

# IMAGES OF WAR IN ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S *THE SACRIFICE*: FOUR LEVELS OF MEANING

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*The Sacrifice*, Andrei Tarkovsky's seventh and last feature film, has been frequently referred to as an elliptical narrative brought forth by an unclear and ambiguous plot, with the use of highly complex characters and plenty of biographical detail.<sup>1</sup>

In his book *Sculpting in Time* Tarkovsky gives us a partial account of his personal views of the film, placing the narrative in the category of poetic cinema.<sup>2</sup> Although the term has been often misunderstood and used rather loosely, the definition falls in with a narrative that goes beyond mere photographic descriptions of film action, being the manifestation of hidden realities, ideological and spiritual, as they are perceived by the author.<sup>3</sup> There has been also tremendous attention on the symbolical imagery and narrative structure, with obvious violations of chronological and logical unfolding of the plot's temporal order.<sup>4</sup> However, of all the studies done about the film, one thing has been consistently overlooked: the meaning and interpretation of the film's cinematic representation of war.

The treatment of war in the film is central if we search for Tarkovsky's inner anxieties. The narrative is structured around the reenactment of catastrophic consequences in the future of history. The film's imagery of war speaks of an end, the destruction of a civilization. This final damnation can be avoided only if humanity is able to rectify the trajectory of history.<sup>5</sup>

The sacrificial element to correct history is posed in the film by the main character as he confronts the unavoidable disaster -the nuclear war- by becoming himself the immolative victim breaking «irrevocability with the world and with its laws».<sup>6</sup> Tarkovsky not only looks toward a possible outcome of the future, but also gives a hard look at the present condition of western culture. The apocalyptic cataclysm embedded in the narrative makes it not a science fiction film, as its subject matter could easily suggest, but Tarkovsky's subjectivization of a perceived world reality.

It is the purpose of this paper to study the cinematic representation of war in Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*. The task is two-fold' first, I wish to illustrate that the treatment of war in *The Sacrifice* addresses historical reality effectively although the film depicts a war that never took place in history, This distinguishes it from the Hollywood narrative that address actual wars. Second, I would like to explain how Tarkovsky is able to transcend the reality of war and take it to a deeper level of meaning,

To attain these objectives I will do the following: 1) Study layers of meaning in those parts of the narrative of *The Sacrifice* that relates to war based on David Bordwell' s four levels of meaning. 2) Expose the cinematic imagery of war used in the film to bring forward the underlying ideological mindset that drives the film. 3) Contrast the use of war in the film *The Sacrifice* to the Hollywood war narrative.

If we compare Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* with Hollywood films about war such as *Casablanca*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Lifeboat*, *Since You Went Away*, and others we could say that they share a few things in common. They are all fiction narratives whose stories unfold against the backdrop of a war. Their representation of combat action is suppressed. To a large extent the aspect of war becomes a causal element motivating the theme of the narrative. However, in terms of their formal narrative structure and how their representation of war is handled, Tarkovsky's film *The Sacrifice* differs significantly from those Hollywood films,

Tarkovsky' s work is idealist in its approach. It asserts that symbolic representation takes precedence over objective reality. On the other hand, the Hollywood film is realist in essence. Whereas the typical narrative anchors the war issues on concrete objective representational reality, the idealist maintains that the world created by the narrative and how this engages the viewer is strictly dependent on the director's subjectivity and the viewer's interpretation of it. The realist maintains that the world of the narrative is objective and exists independently of the viewer's experience.

Technically, these two distinct ideological narrative structures are formulated by David Bordwell as: traditional or classical Hollywood narrative and non-traditional narrative. The traditional narrative presents a particular pattern of narrative organizational structure that had dominated Hollywood's mode of narration from 1917 to 1960, The non-traditional narrative, on the other hand, offers a different kind of

cinematic discourse. Its internal formal organization stands in opposition to the Hollywood narrative. It is important to note that although these two narrative structures appear strikingly different, at times it is hard to isolate one from the other, since both share and borrow common formal traits. The difference will be always a matter of degree as their narrative formal traits appear closer or further apart from each other.<sup>7</sup>

As we consider these two modes of narration, it is obvious that each requires a different reading procedure. The traditional Hollywood structure requires an active viewer to follow the clearly defined story pattern. This viewer is required to have some degree of involvement in order to follow the intricacies of the plot. In the non-traditional structure, the viewer's involvement requires even greater effort and participation because of an intentional lack of narrative objectives and the ambiguities designed into the cinematic discourse.

