



## THRENODY FOR MODERNITY

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### Hearing (from) Elsewhere

Elaborating on his approach to filmmaking, Tarkovsky wrote: "I am recreating my world in those details which seem to me most fully and exactly to express the elusive meaning of our existence."<sup>1</sup> I want to underscore two distinct aspects of this statement: first, the auteur wanted to reveal and record the sublime dimensions of Being that tend to escape representation; second, he hoped to capture such "elusive" elements by rendering certain "details" that, for him, intimated the inexpressible. To illustrate his point, Tarkovsky spoke of the "freak spring snow" that fell on the dying heroine of Bergman's *Virgin Spring*—the snowflakes that clung to her eyelashes and that, in their precarious transience, "pierced" audiences. One could try to determine the precise, literary "meaning" of the snow; but what mattered most to Tarkovsky, beyond any such direct connotation, was the status of the snow as "the thing", the very detail "within the span and rhythm of the shot," that steered "our emotional awareness to a climax."<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is an exploration of the acoustic details through which Tarkovsky attempted to go beyond the banal and the perfunctory, to convey the profundity of human experience. Focusing primarily on the music and sound in his two last films, *Nostalgia* and *The Sacrifice*, I will interrogate the ways in which the filmmaker called on his audiences to train their ears askew, to listen elsewhere—not only offscreen, but perhaps even within the frame at a level beyond



#### Previous pages

The final scene of *Nostalghia*, where Gorchakov is shown seated in front of the Russian dacha that has been merged within the cathedral.

#### Above

Still from *Nostalghia*.

the tangible. I will argue that in the end, Tarkovsky remained frustrated in his search for re-enchantment; his rigorous Formalist efforts at capturing ontological resonance managed a coruscant Hyper-realism. In performing this failure, his late films mourn a sensuousness of human existence lost in the wake of Modernity.

My sense of Tarkovsky is moulded by rather distinct, even inconsonant, influences. The director's oeuvre, with its dazzling expressivity and intimations of an enigmatic inner life, remains a locus of worldwide cinephilia. By the mid-1980s, he had become an iconic figure in Calcutta, my cinema-crazy hometown; while the wide circulation of Eastern European films among local cine-societies must have helped the distribution of his work, something about his films truly captivated the middle-class Bengali literati circles.<sup>3</sup> By the time I encountered my first Tarkovsky film (ironically, the auteur's final work, *The Sacrifice*), I had already left home to pursue my studies in the USA. I saw the film in Chicago, in the middle of the infamous heat wave of 1988 that made 'greenhouse effect' a household term. There are two points to this personal excursus. This chapter, while informed by my formal schooling, also bears traces of a ground-level global cinephilia, refracted through a Bengali lens, which shaped my interest in Tarkovsky even before I had seen any of his films. What is it about his work that inspires such cross-cultural adulation? And what sustains my fascination in the face of formidable critical apparatuses internalised during my years in academia? The last question is particularly germane to *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice*, works that strain audience credulity and analytical reason. I will argue that these 'failed' films impel us to look and listen more attentively for their own logics—a task that might take its cues from a middle brow, cosmopolitan cinephilia. The second point has to do with Tarkovsky's current ethicopolitical relevance. As I write this chapter, 'global warming' has been permanently emblazoned in a planetary popular imagination; notwithstanding the rhetoric of a 'global village', new animosities, divisions and hierarchies have pushed the contradictions of Modernity to unforeseen limits. Again, the only contrived solution that Tarkovsky's implausible tales of redemption offer to such crises is a romanticised, if deeply felt, critical Humanism. What insights might a return to Tarkovsky, and to his vexed ideals of cosmopolitanism and Humanism, possibly generate for our current conjuncture?



Still from *Nostalghia*, where Eugenia becomes frustrated after being dismissed by Domenico.

#### A Shimmering Sensuousness

Tarkovsky's own pronouncements on the importance of capturing the immediacy and immanence of reality in cinema place him at odds with the mainstream of anti-essentialist critical thinking of the last three decades. His longing for a metaphysical wholeness seems quaint in relation to contemporary skepticisms about all ontological and foundational pre-suppositions. On the other hand, his views on representation provide necessary correctives to analytical approaches that focus on textuality and discursivity alone.

