

# 'TARKOVSKY AND THE BEAUTY OF AMBIGUOUS SOUND'

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## Abstract

Russian cinema has a strong history of foregrounding aesthetic beauty. This statement probably seems strange given the almost unshakeable association with structuralism, soviet montage and cold formalist experimentation. However, prior to the revolutionary cinema of Pudovkin, Eisenstein and Vertov; there were stronger theatrical and artistic connections to 'sensual' art, foregrounding art nouveau aesthetics through film makers only now being discovered.

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Until 1907 the only film companies operating in Russia were foreign. The domestic market being dominated by Lumiere and Pathe. After the set up of the first Russian production, by 1917 there were more than 20 companies indigenous to Russia producing mainly literary and dramatic adaptations.

## **BAUER**

Evgenii Bauer worked for the Khanzhonkov company and directed over eighty films during his short career between 1913 and 1917. He died on 9th June 1917 from stagnant pneumonia. Many of his films exhibited a preoccupation held by popular audiences of the day, with melancholy and the inevitable ending (Indeed Bauer's own tragically early demise seems to echo much of his work). These narrative conclusions, which invariably ended with the death or tragic injury of a central character, can be sharply contrasted with the happy endings of much of American and European cinema of the period. The Russian film makers of the period were effectively working to suit the tastes of two markets, the indigenous and the foreign. Often, two separate endings would be made for the same film. Yakov Protazanov's film, 'Drama po telefonu (1914) is a remake of a D.W Griffith feature, 'The lonely Vila', but the ending is changed creating a typically Russian. These 'Russian endings' were introduced into the popular unconscious through late nineteenth century theatrical melodrama. Similarly, the ideas of immobility of characters in these films can be traced to psychological pauses in the Art Theatre of Moscow. Also influential were the acting styles of Italian and Danish cinema. A manifesto of this Russian style stated "The full scene involves a complete rejection of the usual hurried tempo of the film play. Instead of a rapidly changing kaleidoscope of images, it aspires to rivet the attention of the audience onto a single image" The Italian cinema particularly, was in the advanced stages of articulating such a filmic-syntax. 'Cabiria' (Giovanni Pastrone) in 1914, which instigated the 'Cabiria movement', employed a slow lateral tracking shot, it's aim was to reveal the proportions of the sets and to enhance the three-dimensionality of the space. The concern with the moribund had several stylistic manifestations, more especially in the films of Bauer. The pace of the films was slow, achieved through a proto-expressionist acting style. Opulent and decadent sets, were carefully composed and framed within the shot (inspired by the popular art-nouveau style of the time). Lighting, and importantly camera movements were utilised expressively with astonishing artistic control. Although the tendencies towards the art cinema throughout the 1910's in Europe were fairly unified, the isolation of the Russian film industry to pursue its own aesthetic concerns enabled a radical alterity of style to develop.

This situation suddenly and radically changed by October 1917, the October revolution forced veteran directors, actors and technicians to emigrate as a violent transition affected normal production conditions.

The new Bolshevik government saw film as a vital tool in revolutionary struggle and set about re-constructing the film industry to this end. By 1918 the first agit trains (mobile propaganda centres) left for the eastern front, specially equipped to disseminate political propaganda through films. Until 1924 films remained conventional in style, untouched by the explosion of avant garde experimentalism evident on other arts of post revolutionary Russia. Then, in 1925, the industry was allowed an increased aesthetic independence in the wake of a polit buro decision endorsing state non-intervention in matters of style in the arts - thus was inaugurated the 'experimental phase' of Soviet cinema

It is with these earlier Russian films that Tarkovsky's work sits more comfortably along-side, rather than the radical experimentalism of Eisenstein et al. Tarkovsky favours the long lingering takes, tracking shots, the mise-en-scene filled with delicate foliage and subtly and carefully lit sets, although Tarkovsky favours the more ambiguous endings rather than a tragic ending, one can certainly say that they are not in any sense 'classical Hollywood endings' in terms of narrative resolution, and indeed many of his central characters appear 'moribund'. Tarkovsky's use of sound also fits strongly into this aesthetic schema, in that he picks out a single sound or atmosphere and lets the audience experience it for long periods of time, allowing the 'experience' of that sound as a delicate lingering image does.

