Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema Study Guide

Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema by Andrei Tarkovsky

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Sculpting in Time collects the theoretical writings of Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky expresses his views on the nature of art and cinema, and provides some insight as to his films.

In his introduction, Tarkovsky states that he has written the material in the volume over a period of years, and was initially inspired to write because of letters from fans. Some fans expressed puzzlement or curiosity as to what Tarkovsky had tried to attempt to communicate in his films. Underwhelmed by existing critical literature, Tarkovsky embarked on his own attempt to define such things as art and cinema, and to comment on his films.

Cinema, as its core, is the capture of reality over time. At its heart is careful observation of reality. The artist brings his own unique reality and worldview to a film, creating a prism through which objective reality is filtered. The artist must depend on his own experience, feelings, and thoughts in crafting a cinematic work.

A cinematic masterpiece (and Tarkovsky doubts that cinema, in its relative infancy, has even had a master yet that future generations will look to) is characterized by its organic wholeness, with every element of the picture (sound, acting, lighting, shot selection, etc.) working in perfect harmony.

The basic element of cinema is rhythm. The director brings his own rhythm to a picture, as do the subjects photographed as well as the editing imposed upon the footage.

Reality should always be the first virtue of the filmmaker. Artifice, in the form of theatrical acting, overly symbolic or literary intention, or gimmicky effects, should be avoided at all times. The "mise-en-scene," the design of a scene to be shot, should be free to be realistic rather than manufactured. Similarly, film acting should strive for in-the-moment psychological truth, and should never borrow from theatrical acting.

The artist battles against several factors which would seek to dilute his artistic vision. These include the hardships of production, the interference of creative crew members, and the pressures of being commercial. Commercial cinema and artistic cinema can never be the same, and the true artist eschews the easy money of commercial success in order to stay faithful to his uncompromised vision. The artist should not cater to the perceived expectations of his audience; however, he does have a moral responsibility to those audience members who respond to his work. This moral responsibility takes the form of the sharing of personal experience, and a faithfulness to self no matter what.

Art, in a broad sense, is spirituality. It seeks to awaken the spirituality of the spectator, to uplift them, to make them feel more alive. The modern world, with its material comforts and technology, is in desperate need of the spiritual awakening promised by great art.

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

Tarkovsky tackles the question of why he would bother writing film theory when he could be busy making films. He admits he wanted to argue certain points that were missing in existing film theory books, and he also admits he has more time between films than he would like. He also started writing because of audience reaction, particularly the many letters he has received from people who have seen his films. He quotes a few letters. Some expressed confusion, others disdain or outright hatred of Tarkovsky's work. But others were more curious, asking Tarkovsky to clarify certain moments of his films. Still more letters expressed admiration for Tarkovsky, and the sentiment that Tarkovsky had expressed a profound truth that resonated with them and made them feel more alive. These letters are particularly meaningful to Tarkovsky.

So to answer critics, fill in holes in the literature of film theory, and to clarify and expand upon his artistic intentions for the benefit of his curious audience, Tarkovsky for years has been writing what has now been collected in this single volume. Tarkovsky expresses excitement for the possibilities of cinema, still a young art form, and states that there are an infinite number of interpretations possible when discussing artistic creation, and that he hopes a small step can be taken forward with his own interpretations and thoughts.

Chapter I

Chapter I Summary and Analysis

Tarkovsky's first feature film was called Ivan's Childhood. It was based upon a short story written by Russian author Bogomolov. Tarkovsky was attracted to the story's originality and firm structure. Also, instead of the usual "happy ending," the hero, Lieutenant Galtsev, dies in the end, which Tarkovsky was struck by. He felt such an ending portrayed the monstrousness of war effectively. Tarkovsky was also impressed by the character of the young boy, Ivan, and his intense emotions.

However, the format of the story, told as a reporter, was unacceptable to Tarkovsky and against his artistic principles, so he took full creative license in transforming that aspect of the story to suit his taste. Tarkovsky is less interested in the machinations of the plot and more interested in "poetic connections" that cinema makes possible through editing. Tarkovsky wants the audience to be an active participant. He does not think cinema should hand the meaning of a film over easily; the audience should be confused and have to work to discover the meaning for themselves. Anything else would be artifice and not representative of true life. And cinema should be as close to real life as possible.

Tarkovsky sees cinema heading away from its dependence on theater or literature, and sees it becoming its own art form with its own distinct language, and this is a good development.

Tarkovsky next moves to the concept of "mise-en-scene," the design of a scene, from lighting to costume to furnishings. Many filmmakers believe the mise-en-scene should be manipulated to reinforce the emotion or action of the scene; Tarkovsky believes that this is artifice, and that the mise-en-scene should stay as real-to-life as possible, and not be a consciously designed element of cinema.

The artist should be free to be subjective, to bring his own reality to a film. The artist's goal is to make man more perfect. Tarkovsky "went for broke" in terms of technique and artistry with Ivan's Childhood: as his first feature, it was his test, his chance to determine whether he was destined for directed.

On the topic of subjectivity, Tarkovsky found Bogomolov's descriptions of landscapes thorough but dry, so he took particular freedom in creating evocative settings. This is in keeping with Tarkovsky's view of cinema as "poetic logic". Tarkovsky drew from a childhood memory for one scene, and other scenes were similarly inspired by dream imagery.

Tarkovsky admits that several scenes in the film are not emotionally effective, because he (as the author) failed to properly illuminate the scenes for the audience. In gauging

effective scenes, Tarkovsky depends on his own emotions. If he is moved by a scene, he believes the audience will be moved as well.

