

A black and white photograph of Andrei Tarkovsky, looking upwards and to the right. He has dark hair and a mustache. He is wearing a dark jacket over a striped shirt and a patterned scarf. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a window with curtains.

ANDREI TARKOVSKY

A LIFE ON THE CROSS

LYUDMILA BOYADZHEVA

GLAGOSLAV

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GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

ANDREI TARKOVSKY:
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by Lyudmila Boyadzhieva

Translated by Christopher Culver
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A DANCE OF THE FLESH AND SYMPHONY OF THE SPIRIT

TARKOVSKY REVOLUTIONIZED THE WORLD OF FILMMAKING, WORKING almost half a century ahead of his time.

He brought a kind of magically arranged film content to life, which the audience was not supposed to understand or even perceive. Emotions and the intellect are only pitfalls in an attempt to understand the human soul. He sought a way to convey deep, mysterious but stirring images from one soul to another, he dreamed of a filmmaking that affected people on a subconscious level, because this would save all mankind. He knew one thing for sure: in order to survive, the world needs a renewed Homo sapiens, developing under the influence of great art, high culture and firm spiritual values, an individual driven exclusively by moral standards, ignoring all the material demands of the base flesh.

Cinema, true cinema, would be the unique means of influencing the transformation of the human race and therefore the most effective medium for saving the world.

Andrei Tarkovsky made seven complete films and left one unfinished. Each of them won the highest acclaim from the international film community. One of his films, *Andrei Rublev*, has been given the title of “film of films”, just as the Bible has been called the “Book of books”.

A great deal has been written and said about Tarkovsky. His films have been watched and will continue to be watched, uncovering more and more meanings, sparking reflection and debate, at least as long

as the controversy between the spiritual and the material finds no definitive solution; as long as there are no answers to the “eternal questions” such as: Who are we? Who sent us into this world? What are we living for? Where do we go afterwards? It is only then that what tormented Tarkovsky, gazing into the abyss of human existence, will seem to us, the omniscient ones, no less naive than the historical disputes over the shape of the Earth.

It seems, however, that the plan of the Creator, combining spirit and flesh into a single creation, does not offer any key. Therefore, the search for the meaning of existence, expressed by the language of cinema, will always be relevant, as long as cinema does not become a quaint exoticism, out of touch with the mankind of a new civilization; when, like old floppy disks, communication by means of a camera and the methods of transferring information available to it become superseded with no going back. Only then will the “damnable questions”, debated for centuries, be approached through other means of creativity.

However, something quite the opposite might happen as well. It may be that the magical, not entirely comprehensible essence of Tarkovsky’s films will be of particular importance to a world on its way to spiritual collapse. The special properties of his film language are matter, cut open, as if under the dissector’s knife, and time caught in a trap by a motionless camera — these transform the slow pacing and the unspoken into “spiritual zones” (like Goa, hidden from civilization), areas for meditative immersion into the depths of self-knowledge, and they will preserve his films in a special niche of wisdom, along with religious teachings and spiritual practices.

Tarkovsky’s seven-and-a-half films are a drop of something different in the ocean of commercial and simply bad cinema, whatever its origin. These seven-and-a-half achievements, standing apart in the world of film, are like the small verdant island in the mysterious ocean of *Solaris* and have become a code word for a person’s intellectual and aesthetic maturity, a sort of IQ in and of themselves.

When thinking of Tarkovsky and his work, one main, unanswered question remains, connected to a realm generally inaccessible to

human beings: the matter of talent, inspiration, sudden insights, i.e. the presence of some irrational higher power in earthly affairs, in the frail confines of human embodiment, which is often alien to this higher power.

Where did Tarkovsky, not always aware of the workings of his revolutionary output, draw these images, motifs, ways of combining or the joining together of various aspects of creation into a single whole, playing with such concepts as the soul, matter, humanity, history, death and eternity?

