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# ReFocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky

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Edited by Sergey Toymontsev

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## CHAPTER 12

## Cinema as Spiritual Exercise: Tarkovsky and Hadot

*Anne Eakin Moss*

The French philosopher Pierre Hadot strove to reconcile the strategies and aims of philosophy and religion by calling for "spiritual exercise" to enable the practice of "philosophy as a way of life."<sup>1</sup> Born in 1922 and sequestered in a seminary for most of World War II, Hadot left the Catholic Church in 1952 to marry and pursue a scholarly career. Responsible for introducing Ludwig Wittgenstein to French philosophy, Hadot was elected to the Collège de France as chair of the History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought in 1983 on the recommendation of Michel Foucault.<sup>2</sup> Though Andrei Tarkovsky was born ten years later than Hadot, and died prematurely in 1986, the mature work of both men was infused by the introspective post-war atmosphere of disillusionment and Existentialism, Socialist hopes and disappointment, Cold War anxiety and Soviet stagnation.<sup>3</sup> Tarkovsky's poetic and explicitly "spiritual" films resonate with Hadot's philosophy in their pursuit of "cosmic consciousness"—a term that is Hadot's but could just as well refer to the sea on the planet Solaris.<sup>4</sup>

Hadot examines ancient Greek philosophy with philological and historiographical tools, considering philosophy as a way of life, rather than a system of ethics, politics, or formal logic. For Hadot, philosophy is an embodied, ongoing practice that orients the self within a larger whole, one that can be likened to meditation, art, and science.<sup>5</sup> "[I]n each philosophical school," he writes, "we find the same conception of the cosmic flight and the view from above as the philosophical way par excellence of looking at things."<sup>6</sup> Tarkovsky's films, in dialog with the great philosophical novels of the nineteenth century and dissident poetry of the twentieth century, as well as medieval and Renaissance painting, Russian Orthodox theology and Existentialist philosophy, strive to teach a practice of attention that seems quite similar to what Hadot describes as "the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude"—"a continuous vigilance and

presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit."<sup>7</sup> Hadot's call for the artist that "must paint in a state in which he feels his unity with the earth and the universe" could just as well be Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublev as it is Hadot's Paul Klee or Cézanne.<sup>8</sup> It could just as well be Tarkovsky himself.

How are we to take this similarity? What does it mean to think of cinema as spiritual exercise and as philosophy more generally? What are the stakes and pay-off of such a comparison? Here I offer two primary avenues of inquiry. The first is to ask how Hadot's analysis of ancient philosophy and his concept of spiritual exercise might illuminate Tarkovsky's films and film practice in some new way. What can looking at Tarkovsky's films and filmmaking as kinds of spiritual exercise tell us about the films themselves, and then perhaps, about the possibilities of cinema as a medium and Tarkovsky's role in expanding those possibilities? I touch on each of the major films, noting how their themes of spiritual seeking follow a progression through Tarkovsky's oeuvre that leads all the more to a notion of spiritual exercise without the promise of recompense, epitomized in Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice* (*Offret*, Sweden, 1986), as the faithful daily watering of a dead stick. Then I examine specific visual techniques in the films and the ways in which they encourage a mode of viewing that is non-linear and might be considered spiritual exercise in itself. The second avenue of inquiry is to ask how Tarkovsky's films might illuminate Hadot's notion of spiritual exercise, and further, how they might suggest a way of understanding cinema itself as a form of spiritual exercise for the modern age. And in so doing, they may offer a way to understand how the media of communication negotiate the practice of religion, philosophy, and spiritual exercise in modernity.<sup>9</sup>

#### FILMMAKING AS SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

On the most basic level, Tarkovsky's films can be seen as vivid narrative illustration of spiritual exercises in Hadot's terms. Each of the protagonists of his seven major films demands of himself extreme forms of mental concentration, focused on goals that depart from the everyday and can only be seen as spiritual or metaphysical. The child spy, icon painter, cosmonaut, autobiographical subject, stalker, writer, and father are all quixotic seekers of some transcendent aim, their quests characterized by deep attention to the world around them. Hadot, in his inaugural lecture to his chair at the Collège de France, describes the writings of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism as linked in so far as they seek "not so much to inform the reader of a doctrinal content but to form him, to make him traverse a certain itinerary in the course of which he will make spiritual progress." That itinerary is not clear-cut, but

one "in which all the detours, starts and stops, and digressions of the work are formative elements."<sup>10</sup> The same could be said of the path laid out for the heroes of each of Tarkovsky's films, and even for his actors across the seven feature films, as they are seemingly reborn in new roles. Events and actions bear less narrative significance for the heroes than they do spiritual significance. The transcendent aim which they seek, though arguably achieved in the first two films—Soviet victory and the enduring art of the icon—recedes in the later films, never to be explicitly consummated, nor revealed. Alexander may have reversed the apocalypse in *The Sacrifice*, but Little Man will still water the dead tree. Hadot concludes his inaugural lecture with the assertion that ancient philosophy's enduring legacy is its pursuit of "the feeling for the seriousness and grandeur of existence."<sup>11</sup> In his oeuvre, Tarkovsky demonstrates cinema's ability to take on that legacy. As he declared in his essays on filmmaking, art "makes infinity tangible."<sup>12</sup> Both men aspire to make the spiritual sensible in the everyday.