In his book *Making Meaning*, David Bordwell discusses this active role of the viewer as a process of «comprehension and interpretation» of the narrative information.<sup>8</sup> He explains that the viewer's interaction with the narrative can be at four possible levels: referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic. Comprehension falls into the descriptive categories of the film. What we see is what it is -these are referential and explicit meanings. Interpretation falls into the subjective categories of the film. There is more to what is being said- these are implicit and symptomatic meanings.

At the first level, which is the referential meaning, the viewer has a general understanding of the film. This is a capsulated summary of the plot's action as it takes place in space and time. At the second level, explicit meaning, the narrative information is given literally. What the viewer sees and hears is what it is, and that is how it is to be understood. At the third level, implicit meaning, the information is indirectly conveyed. There is more to what the viewer sees and hears. At this point the viewer reaches conclusions through interpretation and therefore meaning may vary from one viewer to another. Finally, at the fourth level, which is symptomatic meaning, the viewer constructs meaning outside of the information that the work displays. At this level, the narrative unintentionally conveys more meaning than what is expressed explicitly or implicitly.

If we make the assumption that at the referential, explicit, and implicit levels the author is conscious of what is being placed in the film, at the symptomatic level the viewer is invited to relate to what has been placed there unconsciously.

Having presented the framework for this discussion, I would like to move on to the analysis of Tarkovsky's treatment of war in *The Sacrifice*.

At the referential level, the narrative of *The Sacrifice* is described as follows: Alexander, a lecturer and retired actor who lives with his family in the country near the sea, is celebrating his birthday. The outbreak of a nuclear world war takes place right before dinner when he is to join his family and friends to celebrate the occasion. After a long night with no electrical power -and haunted by fear and desperation- Alexander asks God to spare them and the world of the terrible consequences of this war. He offers himself, his family, his house and all his possessions, and even his speech if God grants him his petition. Nonetheless, the following morning the power lines have been re-established and apparently the war has ceased. Alexander burns the house as a fulfillment of his promise.

The war imagery in the film is set in motion at the explicit level by the following: the roaring of jet engines passing at low level, a television broadcast alerting all the citizens of the outbreak of war, the petrified expressions of the characters as they listen to the announcement of the impending nuclear disaster. In this instance, Tarkovsky suppresses the visual action of war opposing the classical narrative. A narrative that elaborates on the effect of the action for the purpose of heightening the dramatic exposition. Because of the abstraction taken at this point, the film makes it clear that the concern is not to follow the pre-established classical formulas of war representation but to make a serious and personal statement of war. As a result, Tarkovsky elevates the imagery of war to a more subjective level of representation. From actual representation of war to a consequential representation of a world in crisis. The narrative speaks no longer explicitly but implicitly; the narrative searches for causes and not effects. This is illustrated in the narrative when the main character, Alexander, in a monologue introduces the causes of the impending nuclear war as something closely connected to the malaise of a world that has turned its course, replacing spiritual truth with materialistic ideas, a world that has fallen into the fallacy that the technological race is for progress when actually what lays behind is the search for power.

«... The result, (Alexander exclaims) is a civilization built on force, power, fear, and dependence. All our «technical progress» has only provided us with comfort, a sort of standard, and instruments of violence for keeping power.

We are like savages! We use the microscope like a cudgel!... If that is so, then our entire civilization is built on sin, from beginning to end. We have acquired a dreadful disharmony, an

imbalance if you will, between our material and our spiritual development. Our culture is defective, I mean our civilization. Basically defective, ...»

Also at the implicit level, the narrative structure focuses on the theme of salvation by introducing the concept of the person «who is capable of sacrificing himself and his way of life for the sake of someone else». <sup>9</sup> Tarkovsky sees this as the central theme of the film. His concern is to bring forth the idea that what makes us human in the full sense of the word is the action of giving oneself for the good of others. Tarkovsky states that there is no other «higher form of spiritual life which alone is worthy of mankind and which represents man's one hope for salvation» <sup>10</sup> For him the person who is able to do that «brings about fundamental changes in people's lives and in the course of history» <sup>11</sup>

In *The Sacrifice*, the necessary immolative action to correct the course of history is done by Alexander. Overcome by fear and surrounded by a dreadful darkness, Alexander willingly offers himself and everything he holds dear in a final vow to God.

Tarkovsky extends this theme of salvation by superimposing the film's narrative on the outbreak of the war with the pictorial narrative of *The Adoration of the Magi* by Leonardo da Vinci. The painting conveys the world's salvation through the birth of Christ. In it, the central figure is Mary holding the child Jesus while a Magi offers a present to the infant with the greatest reverence. A crowd of bystanders at both sides contemplates the historical moment.

