

FILM REVIEWS

ANDREJ TARKOVSKIJ: IL CINEMA COME PREGHIERA (ANDREI TARKOVSKY: A CINEMA PRAYER), ANDREI A. TARKOVSKY (DIR.) (2019), ITALY: ANDREI TARKOVSKY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE, KLEPATSKI PRODUCTION, HOBAB AND REVOLVER

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Andrei Arsenevich Tarkovsky's films¹ lend themselves to being watched repeatedly over time due to their poetic and philosophical density and the multiple codes they rely upon. Every viewing discloses new details of the artist's poetics and emotional world – like those literary works that only after several readings lead to what Vladimir Nabokov defined as 'artistic pleasure' and make it possible 'to capture their images', using Tarkovsky Sr's words.

In these terms, the documentary *Andrej Tarkovskij: Kino kak molitva (Andrei Tarkovsky: A Cinema Prayer)* (2019) by his son Andrei Andreevich Tarkovsky² lets viewers 're-watch' some key moments from Tarkovsky Sr's seven feature films³ in an originally edited version. The films were shot between 1962, the year in which *Ivan's Childhood* was released and 1986, when Andrei Arsenevich's last film *The Sacrifice* appeared on-screen.

Tarkovsky Jr's work is significant as it merges his father's film scenes with rare archival material (mainly video-interviews, notes, sketches and shorthand censorship documents – since Tarkovsky Sr's scripts were constantly subjected to massive cutting and editing). In this extra material, Andrei Arsenevich talks about himself and his life in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s and later in Italy. The director's Italian years include: his extended trip to Italy with Tonino Guerra while shooting *Nostalghia (Nostalgia)* (1983); the press conference he attended in Milan on 10 July 1984, in which he took the painful decision to seek political asylum in Italy and his later years in Florence, where the house he lived in is now home to the Andrei Tarkovsky International Institute.

Quite unexpectedly, *Andrei Tarkovskij: A Cinema Prayer* opens by showing footage from Tarkovsky Sr's fourth – and not first – film, *Mirror* (1974),

1. Andrei Arsenevich Tarkovsky (1932–86) was personally involved in writing the screenplays for all his films, sometimes with a co-writer.
2. I am very grateful to Andrei Andreevich Tarkovsky for sharing his documentary with me.
3. Eight films, if we also include his graduation project *The Steamroller and the Violin* in 1961.

4. Lines read in the film: 'We have yet to conceive a child, / And already beneath his feet, / The film bows outward cast / Upon his circular orbit'. This translation is from the subtitled version of the documentary.

the most autobiographical of his works. Here, the Russian director recounts his life by relying upon non-traditional narrative devices and engaging viewers in a game of mirrors that reflects in a complex manner his adult life and his childhood. Before (re-)showing some of the film's most suggestive and iconic scenes (such as the lonely mother who stands heartbroken after her husband has left), Tarkovsky Jr starts the narration by showing some images of his grandfather, the poet Arseny Tarkovsky (1907–89) and his father as a child. In a voice-over, the poet reads his poem 'Belyj den' ('A White, White Day') (1942). The opening already contains all the key themes to be later found in the documentary: childhood as a lost ideal time when individuals are wiser and have a stronger bond with a different world which is lost for good as people grow older, as Tarkovsky Sr's voice says later on; the essential role of his mother Maria Ivanovna Vishnyakova in raising Andrei and his sister Marina; the pervasive presence of his father Arseny as a poet, who will affect all of his son's film productions.

Tarkovsky Jr's documentary is scattered with lines from his grandfather's poems, including not only those his father had used in his own films, such as *Pervoye svidaniya* (*First Dates*) (1962), in *Mirror* or *Merknet zrenie: Sila moyaya* (*Visions Fades, My Strength*) (1977), in *Nostalgia*, but also many others – such as *Orbita* (*Orbit*) (1968),⁴ which is juxtaposed with *Ivan's Childhood's* dream-like ending. The constant pairing of poetry lines with film scenes shows how film imagery often implicitly translates the poetic experience that binds together father and son. In the documentary, Tarkovsky Sr says he would never dare ask his father to write a poem for one of his films – but the need never actually arose. Several of Arseny's poetic images seem to evoke and mirror their later representation on-screen.

What strikes the viewer is also Tarkovsky Jr's final juxtaposition of the poem 'Fotografiya' ('Photography') (1957) with images of Florence – as if Arseny's lines, evoking death in a foreign land, concurrently brings life ('Won't let you pulverize / Even if you're dead, you live / Not completely, a hundredth / On tip toe, within a dream / As if meandering in a field / Somewhere in distant lands» foresaw his son's fate').

After *Mirror* the narration moves to two other works related to the theme of childhood: *The Steamroller and the Violin* (1960) and *Ivan's Childhood*. Andrei Arsenevich's words about the latter underline one of its dominant features, i.e. the constant strain towards individual and artistic freedom, which he had fought for since the beginning of his career regardless of all else. *Ivan's Childhood*, based on the short story 'Ivan' (1957) by Vladimir Bogomolov, had already been almost completely filmed by a different director. The final product, however, was not convincing and Tarkovsky Sr was presented with the same project. Andrei Arsenevich accepted and agreed to work on the remaining budget on one condition – that he could shoot the film without watching any of the previously filmed material and was free to work with an entirely different crew.

Some scenes from *Andrey Rublev* (1966) later appear on-screen: the Russified Christ in a snow-clad landscape, followed by a procession of suffering Russians; and the violence perpetrated by Tatars and Russians alike. More scenes from Tarkovsky Sr's ensuing films follow. In the meantime, Andrei Arsenevich muses about time; faith, the sacred dimension and art as an unconditional act – as well as a personal prayer that can become everyone's prayer and art; nature and death.

According to Tarkovsky Sr, truth lies in nature only, and it is through contact with nature that the Russian character is shaped. His love for nature

and for human immersion in that physical and auditory space is evident in all Tarkovsky Sr's films and in his decision to buy a house in Myasnoe in 1970, in the heart of Russia and near Ryazan. The house resembles his childhood home, very much like the one in *Mirror*.⁵ Andrei Arsenevich actively took part in the house renovation, as the detailed floor plan reveals, with its meticulous notes resembling the sketch of a set. Alongside that, further evidence is found in the picture of a smiling Tarkovsky Sr working on the roof of the house. How hard it must have been for a person so deeply immersed in Russian tradition to be forced to leave this world of dreams and loved ones in the space of a few years.

The documentary's ending comes full circle, showing pictures of Andrei Arsenevich going back in time. The final pictures show him as a child again, with his father Arseny and his mother Maria Ivanovna. Hence, in the slow flow of the film and of the memories it evokes, Tarkovsky Jr's respectful and intimate gaze gives new life to his father, to his works and to his family's story, recalling the naïve eyes through which a child sees the world.

5. Tarkovsky's love for nature and truth takes us back to Anton Chekhov and his house in Melichovo, where the writer spent seven years of his life and devoted himself to literature and to building schools, libraries and medical clinics.

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