The hero of Tarkovsky's lyrical Thaw-era debut feature, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), is a twelve-year-old boy orphaned in the course of the Great Patriotic War and now a reconnaissance spy for the Soviet army. Jean-Paul Sartre defended the film in *l'Unita* (the Italian communist party journal) from accusations of petit-bourgeois expressionism, praising its beauty and calling it "absolutely Soviet." He observed that "the film's lyricism—its churning skies, its tranquil waters, its countless forests—are life itself for Ivan."<sup>13</sup> Sartre's observation is borne out by the film's portrayal of Ivan's point of view and his dreams, which mirror but intensify the fractured experience of wartime existence. Ivan experiences the world with all of his senses, as if a string ready to pick up the slightest vibration around him. His intensity of attention and "concentration on the present moment" resembles that of the Stoic philosopher.<sup>14</sup> His past is gone and he looks forward to no future, only the present of his mission. If Sartre is right that the film's "lyricism" is Ivan's "life," then it is because Ivan is ideally oriented within the fractured world of the war, registering its signs with the dismay and horror of a child, but answering to them with the responsibility and seriousness of a war hero. When Galtsev discovers that Ivan has been executed in German captivity, he assigns himself and the viewer the task of his last line: "I must think about this." Having been martyred, Ivan has achieved a form of perfection, of being one with the Soviet world, that is inaccessible to the scarred Galtsev, and to the spectator of Soviet Russia in 1962.

Tarkovsky turned to the Slavic past in search of a source of spiritual identity in his next film. In an interview with the Soviet film journal *Ekran* in 1965, Tarkovsky described the hero of his new film, which after several years of struggle with conservative post-Thaw Soviet censorship would become a three-hour saga based on the life of the medieval Russian Orthodox icon painter Andrei Rublev (*Andrei Rublev*, 1966). He said that Rublev is "a person

seeing the world with a painful keenness, reacting with utmost sensitivity to everything he encounters . . ." and that "he strove to express an all-embracing harmony of the world, the serenity of the soul."<sup>15</sup> Compare Pierre Hadot's interpretation of Plato's *Phaedo* and the *Republic*: "the whole of the philosopher's speculative and contemplative effort becomes a spiritual exercise, insofar as he raises his thought up to the perspective of the Whole, and liberates it from the illusions of individuality (in the words of Friedmann: 'Step out of duration . . . become eternal by transcending yourself')."<sup>16</sup> The young bell maker, played by a slightly older Nikolai Burlyayev (Ivan in *Ivan's Childhood*), searches for the right kind of clay to cast the bell by reaching out to the world with all his senses, seeking to create an object that will mediate daily between the human and the divine. The color shots of Rublev's icons that burst forth at the end of *Andrei Rublev* suggest transcendence after Rublev's long struggle with human individuality—his vow of silence and refusal to paint after witnessing human violence, all of which the spectator experiences as duration via long takes to be discussed further below.

Kris Kelvin, the hero of *Solaris* (1972), is sent to the space station orbiting the planet Solaris to find out what happened to the mission, and gets drawn into contemplating the mystery of the planet that sends him fleshy apparitions of his dead wife. Kris asks, at the end of the film, "Why are we being tortured like this?" and the lone remaining scientist answers, as if in Hadot's words, "In my opinion, we have lost our sense of the cosmic. The ancients understood it perfectly." Kris ponders what to do at the end of the film, after the last of the repeated incarnations of his simulacrum wives has "annihilated" herself—to return to Earth or stay on the station. Ultimately, his decision echoes Hadot's admonition to the "*Spectator Novus*" of modernity, that "we must separate ourselves from the 'everyday' world in order to rediscover the world qua world":<sup>17</sup>

Do I have the right to turn down even an imagined possibility of contact with this Ocean which my race has been trying to understand for decades? Should I remain here? . . . What for? In the hope that she'll return? But I don't harbor this hope. The only thing left for me is to wait. I don't know what for. New miracles?

