

**A Redemptive Dream of the Bad Old Days:  
Nostalgia, History, and Materiality in Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev***

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## Introduction

Rolan Bykov is sweating. Leaping, spinning, standing on his hands, kicking a drum with his feet, singing things that ought not be sung in polite company. Fortunately, he is not in polite company, but on a film set, in a crude log hut, performing for actors dressed as peasants, having great fun describing the sexual misadventures of the 15th century Russian nobility. The film is Andrei Tarkovsky's 1966 masterpiece, *Andrei Rublev*, a meditation on the life and times of Russia's greatest medieval icon painter. Bykov plays the role of the *skomorokh*, the itinerant jester whose rough stock-in-trade is the profane leavening of a heavy life. His motion is elemental; it stirs the stillness like a hard spring wind; in medieval huts, as on Soviet film sets, the anarchic spirit is an indispensable and dangerous thing. The jester rests, accepts water from his grateful audience. Outside a window frame, rain falls hard upon the countryside. Three monks have entered for shelter; one will betray the jester. Henchmen of the Grand Prince will arrive, pull the jester outside, bash his head into a tree trunk. He will lose his freedom. He will lose his tongue. The film will go unseen by the Russian public for five years; the Soviet authorities will consider it too blunt in its presentation of a cruel age. In 1969, the film will show at Cannes and win the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) Prize. By 1971, the authorities will relent, and *Andrei Rublev* will make its way onto Soviet screens and begin its long ascent into the Russian cinematic canon.

Bykov would later say that he saw in Tarkovsky's works a nostalgia "not aimed at the past" (Bykov, 1990, p. 155). What can this possibly mean? Isn't nostalgia all about the past? And what kind of nostalgia can one attribute to a director whose vision of the past includes such things as the removal of jesters' tongues? Wouldn't this be the opposite of nostalgia? Bykov's words, however, are not to be dismissed. Tarkovsky's cinematic nostalgia, he said, replaced longing for

a lost past with “a yearning for the future, whose roots he sought as an artist interested in history.” Like any good jester, Bykov gave conventional thinking a sly twist, and in doing so offered a gateway to a deeper understanding of Tarkovsky as a director, *Andrei Rublev* as a film, and the position of both filmmaker and film in Soviet culture.

In this paper I will take up Bykov’s invitation and analyze the ways in which *Andrei Rublev* encourages and rewards a creative reconsideration of the very concept of nostalgia. In the first section, I outline the film’s narrative and point out the crucial questions it raises about the nature of hope and longing. The second section introduces and develops Svetlana Boym’s typology of nostalgia. Next, I discuss the conventional portrayal of Rublev as a historical figure and the film’s challenge to that portrayal. Finally, building on the ideas of Henri Bergson, I explore the ways in which the materiality of the film’s images embodies an ambiguous, open-ended, and highly spiritual brand of nostalgic longing.

### **The Narrative Arc of *Andrei Rublev***

The film’s narrative begins in the summer of 1400 with Rublev’s departure from the Trinity Monastery in the forests outside Moscow; it ends 24 years later on the eve of his return to the same monastery, where he will paint his greatest icon, *The Old Testament Trinity*. The young Rublev we meet at the start of the film has acquired a deep but untested faith from the monastery’s founder, Sergei Radonezhky. But as a monk-iconographer in the wider world, Rublev witnesses the depravity of his times, the fundamental imperfection and imperfectability of humanity. He is deeply disturbed by the deep chasm between the ideals of the spirit and life as lived by actual bodies, by the parallel disharmonies between man and man and man and nature. The apogee of his crisis comes when he must kill to save the life of an innocent. He will stop painting, stop speaking, renounce his artistic gift. His learned faith, as Tarkovsky (1986) has put it, will be burned in the crucible of experience. But it will be reborn.

*Andrei Rublev* dispenses with the traditional Socialist Realist biopic model of a positive hero who stands astride the action, disciplining the camera never to stray far from his path. Instead, the camera leaves Rublev repeatedly and for extended periods. Tarkovsky's method is not simply to recreate Rublev's life (approximately 1360-1430)—of which only the barest outlines are recorded in medieval chronicles—but rather to draw from the history of his time a vision of the world with which the artist had to contend. Only once, fleetingly, do we see the great painter paint, restoring a tiny fire-damaged icon of St. George. The film is not about the working life of an artist, but the life the artist must perceive in order to work.

As we alternately follow and depart from Rublev's path, Tarkovsky ushers us through a rogue's gallery of his imagined 15th century: We meet an inventor-balloonist who takes flight even as his countrymen do all they can to stop this devilry; we enter the cabin with Bykov's soon-to-be punished jester; we study with Rublev at the feet of the elderly, deeply conflicted icon painter Theophanes the Greek, who is simultaneously full of pity and brimstone for the tormented and tormenting Russian people (at one point Theophanes must pause in his creation of holy images at a Kremlin cathedral to beg the crowd outside to stop torturing its victim). Later, we share with Rublev the searing vision of flesh and firelight at a pagan midsummer night's bacchanal and watch the next morning as the princely authorities ruthlessly hunt the pagans down; we witness the white perfection of undecorated church walls and the brutal blinding of the masons who built them; we ride with Russia's Tatar overlords and the renegade forces of the Grand Prince's brother as they savagely destroy the ancient town of Vladimir. Amid the chaos of the raid, we watch a Russian raider drag a simple young woman—a holy fool—up a ladder. And we watch as Rublev follows with an axe and saves her. In the dreadful aftermath, as snow falls in the ruined cathedral, Rublev will meet Theophanes's ghost, confess to killing the raider, and take a vow of silence that will last 15 years.