After Ivan's Childhood, Tarkovsky wrote the screenplay for his next film, with working title The Passion of Andrey, about the great Russian painter Andrey Rublyov. He did not want the film to be a historical epic, with all of that genre's artificial trappings and antique furniture, but a living and breathing animal that would explore the nature of Rublyov's unique poetic genius.

Chapter II

Chapter II Summary and Analysis

Art, to Tarkovsky, is an attempt to explain the meaning of existence, and especially the artist's own existence. Art is a "symbol of the universe." Modern art has taken a "wrong turn" by abandoning the search for the meaning of existence in favor of affirming the value of the individual. But because true art is spiritual, that does not mean it is not grounded in reality. On the contrary—the best art pulls from reality.

Art is also about communication and unifying people. The artist cannot work solely for the purpose of "self-expression"; he must be communicating something. The audience/viewer/reader understands art on an emotional level, rather than a scientific, intellectual level. Art is not logical, like science, and does not follow rational rules. To understand art, a spectator must give in to the image and trust in the artist.

And what is the aim of art? It is "to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good" (p. 43). A work of art resonates with the spectator when he recognizes some truth about himself within the work.

Spectatorship creates problems. A masterpiece is difficult to judge outside of people's perceptions of the work of art, and criticism tends to reinforce existing views instead of evaluate based upon unbiased and original thought.

However difficult, Tarkovsky goes on to attempt to define a masterpiece. It is beautiful, finished, organic, and whole. Every element of a masterpiece works in harmony with every other element. It is balanced. One cannot trust the experts and existing critical consensus when judging a masterpiece. For example, Raphael's "Sistine Madonna" painting is hailed as a masterpiece, but Tarkovsky finds it "flabby and insipid." On the other hand, lesser-known contemporary of Raphael, Carpaccio, is much more esteemed by Tarkovsky. Carpaccio possesses a subtlety that Raphael does not possess, and subtlety is also a mark of great art.

Tarkovsky next turns to a filmmaker he regards as an artist of great magnitude, Luis Bunuel, who is "the bearer, above all else, of poetic consciousness" (p. 51). Bunuel has drawn strongly from his Spanish heritage, in that his works display passion, intensity, and love of country.

The artist is also an iconoclast, a bearer of change, a catalyst for conflict between the old and new.

Finally, art does not have to be perfect to be considered a masterpiece. Instead, it must at all times remain true to the artist and his passion. The artist is imperfect, and so we can expect the art to be imperfect.

Chapter III

Chapter III Summary and Analysis

Tarkovsky distinguishes between linear time, history, and a more spiritual sense of time; the latter is that in which Tarkovsky is chiefly interested. In the spiritual, personal sense, time is related intimately to memory. Without memory, man is doomed to madness. Memory is also what makes mankind vulnerable, and subject to pain. Time allows man to be a moral being, to engage in a search for true. Time, in the form of memory, is always with us. To make sense of ourselves, we constantly look to the past and our own memory.

Switching gears, Tarkovsky states that film directing begins at the moment the director has, in his mind's eye, an image of the film. By committing to film his most secret and personal thoughts and dreams, the director becomes an artist.

The film that started cinema was the 1896 short film Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station, by Auguste Lumiere, which famously depicted a locomotive coming straight toward the camera. Cinema, unlike all other art forms, was able to capture the passage of time. The audience, appropriately, goes to the cinema in search of time, of a "living experience." The director could then be said to be sculpting in time (the title of the book).

Cinema's unique aspect is this capturing and shaping of time. Therefore, it should not be beholden to previous art forms, like theater or literature. To chronicle is the ultimate aim of cinema. To Tarkovsky, the ideal movie would be made up from footage of a man's entire life from birth to death, with all but ninety minutes cut out. This is, of course, impracticable, if not impossible, but the principle behind it should guide editing. Cinema is observation, and Tarkovsky admires a couple of Japanese haiku poems for the powers of observation they display.

Tarkovsky expresses annoyance with so-called "poetic cinema," which depends upon a movement away from what is real and observable and concrete. To move away from the real is a regress in cinema, not progress.

One of the "binding and immutable conditions of cinema" is that events must be depicted sequentially, one after another, in a montage created by editing. In this view, Tarkovsky expresses dislike for splitscreen as well as multiple screen cinema spectacles, as such gimmicks are contrary to the essence of cinema. Other gimmicks to create effects, like high-speed filming or a filter put over the camera lens to suggest the image is a dream, are similarly destructive to the essence of cinema. In general, cinema must pursue real, natural forms, and not symbols.

Next discussed are screenwriters. While they offer only a half-finished product, the script, they have an important role: to create and illuminate the psychology of the

characters. In this case, literature (the words of the script) has a profound influence on cinema. However, the director often needs to break and re-form the script, because the script on its face is too literary and would not translate well to screen.

Tarkovsky now turns to his film Andrey Rublyov, which was set in the fifteenth century. Tarkovsky wanted to capture real people, not "revived paintings," and so he strayed from historical facts in favor of some elements of artificiality. When a scene called for a peasant to try to fly from a cathedral top with wings he made, Tarkovsky instead gave him an air balloon to take away the symbolism of wings, and showed the man simply crashing to the ground, as a spectator would have seen it.

Chapter IV

Chapter IV Summary and Analysis

Art forms are not developed randomly; they emerge as a response to a specific need in humanity. So, too, did cinema, at the turn of the twentieth century. Tarkovsky wonders if the rhythm of cinema, in its editing, mirrors the rhythms of modern life. Cinema itself has evolved. In the twenties and thirties, it played to the excitement of the audience in seeing life re-enacted on screen, the novelty of the moving image. Now (at the time of the writing of the book, in the mid 1980s), the audience is sophisticated and matured. It has tired of the novelty of cinema, and looks for cinema to fulfill other needs. Tastes have diverged, requiring more and more films for different types of audiences. One film can no longer be trusted to evoke the same reaction from all audience members. Cinema has in return grown more sophisticated.