Tarkovsky stresses immediacy when he writes: "The purity of cinema, its inherent strength, is revealed... in the capacity of... images to express a specific, unique, actual fact."<sup>4</sup> At another point, he invokes immanence in terms of a "dynamics of revelation": "It's a question of sudden flashes of illumination—like scales falling from the eyes, not in relation to the parts, however, but to the whole, to the infinite, to what does not fit in to conscious thought."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, he believes in cinema's potential to represent a moment or situation in its singularity—even in those essential attributes that escape deliberative logic. Thus infinity, which "cannot be expressed in words or described", can be "apprehended" and made "tangible" through art or cinema.<sup>6</sup> His invocation of infinity echoes the Kantian notion of the Sublime; its representation is presented as a spiritual enterprise: "Art is born and takes hold wherever there is a timeless and insatiable longing for the spiritual, for the ideal...."<sup>7</sup>

When Tarkovsky speaks of "the whole", he is referring to a phenomenological totality and not to the continuity and coherence of the plot. He rails against practices developed to promote efficient storytelling with an eye to profit: practices that made film take "a wrong turn", undermining its most significant innovation—the means to take an impression in time...the possibility of printing on celluloid the actuality of time.<sup>8</sup> For him, representing the volumes and textures, tones and rhythms of the experiential world takes precedence over the demands of narrative movement and plausibility. And yet, even as Tarkovsky is in thrall with the concreteness of human lifeworlds, he strives for transcendence: indeed, his understanding of life's materiality comprises both the tangible surface and the ethereal beyond. Hence his simultaneous stress on the factual and the inscrutable: all the world's mysteries inhere in its mundane facticity.



Still from *Nostalghia*.

Tarkovsky's dilemma is a characteristically Modernist one: how to be objective about material life, how to break down and analyse it, and yet be able to apprehend the spirit and quintessence of experience that resist such abstract parsing? In cinematic terms: how does one articulate depth in terms of surfaces, how does one move from mere illustration to revelation? His solution—consisting in his refusal to separate matter from essence, his insistence on their unity—led to a cinematic praxis that provoked criticisms of opacity, impenetrability and self indulgence. His hostile interlocutors usually started with a set of assumptions about the medium's nature and role that was markedly different from his; they were baffled by his organic and capacious conceptions of "observation", "naturalism" and "*mise-en-scène*."

Take, for instance, the last term—a mainstay of discourses on cinema. Dismissing the common understanding of *mise-en-scène* in terms of "the disposition and movement of selected objects in relation to the area of the frame... to express the meaning of what is happening" (ie. staging of action) as an unnecessarily reductive "ceiling", Tarkovsky proposes instead: "The director,... to build up a *mise-en-scène*, must work from the psychological state of the characters, through the inner dynamic of the mood of the situation, and bring it all back to the truth of the one, directly observed fact, and its unique texture."<sup>9</sup> After the first warplanes roar over the house in *The Sacrifice*, and the family learns of the imminent nuclear devastation from the faltering television broadcast, Adelaide has a hysterical fit. One might take this breakdown to have been induced by sheer terror. But her proxemic relations to her husband Alexander, their friend Victor, and to the other three characters present in the room speak volumes about an unhappy marriage, Adelaide's love for Victor, and her tensions with her daughter Martha and her housekeeper Julia. It is Victor who calms her down: Alexander simply hovers in the background, keeping his distance. Her loud wails and rambling remonstrations take on an oppressive intensity in the shell-shocked lull; as Victor holds her down, others scurry around in confusion; the intensity of the light keeps changing; the color cinematography has a tone that appears curiously black and white. More than the immediate cause, it is the endemic alienation of the characters that constitutes the situation's "inner dynamic", and generates the "unique texture" of its *mise-en-scène*.

Tarkovsky's attempts to get to the heart of reality flout the standard conventions of cinematic time-space. Much has been written about



Still from *Nostalghia*, featuring Andrei Gorchakov's dream of his Russian family, which mixes the sound of an indistinct folk song, running water, a dog's bark and a fog horn.

the liminality, even unreality, of his chronotopic configurations produced through the blurring of dream and waking life, past and present (and, in some instances, the future), material and spiritual, internal and external, subjective and objective.<sup>10</sup> It becomes impossible to sustain the distinctions in his last film—so much so that the narrative's "meaning" strains and stutters. Time and again, he conjures impossible—but utterly vivid spaces. Consider, for instance, the stunning black and white sequence that follows Andrei Gorchakov's nose bleed in *Nostalghia*: he lies down on a bench in the Tuscan hotel, and recalls his family in Russia. In what appears like a single two-minute take, the camera begins on a close-up of his wife's face, moves right to his daughter in medium close-up, then to an older woman (his mother? the maid?), and then keeps tracking continuously in the same direction, with no apparent break, to reveal the same three women again. Only now they are farther away from the camera, and joined by the son, the dog, and a white horse, forming a group tableau, their dacha in the background. On the soundtrack, an indistinct folk song (possibly on the radio) gradually gives way to the gentle burble of water, a dog's barking, and a foghorn: the sun comes up behind the dacha. The continuous tracking shot has a logic all its own: while not realistic, it is strangely compelling. While the shot may seemingly be 'explained' as a part of Andrei's dream, other such scenes are presented as a matter of waking reality. When Andrei visits Domenico's house, a tracking shot begins on him in medium range, standing next to and being reflected in a mirror; the camera moves left, gradually taking in the sundry items on a wall shelf, and comes to rest on the back of Andrei's (not, as expected, Domenico's) head in close-up, looking intently at a picture on the wall in front of him—the same wall to which he had his back earlier in the shot. How does one make sense of the space mapped in this shot? As the narrative unfolds, the viewer realises that it is one of several scenes which underscores the transference relationship between Andrei and Domenico: it is this 'subjective logic' of their status as each other's double that motivates the confounding spatial configuration.<sup>11</sup>

