

Tarkovsky as a Master, autobiographical notes



Love it when, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, a lone wolf Nietzsche says to discerning readers to come: every philosophy, after all, is a “memoir”. He insinuates that any philosophical activity is at heart autobiographical, that it’s about searching for meaning in your life. Nietzsche preaches that we should seize the opportunity to be honest with ourselves, to begin with.

How would Plato's autobiography look, for example? is it in his dialogues? what would we know about the actual Plato, the living founder of the Academy, if it weren't for several surviving anecdotes spotlighting his contemporary Diogenes the Dog, a street thinker? The old-school Cynic is notorious for posing fearless humanistic questions, such as, “Who is a man who has spent all his time philosophising without having once disturbed or worried anyone?”. Why do our academics tend not to write memoirs?

As Nietzsche's spiritual autobiography is vivid in his works, so is Andrei Tarkovsky's. Like Tarkovsky was more interested in Dostoevsky’s character, rather than his work as such, I am intrigued by Tarkovsky's character, his style of thinking and his strivings, responsible for disturbing and nourishing people for a number of generations.

An artistic master, Tarkovsky emerges during the oblivious Soviet regime. His youth and studies coincide with the post-WWII period when Stalin was burning books and heretics, proclaiming that “life's gotten better, and more cheerful”. From then until his untimely death, Tarkovsky represented humanity that resists falling prey to plebeian dreams of dreaming like everyone else, of finding home in material security and abstract struggles.

As a devotee of his art for a long time, I do not remember why I thought of teaching a course dedicated to Tarkovsky. Possibly there was a gap-instinct, an empty space, a yearning to get to know him better. Perhaps I felt nostalgic for a time when I had a comparable companion around. With the support of the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy I ran the course “Tarkovsky’s Philosophical Portrait”, in winter 2019, a course which has set into motion a wild, almost fictional spiral in my life.

Currently navigating a peaceful and open-ended curve, no-one knows where, broke and thriving, on the prehistoric shores of rural Victoria, observing, hoping to catch a fish. Digging for worms beside a lyrebird, tiger snakes skulking among black skeletons of trees inanimate after this year’s fierce fires. An eagle hovers against the sky above me.

At the time of the course, however, and for the five years prior, I was living atop Mount Dandenong, the old mountain shielding remaining swathes of ancient forest from the persistent encroach of Melbourne’s suburban periphery, from the noise. I was fortunate to spend those special weeks crafting the course with my son by my side, mostly, and Tarkovsky too, savouring aimless investigations into the wild.

In a video interview held somewhere in the wilderness of Italy, Tarkovsky is held by the branch of a tree, hands behind his head, and invites coming generations “to learn solitude, to *love* to be on their own” (my translation and emphasis).

It seems far-fetched to find solitude, one of the key conditions for self-understanding, while enmeshed in a life structured by urban pressures and temptations. Well, possibly in your loo...

“Tarkovsky’s Philosophical Portrait” approached five of his seven films as memoirs, artistic attempts to communicate his vision of humanity as situated in a world devastated by cruelty, greed, ignorance, wars, scars, hypocrisy, complacency, trauma fears aggression shame, the ruins of hollow feelings, a world that, most probably, can no longer be saved by beauty (as Dostoevsky’s *Idiot* promised), a world where beauty is no longer the promise of happiness -- despite all the faith, scientific insights, gender fluidity, eight-hour days, free speech and cosmopolitan education, despite all the hard work and progress.

Tarkovsky's world gravitates toward sacrifice, toward the spiritual roots, an example of life that is adamant not to compromise the pursuit of truth despite the iron-willed bullying of the state, its weapon of poverty, and the illusory lures of a penthouse lifestyle.

In my eyes, Tarkovsky belongs to a strand of rebels who sense an abundance of shit in this endlessly churning world of ours. Montaigne, Diderot, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Tarkovsky -- all offer rare insights into the fleeting sense of freedom and play surfacing on the overall dull face of humanity, which bears a tragic expression. Again and again, our attention is called toward an observation of humanity as callous, fragmented and self-centred; here, only a fortunate handful are drawn to face their life's promptings.