Tarkovsky admits that, prior to making Ivan's Childhood, he did not know what his calling was, and if director was truly for him. Ivan's Childhood represented a "getting to know cinema" period for Tarkovsky, when he was trying out techniques and finding his voice. By the time of his film Andrey Rublyov, Tarkovsky was in a state of becoming, of progression and transformation into the director-artist. This progression was in fact mirrored in the film itself. Rublyov was brought up in a monastery and lives a secluded life. Once outside the walls of the monastery, Rublyov was confronted with reality and was unequipped to properly deal with it. Rublyov suffered and went through trials by fire, but in the end he emerged with the same basic goodness he had developed in the cloistered monastery. Tarkovsky sees this kind of trajectory in his own directing path.

Tarkovsky next reflects on his film student days. Students were barred from seeing any Western movies because of its supposed pernicious influence, which Tarkovsky thinks is absurd. Russian filmmakers, because of this censorship, had to "reinvent the wheel" and make their own cinema without having the benefit of seeing any of the world's other cinemas.

In his fourth year, Tarkovsky made a short film with another student, Alexander Gordon. They longed, even then, to make a "real" feature-length film. Film as art eluded them; they were instead fascinated with production and organization, the "nuts and bolts" of filmmaking. Tarkovsky feels short films are harder to make than feature-length films, and he hopes to make a short film one day, based upon a poem written by his father.

Turning back to art in general, Tarkovsky again laments "modern" art for its dependence and focus on method, rather than spiritual truth. This is reflected in the culture at large, which has lost much of its spirituality. A common term applied to modern art, avant-garde, is disliked by Tarkovsky, as it implies that art is progressing, an absurd concept. Shakespeare's art is as truthful and "advanced" as Thomas Mann's art. Avant-garde also implies experimentation and the artist as a seeker of truth. Not so, says Tarkovsky; the artist is already revealing the truth, he is not seeking it.

Chapter V

Chapter V Summary and Analysis

The artist's thought is expressed in the form of the "artistic image," which comes nearest to "conveying the artist's world." The image is "a kind of equation" between truth and the human consciousness. Tarkovsky again points to Japanese haiku poetry as the best example of narrowly-focused truth-telling. Cinema is based upon observation as its first principle. But mere observation is enough. The director-artist must capture his perception of the object, not just the object itself.

Tarkovsky points to Leonardo Da Vinci's portrait "A Young Lady With a Juniper" as a masterpiece of art. He used the portrait as part of the scene in a section of his film, Mirror. The portrait is a masterpiece because of Leonardo's amazing ability to objectively capture the subject, and because of the ambivalence the portrait stirs in the viewer. The viewer finds the young lady simultaneously attractive and repellent. Also, the art work cannot be broken up and analyzed according to disparate elements - it is united and whole, and Tarkovsky likens this to an "interaction with infinity."

Tarkovsky speaks of his film, Mirror. He has some regrets, but also some shots he regards as successes. A slow-motion shot of a woman debating whether or not to cut off a rooster's head is deemed "bad" because the slow-motion is too obvious a way to represent the woman's psyche. On the contrary, another shot in Mirror of a printing-press was also shot slow-motion, but it was done with carefulness and subtlety, and so it is effective.

Turning now to rhythm and editing, Tarkovsky feels the all-powerful factor of cinema is rhythm. Other things like actors, sound, music, scenery, can be taken away from a film, but rhythm cannot. Tarkovsky disagrees that the heart of cinema is editing, as Russian filmmakers Eisenstein and Kuleshov theorized. The very shot itself, during film, acquires a rhythm, and editing is also adding additional rhythm to the completed film. Well-shot footage edits itself; editing is usually quite mechanical. Of his film Mirror, Kuleshov recalls they he and his editor had put the film together in twenty different ways, and finally the film came alive, not because of editing but because the rhythms of each shot were in harmony. A film's process of "coming alive" is tied by Tarkovsky back to art's ability to "interact with infinity."

Rhythm is individual to a director, but rhythm is also dictated by the subject, by what is shot. A director brings his sense of the world, his sense of rhythm, to a film, through shot selection and then through editing. He sculpts, in time.

Switching gears, the director has a constant battle on set; to keep to his original vision. The difficulties of production, and the fact that so many other creative people are assisting, means the director has to fight for his vision. If the composer writes his own

music instead of what the director wants, no matter how beautiful the music is, it will not cohere with the rest of the film.

The script writer must be especially in tune with the director's vision. In fact, the director should feel free to change any and all parts of the script at whim. Tarkovsky finds it strange that screenwriters exist at all; if they were true writers, they would be writing novels, and if they truly think in terms of cinematic images, they should be directors. The only good reason for a script that displays fine literary qualities is to convince producers or money-men of the merits of the final film.

Tarkovsky describes the process of bringing the Mirror from script to screen. The first draft was a nostalgic, sad look at his own childhood, but it was not cinematic. The next interspersed childhood memories with documentary interviews with Tarkovsky's mother. This structure, though interesting, was rejected. Next Tarkovsky found actual newsreel footage of the Soviet army crossing Lake Sivash in World War II, 1943, and that scene became a sort of lynchpin for Tarkovsky to build a theme around. The final ingredient was to introduce the narrator's wife into the script, which was never planned.