He established new worlds out of elements that were occasionally not rationally explainable, studying phenomena and feelings that were not so close to him personally — sacrifice, compassion, love. The paradox of Tarkovsky's personality, marked by an enigmatic complexity, consists in his simultaneous existence in two different worlds, his "double citizenship": the material and the spiritual. Thus in the higher spheres lie the sources of his unique talents, while the mundane level determines one's human nature, something that cannot be confused with talent and often contradicts it. The result of this is the long series of paradoxes which followed all of Tarkovsky's undertakings like a bad omen.

He respected his home country, accepting it with all its drawbacks of full-fledged socialism, with its idiocies, cruelty, hypocrisy and hostility. He wanted to be "understood by his own country", embraced and rewarded by it. However, being far from political and social engagement, lacking an understanding of the backstage workings of the world of cinema, he suffered failure after failure. For the Soviet authorities, the law-abiding, ideologically moderate Tarkovsky remained an outsider, a nuisance due to his obscurity and incapability for mutual understanding. Sniffing out with their hunter's senses his outsider inclinations, the authorities did everything they could to reject his works, excommunicate and annihilate them. Standing distant from ideological rebellion, devoted to his country without any dissident plotting, Tarkovsky virtually became a foreign object, forced to seek refuge abroad.

He thought of himself as a messiah, devoting all his spiritual and creative energy to the refinement of humanity. But the audience for whom he worked often was unable to reach an understanding of what he was preaching. The wide audience of the USSR had no cultural bearings with which to get a handle on Tarkovsky's films. They lacked an intellectual background and subtleness of perception, a familiarity with sophisticated material. "Yes, my films are received with difficulty," Tarkovsky admitted. "But I will not make even the smallest compromise for the masses, make my films more accessible or 'interesting', I will not take even half a step toward being understood by the audience."

He was not going to entertain, or even sustain interest. He feared even the tiniest drop of sentimentality or humor that might sneak into the film. Tarkovsky was absolutely insistent that the reception of his films ought to be a painful act, almost as distressing as the making of a film itself. Only then would someone be able to change something in himself and, subsequently, the world that had sunk into mundane materialism would change.

Tarkovsky rejected other ways of influencing audiences through the medium of cinema. He spoke very negatively in his public statements about the leading figures in the film industry who looked for ways of communicating with the audience that were different from his own principles. The insistence of the "messiah" exasperated the "unbelievers". More and more often they would shout, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

In his films, Tarkovsky depicted love and sacrifice as the primary manifestations of the spirit, holding the universe together. In real life he was unfamiliar with the mystery of love. In fact, he did not feel devoted and self-sacrificing love toward anyone, whether friends, colleagues, children or women. "A woman does not have her own inner world and should not have one. Her inner world should be completely dissolved into the inner world of a man." Such was his unbending insistence.

Unable to love, he could not distinguish authentic feelings from a poor imitation. Though he proclaimed as an artist the importance of loyalty and complete sincerity in a relationship between a man and a

woman, he was himself an inconstant partner. His fate was to cheat on women and be cheated on. Any woman who was not ready to dedicate her life to an outcast and martyr could not be his support and his muse, her feelings would go unrequited. In his marriage, Tarkovsky was dealt the role of prey, a puppet in the hands of a stronger, mercenary partner. Consequently, marriage to a woman destroyed his own identity. Probably the worst trap that Tarkovsky's fate set for him was to meet and then spend many years of his life with Larisa Kizilova, later Mrs. Tarkovskaya.

The conditions of the last years of Tarkovsky's life turned him into a bundle of nerves. This was owing in large part to his steady companion, who decided, whatever it took, to "go down in history", to enter an esteemed place among the greats, to get a ticket to the easy life. And the most important thing was to remain for Tarkovsky's descendants the rightful owner of his fame, his guardian angel, his inspiration, who everywhere and always helped this genius to ascend to the throne of demiurge of world cinema. In the union of Mr. and Mrs. Tarkovsky, genius and malice became merged like two halves of an androgynous individual. When he got himself his own personal tempting serpent, Tarkovsky began a headlong journey into his own tragic ending.