The narrative space of the film blends with the narrative space of the painting when Alexander's reflection on the painting's protective glass appears as if he himself is in the pictorial space, making him another bystander among the pictorial characters. At this very same time, the outbreak of the nuclear war is announced. The off-screen voice coming from the television monitor downstairs is calling its listeners for calm and courage in such a difficult moment as they all face the inevitability of war.

The integration of the painting's narrative with the film's narrative goes one step further as the nuclear war in the film parallels the painting's representation of war in its background. The background of the painting depicts a world of ancient buildings in ruins, horseman fighting... in «forms either fading or incomplete, conveying the visual markings of a world order that is collapsing» <sup>12</sup> Contrasted with the foreground action of the Adoration, the painting represents the transition from one period of history to another: the end of paganism and the dawn of Christianity. <sup>13</sup>

In *The Sacrifice*, Leonardo's historical theme is reversed: it is the waning, not the dawning, of Christianity that is taking place in the film's narrative. This historical interpretation brings us to the fourth and final level, the symptomatic meaning.

Tarkovsky gives us a personal interpretation of the Western culture five hundred years after the painting of *The Adoration of the Magi* (1482). This is suggested when Alexander is shown looking at a book of Christian icons and lamenting that «all of this has been lost», referring to the Christian era. The emerging era is defined by Alexander later in his monologue as a godless culture whose only concern is the acquisition of power.

The clash of these two eras provide ample space for this fictional war that exists asleep in the heart of the emerging civilization marked by a great advancement in technology -technology that has become questionable-. In the film's narrative this is implicitly conveyed in Alexander's monologue as he denounces that «all our technical progress has only provided... instruments of violence for keeping power... power that we have put it to use at the service of evil». Alexander's suspicion of the new emerging era is in its insistence to disguise its course of action under the name of progress and welfare for the entire humanity. For Alexander, this relationship between technology and power has reached its final count as the emerging era is now capable of self- destruction.

In his book *Sculpting in Time* Tarkovsky talks about his film *The Sacrifice* and describes this dilemma in that the person of today stands «at a crossroad, faced with the choice of whether to pursue... the implacable march of new technology ..., or to seek out a way that will lead to spiritual responsibility, a way that ultimately might mean not only his personal salvation but also the saving of society at large» <sup>14</sup>

There are many other compositional elements which the *The Sacrifice* seems to borrow straight from Leonardo's painting. For instance, the tree in the painting is used in the opening as well as in the closing of the film. The role of Mary in the painting, that of salvation coming through a woman, is mirrored in the film's narrative as the character of Maria, the housekeeper, becomes the vehicle for Alexander's redemption. In the painting the child Jesus is the embodiment of the sacrifice without which there can be no salvation; in the film Alexander offers himself in an act of sacrifice in order to stop the abominable nuclear catastrophe.

These similarities are so striking that Peter Green suggests that we would not give justice to Tarkovsky's creative talent if we consider that all the similarities in the film and the painting are just «a

direct translation of the contents to another medium»<sup>15</sup> Whatever the case may be, it is obvious that Tarkovsky intertwines both pictorial and cinematic action.

In terms of war representation, Tarkovsky's imagery of War is quite different from the Hollywood narrative. In *The Sacrifice* he gives us a personal introspection of the history of Salvation as he elevates the narrative of the film at the metaphorical level by contrasting it with the painting to provide a new narrative content that expresses the fatal transformation brought about by the new emerging culture. *The Sacrifice* becomes a symbolic construct. It is not interested in tangible reality nor in concrete objective exposition of the action as in the case of a Hollywood film. Rather it searches beyond the object presented, looking for an abstract reality that escapes what we perceive on a sensory level. This cinematic discourse recognizes that the subjective takes precedence to the realistic representation. In *The Sacrifice* the representation of war is not an outward action of one against another, but it is a war that is taking place within one and the same individual, Alexander.

This degree of personalization of war found in Alexander's character is cinematically conveyed through various stylistic elements such as: mise-en-scene, lighting, cinematography and sound. Cinematographically, the imagery of war is displayed in three different representational levels: objective reality, subjective reality, and the subconscious or Alexander's dreams. These levels of representation are depicted by actual photographic manipulation in the following order: from normal colour rendition, to colour filtering or low colour saturation, to black and white photography. In the narrative, proper colour rendition ends where the first signs of Alexander's experience of the nuclear war begins, and comes back again when the war inexplicably seems to have vanished. In between, is Alexander's introspection which is cinematically represented in low colour saturation, and black and white. The connecting element of the various photographic transitions, as the narrative moves inwardly, is a sound effect: the sounds of passing jets, the dripping and trickling of water, the faint calling of a shepherd...