An arsenal of unconventional formal strategies enables Tarkovsky to achieve the shimmering sensuousness of his *mise-en-scène*. There are the very long takes, lasting up to nine minutes: in their prolonged duration, they make the viewer endure the materiality of time, forcing an acknowledgement of time not as something that is simply expended, but as a core plastic element that is intrinsic to film. In Tarkovsky's words: "Film is the sculpting of time"<sup>12</sup>



Still from *Nostalghia*.

#### Following pages

Still from *Nostalghia*, where a crowd has gathered on the steps of Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome, to listen to Domenico's tirade against the ills of society.

The tracking shots, both sideways and along a plane orthogonal to the frame, often unfold at such a slow pace that the camera movement is barely registered. The gradual alterations in the intensity of light; the depth-of-field cinematography; the shifts between colour and black and white; the shots that look like they are, at once, in colour and black and white: these techniques imbue Tarkovsky's films with a look that appears animated from within.<sup>13</sup> And then, there are the audio elements that often operate at the edge of consciousness, which will be discussed later. Together, these tools and methods shape the auteur's highly individualistic *imprimatur*.

Not only did Tarkovsky eschew a narrowly construed narratological rationalism and its attendant abstractions and standardisations, but he also derided an easy symbolism, a reductive search for surface meaning:

When the screen brings the real world to the audience, the world as it actually is, so that it can be seen in depth and from all sides, evoking its very 'smell', allowing audiences to feel on their skin its moisture or its dryness—it seems that the cinema-goer has so lost the capacity simply to surrender to an immediate, emotional aesthetic impression, that he instantly has to check himself, and ask: 'Why? What for? What's the point?'<sup>14</sup>

In response, he formulated a naturalism all his own: "I do not use the term here in its accepted literary connotation—as associated, for instance, with Zola; what I mean is that *we perceive* the form of the filmic image *through the senses*."<sup>15</sup> Here one begins to see what is at stake for cinema studies in revisiting Tarkovsky at this point: he forces one to reconsider the excessive contemporary stress on the discursivity of representations. His films, and his writings on film, remind one that filmic signification involves an intrinsic corporeality: just as in life, perception and cognition in cinema are rooted in the body. Like Merleau-Ponty, he appears to understand human consciousness as inherently incarnate. When Tarkovsky writes that we "perceive... through the senses", he clearly proposes that perception is an embodied faculty; when he stresses that perception cannot be reduced to "cerebral" logic, he points to its partly unreflected nature. Unlike the philosopher, though, Tarkovsky holds that perception and emotion are universal, reducing them to a matter of biological hardwiring.<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty's stress on the entanglement of human subjectivity in social and political networks is lost in Tarkovsky's metaphysical yearnings



for transcendence and clarity: the latter sees all art, including cinema, as the realm of faith and prayer, far removed from structures of power.<sup>17</sup>

This tension in Tarkovsky between the material and the transcendental proved to be highly generative for his films: it led to one of the most numinous bodies of work in the history of cinema. Later in the chapter, I will point to certain *aporias* that resulted from this tension; for now, let us continue to examine his innovations on his own terms. Tarkovsky's search for the cinematic expression and embodiment of spirit led him to develop a distinctive use of sound as style. Indeed, sound emerged as one of the defining elements of his authorial signature. I will argue that more than any other cinematic component, the intrinsic characteristics of sound suited his objective of overcoming narrow aesthetic categories and the material-spiritual divide, and of getting to the heart of human existence.