Tarkovsky was proud, unmercenary, firm in his intentions, madly courageous in defending his own principles. Dignity and a firm adherence to one's principles were his motto. But he then slandered his friends, insulted his colleagues, raised his demands for payment from foreign distributors and scared away those who had offered him a helping hand with his cold disdain.

The majority of people who encountered him in the course of his career reluctantly admitted, "He's a genius, but he is not a great human being."

Stubborn, provocatively direct, far from being sentimental, even with those who unquestioningly executed his ideas, he submitted to a selfish woman and he dealt roughly with his colleagues, friends and relatives, who were not useful to him, that is, he thought them of no practical value.

Perhaps he found it easier to arrange his private things with someone else's help. Perhaps, immersed in his work, he was simply too weak to oppose her.

Tarkovsky, persistently declaring his disdain for material values in the name of spiritual growth, reconstructed his ideal existence in his film *The Mirror*: a poor village from his childhood. At the same time he undertook the construction of an "estate" in Podmoskovye, adorning it with paintings and buying antique furniture. He dreamed of acquiring an old castle in Italy, giving careful consideration to the size of its pool. Keeping on the right course was still managed by the same woman who had taken the biggest role in Tarkovsky's life.

Tarkovsky never had the timid smile of an artist who had reason to doubt his own achievements in cinema and for humanity. He knew his own worth perfectly well, defying authorities as early as in his university years. When he found himself in the "jungle of capitalism", Tarkovsky claimed exclusive rights: general admiration and financial success. He demanded that his revelatory films, which he had "gratuitously given to the people", be generously rewarded. Tarkovsky did not place himself alongside anyone, even his respected elder Bresson, whose win at Cannes he questioned.

A stranger in the land of people who were cynical and mercenary, or simply did not understand him because of his different approach, he struggled, baited by fear and anger, and became stuck in the trap of collisions with the authorities, unsettled financial hardships, and a disconnect between his personal and creative life. The eternal struggle of the spiritual and the material, the investigation of which he believed to be the primary objective of art, became his own fatal battle.

The outcome is a sad one: an incompatibility with everything that he was living for, the endless pressure of a woman driving him like a horse with more and more demands, brought the irreversible disaster nearer. In his last years Tarkovsky, already impulsive enough, was constantly on the verge of a nervous breakdown. His terminal illness — "the disease of my entire life" — was a death sentence, the end. He was worn out and grew weak. He would not believe the news

for a long time, just as he refused (so stubbornly refused) to believe in death. "For me there is no such thing as death." By deluding himself, he tried to ward off the inevitable.

He died before he even had the chance to grow old, to fully carry out his work, to finish realizing his many plans, a poor man but renowned worldwide. He died rejected by his homeland, deprived of the legitimate honors and financial independence that he ardently yearned for. He left the world pitifully early, not entirely sure if he was going out as a winner or a loser.

PART I. A feeling of immortality

*“All his life an artist feeds on his childhood
and his own memories, the sense of
immortality, his keen reflexes and simple
happiness.”*

Andrei Tarkovsky

Chapter I.

CHILDHOOD

*The brighter one's childhood memories,
the greater one's creative potential.*

Andrei Tarkovsky

I.

Andrei Tarkovsky was fortunate with his ancestry. He was fortunate if one looks at the seven-and-a-half films which he managed to bring into the treasury of world cinema, and if we overlook the painful road he was forced to walk. In his genes lay a powerful gift and the elements of a contradictory, complex personality, which predetermined the director's difficult path through life.

Andrei Tarkovsky's father, the famous poet Arseny Alexandrovich Tarkovsky, was born in 1907 in a provincial town in the Kherson Governorate to the family of a clerk at the Elisavetgrad Public Bank. However, the volatile blood of the rulers of Dagestan, who were the root of Tarkovsky's ancestry, showed itself — the fate of its representatives was not easy.