The director must walk a line between collaboration with crew members and maintaining a singular vision. Sometimes Tarkovsky found it useful to withhold his ideas about the film from crew members, so they would not be unduly influenced and would just do their job. Cinematographer Vadim Yusov, a longtime collaborator of Tarkovsky's, refused to film Mirror after reading the script, considering it self-indulgent on the part of Tarkovsky, and Tarkovsky wonders if he should have withheld more from Yusov.

Regardless, on Mirror, Tarkovsky and his crew attained a sort of spiritual unity, a harmonious union. He considered them to be family by the end of shooting, and it was painful to then break up that family.

Tarkovsky makes a brief comment on color. Color should be carefully restrained in the composition of a shot, otherwise the film will be too painterly. Strangely enough, black-and-white films, to Tarkovsky, come closer to psychological and spiritual truth than color films.

Next discussed are actors. Film actors only have to be true to a moment in time, the scene. This is in contrast to theater actors, who have to have a larger conception of their character to carry through an entire play. Since the film is only created later, film actors do not have this duty to think so hard about their character. In Tarkovsky's words, the actor's "task is to live!—and to trust the director" (p. 140). Appropriately, then, Tarkovsky prefers that his actors not know the plot. They are only responsible for being true to moments. Certain actors are capable of this moment-to-moment performing, which involves an almost child-like trust in the director, and some are not. Tarkovsky points to Anatoliy Solonitsyn as an actor who was natural as a cinema actor, and Donatas Banionis (who starred in the film Solaris) as a theater actor who was not comfortable as a cinema actor. Nevertheless, Banionis turned in a great performance in the film, but it was not an easy working relationship. As for directors, Ingmar Bergman had a brilliant way of keeping his actors "in the moment."

Relatedly, to get actors to try to play "comedy" or "drama" roles is to ruin the truth of the situation. In general, making "genre" pictures (Western, comedy, thriller) is to not make art. The great film artists, especially Bresson, did not make generic pictures. And the genius of Charlie Chaplin was not that he was a comedian, but that he performed with such human truth, even surrounded by absurdity. When a director sets out to make the audience cry or laugh, he is almost always doomed to not succeed.

Finally, film music is discussed. Ideally, music should be to add something distinct yet organic to the image, and not merely reinforce the image. Tarkovsky imagines that, if a cinematic work was visually perfect, it would need no music at all, and yet all of his films have contained music, though with films Stalker and Nostalgia he was close to requiring no music. Tarkovsky is heartened by the potential of electronic music for augmenting a work and yet remaining somewhat invisible. By contrast, the problem with instrumental music is that it is inherently "illustrative," and thus to include it in a film requires some degree of artistic compromise.

Chapter VI

Chapter VI Summary and Analysis

Cinema is unique in that, in most parts of the world, it has been closely tied to commercial profit. It has become a business. This hurts any attempts to make art, because art by nature is "aristocratic" and selective, and the cinema business wishes to make movies as broadly appealing as possible. The artist is torn between remaining true to their vision, and "cashing in" by making an inferior commercial film for personal wealth.

The artist must remain true, and must not cave in to commercial pressures. The artist must remain faithful to himself, because almost by definition, his unique vision of the world will only be shared by a select few, and is not fit for mass consumption.

The link between audience and artist is a spiritual and emotional one. The artist must understand his audience and the zeitgeist of his era.

Success cannot be measured by tickets sold, and the artist should not hope for a unanimously positive audience reaction to his films. But while the artist should not cater or pander to the audience, Tarkovsky knows of no filmmaker who does not fervently wish for the audience to love his film.

Indeed, Tarkovsky asks, how can the artist even begin to make films to please others? Who are these "others," and what do they feel? How can anyone hope to categorize the world's people according to their artistic needs and desires, and then make a film to satisfy those needs and desires? This is what commercial cinema purports to do, and it is a preposterous situation to Tarkovsky.

While the artist cannot work to please the audience, he still has a responsibility to them. Tarkovsky thought of quitting directing after Mirror, but thought better of it when he realized many people delighted in and perceived truth in his films. It would be irresponsible of Tarkovsky to retire when there are people out there who long for his work.

Chapter VII

Chapter VII Summary and Analysis

Film is an emotional reality. The director-artist is capable of creating his own world. It is also an "immediate" art form, like music, in that it can be directly perceived. By contrast, literature conveys meaning through symbols, the words on the paper.

Because cinema is so similar to reality—unlike a painting, which can be said to be "life-like" but would never be mistaken for real people doing real things—cinema is particularly capable of evoking emotion and otherwise affecting people. It can be used for escapism and entertainment as well as spiritual enlightenment. Because of this power, filmmakers have a responsibility to the audience. "Artistic freedom" is a bit of an oxymoron, because the artist is never free; he is beholden to his community.

Tarkovsky estimates that eighty percent of a cinema audience is there for reasons common to commercial cinema; they want to be entertained. But the artist's responsibility is to the remaining twenty percent, who are there to think and to appreciate the aesthetic value of the film. Art is valuable on its own merits; it doesn't have to falsely extend itself by being "entertaining."

Specifically, it is the artist's responsibility to truthfully and forcefully share his own life experience with the audience. The film is a mirror in which (hopefully) the viewer sees him/herself. Film cannot succeed in totally imitating reality; rather, the artist imposes his individuality and vision upon the film, choosing which bits of reality to present. Art cannot be "naturalistic," and Tarkovsky uses the opportunity to scold his Russian critics for labeling his film Andrey Rublyov "naturalistic."

In terms of the artist's responsibility, the artist must not bow to commercial/business pressures. Commercializing one's work necessarily means compromise. This can in fact lead to the spiritual corruption of the viewer. Filmmakers should not be professional mercenaries, manufacturing a product intended to be consumed, for this betrays the artistic vision.