The next sequence allows us at first to think that Kelvin has returned to his father's house on Earth. Kris looks into the window of his father's house and ponders all the objects in it, which we've seen at some length earlier in the film. Like one of those "spot the differences" pages, everything is made strange. Hadot, coincidentally seeming to echo Viktor Shklovsky, writes: "Philosophy . . . deepens and transforms habitual perception, forcing us to become aware of the very fact that we are *perceiving the world*, and that the world is that which we perceive."<sup>18</sup> However, the final shot zooms out to reveal that the return of the

prodigal son is taking place not on an altered Earth, but on an island-simulacrum on the surface of Solaris. Interpreting this much-debated ending through the prism of Hadot's philosophy, Kelvin has not indulged in escapism by remaining on Solaris, but has demonstrated his commitment to spiritual exercise in the form of examining the obstacles in the self that prevent the perception of the world qua world. Kris has to be in the cosmic in order to see the everyday.<sup>19</sup>

Hadot concludes his inaugural lecture with a quotation from Communist fellow traveler Georges Friedmann, who in 1942 demanded of his reader, "every day, a 'spiritual exercise,'" on the grounds that "very rare, are those who, in order to prepare for the revolution, wish to become worthy of it."<sup>20</sup> The revisionist culture of the Thaw, in literature and cinema, similarly, revealed the extent to which the Soviet revolution never allowed for care of the self. More heretically, it questioned whether or not the real revolution had come. Tarkovsky's monumental focus on the individual quest of self-understanding, set against the backdrop of the signature international competition of the Cold War, the space program, insisted that Russian culture still had a spiritual program to offer as well.

Tarkovsky's next film, the autobiographical *Mirror* (1974), takes the filmmaker's own spiritual exercise as its subject. It begins with the young mother in stillness, waiting for the father's return, and ends with the old mother (played by Maria Vishnyakova, Tarkovsky's real mother) in movement, as if the film freed her, or the hero's memory of her, to reconcile past and present. Further, the process of making the film might be seen as a demonstration of the ability of filmmaking itself to be spiritual exercise. *Mirror* was conceived first as a dialog (as an interview with his mother filmed with hidden cameras) and latterly as a confession.<sup>21</sup> Filmmaking is of necessity a dialogic process of negotiation toward a shared vision among director, cameraman, cinematographer, actors, studio, and state censorship apparatus, yet *Mirror* gives the impression of an intensely first-person meditation. Tarkovsky's work on the film lasted ten years from its conception in 1964 to its production in 1973–4. In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky professed, "The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good."<sup>22</sup> The film's engagement with the religious was the product of a long negotiation with the censorship state that demanded the filmmaker cut elements of the screenplay that had a "biblical tone" and that he "relieve the entire film of mysticism."<sup>23</sup> Yet if spiritual exercise serves as an attempt to "find the truth that lives within each of us that can be found and used," this film can be seen as its epigone. The making of the film also demanded the vigilance and attention to the world depicted in all of his films. Tarkovsky was told he would be given enough film for three takes per shot, but received only about enough for one.<sup>24</sup> He carefully selected every object that made its way into the *mise-en-scène*—to the extent of rebuilding his mother's dacha from photographs and having the

fields around it planted with exactly the kind of grass (buckwheat) that he saw in his memory, taking literally his call for art "to plough and harrow his soul."<sup>25</sup> The artistic transformation of Tarkovsky's personal history took the form of spiritual exercise in its very production, and demanded the same of the viewer in the durational and puzzle-like experience of the final product of the film.

#### SPECTATORSHIP AS SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

From the turning point of *Mirror*, the second half of Tarkovsky's filmic production, *Stalker* (1979), *Nostalghia* (1983), and *The Sacrifice*, shifts the emphasis from filmmaking as a process of spiritual exercise, to teaching the viewer to exercise a spiritual kind of seeing in a modern, secular, and technological age. The *Stalker* guides his companions through the mysteriously transformed world of the Zone, teaching them to see the natural environment as alien and to place every footfall with intention. Refusing to follow his translator and guide, Eugenia, from the very start, the traveling writer of *Nostalghia* casts his eye over Italy, recalling Russia all along, and finds himself attracted more to the madman Domenico than the earthly beauty of Eugenia. And finally, the father of *The Sacrifice* guides his family and friends in how to see the world at the end of time, though the postman Otto reminds him that there is no such thing as truth. Each of these films poses a complex cinematographic puzzle to the viewer, and thematizes the relationship between seeing and knowing. Beyond narrative illustration of characters engaged in spiritual exercise, Tarkovsky's cinematography—his extremely careful and controlled *mise-en-scène*, long takes, painterly shot composition, deliberate use of color and contrast, aural composition, and non-linear montage—guides and instructs the spectator to look at and listen to his vision of the world with the same kind of deep attention as well as estrangement.