All these rebels offer an affirmation of one's life, a possibility of purpose, a friendly laughter, their own voice, a kiss in the abyss. They give you no promises of comfort and convenience.

I am still not sure whether these free-spirits can be taken seriously in a place where the forceful drive to a secure comfortable-chair future, and jogging, inherited from previous generations, overrides the sweet heart-beat of taking existential risks, of trying it out, carving it out. This is not to critique the value of safety, a supreme achievement, but to expose the risks of a safe conformist existence. It baffles me that Tarkovsky is widely recognised as a genius, and yet his innermost messages to us are glossed over in favour of studying his artistic approach.

A striving XXI century artist should read Tarkovsky's diaries -- *Martyrology*: a word of the martyr -- to learn fortitude and resilience in the face of indifference and bigotry. All of his films are guided by a sense of urgency, as opposed to success, by dramatic feelings, which are more often than not sharpened by criminal or violent activity. He shares this artistic inclination with Dostoevsky, and yet note that Tarkovsky hardly ever gives voice to any trivial struggles in the ordinary world. Much of his work is other-worldly, it invites us to participate in painfully crafted events and experiences, allows the sensitive person to entertain an ideal, a long moment of stillness, which may then reshape one's cast of mind in the everyday, so long as one approaches his films as a form of education, rather than merely high-end entertainment.

Tarkovsky belongs to a thorny lineage of humanistic authors who, in one way or another, communicate to us an ideal of spiritual change as a necessary condition for realising our

humanity, and each other. What this change is about -- in ways of thinking, feeling and being -- is an endless topic, a forking path. What is clear in Tarkovsky's oeuvre is that such a change can't be entertained alongside a hopeful submission to the rules and promises of regimes which insist on their notion of having a "productive" day. Tarkovsky is shaped by war and love, by exploring talents, true friendship, and by confronting some of the root-causes of disciplinarian aggression; these forces are not original. He wanted to share *his* truth in a world where "truth" is an office problem.

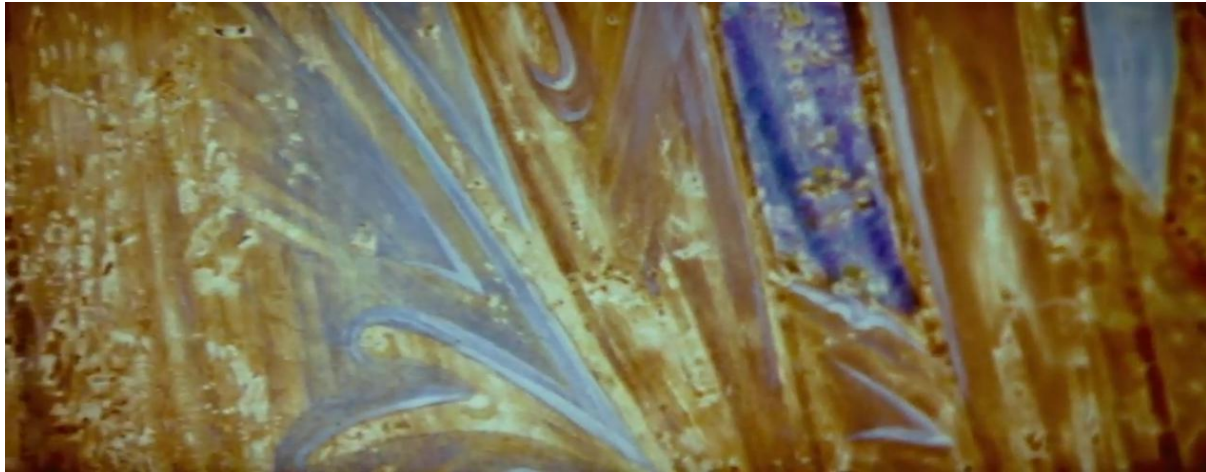
In another video interview, Tarkovsky considers the meaning of life and says that for him it is "to spiritually elevate ourselves, and hence our art is to serve this [purpose]; if I were to choose a different principle for myself, then my art would look different and I'd create something else" (my translation).