## **TARKOVSKY**

Andrei Arsenevich Tarkovsky was born on April the 4th 1932 in Zavrozhne, 60 miles to the north of Moscow. His father was the respected Russian poet Arseney Alexandrovich and his mother was Maja Ivanovna Vishnakova.

Andrei's schooling began in Moscow during 1939. This was cut short after two years when the war against Hitler intervened, but resumed in 1943. It seems that he was nurtured to be an artist, as at the same time as his official education, Andrei received several years musical study and drawing classes.

After several years of various other activities, such as learning Arabic and furthering an interest in Geology via an expedition to Siberia, he returned to Moscow in 1954 where he enrolled in the Moscow State Film School (VGIK) where he was taught by the celebrated film maker Mikhail Romm. The course was to last six years, and during this time he was bathed in the whole range of cinematic aesthetics, acting, mise-en-scene, sound, cinematography, writing and direction.

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Tarkovsky had completed two films during his time at VGIK. These are 'There will be no Leave Today' (1959) and 'The Steamroller and the Violin' (1960). The latter of these films was made in collaboration with a local children's foundation and is an account of a little boy violinist's relationship with a worker laying tarmac in a courtyard. It establishes a theme for later Tarkovsky films in the seriousness and responsibility of art.

Tarkovsky's first major work was shown in Moscow in April 1962, this was 'Ivan's Childhood' and was based on a novel by Vladimir Bogomolov. The film won the Golden Lion Award in the same year in the Venice Film Festival. This international recognition triggered off a considerable ideological concern in his own country. At the end of 1969 after working on his second feature, the epic 'Andrei Rublev', the film won a special prize at the Cannes Film Festival, however it was only cleared for export outside the Soviet Union by the Soviet Film Department in 1973. In the same manner, 'Mirror', an unusually publicly conceived memoir film which was completed in 1974 against strong bureaucratic resistance, reached western audiences only years later.

With 'Solaris' (1971) based on the science fiction novel by Stanislaw Lem, Tarkovsky touched upon the innocuous subject of interplanetary space travel, and still generated a list of criticisms and objections from the film department.

'Stalker', which was to be Tarkovsky's last film made in the Soviet Union, is based on the novel 'Roadside Picnic' by the Strugatsky Brothers. After a stage production of Hamlet in Moscow, Tarkovsky travelled to Italy in 1982 to shoot his next film, 'Nostalgia'. This was a Soviet-Italian co-production and was based on a script written jointly between Tarkovsky and the poet Tonino Guerra. The theme is typical of the dilemma Tarkovsky was suffering at the time, that of the artist abroad, homesick, unable to live in his country or away from it.

In the autumn of 1983 Tarkovsky staged a production of Boris Gudunov at Covent Garden opera in London. A year and a half after this his widely acclaimed book 'Sculpting in Time' was published. At this time he was also preparing in Berlin for his last film on a fellowship from the German Academic Exchange Service, this was to be 'Sacrifice'.

At the end of 1985, after completing the shooting of Sacrifice in Sweden, Andrei returned to Rome, already afflicted by the disease to which he was to succumb he died on December 29th, 1986 at a Parisian cancer clinic. He is buried in a graveyard for Russian émigrés in the town of Saint-Genieve-du-Bois, France.

## **SOUND AND THE SENSUAL**

Tarkovsky is one of the few cinematic auteurs who had a very distinctive control over all elements of the film, and no exception to this was the soundtrack. When we get into the pace of a Tarkovsky film we realise that the sounds are there to be drunk in, to be experienced sensually. Sounds perfume every frame with their intrinsic beauty. Very often these sounds are at odds with the image, and their 'off screen' source is never revealed to the viewer. This use of non-diegetic sounds and 'aural imagery' is something that feels unique to a Tarkovsky work.

All Tarkovsky's films are littered with examples of delicate lingering sounds with Stalker, Sacrifice and Solaris as stronger examples. Sound is often at odds with images, and though this may feel sometimes like a mistake, the amount of control over the post production environment certainly dismisses this idea. All we hear is meant to be heard.