Other significant aspects of cinematography used in the film are the long take and tracking shots, both adding an aura of mystery and suspense to the narrative. Tarkovsky also combines the cinematography with the mise-en-scene, shifting the meaning of the scene right in front of the spectator's eye, from objective to subjective representation.

He applies this technique to the first images of war in the film. The scene begins at the objective level -at normal colour rendition- with the trembling of wine glasses immediately followed by the thundering sound of roaring jets passing at a very low altitude. Taken by surprise, the characters run from one window to another trying to see what is happening. At this point, however, certain elements of the mise-en-scene shift the action to a deeper level of meaning.

While everybody appears to be affected by the happening, Otto the postman is sitting calmly gazing at a large cylindrical glass jar containing milk unusually placed in the display cabinet. The jar falls and breaks, the milk spills. The focus is then switched outside -this is at low colour saturation- with the sound of the jets linking the transition. Alexander is standing facing the house. The camera tilts down following Alexander slowly leaning forward. The shot ends with a small scale model of the house. The cinematic representation at this point can no longer be sustained objectively. The use of the long take and low colour saturation photography, in combination with the mise-en-scene, bring about Alexander's entrance into his subjective world.

Part of this over all experience of Alexander's inner world is the design of the sound track in certain parts of the narrative. Aside from the sound effects, the music breaks traditional narrative conventions. Japanese flute music is introduced as non-diegetic to become diegetic few minutes later. At the end of Alexander's first encounter with Maria, the music is played in the background giving a non-diegetic character. In the following shot the music is presented diegetically, as we see Alexander turning off the stereo where the music is being played.

Tarkovsky's personal narrative, *The Sacrifice*, offers a new kind of war representation. It is different from those Hollywood War films of World War I, World War II, or Vietnam, in that those films are based in actual wars, while *The Sacrifice* points to a war that never took place in history. *The Sacrifice* develops a war experience that is still to come. It re-enacts the chaos of a war that the world has not yet lived, although its roots are already found in this present time. The difference between *The Sacrifice* and Hollywood War film, however, is not just on fact or fiction, but on how these two representational modes handle reality and illusion.

Tarkovsky's presentation of the narrative events questions the conception of reality set by the Hollywood narrative where reality is processed and simplified. That is, a clear construct of events that flow in a consistent and logical pattern. *The Sacrifice* sees reality not as a cinematic construct, but as something complex and at times ambiguous, as reality is.

*The Sacrifice* presents a reality of war both at the objective and subjective levels, blurring the distinction between reality and illusion which the film never resolves. In the film, the narrative blends the internal and external worlds of Alexander to one level of reality, thereby creating a pattern of ambiguity that deliberately governs the entire structure of the narrative. This is illustrated by Alexander's dreams in black and white and the juxtaposition of Leonardo's painting with the film's narrative of war.

This ambiguity is felt most predominantly when, suddenly the war seems to have vanished. The light is turned on, the power lines seem to have been restored, the telephone is working again... Nothing seems to indicate that there has ever been a war. There is not a single mention of the war by any of the characters. The film deliberately conveys an ambivalent interpretation as it makes the audience wonder if those images of war are a product of Alexander's imagination since everything seems to have returned to normal.

Tarkovsky tells us that the structure of the narrative is deliberately planned to be taken in a different light, so that the meaning of such elliptical representation will be solely «...for the audience to reach independently»<sup>16</sup>

So what are we to make of the images of war in *The Sacrifice*? I would like to suggest that Tarkovsky's use of the nuclear war is at two distinct levels running in parallel. At one level he recreates the present decadent condition of the western culture culminating with the end of the Christian era; at the other, he uses war as a metaphor for expressing his own inner anxieties.

The film's imagery of war warns us of the impending destruction of the western civilization by the historical, spiritual, social, political, and ideological conditions created by the technological culture. The real war throughout the film is the war between a fading Christian culture and the present culture which is quickly approaching self destruction.