### Spirit Soundings

In her essay on Tarkovsky's films, Andrea Truppin argues that sound, in its ability to "bypass reason" and "communicate on a more immediate, more intuitive level", provided the director with "a primary means of meaningful communication".<sup>18</sup> While her observation is quite astute, I am not sure why sound would have to "bypass reason"—unless, of course, reason itself is being construed in a narrow, ocularcentric sense. What is missing from Truppin's account of the materiality of film sound is any consideration of sound's location within a Modern epistemological hierarchy. Ever since vision was consecrated in the eighteenth century as the noblest of the senses, other perceptual faculties have been considered less important to human subjectivity than the ability to see (a bias encoded in the very word enlightenment—designating the event that imputedly inaugurates the Modern rational subject). I want to hold on to a more capacious understanding of reason, one that harnesses all human sensory abilities, that captures how real-life human beings actually make sense of their lifeworlds, and that—I believe—is central to Tarkovsky's embrace of a proximate and immersive conception of existence.

Truppin states: "The spiritual is mysterious, inaccessible to sensual experience. It becomes perceivable only through phenomenological representation."<sup>19</sup>



Scene from *Nostalghia*.

Obviously, she has in mind the Christian undertone of the filmmaker's work. But is this observation apposite to Tarkovsky's take on a non-alienated world? Does he really see the "sensual", with its frequent associations of immorality and sinfulness, as the wedge between human beings and the spiritual domain? Is he not protesting precisely such demarcations? When Alexander regains faith, he also sleeps with Maria—a kind woman who may or may not be a witch, but who certainly comes across as an "Earth mother" in touch with elemental forces. Tarkovsky also conjures up the elemental in his references to Eastern philosophies such as Daoism and Vedic thought.<sup>20</sup> While his Christian roots provide him with a cultural-epistemological repository of emotions and ideas, his takes on spirituality, faith and redemption appear quite *laissez faire*, more intent on re-establishing an intimate connection with the universe than on reiterating any religious doxa.

The "sensuous", a term I have been using here, seems more appropriate to a discussion of Tarkovsky work. For our purposes, the word articulates multiple meanings: "concerned with sensation or sense-perception" (*OED*), "keenly alive to the pleasures of sensation" (*OED*), and "non-alienated (Being)". This last connotation of "sensuous" derives from a marxist-humanist paradigm that is important to my understanding of Tarkovsky. Just as one cannot ignore his Christian predilections, one cannot overlook the influence that Marxist thought has had on his intellectual formation: indeed, when he repeatedly invokes materiality, connection and sensuous contemplation, he appears to be channeling the Marx of *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845. In spite of all his flirtations with metaphysical idealism, in the last two films Domenico and Alexander perform very material sacrifices motivated as much by faith as by a need for transformation: spirituality is recast here in revolutionary terms.

What is it about sound that makes it a particularly sensuous means of communication? Sound waves require a material medium for their propagation; unlike light waves, they cannot travel in vacuum. Unlike sight, for which the viewer must step back from the object, hearing entails a direct physical connection. In contrast to the clear subject/object distinction in seeing, hearing works through material association: immersion, and not distancing, is its operative mode. While sound cues affect us in more corporeal, concrete, and subliminal ways, images produce more abstract, detached, and reflective responses. Of course, these distinctions are schematic and exaggerated: in practice, the sensory cues mobilise far more synaesthetic reactions, and produce an overall effect through their



Still from *The Sacrifice*, where Alexander's face is reflected in a mirror by a stereo that plays Japanese *shakuhachi* music, which is associated with spiritual contemplation and communion with nature.

interaction. Nevertheless, the point remains that sound constitutes a stimulating sensory field that is embedding and immersive; it helps blur the categorical boundaries and dichotomies (subject/object, deliberative/intuitive, cerebral/corporeal, rational/emotional) on which Modern subjectivity is predicated.

Tarkovsky must have been intuitively aware of the implications of the physics of sound for his project of achieving a sensuous cinema. But his writings and interviews do not have much to say on the subject. In a sense, he remained bound to an ocularcentric epistemology: hence all the attention to the visual arts, even literature. His obsession with faith and spirituality leant toward metaphysical musings, leaving the more radical aspects of his approach under-theorised. Fortunately for cinema, his practical deployment of sound, especially in *Nostalgia* and *The Sacrifice*, far outstripped his exegetical formulations.