Tarkovsky was disgusted by the mass Soviet philistinism, and appalled by the pandemic of Western professionalism. While filming his concluding work *The Sacrifice* (1986), he writes in his diaries: "The Swedes are lazy and slow and only interested in observing rules and regulations. Shooting has to start at 9 a.m. and not a moment later! And that's outside, on location! This must be the only country [he was wrong] where they treat the shooting of a film like work in an office. From such and such a time to such and such a time, without a thought for the fact that a film has to be *created*" (6/03/85, translated by Hunter-Blair).

In *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), a boy who displays more wisdom and courage than the average old man sacrifices his life for his comrades, for the memories of those he cares about, against the shared enemy.



In *Andrei Rublev* (1966), the icon painter takes a decade-long vow of silence to morph the experience of murder into divine truths glowing sky-blue on wood.



In *Stalker* (1979), the guide protagonist repeats the words of Leo Tolstoy that our spiritual feeling is "atrophied" and that, deep down, we search for little of our own.

For me, the critical moment of running the course was an experience of catharsis. Tarkovsky died in 1986 after a brief battle with lung cancer, a young master who never reached old age. He fled the Soviet space in the early 1980's, and must have suffered much spiritual damage while dealing with a swarm of bureaucratic rats who would not allow his son to join him until his terminal condition was confirmed.

“They are having terrible money problems in Moscow. I must think of some way of helping. What swine those people are! Not allowing me to send money to support my own family! It's tantamount to condemning them to death. They are getting their own back on us by inflicting misery on totally innocent children. Butchers! Monsters! How is it that the earth doesn't swallow them up!” (17/01/84, San Gregorio). “It's all so difficult. And I'm so tired. I just cannot bear it any longer, being without Andriushka. I don't want to live” (29/09/85, Stockholm); “Dedicated to my little son, Andriushka, who is being made to suffer, innocently, as if he were an adult” (10/12/85, Stockholm, translated by Hunter-Blair).
Only a theorist can dismember his art from his life.

There was and currently is a threatening prospect of me being separated from my son Seraphim, too, an omnipresent uncertainty sustained by the local department of immigration and border protection over a number of years. The day after delivering the lecture on Tarkovsky's concluding film, I watched my family's video recordings from 1990, when I was seven. I watched myself as though I was my own son, holding my father's hand like he, my dad, meant a lot to the boy. Thanks to Tarkovsky, I've been learning to weep, that is to say, to understand that there is art and meaning in shedding each tear, that there is a boy within who seeks understanding, an old man and a world in the making.

The day after experiencing this catharsis, my students and I celebrated the completion of the course by attending a play based on Lem's novel *Solaris* at the Malthouse theatre. The show was

a blasphemous spectacle. Despite this, and not unlike the protagonist from Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, I somehow met my angel that night -- sitting by her side for ten wonderful minutes, until the cheap unfolding of the performance forced me back out to the desolate city streets.

We are now having a baby, here on the prehistoric shores of Marlo, away from it all. It is as though I've found home while connecting with Tarkovsky's character, and now I feel a sense of belonging, even around people who confuse my lack of an Australian accent with a lack of intelligence.

Tarkovsky's most famous picture is perhaps *Stalker*, in which myths meet industrial landscapes. The film, based on a novel by the Strugatsky brothers, circles around a spiritual guide, a lunatic, who ushers the disenchanting of this world, painted in the corrosive colours, through the resistance of the police state and into the Zone. Stalker is a spiritual midwife of sorts but, unlike Socrates, he takes you to a place of profound solitude. As one dialogue with his wife suggests, Tarkovsky's protagonist does not belong to our world:

W: You were going to get proper work. They promised you a decent, normal job.

S: I will be back soon.

W: You will be back in prison. Next time, they'll give you ten years instead of five, and you'll have nothing to show for those ten years. Not the Zone, not anything. And in ten years I'll be dead.