The artist is somewhat at odds with society. Society seeks stability, whereas the artist seeks progress, newness, change. The artist seeks to instill a "spiritual crisis" after which a new and better state of being is experienced. This is the journey that the title character of Tarkovsky's film, Stalker, goes on. The theme of Stalker is human dignity, the need for a man to have self-respect. All of Tarkovsky's films serve to show some hope or redeeming faith in humanity. In passing, Tarkovsky laments the necessary science fiction backdrop of his film Solaris. It became too prominent and was a distraction to the human drama. Tarkovsky ends with stating that all a person can count on in existence is the capacity to love, and Tarkovsky, with his films, hopes to show people their need for love and the need for them to give love.

Chapter VIII

Chapter VIII Summary and Analysis

The film Nostalgia is discussed, the first film Tarkovsky made outside of Russia. He intended it as a sort of love song to Russia, a laudatory view of the country and its culture. Specifically, Russians are so attached to their country, they cannot cope or adapt when outside of it. The film centers on a Russian in Italy who is having trouble assimilating and communicating in a foreign land.

When Tarkovsky first looked at the footage of Nostalgia, he found it excessively gloomy, a state which mirrored his own inner turmoil, being far from his family and country while filming in Italy. The protagonist, named Gorchakov, undergoes a spiritual crisis and dies without these crisis having been resolved. He was unable to assimilate. And this is true tragedy, for human connections are essential for man to exist and to thrive.

Tarkovsky does not have "heroes" in his films, with the possible exception of Ivan in Ivan's Childhood. Instead, protagonists are characterized by an inner spiritual conviction, who take upon themselves a responsibility for others. Many of these protagonists are outwardly weak men. Weakness is an attractive subject to Tarkovsky.

Tarkovsky denies that his films are symbolic. When he is asked by audiences, for example, what rain in his films symbolizes, he doesn't know how to respond. He shows rain in his films because, in the part of Russian where he grew up, it often rained; it is as simple as that. Tarkovsky, despite the popular misconception, does not deal in symbols.

Chapter IX

Chapter IX Summary and Analysis

Tarkovsky's last film, The Sacrifice, was conceived early in the filmmaker's career, while he was still in the Soviet Union. He was obsessed with the notion of sacrifice and the duality of love—love's ability to both enthrall and to free. Tarkovsky centered the film around a man who was capable of sacrifice. In a larger sense, Tarkovsky wanted to remark on the materialism he saw the world being infected with. Modern man has a poor sense of spirituality, of deference to a higher power.

The protagonist of The Sacrifice, Alexander, is remarkably cured of cancer after spending a night in bed with a witch. Art is eerily reflecting life; at the time of the writing, Tarkovsky's favorite actor, Solonitsyn, had recently died of cancer, and Tarkovsky himself is battling cancer (a battle he would unfortunately lose soon after the writing of the book). The Sacrifice took the form of a complex parable, and is less dependent on formal structure than previous Tarkovsky films.

Alexander, the protagonist, is full of despair at the beginning of the film. He turns to God in prayer, and afterward he resolves to live life anew, as he had never lived it. Alexander emerges with a strong sense of spiritual faith, which Tarkovsky holds as a great virtue.

At one point in the film, Alexander burns down his home. When they were shooting that scene, the camera broke and Tarkovsky was full of despair; four months of preparation for nothing. But amazingly, the house was reconstructed in four days, and the scene was shot again successfully. As with other films, Tarkovsky forged a familial bond with his crew, especially in light of such adversity.

Tarkovsky returns to his contention that modern man has little conception of God or the spiritual world, and he relates this dearth of spirituality with the prevalence of commercial cinema. The Sacrifice was, in part, a repudiation of commercial cinema, Tarkovsky's plea that man return to a state of spiritual curiosity.

Conclusion

Conclusion Summary and Analysis

Tarkovsky ends by stating his perceptions are not about art or cinema, but the world at large. He sees that mankind is on the precipice of disaster. Mankind is at the end of a historical cycle, in which individual responsibility has been de-emphasized. Individuals increasingly rely on the state or other apparatuses for sustenance. Simultaneously, individuals have been more isolated, and more selfish. Modern man is only interested in increasing their own personal wealth or stature, and they have no regard for their neighbor, no conception of being a part of a larger community. Similarly, spirituality is on the decline. Individuals are becoming nameless cogs in a great societal machine.

People in the West, with their ingrained capitalism and democracies, are the most impoverished spiritually. They are slaves to possessions and to material comforts.

In this worldview, art is a weapon, perhaps the only weapon, to usher in a renewed spiritual awakening. Man is born into suffering, not happiness, and art is the vehicle by which man is uplifted and given hope. Art can combat materialism, which is a great evil that threatens to rend our modern civilization asunder.

Characters

The Artist

The artist, as embodied in the film director, translates his unique vision of the world and his individuality onto the cinema screen. The chief weapon in his employ is rhythm over time. The artist is imbued with a unique rhythm, a perspective on the world, and this "mark" is made upon each element of the film, from set design to dialogue to shot selection and editing. The artist uses his own rhythm, along with the natural rhythms of the subjects he is capturing, and then further shapes this rhythm in the editing room. The film artist is thus a sculptor of time, shaping reality-in-motion in order to reflect his unique worldview.

The artist must always be true to himself, and must remain steadfast in the pursuit of his vision for a picture, even as production realities and creative crew members attempt to alter this vision. The artist is also in danger of compromise, in the form of the allure of commercial cinema. Commercial cinema is at odds with artistic cinema; to Tarkovsky, the two cannot be one and the same. The artist, because he is unique, will produce work that will only resonate with a relative handful of people, while commercial cinema strives to dilute the artistic work so that the most amount of people will enjoy it.

