Self-Sacrifice and the Other(s): Reflections on Andrei Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice*

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1 Introduction

In 1986, the year of his death from cancer at the age of 54, the expatriate Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky published his last film, titled *The Sacrifice*. It presents the character of Alexander, a former actor who has now become an essayist and lecturer. The film takes place on his fiftieth birthday, a day celebrated with his family and a few friends in his mansion in a remote corner of the Swedish countryside. This party is interrupted when the television news announces that a nuclear war has broken out. In his desperation Alexander turns to God, in whom he had not believed until then. He promises God to sacrifice all he possesses and to remain mute for the rest of his life, if only God will save his family and friends from the imminent nuclear holocaust. When he wakes up the next morning, everything has gone back to normal, as if nothing had happened the previous day. Alexander then fulfils his part of the deal: He burns down his house, and is taken in an ambulance to be locked up in a psychiatric hospital, unable to explain his deed because of his vow of silence.1

2 A Multi-Layered Plot

Tarkovsky’s last film has confronted its viewers and interpreters with many puzzles and unresolved questions. As pointed out by the Australian cinematographer Gino Moliterno, many critics, even those who think favorably of Tarkovsky, have claimed that the film is “flawed” and “strongly undermined by considerable narrative and thematic confusion”.2 Part of this confusion is

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caused by the fact that in the film we actually get two crises at the same time. There is – just as in the narrative of the African sacrifice – a close connection between sacrifice and the fate of the community. As outlined by Mark Le Fanu in his discussion of the film, next to the political crisis on a planetary scale (the imminent nuclear holocaust), there is also a personal crisis: A marriage crisis between Alexander and his wife Adelaida, who is suggested to have an affair with their friend Victor. The significance of this affair for his sacrifice is never completely fleshed out. On top of this, things become even more complex when Alexander, after he has made his vow to God, is visited in the middle of the night by Otto, the postman and a friend who was also present at his birthday party. Otto urges him to go to the house of his servant Maria and to sleep with her. She is a witch of the best kind, Otto knows, and spending the night with her will return things to normal. Alexander first objects, but eventually yields and goes off to Maria’s. This narrative complication is a remainder of the first drafts of the manuscript of the film, which was originally titled *The Witch* and would tell the story of a man who is cured of a fatal disease after sleeping with a witch. The imminent nuclear holocaust and the pact with God were only added at a later stage. The relation between Alexander’s pact with God and Otto’s promise of redemption through Maria remains unclear, however. Or, as Peter Green puts it: “Is this [promise] an immediate answer to [Alexander’s] prayers, the response to his vow, or is it an alternative to sacrifice?”. In the end it is, as Le Fanu notes, unclear what returned things to normal: The deal with God, the night spent with Maria, or neither: Maybe the superpowers returned to their senses and the nuclear war was stopped anyway, independently of any act of Alexander.

3 Three Philosophical Issues

Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice* also raises several questions of a philosophical nature. A first question concerns the characterization of the sacrificial gesture in *The Sacrifice*. During an interview in March 1986, Tarkovsky stated that

3 See the contribution of W. E. A. van Beek in this volume.