The roots of the Tarkovsky family, according to one version, go back to the "Tarkovsky holdings", as this area, covering almost the whole of Dagestan was called, and only after 1867 was its name changed to the Temir-Khan-Shura district. Shamsudin, the last prince of the Tarkovsky holdings, is considered to be the founder of the Tarkovsky bloodline. The features of the powerful prince can be guessed in the

rugged handsomeness and stern character of Arseny Alexandrovich and his son Andrei.

Alexander Karlovich, Andrei Tarkovsky's grandfather, was endowed with an uneasy and restless soul. Apart from his work at the bank, he wrote poems, stories and translated Dante, Giacomo Leopardi, Victor Hugo for his own pleasure. Furthermore, in the 1880s, he took part in a Narodnaya Volya circle, which brought him under police surveillance. He was arrested, imprisoned three times in Voronezh, Elisavetgrad, Odessa and Moscow and exiled for five years to Eastern Siberia. In exile, he took up journalism, working with newspapers in Irkutsk. Alexander Karlovich's first wife died young, leaving behind a young daughter. His second wife, Maria Danilovna, bore her husband two sons, Valery and Arseny. As he was undependable for political reasons, Alexander Karlovich's children were mostly brought up by the family of a relative, the actor and playwright Ivan Karpovich Tobilevich, who was one of the founders of the Ukrainian theater and known in the history of drama under the name Karpenko-Kary.

The family was immersed in literature and theater. Poems and plays, written by lovers of the stage, were performed among friends. At the beginning of the 20th century, drama circles, societies, university and high school student troupes quickly multiplied, encompassing what we might call today the entire youth subculture. Almost everyone wrote poetry: in girls' albums, in local magazines and newspapers; they published collections at their own expense or timidly kept their secret writings in a desk drawer. And most importantly, they read the poems in mellifluous voices at literary evenings, which were held regularly and ended with stormy debates or dancing.

Arseny, writing in secret and only for the eyes of a girl he loved, found great success among his young peers due to his outlook, which everyone compared to the anti-hero Pechorin in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, and his mysterious, romantic nature. As a young man, he was handsome with a fiery Caucasian beauty, and this alone could evoke sighs and note-passing from the fair sex. And when he recited poetry, it led to walks in the dusk or gardens that had frozen over,

kisses, vows, as in the sort of sweet stories that Kuprin, Bunin and Chekhov often wrote.

In the intellectual Tobilevich home, thoroughly in tune with the cultural and artistic trends of the time, one could hear a piano or singing to guitar accompaniment, recitals of poetry or performances of theatrical sketches. How similar was the cherry plush of the Tobilevich living room, the porcelain stove, the cream-colored curtains over the windows to the home of the Turbins, the childhood home of Mikhail Bulgakov. This was an atmosphere in which people were brought up with Romantic bravery, an unshakable sense of duty and a thirst for artistic expression.

While still quite young, Arseny Tarkovsky, together with his father and brother, participated in the literary evenings of some of the capital's celebrities: Igor Severyanin, Konstantin Balmont and Fyodor Sologub. Later the young man came to Moscow to immerse himself in an atmosphere of poetry. It is difficult to imagine that somewhere beside him, in a banquet hall packed with attentive listeners in rows of chairs, shone the short-sighted eyes of a young Marina Tsvetaeva. Perhaps Arseny saw how, with trepidation, she presented Konstantin Balmont with a white peony after one of his recitals, blushing with embarrassment. Perhaps Arseny heard the first recitals of this budding poetess, who, at her own expense, had already published the collection *Evening Album*? Much later, in pre-war Moscow, having returned from the West, Marina Tsvetaeva fell under the spell of this handsome man, no longer young, and even wrote him passionate poems. A year later Arseny, learning of her tragic death in August 1941, wrote an epitaph in verse for the martyred Marina.