Andrey Tarkovsky, Russian filmmaker of world renown and the author of the volume, represents himself as this film artist struggling to maintain his vision against the pressures of filming realities, stubborn crew members, commercial cinema, as well as the careful censorship of his country.

Modern Man

According to Tarkovsky, modern man has lost a sense of spirituality. Modern man is at the edge of history, at the end of a large historical cycle in which leaders, which Tarkovsky chidingly calls "great inquisitors," have promised modern man all manner of easy solutions and material comforts. As a result, modern man has forsaken individual responsibility and has become too dependent upon, for lack of a better term, the welfare state. Too focused upon creature comforts and earthly possessions, modern man has lost piety, a sense of duty to a greater power. Modern man has become isolated, and has little regard for his neighbor and instead selfishly hoarding wealth and possessions. The modern man of the West is especially spiritually impoverished, but the Western influence has had a profound influence on all the world and has effectively defeated the East and its more spiritual leanings.

Because of this dearth of spirituality, modern man is full of despair, of a longing he cannot quite articulate. He is on the edge of destruction. Only art, and its eye-opening focus on spirituality, can save the modern man from himself. Modern man believes he is free, but in fact he is enslaved by his possessions. The spiritual man, full of love, full of

giving and sacrifice, is the only one who is truly free. Paradoxically, one must give oneself over to the community (in the form of volunteer service) in order to obtain genuine individuality.

Anatoliy Solonitsyn

Solonitsyn is a Russian actor and the chief actor Tarkovsky used in almost all of his films. He died of cancer in 1982. For Tarkovsky, Solonitsyn was the ideal film actor, for he acted in the moment and placed complete trust in the director.

Luis Bunuel

Tarkovsky greatly admires Spanish filmmaker Luis Bunuel for his "poetic consciousness."

Leonardo Da Vinci

The Renaissance painter is admired by Tarkovsky, who hails Leonardo's "A Young Lady With a Juniper" as a masterpiece. Tarkovsky used an image of the painting in his film, Mirror.

Leo Tolstoy

This famous Russian novelist is repeatedly referred to by Tarkovsky as an artist he greatly admires. Tarkovsky forgives Tolstoy his artistic faults, such as his incessant moralizing, and uses Tolstoy to show that artists do not have to be perfect to be great.

Andrey Rublyov

Rublyov was a famous Russian painter of the fifteenth century. Tarkovsky created a biography of the painter in a 1966 film. In the film, Rublyov goes on a journey from cloistered monastery to first-hand witness of the ills of the world, but in the end the painter remains full of hope and love for mankind.

Sergei Eisenstein

Eisenstein was a Russian filmmaker of the 1920s and 1930s who wrote extensively on film theory. Like other Russian theorists of his time, Eisenstein subscribed to the "montage" philosophy of cinema, in which the content of shots is less important than their juxtaposition (via editing). Tarkovsky believes editing is not the central element of cinema, but instead rhythm, which is found within shots, and not just between shots.

Donatas Banionis

Banionis was the star of Tarkovsky's Solaris film. Unlike actor Solonitsyn, Tarkovsky had a difficult working relationship with Banionis, who was endlessly analytical and who prodded Tarkovsky for extensive background information on the character he played. Banionis was a theater actor before he was a film actor.

Robert Bresson

Robert Bresson was a French filmmaker. Tarkovsky expresses great admiration for the filmmaker and cites him as an influence on his own work.

Objects/Places

Ivan's Childhood

Ivan's Childhood was the first feature film Tarkovsky directed after graduating from film school. He was still deciding whether or not to become a director and was trying to prove he had the talent and skills to be a director, so Tarkovsky "went for broke" in terms of techniques for shooting the film. Tarkovsky admits the film has its faults, but he still finds several scenes valuable.

Literature

While cinema owes much to literature, including dialogue and many of its stories, Tarkovsky insists cinema must break with literature in order to forge its own identity. The director as artist must be free to completely reshape stories which originated in literature (including the screenplay), in order to make that story uniquely cinematic.

Mirror

Mirror was a film Tarkovsky made in 1975. It was largely autobiographical, drawing heavily from Tarkovsky's childhood memories. Tarkovsky was criticized for being self-indulgent by making the film, but he insists that is not the case.

Rhythm

Rhythm is cinema's essential element. All other elements—actors, sound, scenery—could be taken away, and one would still have a film. The director brings his own rhythm to a film, and subjects to be shot provide an additional rhythm. A final rhythm is attained through editing.

Music

To Tarkovsky, film music should act as a refrain does in poetry. It should make a statement on the film image, contributing a new meaning rather than simply reinforcing an existing meaning. Tarkovsky believes that the perfect film would not need music at all.

Color

Tarkovsky advises the filmmaker to be cautious about the use of color. Too much color would distract and dominate the image. Color is the painter's medium, not the

filmmaker's. In fact, Tarkovsky believes the black-and-white film to be more spiritually truthful (and thus, by his definition, more artistic) than the color film.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia was Tarkovsky's first film he made outside Russia. It is about a Russian man in Italy who finds he cannot fit in to Italian society, longing as he is for his mother country. Tarkovsky admits he experienced the same kind of longing when he was making the film in Italy.

The Sacrifice

Tarkovsky's last film, The Sacrifice, centers on a man dying of cancer, who is miraculously cured after sleeping with a witch. The protagonist makes a noble sacrifice, doing away with his earthly life in favor of a closer relationship with God.