When one cannot identify the source of a sound onscreen, one must imagine causes or explanations for that sound. Michel Chion relies on Pierre Schaeffer's notions of reduced listening and causal listening to explain what happens to the auditor in this situation (indeed the audience's mental functions are constantly in flux between these two modes) Yet in-between these two modes are where 'aural imagery' appears, as one's own interpretation on a non-linguistic, but sensual aural level of what these sounds may represent. Non-diegetic sounds are not nailed down to meaning by having their sources revealed. Many other film makers have used these notions, particularly Robert Bresson, having introduced a non-diegetic sound its meaning is in flux in the mind of the auditor, poetic and floating, until its cause is revealed and fixed or nailed to the diegesis and the narrative.

It is this floating nature of the meaning of non-diegetic sounds that makes them highly charged poetic elements. When they fuse with the images to which they appear disparate to, they fuse in that montage like sense, on a vertical level across the senses of vision and audition.

In his book 'Sculpting in Time' Tarkovsky offers us a glimpse into his own inner ideas, and allows us to draw a line between theory and practice in his films. The writings strictly posit him against the aims of montage and their strict ideological motives, and also clearly places him in a tradition against the classical mainstream of cinema being an entertainment medium (which is an extension of 19th century literary and theatrical narrative traditions) Tarkovsky's films resist interpretation on an intellectual level, one gets the impression from reading his theories that this is quite a deliberate position. Instead he requires the audience to sensually and viscerally experience his images (both visual and aural) in terms of their infinite meaning. He is also quite verbal on the ideas of the film maker being of no consequence in the final meaning of the film.

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"...for the empirical process of intellectual cognition cannot explain how an artistic image comes into being - unique, indivisible, created and existing on some plane other than that of the intellect"

His viewpoint differs radically from modernist individualistic and 'wilful' acts of expression...

"Modern art has taken a wrong turn in abandoning the search for the meaning of existence in order to affirm the value of the individual for its own sake. What purports to be art begins to look like an eccentric occupation for suspect characters who maintain that any personalised action is of intrinsic value simply as a display of self will" p.38  
Tarkovsky believed in deliberately leaving meaning open in his imagery, he did not believe in symbolism, again like montage a form of fixed and intentional meaning...

"What I'm interested in is not symbols but images. An image has an unlimited number of possible interpretations" and this clearly extends to his use of ambiguous sound.

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He also states..."Art consists of its not being noticeable' wrote Ovid. Engels declared that 'The better hidden the author's views, the better for the work of art'. the work of art lives and develops like any other natural organism, through the conflict of opposing principles, opposites reach over into each other within it, taking the idea out into infinity. That is why Goethe said 'the less accessible a work of art is to the intellect, the greater it is.

This very notion of 'opposites reaching over into each other and taking the idea out into the infinite' describes perfectly what happens in Tarkovsky's films when a sound and an image convey differing images.

It is clear that Tarkovsky was responsible for all these decisions of sound and visual poetics as he is such an autocratic voice in his own film making. he has also had a steady stream of different sound collaborators and one gets the impression that these sound men were learning sound aesthetics from Tarkovsky rather than the other way around. However, Owe Svensson, who was the sound designer on *Sacrifice* seems to be himself very much attuned to what Tarkovsky was trying to achieve, in an interview for school of sound he states...

"Sound is an emotional experience, it heightens the feelings...when you watch a film you are supposed not to notice the sound, the sound should just be felt...if you are to create something with sound I increasingly believe it has to be achieved through experience"

The multiple interpretability of Tarkovsky's non-diegetic worlds are open to misinterpretation, Andrea Truppin states "the undeniable existence of a sound phenomenon for which there is no plausible explanation is, in the world of these films, proof of God's existence and is likened to the Christian notion of revelation"

By implying this particular 'reading' and solidifying it in a critical text one is missing the point of what Tarkovsky's work is communicating to us. Elements of ambiguous sound function to allow an infinite number of multiple interpretations to co-exist in the minds of the auditor, there are no fixed readings of Tarkovsky's works, nor is this to be a fruitful or plausible exercise, as indeed for *any* audio visual text. What Tarkovsky posits is that the 'meaning' of these sound / image constructs is a constantly shifting, infinitely resonant subjective phenomenon

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