The Ukrainian civil war ended with the victory of the Soviet authorities. Arseny's older brother Valery was killed in battle against the ataman Grigoriev in May 1919. People were terrified by the Soviets' seizure of power and hoped that it would not last long. Arseny and his friends, mad for poetry and constitutional monarchy, published an acrostic in a newspaper in which the first letters depicted the head of the Soviet government, Vladimir Lenin in an unflattering light. The

young men were arrested and taken to Nikolaev, which in those years was the administrative center of the oblast. Arseny Tarkovsky managed to escape from the train on the way. This son of an intellectual family became a starving beggar, wandering across Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula. He was forced to try his hand at several professions, working as an apprentice to a shoemaker and in fisheries. He turned out to be a jack of all trades, which proved useful in his later life.

In 1923, Arseny Alexandrovich came to Moscow and called on an aunt, his father's sister. Two years later, he enrolled in the Higher Literary Courses, which had been organized in place of the Literary Institute, closed after the death of Valery Bryusov. After he had observed the students for a while, Arseny noticed a beautiful young woman with a tuft of fair hair on the back of her neck, as if her hair were so heavy that it made her hold her chin up with pride.

"She's the one!" the young poet decided after Maria Vishnyakova's speech in a student auditorium, where she talked passionately and in an inspired tone about the poetry of Blok.

They would soon take long walks along the Moscow lanes, dance to an orchestra in Gorky Park, read poems ceaselessly to each other and kiss in the intoxicating scent of blooming linden trees.

"I started to write poetry already when I was in nappies!" Arseny boasted, a smile in his dark eyes. "Our house was a place for high arts, we organized various events and poetic evenings. I don't even remember any more when I made my debut. I just remember that I had to stand on top of a stool. Only later did I grow tall. As a boy I was quite small."

"At least in my ancestry we are very tough and principled. I don't forgive insults." Maria looked into his loving eyes. She knew that she wasn't the only one dreaming of the handsome young man with the dark looks, but she thought, "Other women's husbands cheat on them, but I'm a special girl!" and said to him, "Remember, Arseny, you are meant for me for life."

"Don't worry, you can rely on me," he said. "If I have fallen in love with you now, it is for life." He embraced Maria, but she pulled away

and ran ahead of him, a gauze scarf fluttering in her hand. She hid behind an old maple, pressing her back to its trunk. Arseny caught up with her, kissed her gently on her snub nose, took her in his strong arms. "You won't get away now. I respect people with principles." He buried his face in her warm hair, which smelled of wild strawberry soap. "You are the only one for me. This scent... No one can have a scent like this!" (Under the spell of love, the country's only brand of soap at the time was transformed into a rare perfume.)

"And what do you like most about me?" he asked.

Maria furrowed her brow playfully and answered, "That you know how to make shoes. I'll never be barefoot."

Maria's parents liked him and in 1928 the young couple were married.

The next year, Tarkovsky was granted, in recognition of his excellent studies, a monthly stipend from the state publishing house's foundation for beginning authors. This small sum of money came as a great help to the young married couple. Tarkovsky's first publications — the quatrain "*Svecha*" (The Candle) and the poem "*Khleb*" (Bread) date from his studies in the Courses of Higher Literature. But then the poet's career stalled. He had to wait a long time to issue a collection of his own poems — several decades, in fact.

In the following year, the Higher Literature Courses closed under scandal, the suicide of one of the female students. Tarkovsky was hired by the newspaper *Gudok*, the very one where Bulgakov, Olesha and Ilf and Petrov moonlighted. Tarkovsky reviewed court cases and wrote satires in verse and fairy tales under various pseudonyms. The most popular "author" of Arseny's satires was the rustic character Taras Podkova.

In 1931, Tarkovsky worked as a senior instructor and consultant for an arts program on Soviet radio.