S: "Prison"? I am imprisoned everywhere.

In Russian, a colloquial word for prison is zone, "зона". That which is dispiriting for the many is Stalker's home and vocation. A decent job! A normal life is a prison, a chain of habits and aspirations. The Zone, on the other hand, has its own laws, reminiscent of an ocean's nomadic motions. The Zone is a strange domain one must negotiate so as to discover who s/he is, to use Nietzsche's formulation of the ultimate calling, to face their ghosts, inhibitions, -- no guns, psycho-analysis and pharmaceuticals are tolerated here, -- to realise that one's innermost desires can be ascertained and fulfilled. In the allegorical Zone, this place is called the Room. No character in the film, besides the telepathic daughter of Stalker and an antecedent Stalker named Porcupine, enters the Room. The English word "porcupine", again, does not do justice to the profound hues of meaning in the Russian "дикобраз", comprised of "дикий" and "образ": *a savage image*. Porcupine is a savage image of humanity who enters the Room, gets filthy rich once out of the Zone, and then, dismayed, commits suicide.

What are your innermost desires? where do they come from and what are they directed toward?

Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice* seems to imply that the Room is too remote a place for us, and shifts our attention toward a more basic territory. To begin with, we are to seek a boundary between the monochrome pursuits in the everyday and the Zone, the protected boundary between an arbitrary value system and one's humanity.

Tarkovsky's own despair in his final years are channeled into *The Sacrifice*. In the background of the film is the ominous presence of nuclear warfare captured in a second-long episode of a thunderous explosion.

Tarkovsky knows we'd keep waging wars one upon another.

Early on, the protagonist Alexander discusses with Otto, a postman, a passage from Nietzsche where Zarathustra falls on the ground, breathless. Setting the tone for the film, Nietzsche urges the reader to attempt to overcome the "dwarf" inside, the spirit of gravity taking pains to convince you that your innermost dreams are mere dreams, weak and worthless, that pursuing similar dreams to those around you is sign of humanity and civility, rather than a decadence. A mad, dangerous passage -- look for it, for your own safety!

In his earlier films, Tarkovsky's characters are desperate to find a worthwhile ground for human existence in the world; though we may find it hard to relate to a warchild Ivan, or a troubled genius of the 15th century iconographer Rublev, the sci-fi mental trips of Kris on the orbit of Solaris, or the post-apocalyptic lands wandered by Stalker and his followers. In his last film, however, Tarkovsky brings a more tangible obstacle to our attention, not just the limits of our imagination.

The Sacrifice, edited while Tarkovsky was undergoing chemotherapy, is nearing its finale with Alexander setting on fire the dream of all Western dreaming, the dream of owning a home, typically, one's central material possession. Fire communicates a fierce sense of urgency, and home can mean many things.

Desperate to feel a spiritual footing, Alexander is watching his country residence alight, in a ritualistic gesture, and then momentarily gets locked up, assisted by his caring family, the medical car driving off to one of the city's rectifying leveling facilities.

What fool would set his own house on fire, right?

And yet, in the manner of Tarkovsky's oeuvre, this masterpiece does not end by accentuating the discord between the demands of searching for one's own character and the pull of arbitrary cultural norms.



All of his films are imbued with beauty – the impossible occupies a sacred place in his work, like air in his blackening lungs.

The Sacrifice paints a cycle as Bach's *Matthew Passion* accompanies both the beginning and the finale. At the outset, Alexander attempts to plant a dead tree, his son (youthful like Tarkovsky's son and my master boy) helps him to place pebbles at the base to secure it. They leave. Once Alexander is condemned to be diagnosed in an asylum, the beautiful boy returns to the crooked tree, on his own, with two metal buckets full of water he can barely handle.

Andrei Tarkovsky's life was full of agonising moments, though it's not an agonising portrait: when he, irrevocably ill, finally embraced and kissed Andriushka, crying like a child, he must have forgotten all the futile pain of this world and felt it is all worth it.

“Butchers! Monsters!”

Who is human, then?