In frustrating the rules of classical Hollywood narrative continuity, Tarkovsky can be seen as training the spectator in something like the Stoic art of living—to teach us to "switch from our 'human' vision of reality, in which our values depend on our passions, to a 'natural' vision of things, which replaces each event within the perspective of universal nature."<sup>26</sup> This "'human' vision of reality, in which our values depend on our passions," might be associated with classical Hollywood continuity, with its logic of the shot/reaction shot that sutures the viewer to a specific, and usually human, viewing position, one conditioned by voyeuristic desires. Tarkovsky's aesthetics instead prevent the viewer from engaging in "habitual perception," imposing a "'natural' vision of things, which replaces each event within the perspective of universal nature." Rather than a subjective point of view that focuses the viewer's attention on human agency, Tarkovsky's cinematography asks us to contemplate the

contingent relationship of the subject, character, and viewer to the material and moral world around them both.

Fredric Jameson somewhat astonishingly accuses Tarkovsky's films of lacking in self-reflexivity, criticizing them for the hypocrisy of the "valorization of nature without human technology achieved by the highest technology of the photographic apparatus itself. No reflexivity acknowledges this second hidden presence, thus threatening to transform Tarkovskian nature-mysticism into the sheerest ideology." Robert Bird retorts that "Tarkovsky's entire cinematic project was aimed precisely at exploring the cinematic apparatus and investigating its impact upon human experience—as much sensory as intellectual and spiritual."<sup>27</sup> Considering the narrative repurposing of documentary footage through *Mirror*, Bird writes that "Though it is not specifically a critique of the Soviet imaginary, *Mirror* seeks to redefine the viewer's very attitude towards images, not as the storehouse of the known, but as a possibility for envisioning the new."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the hallmark of auteur cinema, and Tarkovsky's in particular, is the self-conscious cinematographic transformation of the filmed world, and the personal signature of that transformation is generally recognizable to the art cinema goer. The "revelation of the device" demanded by Jameson may be seen explicitly in the shadow of the microphone at the beginning of *Mirror*. But even when the technological apparatus remains hidden, the auteur's mark can also be seen in the films' essayistic form and mode of representation. Tarkovsky's long takes and compound images, which he called "imprinted time," and Giles Deleuze took as prime examples of the "time-image," often come from an impossible point of view, and force the viewer to contemplate the passage of time, the logic of the gazes within the shot, and the relationship of the universal to the particular.<sup>29</sup> These contemplative, long-duration shots generate moments of "essayism" that Timothy Corrigan defines as "a figurative disruption or digression that questions, at its heart, the experiential mode of film narrative itself."<sup>30</sup> In his essayistic narrative films, Tarkovsky demands that the viewer reflect on the experience of cinema, of memory, and of the progress of the spirit through the course of the film, and through the course of engaging with his oeuvre, in the dialog generated by all seven of his major films together.

Thus the return of Anatoly Solonitsyn, who played the title character in *Andrey Rublev*, as the passing doctor at the beginning of *Mirror*, and the mysterious breeze that blows through the grass at the beginning of *Mirror*, seeming to push the doctor back to the dacha, and that same breeze that seemingly returns to warn the same actor, playing the Writer in *Stalker*, to turn back from the direct path to the room, all reminds the viewer to view each individual scene in light of the whole artistic project. The viewer engages in similar work when comparing the repeated images of levitating women, wandering dogs and horses, and rain that falls inside houses and in sheets that do not wet the character and do not extinguish fire across the films. The films demand that the

spectator never finalize his or her understanding of an individual image. Actors grow old from film to film, like the central figures of Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* (2014). Recognizing these connections serves to estrange the viewer from "nature-mysticism" and remind them of the aesthetic mediation of the images on-screen. Tarkovsky's filmic poetics intend to make the viewer a participant in the sense-making of the film. Via associations such as these, the viewer is invited to become "co-creator."<sup>31</sup> Hadot writes, "The experience of modern art thus allows us to glimpse—in a way that is, in the last analysis, philosophical—the miracle of perception itself, which opens up the world to us. Yet we can only perceive this miracle by *reflecting* on perception, and *converting our attention*."<sup>32</sup> Tarkovsky insists on redefining the viewer's mode of engagement with images and transforms this engagement from a ritual of distraction, as Walter Benjamin might have it, into spiritual exercise.

What Hadot, illustrated here by Tarkovsky, demonstrates is the possibility of philosophy to reconnect us to the world. That connection is not something to be achieved, but to be practiced over time, throughout a life. Seeing Tarkovsky's cinematography as spiritual exercise does not demand, then, a purely affective, associative mode of spectatorship, but on the contrary, requires cognition, memory, and analysis. What Nora Alter has written about the essay film genre holds true for Tarkovsky's narrative films as well: "Like 'heresy' in the Adornian literary essay, the essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, it is self-reflective and self-reflexive."<sup>33</sup> Tarkovsky's films engage in a kind of reflexivity that is intensely cognitive and intellectual, and rewarded by dialog between spectator and image. "Spiritual exercise" differentiates itself as well from the ritual and aura of worship, aspiring to an everyday form of life. Ultimately both Hadot and Tarkovsky want to rejuvenate the practice of living.