The auteur's concern with capturing an ontological essence shapes his expressed ideas on film sound. In his view, sound cannot remain either additive or secondary to the images: it must work organically with the visual elements to generate cinematic meaning. He writes of his desire to find "ways of working with sound... which would allow one to be more accurate, more true to the inner world which we try to reproduce on screen; not just the author's inner world, but what lies within the world itself, what is essential to it and does not depend on us."<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Tarkovsky does not call for a strict mechanistic reproduction of all natural sounds; rather, he wants to achieve a "resonance" by the careful selection and manipulation of sound that appear to belong naturally to a scene:

As soon as the sounds of the visible world, reflected by the screen, are removed from it, or that world is filled, for the sake of the image, with extraneous sounds that don't exist literally, or if the real sounds are distorted so that they no longer correspond with the image—then the film acquires a resonance.<sup>22</sup>

He also writes of the need to "enlarge", "single out", and "hyperbolise" sound elements; he speaks of his interest in artificially generated effects and electronic music to enhance acoustic expressivity. Johnson and Petrie point out that Tarkovsky, in spite of his "professed antagonism to Eisenstein", effectively "echoes the argument for a 'contrapuntal' use of sound from the famous Eisenstein/Pudovkin/Alexandrov 'Statement' of 1928".<sup>23</sup> Tarkovsky's Formalist approach to cinematic sound draws and



Still from *The Sacrifice*.

elaborates on acoustic innovations of high Modernist cinema—especially the films of Antonioni, Bergman and Bresson. Formalism in this instance becomes the conduit to a Hyper-realism, generating a screen-world pulsating with presence and meaning. The sonic tapestries in the last two Tarkovsky films draw on a vast range of sound effects, besides fragments of music. Owe Svensson, the sound designer for *The Sacrifice*, writes that the director had asked for 253 different sound elements; the film ultimately included about half that number.<sup>24</sup> Svensson speaks of all his experiments with the "quality" of sound—for instance, walking in different parts of a room with wooden floorboards, wearing different types of shoes, and recording the results to make sure that "no two footsteps would sound alike."<sup>25</sup> They looked long and hard for the perfect recording of the shepherds' call, finally settling on an old recording "made via a telephone cable from... the Swedish countryside to Swedish Radio in Stockholm" and "mastered on... wax cylinders". Tarkovsky thought it was "marvellous" that the recording had "crackling and static"; they used it in the film, "mixed into the outdoor environment with a certain amount of reverberation".<sup>26</sup>

Reverberation is only one of many techniques that enables Tarkovsky and his team to exploit the plasticity of film sound; other common tricks include modulations of volume, intensity, pitch, timbre, filtering, gating, changing the ratio between direct and indirect sound, fading in and out, elimination of sound expected with a particular image.<sup>27</sup> Often, primarily acoustic impressions are

generated in visual terms, obverting the standard notion that sound plays second fiddle to the cinematic image. The obvious examples are shots of objects moving in a repetitive and insistent manner – dripping water, billowing drapes, the rustling of leaves, the vibration of glasses, rippling water surfaces; then the associated sounds, or their artificial cognates, are added in with necessary modulations to produce the desired overall effect. Even the deliberate and slow camera movements, the gradual fluctuations in light intensity, the nearly subliminal gradations between colour and black and white, and the extremely long takes all mimic acoustic modes, achieving a certain musicality at the level of the visual, and conjuring up a numinous reality. In the hotel-room sequence of *Nostalghia*, action does not incite narrative motion: yet, Andrei's dislocation is made resonant for the viewer via the practically imperceptible camera movements, the measured modulations in lighting, and the sheer duration of the shots. The space is rendered cavernous and intimate through the ambient acoustic embellishments: the gentle sound of rain outside, the sharp drip of water in the bathroom, the sharp sound made by an invisible bottle rolling across the floor, and the heavy panting of a dog that inexplicably enters Andrei's room (is it the family dog in Russia, Domenico's dog, or the dog that belongs to another hotel guest?).

Consider the apocalyptic moment in *The Sacrifice*, and the strangely calm scene that follows as its counterpoint. One never actually sees the jet fighters flying over the house, nor does one see images of destruction on television: yet sheer terror engulfs the scene as the glasses tinkle, the furniture rattle, the overhead roar rises to a screeching, tearing crescendo, and the vibrating jug of milk crashes down to the floor. A cut shifts the scene to the wet, blue-green outdoors: Alexander stands in profile, in a close-up shot, his head turned away from the camera; as the jet roar grows faint, he tilts his head; the camera tilts with him, roughly in sync with the recession of the sound, and comes to rest on a miniature model of the house; as a sylvan lull returns, one hears his shuffling footsteps; unseen gulls screech in the background; the one-time thespian quotes a line from *Macbeth*, wondering who is responsible for the miniature replica (and perhaps for the larger calamity); he begins to walk slowly, the camera tracking his movement, as a ship's horn is heard in the distance. The orchestration of camera movement, framing and colour with ambient sounds tweaked to the appropriate pitch, timbre and reverb produce a sequence whose two parts, joined by a sound bridge, enhance one another's resonance. Considered overall, the effect of the sequence is to



Still from *Nostalghia*, where Andrei and Domenico walk around a dilapidated house amid the sound of drizzling rain.





underscore Alexander's dissociation from his family: it is as if he lives in an altogether different reality. The sequence tellingly ends in his first conversation with Maria who will, in a sense, save him from his alienation.

