friend Sergei Parajanov (1924–90), who spent a number of years in prison on trumped-up charges and whose career was badly hampered by the authorities, Tarkovsky managed to remain relatively free to pursue his vision, despite the fact that he was not a Party man and his films did not conform to the Socialist Realist norm that the Communist Party championed. This suggests that the Soviet system was not as monolithic as we might be tempted to think it was, to say nothing of Tarkovsky's own tenacity. A brief overview of the Soviet film industry will go some way towards helping us to appreciate what obstacles a filmmaker in the Soviet Union had to face and how that, in turn, played a part in shaping Tarkovsky's films.

The Soviet film industry, like every other walk of life in the Soviet Union, was heavily centralised. Goskino, a body founded in 1922, oversaw every aspect of filmmaking in the USSR, having the final say on each stage of the production

of a film, from script approval, to green-lighting a film's release. All 40 or so studios across the Soviet Union were answerable to Goskino, including the largest studio, Mosfilm in Moscow, where Tarkovsky made all of his Soviet features. During Tarkovsky's career, Goskino was headed first by Alexei Romanov (1963–72) and then by Filip Yermash (1972–86), who would become something of a personal nemesis for Tarkovsky.

Mosfilm, like the other studios, was comprised of various departmental heads, who oversaw their respective areas – such as production, scriptwriting and editing – together with an artistic council made up of Mosfilm top brass, filmmakers and Party officials. This council had the final say in how a film should be distributed, either in Category 1 (wide release in the major cinemas), or Category 2 (limited release in smaller cinemas). Everyone at the studio was answerable to the studio head. In Tarkovsky's time, these were V Surin and then Nilokai Sizov. Although Tarkovsky quickly developed a reputation for being stubborn and refusing to make cuts in his films, as we shall later see Goskino and Mosfilm officials were not necessarily hostile to Tarkovsky just for the sake of it; sometimes Tarkovsky took their feedback on board and made changes to his films accordingly (especially in the case of *Mirror*).

The process of getting a script approved was frequently a long and frustrating one. A project would first be submitted to the editor of the script department at the studio, who would then review it before passing it up the hierarchy. Finally, the script would arrive at the desk of the head of the studio. The studio head could not, however, greenlight a film until the whole process had been repeated at Goskino. Despite these supposedly stringent controls, however, the system was hampered by one major factor: during the mid to

late 1950s, the Soviet film industry began expanding at an almost exponential rate, epitomised by the international success of Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes are Flying*, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1957.

This resurgence owed a lot to the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1956, at which Khrushchev denounced Stalinism, thereby precipitating the 'Thaw' that initiated the most liberal cultural climate in the Soviet Union for 30 years. The film industry thrived as a result. In 1955, 65 features were produced; by the early 1960s, this had risen to over 100 per year. Cinemas likewise doubled in number, from 59,000 in 1955 to 118,000 in 1965. Aside from Kalatozov, other directors rose to prominence between the late fifties and mid sixties, such as Elem Klimov, Larissa Shepitko and Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky, and the only two Soviet directors Tarkovsky professed to admire, Otar Iosseliani and Sergei Parajanov.

The very success of the Soviet film industry meant, ironically, that theory (i.e., ideology) was not always practice. Industry personnel were overworked, deadlines had to be met, and scripts and films had to be approved. Once a script had been approved, a director such as Tarkovsky, who enjoyed an international reputation, would face very little, if any, interference from either Mosfilm or Goskino during shooting. Problems usually set in when Tarkovsky submitted a film for approval. Discussions would be held, cuts would be demanded, complaints would be lodged. As Tarkovsky often rewrote his scripts while shooting them (especially in the cases of *Mirror* and *Stalker*), this stage would often be fraught.

Tarkovsky would sometimes submit edits of his films that he knew were too long, so that when calls came for cuts, he would then cut the parts he was dissatisfied with, and could thus show that he had complied with requests to shorten the



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