#### SPIRITUAL SPECIAL EFFECTS

The contemporary philosopher of religion Hent de Vries, for whom Hadot is an important influence, draws a connection between the cinematic special effect and the religious notion of the miracle, arguing that the special effect cannot be "thought or experienced—without some reference to (or conjuring up of) the miracle and everything for which it stands." At the same time, he argues, "[c]onversely, . . . thinking the miracle was never possible without introducing a certain *technicity* and, quite literally, a *manipulation* of sorts."<sup>34</sup> In the chapel at the beginning of *Nostalghia*, the birds do not burst forth from the statue of the Madonna miraculously, but are released with an audible snap from her dress by the hands of the kneeling supplicant. Tarkovsky asks us (and Eugenia) to see this both as miracle and a deliberate effect, part of a ritual

constructed to inspire faith, in other words, synecdochic to the miracle itself. Tarkovsky was extremely wary of the special effect, fearing any introduction of fakery or falseness into his films, and asserting that "outward effects simply distance and blur the goal which I am pursuing."<sup>35</sup> He nonetheless used cinema trickery in a number of signature techniques that depart from a mimetic reproduction of reality and can leave no doubt in the viewer of the fact of technical manipulation.

In the remainder of this essay, I look at three of these signature techniques in Tarkovsky's filmic language to show how they ask the viewer to engage in a mode of spectatorship that can be likened to spiritual exercise, and might be considered "spiritual special effects." The first is the compound image, which serves as something like a temporal covering shot, combining images in impossible time and space. Just as Tarkovsky claims to be "sculpting in time," Hadot cites Plotinus' metaphor of the sculptor, which says that seeing the soul in its "immortality and immateriality" requires that you "remove from it everything that is not itself."<sup>36</sup> Rather than transcendence, I argue, these shots point to the ongoing work of spiritual exercise, invoking the miraculous, yet redefining it for the secular, modern era. I discuss here the final shots of *Solaris* and *Nostalghia*. The second is an approximately 360 degree pan, which, while not exactly a special effect, violates the 180 degree rule that conventionally governs continuity cinema, and seems to situate the viewer at the center of the film's world. I examine two examples, one from *Andrei Rublev*, and the second from *Nostalghia* (though this shot is not strictly speaking a full 360 degrees, it suggests that illusion). Like the long-duration shots that Tarkovsky allegedly said generate "a new intensity of attention" over the time of viewing, these shots force the spectator to think about what does not match up, then to pass through boredom and confusion to decide on some linkage on the spiritual level.<sup>37</sup> Finally, I touch on the repeated scenes of levitation through Tarkovsky's oeuvre, from Ivan's dream at the beginning of *Ivan's Childhood*, to the scene of weightlessness in the library in *Solaris*, to the floating women and couple in *Mirror* and *The Sacrifice*. These moments of transcendence, whether framed as dream, science, allegory, or witchery, are all connected to mother figures and stand for the fecund possibility of the miraculous.

The zooming-out sequence at the end of *Solaris*, which reveals the scene of the prodigal son to be taking place on the surface of the planet Solaris, not Earth, allows the spectator the view from above. Yet it also incorporates a special effect-shot, combining dacha and planet, presumably by means of a matte, designed to reconcile the film's worlds and offer its last word on the planet's effects on Kris. Though Burton "filmed only clouds" and neither the scientists nor we get to see his view of the "giant baby," the ending gives us a non-subjective and impossible view of Kris' epiphanic reunion with his

father. Hadot considers the science of physics to be a form of spiritual exercise in its pursuit of the “imaginative ‘overflight’ which causes human affairs to be regarded as of little importance.” Kris might be on the surface of the planet, but we are with Seneca, “. . . casting a contemptuous glance at the narrow globe of the earth from above . . .”<sup>38</sup> However, as Hadot would also assert, the spectator does not achieve transcendence by possessing this view. Instead, as much debate over the meaning of the ending of *Solaris* attests, spectators are put in dialog with the deliberately composed image, forced to ask what that view entails, costs, or demands. What responsibility do we as viewers have to, and for, transcendent vision? In psychoanalytic film theory the establishing or initial shot is the “site of *jouissance*,” of the overweening sense of control over the image, which offers the spectator a vision of “imaginary plenitude, unbounded by any gaze, and unmarked by difference.” Conventional rules of continuity, as Kaja Silverman further explains, usually require the initial shot to be followed with a reaction shot that assigns the transcendent view to a character in the narrative. Continuity cinema thus aims to make “the viewing subject . . . aware of the limitations on what it sees.”<sup>39</sup> Although it may seem to reverse this conventional sequence, I would argue that Tarkovsky does not allow the covering shot or “overflight” at the end of *Solaris* to give us unbounded plenitude, but instead demands reflection and reflexivity in dialog with Tarkovsky’s oeuvre. The documentary shots of aviators hanging from Soviet stratospheric balloons—agents of the overhead view—in *Mirror* serve as a metafilmic comment on the truth claims of documentary. And the crash of the medieval hot-air balloon in the prolog to *Andrei Rublev* insists on the failure of the attempt to transcend. The only reaction to the peasant’s flight is the mute rolling of the horse.