A similar fusion of visual and aural elements comes into play when Andrei, the homesick poet in *Nostalgia*, dreams of his family. As he whispers his wife's name, his intimate yet insistent tone—"Maria!"—leads into the black and white dream sequence, into the space of his home: suddenly Maria sits up on her bed and looks quizzically into the camera, as if she has been woken by his call across the great distance between Italy and Russia. Maria paces the room in her confusion; the floorboards sigh under her feet; dog barks in the distance; as she pulls aside the drapes, a bird flutters on the window sill; she opens the door with a loud and drawn-out creak; pacing itself to this haunting sound, the camera moves outdoors to the mist-enveloped Russian countryside with their children, the dog and the white horse. A troubled sense of anticipation is palpable here, turning the scene into a virtual flashforward to Andrei's death: as if he dreams of his family at a time when he is already dead. The viewer is privy to, and participates in, Maria's anxiety at the sense of an uncanny presence—the kind that announces someone is lost forever. One also experiences the intensity of Andrei's loss of family life and homeland—a loss that he projects onto his family, and a loss that was previously mirrored in a reading of the exilic Russian composer Sosnovsky's letter, in the scene that led into the dream (Sosnovsky speaks longingly of the birches, the brooks, the air of his childhood).

I want to dwell on two other sequences, in which acoustic elements not only hold the shots together (in terms of their common deployment as 'sound bridges' and 'motifs'), but also make every shot pulsate from within. In each case, the protagonist visits a marginal person's home and forms a strong, empathetic bond with the other—the kind of empathy he no longer enjoys with the adults in his life. Tarkovsky embeds his characters (and his audiences) in a resonant and unifying sensorium, and intimates their longing to overcome the pervasive feelings of disconnection and isolation. When Andrei enters Domenico's dilapidated house in *Nostalgia*, the floor is covered in puddles, rain pours beyond the windows, and water drips, it appears, from every surface. The sequence *sounds* drenched: water drops on the puddles, sending sharp echoes across the bare rooms, and into empty bottles, producing



Still from *The Sacrifice*, where Alexander is startled by Little Man and collapses, instigating the dream sequence of an empty post-apocalyptic street.

a high-pitched, whistling noise; the drizzle of rain waxes and wanes as the two characters walk around the house. What is the point of this waterlogged *mise-en-scène*? And what does one make of the background drone of an unseen mechanical saw that recurs throughout the film, and is particularly noticeable in this sequence? Domenico takes a bottle of oil, pours out a couple of drops onto his palm, and declares: "One drop plus one drop makes a larger drop, not two drops." The inveterate idealist's fond hope: as fluidity overcomes viscosity in the cup of his palm to form a "larger drop", so may unity transcend alienation to produce community. Eventually, Andrei heeds Domenico's request and carries a lighted candle across the pool at Bagno Vignoni to keep the latter's vow to St Catharine; but he collapses and dies in the process. At one point during Andrei's visit, the metallic buzz of the saw becomes louder as the camera zooms in on the disquieting image of a doll on Domenico's wall, introducing a foreboding strain into the two men's communion. In Andrei's death, the premonition of that unsettling moment is realized: spiritual entropy is overcome, but at a high cost.

In *The Sacrifice*, Otto the mailman, tells Alexander that he must lie with Maria, the local witch, if he wishes to save his family and the world from imminent disaster. The sequence in which Alexander visits Maria's house may well be a part of his dream: in its confusing emplotment and its hallucinatory quality, it remains ambiguous. The faintest tick of a clock, punctuated by the occasional noise of a flock of sheep outside (the sound of their hooves as they are herded around by the dogs, and their bleating), comprise the ambient core of the sequence. Alexander sits on a creaking chair, plays at an organ, and recites a story about trying to tend his mother's garden and destroying its natural beauty in the process; then he asks a surprised Maria to save him with her love. In a state of distraught confusion, he takes out a gun and holds it to his head: the shattering roar of the jet fighters returns, ending the bucolic lull. The sonic invasion focalises the viewer through Alexander's point of audition to his frame of mind, for Maria does not appear to hear the jets; moved by his inexplicable fear and anguish, she agrees to sleep with him out of simple kindness. As Maria holds Alexander and comforts him, the two levitate above the bed wrapped in white sheets (as though the voluminous folds of a marble statue). Two acoustic elements already heard in the film—the ethereal shepherds' call (with its immanent spatial signature of the virgin countryside), and the Japanese flute music that Alexander had played on his stereo