"They took me, dear Maruska, they took me!" he said to his wife as he got home. "Now we'll make the big money. I'll write plays for broadcast over the radio."

"Oh, for radio! You're my hero. That sounds like a promising

and progressive career. But the important thing is not to lose your ideological bearings and don't say anything... Well, you know," Maria broke off and looked around furtively, lest someone might have heard the word "anti-Soviet" almost tumbling from her lips. She was making soup from bad fish, part of their rations, on a kerosene stove. "Don't worry, I'm a smart man, I've had some schooling. They've already given me a commission for the radio. The play will be called *Steklo* (Glass). It tells of heroic glassmakers." Arseny scooped up a bit of broth, blew on the spoon and tasted it. "It's like in a restaurant! It's even better that the potatoes are frozen, so they melt in the mouth."

To get acquainted with glassmakers and learn something of the process by which they worked with molten glass, Tarkovsky went to visit a glassworks. The play was produced in a very short time, recorded by the noted actor Osip Abdulov and broadcast by All-Union Radio.

Almost all the inhabitants of the communal apartment gathered around the radio receiver in the kitchen, neatly seated in rows, as if at a theater. After the play finished, the author was congratulated by his neighbors. Maria set the table, welcoming them with her own vinaigrette salad recipe. They read poems, sang and drank to their life becoming completely wonderful as soon as possible.

"Life will be wonderful! You'll become a writer for the stage, and we'll have a son," whispered Maria one night into the shaven but always stubbly cheek of her husband. "Your hair is so coarse, like bristles."

"Huh, what?" his eyes shown in the darkness, he sat up and embraced her in astonishment. "What are you saying, Maruska?! You're expecting a baby boy? That's fantastic!"

"Or a little girl..."

"No, as you promised, first a boy and then later a girl."

The next evening Arseny came home in a somber mood. He sat down and pushed his dinner plate away. "I don't deserve this food. Marusya, your husband is without a job. Oh, what a thrashing the director gave me just now! My ears were burning."

"They didn't like the play?" his wife asked, horrified.



LYUDMILA BOYADZHIEVA

Lyudmila Boyadzhieva is an outstanding Russian documentary writer. Novels, novellas and short stories by Lyudmila Boyadzhieva first began appearing in print nearly two decades ago under various pen names. Since then, Boyadzhieva has earned a reputation as an author of modern classics. Her works are a synthesis of various genres, striking combinations of suspense, adventure and love stories. Boyadzhieva's work on Andrei Tarkovsky is the latest in her series of documentary novels examining the lives

lives of outstanding figures from Russia and elsewhere, such as Max Reinhardt, Marlene Dietrich, Frank Sinatra, Mikhail Bulgakov, Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova.



Andrei Tarkovsky died in a Paris hospital in 1986, aged just 54. An internationally acclaimed icon of the film industry, the legacy Tarkovsky left for his fans included *Andrei Rublev*, *Stalker*, *Nostalgia* and a host of other brilliant works. In the Soviet Union, however, Tarkovsky was a *persona non grata*. Longing to be accepted in his homeland, Tarkovsky distanced himself from all forms of political and social engagement, yet endured one fiasco after another in his relations with the Soviet regime. The Soviet authorities regarded the law-abiding, ideologically moderate Tarkovsky as an outsider and a nuisance, due to his impenetrable personal nature.

The documentary novel *Andrei Tarkovsky: A Life on the Cross* provides a unique insight into the life of the infamous film director and a man whose life was by no means free of unedifying behaviour and errors of judgement. Lyudmila Boyadzhieva sets out to reveal his innate talent, and explain why the cost of such talent can sometimes be life itself.

Featuring profound comments on history and cinema as an accompaniment to the text, *Andrei Tarkovsky: A Life on the Cross* enables readers to step into Tarkovsky's shoes as he put together his masterpieces, seeking ways to solve his artistic dilemmas and overcome the obstacles that the Soviet regime put in his way.

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