Tarkovsky’s shots of landscapes, earth, tree trunks, and water exceed the subjectivity of the characters to which they are sutured, if they are sutured at all. These complex, absorptive shots demand attention to texture, detail, movement—both the surface and depth of the cinematic image. When the doctor at the beginning of *Mirror* falls off the fence, he gets a new view of the earth that prefigures the Stalker’s awestruck contemplation of the Zone: “Look at these things, these roots, bushes . . . Plants feel, are aware, maybe even perceive. [ . . . ] They don’t hurry, while we speak banalities.” The natural environment seems to look back at the characters and the viewer, challenging any attempt to encompass or control the view. Hadot’s citation from Plutarch captures the attitude toward the world demanded by Tarkovsky: “For the world is the most sacred and divine of temples, and the one most fitting for the gods. Man is introduced into it by birth to be a spectator: not of artificial, immobile statues, but of the perceptible images of intelligible essences . . .”<sup>40</sup>

At the end of *Nostalghia*, a zooming-out shot similar to the end of *Solaris* compounds all the problematics of the film—the particular (the house) and the universal (the ruined cathedral), Andrei and dog as intellect and nature. These

endings insist on the viewer’s investment in the image as such, not as the narrative perspective of a character, and demand analysis and engagement rather than insisting on an illusion of transcendence. Just as Kris goes to the surface of *Solaris* to contend with his experience of human existence, the final sequence of *Solaris* frames the world as a perceptible image contingent on the cosmic. As the final sequence of *Nostalghia* zooms out to reveal the enclosing cathedral, Russian peasant song fills the space, combining the Western and Eastern, sacred and folk. Finally snow falls over the image, as if to mediate between image and viewer on a tactile level.<sup>41</sup> Though Tarkovsky rejected Eisenstein’s intellectual montage, this layered shot requires dialectical thinking. Rather than a finalized synthesis, it suggests the spiritual seeking of the exile’s lot.

Toward the beginning of *Andrei Rublev*, Rublev and his companions take refuge from the rain in a stable where they interrupt the blasphemous performance of an itinerant jester. In a moment of stillness and waiting, one of the monks leaves to inform on the jester. He pronounces “God sends monks, the devil sends jesters” at the beginning of a 360 degree pan around the stable which ends with a view through the window of his cassocked figure reporting to the mounted noble in the window at the end of the shot.<sup>42</sup> Tarkovsky brilliantly evokes an ethics of spectatorship by inscribing the viewer in the center of this pan, which takes in each of the individuals in the barn as a communal whole, bounded by four walls textured to give their reality a sensuous certainty. There is a tension between the little girl who almost catches our eye and the boy who scratches at the wall, the intense gaze of Rublev, and the shifting eyes of the jester, all of which alerts us, without words, to the ethical responsibilities inherent in looking closely at our neighbor. By placing the spectator in the center of the humble hut that might as well be a manger, Tarkovsky prevents passive viewing or the assumption of superiority.

At the center of *Nostalghia* (at approximately 1 hour, 19 minutes in the Kino Lorber release) is another circular black-and-white panning shot that, unlike the shot in *Andrei Rublev*, disavows the reality of physical space rather than asserting it. As Eugenia reads the letter from Sosnovsky (“I could try not to return to Russia, but the thought kills me, because I would die if I never again saw my homeland”), Andrei lies back to relieve a nosebleed, and seems to have a vision of home. His wife wakes upon hearing her name, and leaves the house to join a young boy, a girl, and an old woman, who all look out expectantly from the hilltop. This sequence returns the viewer to the scene of the opening credits, in which these four figures, dog, and horse are all visible in a long shot from the house looking out over a lake. In the dream sequence, the almost two-minute-long shot pans from a close-up of each of the three women standing in mute expectation, seemingly looking for Andrei, and then pans without an evident cut to reveal, impossibly, the same group of women, plus the boy, dog, and horse, in a long shot suddenly reversed and yet searching still (Figures 12.1, 12.2). Andrei’s absence unites the shot conceptually, yet its spatial impossibility requires of the





Figure 12.1 Gorchakov's wife in the dream sequence in *Nostalghia*.



Figure 12.2 Gorchakov's family in the dream sequence in *Nostalghia*.

viewer the work of understanding what his absence means to him and us. As the sacristan says to Eugenia (in a close-up looking out directly at the spectator, and thus an utterance meant to address both character and audience) at the beginning of the film in the chapel, about the procession in honor of the Madonna del Parto about to occur: "If there are any casual onlookers who are not supplicants,

then nothing happens." Do the women in Andrei's dream wait in vain because of Andrei's lack of belief? Because of ours? "But you should at least kneel down," continues the sacristan. Cinema as spiritual exercise asks of the viewer that we at least kneel down—grant to the filmmaker the possibility of a miracle, wait for it, and take up dialog with it.