(with its association of spiritual contemplation and communion with nature—now return alongside Maria’s gentle reassurances. A jump cut takes the viewer to a black and white shot of a panic-stricken group running into a seemingly post-apocalyptic urban space. Their voices are never heard—only their footsteps echo loudly and eerily; the flute music continues at a muted level, the shepherds’ song becomes louder and immerses the scene. A bicycle bell rings (another ambient sound from the village); Alexander’s distraught mumbles fuse with Maria’s reassurances; he is now lying outside, on the grass, as Maria sits next to him dressed just like his wife. A cut to Leonardo’s painting, *The Adoration of the Magi*, takes one back into the room and the couch where Alexander lay down earlier: this return suggests that the visit to Maria’s may have been part of a dream.<sup>28</sup> Sound, whose materiality engages an embodied consciousness, helps Tarkovsky achieve this obfuscation of the boundaries between dream and waking life, between the subjective and the objective, and between terror and reassurance: it enables him to reach out, in his films, for the resonant fullness of human existence.

Tarkovsky’s writings on film music point to an increasingly minimalist sensibility grounded in his idiosyncratic sense of naturalism:

I have to say that in my heart of hearts I don’t believe films need music at all... [M]usic in cinema is for me a natural part of our resonant world, a part of human life... [I]t is quite possible that in a sound film that is realised with complete theoretical consistency, there will be no place for music: it will be replaced by sounds in which cinema constantly discovers new levels of meaning... Properly organised in a film, the resonant world is musical in its essence—and that is the true music of cinema.<sup>29</sup>

Tarkovsky came close to operationalising this rigorous approach by the end of his life: in his last film, standard orchestral underscoring is almost completely absent, except for the aria “erbarme dich, mein gott” (from Bach’s *St Mathew Passion*) that bookends the narrative; in the penultimate film, only the opening credits and the moment of Andrei’s collapse feature non-diegetic music (short excerpts from Verdi’s *Requiem*). Other musical fragments emanate from the diegetic world: a guest at the hotel near Bagno Vignoni listens to Daoist music; Domenico plays a part of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* when Andrei visits his house, and later commits self-immolation to the accompaniment of “Ode to Joy”; Alexander plays a recording of Japanese *shakuhachi* music on his stereo, which



Still from *The Sacrifice*, after Little Man has been thrown from Alexander’s shoulders.



then filters into his dreams. The recurring shepherds' song in *The Sacrifice*, like the Russian music in *Nostalghia*, is "a natural part" of the film's "resonant world".

Besides their incorporation as ambient noise or as motifs, these rare musical fragments often achieve a stirring poetic expressivity. Consider, for instance, the segment from Shiller and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," which Domenico's compatriots play during his self-immolation. The solemn public event, staged in Rome to protest society's indifference, appears to lose some of its vitality when the tape malfunctions. After initial difficulties, the music fills the piazza, but then abruptly comes to a halt. In the "unplanned" silence that follows, one vividly hears Domenico writhing on the pavement, ablaze, shrieking in pain and calling out to his dog. Tarkovsky allows for a utopian semblance at the heart of this horrific moment: the tape happens to break on the word "brüder" (German for "brother"), encapsulating the dying man's fervent hope for a universal brotherhood that will transcend pervasive apathy. Likewise, Bach's aria at the end of *The Sacrifice* (in which the apostle Peter entreats God to have pity on him after he betrays Him) strikes a note of faith and optimism in the face of great odds—a note echoed in the act of Alexander's young son watering the dried-up tree.

### An Impossible Mourning

What does one make of an auteur whose films straddle reality and reverie, and swing between dismay and hope? How do we evaluate an approach to filmmaking that aspires simultaneously to revelation and enchantment, and that draws its energy from both metaphysical yearning and sensuous activism? One might say that Tarkovsky's cinematic oeuvre constitutes an extended lamentation on the contradictions and disillusionments of Modern life. He denounces the limiting nature of instrumental reason, the devaluation of intuition and emotion, and the excessive abstraction and compartmentalisation of life; he bemoans the dystopic consequences of technology, the attenuation of our embodied relations to the world, the pervasive materialism and spiritual atrophy. The tensions that mark his work are the melancholic imprints of a loss of sensuous unity—a loss that, in the wake of the seventeenth century separation of mind and body, has become a defining feature of Modernity.



Still from *Nostalghia*.

