Chapter 10

Tarkovsky: Embodying the Screen

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Speaking about Andrei Tarkovsky’s films as a philosopher raises two difficulties, each connected to the other: the first is the general difficulty, common to all discursive disciplines, of speaking about images; the second, echoing the first, is that to speak of Tarkovsky’s work is to address an object that, in a singular way, throws into crisis the speech that is at the heart of images, because the poetry of the image produces a commotion at the heart of philosophical language itself. The philosopher’s voice becomes fragile and uncertain before the seismic events that are his films, films that put speculative thought into a state of discomfort. When I look for where the philosophers are to be found in Tarkovsky’s work, I do not find them in figures of eloquence or theory—to the contrary, there, only weakness and vertigo are found. I find philosophers in the bodies of children, in the wind’s voice, in storms or in a dog’s appearing. It is these things that address signs to the professionals of discourse or of writing, signs that are at once tender and violent, signs that concern meaning’s incarnation in the world’s body. These signs manifest this presence of meaning in the figures found in the suspension of words, as if the coming of the word took place in silence. Thus, like a burst of indecipherable light, poetic speech springs up.

That is why we must be very delicate and above all, modest, in assuming philosophical speech about Tarkovsky’s work. Because these films seem to be overflowing with symbols, I will strive, as much as possible, to avoid any position of knowledge. I would like to do what Serge Daney alluded to, on 20 November 1981 in Libération, when he wrote about Stalker, saying that Tarkovsky’s film “is a machine that is sufficiently infernal to not exclude, a priori, any interpretation.... In a potluck, we can bring our food!... We can interpret a film.... But we’re not obligated to. We can also watch a film. We can watch for things to appear that haven’t ever been seen before in a film. The viewer-watcher sees things that the viewer-interpreter no longer knows how to see.” Therefore, I will not seize films for myself as if they were material that could be broken down into particular or recurring elements. I will not make an inventory of theological or fantastical obsessions. No bottom line.

I will try to situate my speaking as best as I can, that is, by testifying to a way of seeing, renouncing all academic theorizing of the way this work is viewed.
Opening paths, proposing connections. Being the Stalker, walker, and watcher, because this work is, par excellence, a meeting between gaze and thought that asks the philosopher to make a radical return to the site where the mystery of the visible intersects with the visibility of the word—as the Christians said one day, its incarnation. Structurally, I do not consider that Christians in any way own this concept of visible incarnation, because by inventing it, they provided the conceptualization of all images with the model of a renunciation of all possession, of any capturing of the visible. Incarnation is the experience of being dispossessed of things for the sake of vision, the experience of a transfiguration of the viewing of images of their absence.

**Renouncing Metaphorical Interpretations**

In Tarkovsky’s films, symbols, citations, and references are so abundant, the cinematographic, theological, poetic, and artistic culture so ample and present that we could content ourselves with a decoding, we could yield to the temptation of a kind of erudite, endless hermeneutic. I spoke of temptation, but I think that we could, instead, speak of a trap since, in the end, the commentariat treats films as objects of encrypted, encoded communication. The “potluck” Daney spoke of can become a caravansary overflowing with referential treasures. Critical thought can make a **bricoleur** of itself, or exercise itself to the point of indecency, by seizing everything that appears in images in order to reorganize it all into expository discourse. Now, a work of art, be it overloaded with codes and references (and great works, more so than all others, are loaded with memory and signs), does not stand in front of us as a work of art save through how it resists all reduction of its effects to referential significations. A work springs forth from its own terrain, certainly, the terrain that nourished it into producing meaning, meaning whose effects are more related to the mystery of presence than to the persistence of sources or the return of what is memorized, or even repressed. A work’s meaning comes from its horizon.

To illustrate the polysemy of all creation, I will recount an anecdote that the dramaturge Valère Novarina told me recently. When he presented his play, *The Red Origin*, in Moscow, he was asked if it was a political work, to which he responded yes. From there he left for Brazil, where he was asked if *The Red Origin* designated the vagina, to which he responded yes. Then when he arrived in Tel Aviv to put on *The Red Origin* he was told that surely it was about the sacrifice of Abraham, and Novarina acquiesced again. *The Red Origin* was all that and thus none of it at all ... In the same way, I think that each of Tarkovsky’s films could be the object of successive and contradictory identifications without ever having its authenticity either betrayed or illuminated in any way. No