Commercial Cinema

Because commercial cinema, with its goal of turning a profit, tries to appeal to as broad a section of audience as possible, it is necessarily opposed to cinema as art. Commercial tries to please, entertain, provide a form of escape, etc., while true art does none of those things. The artist must make a decision between following his vision and "selling out" by making a mainstream picture.

Montage Cinema

Montage cinema was the film theory put forth by Russian theorists of the early twentieth century, like Eisenstein and Kuleshov. It maintained that the chief element of cinema was the edit, and that meaning was derived from the sequence of shots. Tarkovsky refutes this theory, believing that rhythm and not editing is the chief element of cinema, and that rhythm is found not just in editing, but in shot selection and other choices made by the director in pre-production and production.

Themes

Rhythm Versus Editing

Tarkovsky is writing from within a fairly insular Russian filmmaking community. The film theory Tarkovsky was inundated with while a student stressed "montage cinema," the theory proposed by Russian filmmakers and theoreticians Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov.

Eisenstein and Kuleshov believed that the chief meaning of a film is derived at the stage of editing. From the joining of two shots with disparate meanings comes a third meaning from editing, the sum being greater than its parts. This was derived from a larger Marxist and Hegelian philosophy of history: thesis and antithesis combine, and what is left is the synthesis.

Tarkovsky refutes this theory of filmmaking. He believes that rhythm is the first principle of cinema, and that rhythm is distinct from editing. The film director has his own rhythm, which he brings, like a stylistic trademark, to the film, in the form of shot selection, shot content, etc. Each shot then has its own rhythm, dictated by the director as well as the natural rhythm of the subject being shot. In this philosophy, editing becomes only a rather mechanical process of aligning the rhythms inherent in the shots, such that the film acquires an organic wholeness.

Tarkovsky dismisses proponents of "montage cinema," because they seek to too obviously manipulate the audience. This manipulation is memorialized as the "Kuleshov Effect," in which the audience, shown a shot of a boy with a neutral expression and then a shot of a bowl of porridge, might conclude that the boy is hungry because of the sequencing of shots. To Tarkovsky, this kind of filmmaking is disingenuous. It asks the audience to answer riddles and solve puzzles crafted by the filmmaker, instead of enjoying the film on a more natural and spiritual level.

The Role of the Cinema Actor

As Tarkovsky explains, the cinema actor should be viewed quite distinct from the theater actor. In fact, early cinema is marred by its dependence upon theatrical styles of acting. The theater actor must fully control the journey of his or her character. The theater actor must know the full plot and their character's trajectory. Theater's essence is the actor, and so the actor must take the reins.

However, in cinema, the actor does not provide the fundamental experience; the actor is just one of many elements. Moreover, it is the film director, and not the cinema actor, who creates meaning and provides vision for the art to rely upon. Therefore, the cinema actor's role is not to understand the entire journey of the character, but to remain psychologically truthful in whatever scene is being captured. The cinema actor thus performs on a "moment-to-moment" basis. Tarkovsky had become accustomed to

withholding details of plot or the ultimate fate of the character from his actors. This required a large amount of trust for the director on the part of the actor. Some actors responded with the requisite trust and an amazing ability to remain truthful to the moment, such as the actor Tarkovsky used in almost all of his Russian films, Anatoliy Solonitsyn.

Tarkovsky's philosophy in respect to cinema acting relates to his larger philosophy on cinema. Cinema's first principle is objective observation, the simple capturing of truth. The cinema actor must similarly strive to capture psychological reality through truthful performance. The actor must not be working from any preconceived notion, and he or she must not be trying to entertain, be funny, evoke tears, or any other extra-cinematic intention. To so so shatters the truth of the moment and damages the artistic vision.

The Artist and the Audience

The artist and the audience are closely interrelated and their relationship is quite complex, according to Tarkovsky. The artist creates works in order to be experienced by others; no artist would create anything if he thought no one would ever bear witness to his work. On the other hand, the artist must not cater to his audience, or create art that he thinks will be enjoyed by the majority of the audience. The artist, first and foremost, must be truthful to himself, to his vision of the world. Because the artist is unique, and thus his worldview is unique, the artist will probably not enjoy broad support. Many might be annoyed or simply unaffected by the artist's work. And yet, for those select few who are moved by the artist, the artist must continue to produce. The artist thus has a responsibility to pursue his art for the benefit of audience members who, through that art, become inspired or who are spiritually elevated.

Commercial cinema complicates and damages this relationship between artist and audience. The business behind mainstream cinema compels the filmmaker to produce films to be enjoyed by as broad an audience as possible. For the very reasons just described, the filmmaker cannot both be true to his vision and appeal to a broad spectrum of people. So, the filmmaker is torn between following through with his artistic vision and compromising that vision to become a well-paid director in the commercial cinema system.

Style

Perspective

Author Andrey Tarkovsky was a Russian filmmaker and theorist. As a film student in the Russian system, at the State Institute of Cinematography, he was steeped in Russian cinema and exposed to the great Russian filmmakers of the twenties and thirties, such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin. He directed a thesis film, then directed several feature-length films, starting with Ivan's Childhood.

Tarkovsky relies on his theoretical understanding of film, as well as his practical experience with working and directing on many film sets. He supports his ideas on the essence of art and cinema with examples from his own career as well as artists and works he admires. He shows himself to be forever curious and ever-evolving in terms of his films. Tarkovsky admits that Ivan's Childhood was the result of experimenting with different techniques. At that point, Tarkovsky was still determining whether or not he had the desire and talent to become a director.

Tarkovsky regards "rhythm" to be the essential element of cinema. Cinema is also observation, capturing truth through time. So, ideally, cinema is a processing of capturing naturally-occurring, "truthful" rhythms, and then altering this rhythm ("sculpting in time," per the title), according to the director's own internal rhythm, his unique individuality and perception of life.