Tarkovsky's strained relationship to post-Enlightenment worldviews kindles his interest in alternative epistemologies—Daoism, Vedic philosophy—and mystical/paranormal phenomena—astrology, ESP, telekinesis.<sup>30</sup> His last two films incorporate Chinese, Japanese, and what sounds like Turkish Sufi music in their sonic tapestry, ostensibly to evoke a more elemental, more immersive sense of Being. The latent Orientalism that propels these romantic invocations of an Eastern plenitude, frozen in an arcadian past, is troubling—especially in the light of Russia's own vexed history in relation to the Orient. To be fair to Tarkovsky, one might argue that he was striving for a sensuous cosmopolitan humanity that transcended national borders and regional imaginaries: after all, he defines nostalgia as "a state... provoked not only by [one's] remoteness from [one's] country but also by a *global yearning for the wholeness of existence*".<sup>31</sup> However, the Universalism he sought was undeniably rooted in a Euro-Russian cultural and epistemological terrain: that is why, Daoist philosophy or Japanese flute music could be invoked as its supplementary Other. When he hoped that his films would arouse "universal" and "identical feelings in viewers", it remains unclear why his specifically Christian tales of apocalypse and redemption, featuring characters that fit the Russian ideal of a suffering and visionary "holy fool", would have similar resonances for viewers in Florence, Stockholm and Calcutta. Although he had made one earlier film on a religious figure, *Andrei Rublev*, it is in his late films that his metaphysical proclivities take a markedly religious turn: the resuscitation of faith becomes a—if not the—central concern, and the idea of the artist as a holy fool is pushed to its limits with Andrei, Domenico and Alexander, who find apparent redemption in their extreme acts of sacrifice. Again, one could argue, in Tarkovsky's defence, that these films are spiritual melodramas, and his protagonists are modern-day tragic heroes whose labours and utopian visions hold some appeal for culturally differentiated audiences all over the world. After all, eschatological worries are common to all religions, although their approaches and resolutions remain singular. It is Tarkovsky's stress on "universal" and "ideal" viewers that remains vulnerable to criticism: while condemning Modern Abstraction and dissociation, he appears to have produced his own obfuscations. In particular, he espoused a tendentially idealised notion of art as a purely aesthetic realm, with no links to power ("art is not made out of power. Art is made by artists") or sociology.<sup>32</sup>

And yet, Tarkovsky's men of faith undertake actions that constitute defiant acts of rebellion against a numbing conformism. Domenico



Still from *The Sacrifice*.

asks Andrei to light a candle on his behalf at the alter of St Catherine, and then delivers a highly polemical public sermon before setting himself on fire. Alexander prays to God, vows to remain silent for the rest of his life, and burns his house down. The holy fool begins to approximate the revolutionary: after all, both are driven by faith. The moment of re-enchantment inaugurates the possibility of critical transformation.

In Tarkovsky's late works, Modernity emerges as a soulless nightmare, and reality remains opaque and incomprehensible, but he leaves the viewer with a fragile—and, for it, all the more alluring—hope. The marathon last shot of *The Sacrifice* features Alexander's young son watering a dead tree; after a long silence induced by a throat surgery, he is able to speak once more. *Nostalghia* ends with the stunning image of the Russian dacha now improbably nestled inside the ruins of the Italian cathedral: it is as if Andrei—who sits in the middle of the frame like an inscrutable apparition—has finally reconciled his two lives in death. The shimmering light reflected by the sea in the first instance, and the weightless snow that magically wafts down in the second, accompanied respectively by the Bach aria and the Russian folk keening, underscore the ethereal nature of these two utopian endings. What might these precarious gestures intimate, how might they effectively secure a more ideal future? For Tarkovsky, idealism is no less important than the practicality of life: spirituality is a matter of concrete reality, faith an integral part of human technologies.



Still from *Nostalghia*, where townspeople from Bagno Vignoni scour for valuables among the steaming water of St Catherine's pool.

After all, he equates art to prayer, inviting the viewer to think of his cinematic praxis as a form of creative supplication.<sup>33</sup>

Although Tarkovsky's films are infused with an abiding sense of loss, an intense longing for connections, and a desperate search for re-enchantment, his late films ultimately stage the impossibility of recovering a sensuous plenitude. Even as the soundtracks conjure up an embodied, "resonant world", and seek to revivify the immediacy of experience, the films manage, at best, a tenuous Hyper-realism in terms of sheer duration and formal rigour. The very long takes, deep focus cinematography, and acoustic atmospherics create a remarkable ontological depth and resonance, conjuring up a subjectivity-as-sensorium. Ultimately, Tarkovsky does not recuperate the lost; rather, he registers and presents the loss itself through the technology of cinema and its tactile, visual, and aural potentialities—carrying out an "impossible" cinematic mourning, as it were. The critical charge of this melancholic presentation, and of the incipient environmentalism embedded within his search for sensuous connections, constitutes Tarkovsky's continuing relevance for our contemporary moment.