In this regard, the narrative directs our attention to the future. It poses the question: Where is this new historical era taking us to? Tarkovsky's view of the future is not the result of studying data from current and past history upon which to formulate a prediction. Rather, his approach to history comes out of a great awareness of the present situation in need of finding a spiritual turning point that will spare the world from self-destruction. This self-destructing element on the ongoing post-Christian culture is dramatized in Alexander's ambivalent personality as he wanders in the realms of dream, reality, and illusion.

The unresolved war expressed in this ambiguity between reality and illusion brings us to the other level of the representation of war. The image of war is used as a metaphor to convey a mental state of one coming to grips with his own illness and

I perhaps the thought that the end is drawing near. There has been a general belief that Tarkovsky's apocalyptic vision came about as a result of him knowing that he was marked by a fatal illness. (Andrei Tarkovsky died of cancer in Paris after the completion of the film in December 29, 1986.)

These two interpretations of war of a decadent western culture and Tarkovsky's personal anxieties are inferred at the implicit and symptomatic levels. The interpretative quality of the narrative at these two levels is mandated by the ambiguity that permeates throughout the entire film, caused by the point of view of the author who is the central source of meaning in the film.

Alexander becomes Tarkovsky's mouthpiece for conveying his beliefs and personal life experience. Tarkovsky's lamentation of the historical present is latent in Alexander's negative view of the historical situation of the western culture. His pessimism is an attempt to counterbalance the optimism conveyed by the emerging era towards the future. The narrative's repressed meaning is that of an overconfident technological mentality that has set aside its own historical past in an effort to free itself from the morality of a Christian culture that has denounced the evils hidden in the name of progress.

It is Tarkovsky's historical and ideological experience evident in the film that the narrative unfolds, and where he succeeds more in dramatizing in this film than any other Hollywood war film would ever attempt. Through a subjective narrative structure and personal stylistic devices, Tarkovsky is able to successfully bring to light a deeper level of meaning, as well as, elevate the viewer into the ideological dimension of war.

O. T.: *The Sacrifice*. Production: Swedish Film (France-Sweden, 1986). Producer: Katinka Farago. Director: Andrei Tarkovsky. Screenplay: Andrei Tarkovsky. Photography: Sven Nykvist. Music: Johan Sebastian Bach and Sweden and Japan folkloric songs. Custom: Florence Fouquier. Editor: Andrei Tarkovski and Michal Leszczylwski. Leading Players: Erland Josephson (Alexandre), Susan Fleetwood (Adelaide), Allan Edwall (Otto), Gundrun S. Gisladó Hir (Maria), Sven Wollter (Victor). Color -140 min.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) JOHNSON, VIDA T.; PETRIE, GRAHAM: *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky, A Visual Fugue*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- (2) TARKOVSKY, ANDREI: *Sculpting in Time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1987
- (3) YAZZI, DAVID: «Helicon's Filmmaker» *Parnasus*, 22 (1997): 185-200.
- (4) GRAFFY, JULIAN: «Tarkovsky, The Weight of the World» *Sight and Sound*, 7(1997): 18-22. A retrospective article on the imagery and symbolism of Tarkovsky's work.
- (5) TARKOVSKY, ANDREI: *Sculpting in Time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1987. p. 217
- (6) *Ibid.*, pp. 220-222. Tarkovsky believes that a serious work of art can speak of future times, the artist carries a prophetic sense in his work. In his book *Sculpting in Time*, in his chapter on *The Sacrifice* comments that he has noticed that the events of some his films, specifically *Nostalgia*, in one way or another had manifested in his own life. He comments on Alexander Pushkin's belief that a true artist is marked by some sort of prophetic power that allows him/her "to look into time and predict the future..."
- (7) BORDWELL, DAVID: *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. pp. 156-204. By the same author also see *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 367-377.
- (8) BORDWELL, DAVID: *Making Meaning*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 9.
- (9) TARKOVSKY, ANDREI: *Sculpting in Time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1987, p. 217. One of the main themes in the film relates with the concept of a person who is able to give him or herself for the well being of others.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- (12) MAIORINO, GIANCARLO: *Leonardo da Vinci: The Daedalian Mythmaker*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992. p. 61.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- (14) TARKOVSKY, ANDREI: *Sculpting in Time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987. p. 218.
- (15) GREEN, PETER: «Apocalypse & Sacrifice» *Sight and Sound* 56 (1987): p.113.
- (16) TARKOVSKY, ANDREI: *Sculpting in Time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1987. p. 224. Because of its symbolical and dream quality of the narrative, the audience is set to ponder if the apocalyptic nuclear war ever happened or is it the product of fantasy due to the hero's internal turmoil?

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