Tone

Tarkovsky, being a filmmaker with theoretical as well as practical understanding, speaks with a certain amount of authority. He puts forth his arguments as to film theory, the nature of spectatorship, the nature of film music, and more, with force and persuasive rhetoric. There is little room for equivocation, hesitation, or alternate theories in the text.

Tarkovsky backs up his arguments by pulling examples from his own films, his own experience on film sets, and other well-known works of art. Tarkovsky, much like his career as a film director, relies upon his own singular ideas and vision. However, he also has a definite audience in mind. As he states in the Introduction, he is writing in order to illuminate and clarify his methodology and philosophy for the benefit of those who have been puzzled or otherwise intrigued by the films of Tarkovsky. He is careful to state and support his positions in a number of ways, from anecdotal evidence to the language of philosophy and metaphysics, in order to make his thoughts accessible.

The text treats certain subjects with a certain haughty disdain, or at least annoyance. Tarkovsky dismisses modern art and the avant-garde movement, stating that it favors style over substance. Tarkovsky also has little patience or regard for mainstream commercial cinema, which he regards as inauthentic and crass. Tarkovsky is

opinionated and outspoken, and displays little diplomacy in rendering judgments on any number of art- or film-related subjects.

Structure

Sculpting in Time is divided into nine chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion. It is translated from the original Russian by Kitty Hunter-Blair. The introduction details why Tarkovsky decided to put the book together—to fill in what he perceived as holes in film theory, and to answer questions and provide clarifications for many curious viewers.

Each chapter is then dedicated to a specific aspect of cinema in general, or of Tarkovsky's own canon of films. For example, chapter three is titled "Imprinted time," and it talks about the nature of time, and how cinema relates profoundly to a "spiritual" or nonrational sense of time passing. Chapter four is given the title of Tarkovsky's most recent (and, sadly, last) film, The Sacrifice, and appropriately the chapter is devoted to stories behind the movie's production and what Tarkovsky was trying to accomplish.

In each chapter, theoretical and philosophical musings are mixed with anecdotal evidence, stories from the production of Tarkovsky's films, or examples from the art world. Additionally, many pages contain photographic stills from Tarkovsky's films, for visual interest and to occasionally present a scene that was referred to in the text.

The text is neither a straight philosophical treatise on film theory or the nature of art, nor a "behind-the-scenes" account of Tarkovsky's several films and his thoughts while making them. Instead, it is a little of both. A formula develops, whereby Tarkovsky will present a theory and then will use a production story or scene from one of his films to lend weight to the theory, to show that the theory is applicable in the real world.

Quotes

"[I]f the vision of the world that has gone into the film turns out to be one that other people recognise as a part of themselves that up till now has never been given expression, what better motivation could there be for one's work."
Introduction, p. 12

"For me the most interesting characters are outwardly static, but inwardly charged with energy by an overriding passion."
Chap. 1 p. 17

"The fate of the genius in the system of human knowledge is amazing and instructive. These sufferers chosen by God, doomed to destroy in the name of movement and reconstruction, find themselves in a paradoxical state of unstable equilibrium between a longing for happiness and the conviction that happiness, as a feasible reality or state, does not exist."
Chap. 2, p. 53

"[Y]ou can achieve nothing in art unless you are free from received ideas. You have to work out your own position, your individual point of view—subject always, of course, to common sense—and keep this before you, like the apple of your eye, all the time you are working."
Chap. 3, p. 60

"The cinema image, then, is basically observation of life's facts within time, organised according to the pattern of life itself, and observing its time laws."
Chap. 3, p. 68

"What passes for art today is for the most part fiction, for it is a fallacy to suppose that method can become the meaning and aim of art. Nonetheless, most modern artists spend their time self-indulgently demonstrating method."
Chap. 4, p. 96

"The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame."
Chap. 5, p. 113

"Original, unique expressiveness—that is the essential attribute of the cinema actor, for nothing less can become infectious on the screen or express the truth."
Chap. 5, p. 144

"Every age is marked by the search for truth. And however grim that truth, it still contributes to a country's moral health. Its recognition is a sign of a healthy time and can never be in contradiction with the moral idea."
Chap. 6, p. 168

"Cinema is one art form where the author can see himself as the creator of an unconditional reality, quite literally of his own world. In cinema man's innate drive to self-assertion finds one of its fullest and most direct means of realisation."
Chap. 7, p. 176

"As a rule a work of art develops in complex interaction with the artist's theoretical ideas, which cannot encompass it completely; artistic texture is always richer than anything that can be fitted into a theoretical schema."
Chap. 8, p. 216

"I posit that modern man, for the most part, is not prepared to deny himself and his interests for the sake of other people or in the name of what is Greater, of what is Supreme; he will more readily exchange his own life for the existence of a robot."
Chap. 9, p. 281

"Perhaps the meaning of all human activity lies in artistic consciousness, in the pointless and selfless creative act? Perhaps our capacity to create is evidence that we ourselves were created in the image and likeness of God?"
Conclusion, p. 241

Topics for Discussion

What reasons does Tarkovsky give for putting together this volume?

Why does Tarkovsky disagree with "montage cinema" theorists? What deficiency does Tarkovsky see in this approach?

What role should music play in film?

What is the essential element of cinema? How does this element relate to the titular phrase "sculpting in time"?

What theme did Tarkovsky attempt to explore in his film Nostalgia? Why does the protagonist suffer in the film?

How does the cinema actor differ from the theater actor in philosophy and method?

What is Tarkovsky's view of modern materialism? What effect does materialism have on spirituality?