In Tarkovsky's last film, the levitation of Alexander while he lies with the witch Maria represents Otto's promise for the last chance to save the world from apocalyptic destruction. This abrupt departure from indexical reality does not demand that the viewer reevaluate the genre of the film in each case, shifting expectations to the fantastic. After all, the scene of floating in *Solaris* has a perfectly scientific explanation. Similarly, the plastic sheet heavy with water, hung over Domenico's bed in *Nostalghia*, seen retrospectively in light of these other images, stands in for his wife, driven away by the family's seven-year imprisonment to his paranoia. If these symbols have a degree of equivalence across Tarkovsky's oeuvre, then the special effect of levitation does not ask us to reevaluate our understanding of the genre or mimetic quality of the film, and reclassify it as fantasy rather than realistic drama, but instead it tells us that we might find this special effect in our experience of reality. In other words, Tarkovsky asks the spectator to believe in the special effect in so far as it reproduces mimetically the *experience* of the miraculous, the transcendent, and the spiritual.

I have argued for an affinity between Tarkovsky and Hadot in their attitude toward the divine and the world, and I have attempted to demonstrate that affinity through a very brief overview of Tarkovsky's seven major films, examined in Hadot's terms. Hadot's emphasis on practice and duration rather than transcendence or revelation draws attention to the themes of seeking and observation as well as the techniques of long take and complex vertical montage, and offers a way to think about Tarkovsky's production over the course of his oeuvre. Through Hadot's lens, the fruitless searches of Tarkovsky's ruined men in the second half of his oeuvre are as philosophically productive as the transcendent aims of the heroes of the first half. In fact, the outcome is irrelevant to the practice of living a philosophical life, which need not take the form of what is generally considered philosophy at all. Running hands through clay, wading through a swamp, and crossing a pool with a lighted candle—these can all be seen as embodied forms of philosophical practice in so far as they exercise the spirit by bringing the self into dialog with the "cosmic" whole. Hadot emphasizes the work of philosophy in its etymology: "philo-sophia: the love of, or progress toward, wisdom." He writes, "To the same extent that the philosophical life is equivalent to the practice of spiritual exercises, it is also a tearing away from everyday life. It is a conversion, a total transformation of one's vision, life-style, and behavior."<sup>43</sup> This idea allows us to see Tarkovsky's heroes' behavior as a form of philosophy, and offers a new way of thinking about the work asked of the spectator of one of his films.

In turn, Tarkovsky's films illuminate the modern relevance and transformation of ancient philosophical practice as described by Hadot, and offer a self-reflexive vision of the role of cinema in modern spiritual life. They offer a way of seeing cinematic practice, both as filmmaker and spectator, as spiritual exercise. The relationship between Tarkovsky and Terrence Malick, Lars von Trier, Chantal Akerman, Chris Marker, Spike Jonze, or any number of filmmakers of a contemplative or reflexive bent, might be thus considered through the lens of spiritual exercise. De Vries proposes:

To speak of special effects *in terms of miracles* . . . implies that one generalize the applicability of the world of religion—its concept and imaginary, its semantic and figural archive—to include almost everything that, at one time or another, had set itself apart from religion (or from which religion had sought to distance itself, in turn). The magical and the technological thus come to occupy the same space, obey the same regime and the same logic.<sup>44</sup>

In the making and in the viewing, in its themes and its presentation, Tarkovsky's cinema demands the work of reconciling the world of religion with the world of technology. Robert Bird comes to a similar conclusion with respect to the cinematic shot in Tarkovsky: "it conveys . . . a sober recognition of the role visual media have come to play in determining the very constitution of human reality."<sup>45</sup> Tarkovsky's films also reveal the role that media and especially cinema play in human aspirations toward the divine, and the everyday practice of those aspirations. The view from above, the cosmic consciousness, or the miraculous is not something given or answered by Tarkovsky, but an idea that is posed and withdrawn, a position to be desired, but never obtained.<sup>46</sup>

## NOTES

1. See particularly Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson and trans. by Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); hereafter *Spiritual Exercises*.
2. Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, trans. by Marc Djaballah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 22, 40–1.
3. Sartre's interest in Tarkovsky is well documented. See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Letter on the Critique of *Ivan's Childhood*," in Nathan Dunne (ed.), *Tarkovsky* (London: Black Dog, 2008), 35–45. In an interview, Hadot asserts, "Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world." Hadot, *Present Alone*, 108.
4. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 85.
5. See Pierre Hadot, "Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy," trans. by Arnold Davidson and Paula Wissing, *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990): 483–505, 499; also Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 97.

6. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 242.
7. *Ibid.*, 84.
8. *Ibid.*, 255.
9. Hent de Vries lays out the stakes of this problematic in his introduction to the volume *Religion and Media*, eds Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 3–42.
10. Hadot, "Forms of Life," 499.
11. *Ibid.*, 505.
12. Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art*, trans. by Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 39.
13. Sartre, "Letter," 42.
14. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 84.
15. John Gianvito (ed.), *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 12–15.
16. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 97.
17. *Ibid.*, 258.
18. *Ibid.*, 253. Italics in original.
19. Robert Bird's interpretation of the end of *Solaris* resonates with Hadot here: "between our intuitions of a transcendent source (i.e., the Ocean) and the insecurity of corporeal life we erect systems of representation—threads of understanding—which never form themselves into a clear design, yet comprise the very fabric that wedds consciousness to corporeality." *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 162.
20. Cited in Hadot, "Forms of Life," 505. The same quotation also begins his book *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique*, 3rd edn (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1993), 13.
21. See Natasha Synessios, *Mirror*, KINOfiles Film Companion 6 (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 10–40.
22. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 43.
23. Synessios, *Mirror*, 38.
24. *Ibid.*, 27.
25. Synessios, *Mirror*, 44.
26. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 83.
27. Jameson cited in Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, 12.
28. Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, 145.
29. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Nariman Skakov insightfully distinguishes between "Deleuze's theory and Tarkovsky's praxis," noting that while Deleuze "presents the image of time devoid of any moral or theological 'burden,' the latter's temporal 'sculptures' are overwhelmingly anthropocentric, and they strive towards a certain divine ideal." *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 5.
30. Timothy Corrigan, "Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative," in Caroline Eades and Elizabeth Papazian (eds), *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia* (New York: Wallflower, 2016), 15–27, 15.
31. Synessios, *Mirror*, 11.
32. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 256. Italics in original.
33. Nora Alter, "The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*," *New German Critique* 68 (Spring/Summer 1996): 165–92, 171.
34. Hent de Vries, "Of Miracles and Special Effects," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 50 (2001): 41–56, 48. De Vries' study of Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises: Concepts and Practices*, is under contract with Harvard University Press.

35. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 204; see also 30, 71–2, III. See also Naum Abramov, “Dialogue with Andrei Tarkovsky about Science-Fiction on the Screen,” in Gianvito (ed.), *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, 32–7.
36. *Spiritual Exercises*, 100.
37. Cited in Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, 197.
38. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 98.
39. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 203.
40. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 98.
41. On the way in which cinema atmospheres mediate between screen and viewer, see Antonio Somaini, “Walter Benjamin’s Media Theory: The *Medium* and the *Apparat*,” *Grey Room* 62 (Winter 2016): 6–41.
42. Robert Bird performs a careful reading of this shot in *Andrei Tarkovsky*, 194–8.
43. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, 103.
44. de Vries, “Of Miracles and Special Effects,” 51–2.
45. Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, 205.
46. An earlier draft of this essay was originally presented at the workshop, “A ‘Spiritual Exercise’ Every Day,” convened by Sabrina Bouarour and Sara ElAmin at The Humanities Center, Johns Hopkins University, 4 December 2014. I am grateful to the conveners and participants for their feedback and encouragement.

## CHAPTER 13

## Memory and Trace

*Mikhail Iampolski*

## FROM SUBJECTIVE TO DE-SUBJECTIVIZED MEMORY

Soviet culture was oriented toward the future. It was teleological, unfolding time in anticipation of an imminent communism, even after communism no longer seemed achievable. Historical novels were written and historical-revolutionary films were made, of course, but the historical past in these works was usually a distortion of the present. They did not look to history in the interest of understanding and reconstructing the past. In this sense, a long period in Soviet culture all the way through the 1970s and 1980s was fundamentally ahistorical, or more precisely, represented a radical break from the historicism inherited from the nineteenth century.

One of Tarkovsky’s unique qualities is that he was among the first in Russian culture to discover the forgotten theme of historicism and recognize that the future, even more so than the present, has deep roots in the past. The emergence of Tarkovsky, in my view, marks the end of historical teleology. Through his work he identified the boundary beyond which the future began to fade and disappear from public consciousness and the past once again came into its own. I would even go so far as to claim that Tarkovsky is responsible for the atrophy of the future and the viability of the past.

The challenge of reconstructing the past struck Tarkovsky with full force during the filming of *Andrei Rublev* (1966). Tarkovsky described the origin of his interest in history thusly: “The film is set in the fifteenth century, and it turned out to be excruciatingly difficult to picture ‘how everything was.’ We had to use any sources we could: architecture, the written word, iconography.” Tarkovsky ruled out the use of painting, as he considers painting the opposite