In the film's final episode we meet Boriska, a boy whose deceased father was an expert bellcaster but who himself knows nothing of the craft, and we watch as Boriska, driven by a deeper knowledge, leads a vast crew of older workers to cast a bell for the leering Grand Prince. Rublev himself is off-screen for most of Boriska's tale, but he is, just as we are, watching. When the bell is complete, Boriska wanders off alone and collapses in exhaustion. Rublev breaks his vow of silence, comforts the boy, and proposes they go to the Trinity monastery together, Boriska to cast bells, Rublev to paint once more. In the epilogue that follows, the black and white film bursts into color and we see for the first time the works of Andrei Rublev.

From this sketch of events, we can understand how Rublev's youthful faith might be shattered. But how could faith be reborn from such unpromising narrative material? Is Boriska's triumph—which earns not so much as a nod of acknowledgment from a Grand Prince who was more than ready to execute the boy if he failed—the sole source of hope on this bleak landscape? Does hope grow from the *occurrences* in the film, from the “story” within history? Rublev's early faith was destroyed precisely by his perception of the social conditions and conventions of his time, none of which have changed by the end of the narrative. His thirst for a lost and illusory faith can hardly have been “quenched” by worldly events, and his longing for a better world must remain precisely a longing.

How, then, does the film account for Rublev's renaissance? The question requires us to consider the ways in which Tarkovsky has quietly seeded the cinematic soil with both history and counter-history. On one hand, the film presents painstakingly wrought events that appear to leave one with little to long for; on the other hand, it discovers beneath, within, alongside, and obscured by those events numberless spiritual possibilities that remain latent in man and nature, ready to inspire us if only we pause long enough in the business of living to grant attention to life. *Andrei Rublev* rejects *restoration* of the past while inviting us to intense *reflection* upon the

shards of latent beauty that lie within the past, beyond the past, and within us. As we shall see, by lacing his film's images with ineffable indeterminate longing—longing at once temporal, material, and spiritual—Tarkovsky used one kind of nostalgia to shatter another.

### **The New Nostalgia**

In a 1983 interview for *American Film*, Tarkovsky told J. Hoberman and Gideon Bachmann that nostalgia is “sadness for that lost span during which we did not manage to count our forces, to marshal them, and to do our duty” (Gianvito, 2006, p. 94). This is a radical reframing of the notion of nostalgia, in which the longing is not for what *did* happen, but precisely for what did not. In his films, Tarkovsky creates a narrative on one level, but on another he looks beyond the very concept of *happening* to fix upon polysemic images that invite the viewer's creative contemplation of possibilities lost and found. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym (2001) identifies two types of nostalgia that can help us better understand the stark contrast between Tarkovsky's brand of nostalgia and a more conventional vision of nostalgia as the idealization of the historical past.

*Restorative nostalgia*, writes Boym, seeks a trans-historical return to an idealized time or place. It proposes to have a concrete idea of what this time or place looks like, a totalizing vision encompassing aesthetics, ideas, and the nature of relations within the imagined world. It is a form of “national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity”—a story of what was, how it was taken away, how it must be revived, and how efforts at revival are endangered by unpatriotic conspirators. Restorative nostalgia posits an *us* and a *them*— those who share the vision of revival, and those who stand in the way. Like most totalizing visions, restorative nostalgia functions in a highly coded manner; it loves symbols and knows precisely what they mean. It is a vast abstraction that redefines our relationship with things in the world, a transparency overlaid on the map of life. It determines the very nature of seeing.

Because it is a collective and programmatic vision, impossible to implement without leadership, restorative nostalgia is an attractive tool for leaders of movements and nations. It is one of the ironies of reflective nostalgia that what begins as a sense of dissatisfaction with the present—a resistance to the hegemony of the *now*—can be co-opted by present leaders. Stalin realized this as early as the 1930s, when, in the wake of the bewildering modernisms of the Soviet '20s, he fostered a nationwide boom in sanitized folk culture (Stites, 1992). His use of nostalgia as a leadership tool intensified during World War II—known in the Soviet Union as The Great Patriotic War—with appeals to the military, scientific, and even religious glories of the pre-Revolutionary past. Selective restorative nostalgic use of the patriotic archive continued, as we shall see, long after Stalin's death. One must consider that at some point restorative nostalgia becomes no longer “nostalgia” at all—no longer an affect, but a strategy, a policy, an ideology.

Boym's second type of nostalgia is *reflective nostalgia*. Reflective nostalgia functions at the crossroads of individual consciousness and shared frameworks of memory. It puts more emphasis on longing itself than on the revival of the longed-for thing; it recognizes that what is lost does not come back in the same form; it “delays the homecoming,” writes Boym, “wistfully, ironically, desperately” (Boym, 2001, p. xiv). Reflective nostalgia, then, is a sort of spiritual suffering, the only treatment for which is to think long and hard on “the ambivalences of human longing and belonging.” Those who suffer from reflective nostalgia are less likely than restorative nostalgics to see life as a pitched battle with modernity; they recognize life's contradictions as a fact of existence, and engage their sense of longing by exploring “ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones.” They are lovers of details, not symbols. They see their nostalgia as “an ethical and creative challenge” (Boym, 2001, p. xiv).

Reflective nostalgics long for fractional shards of multiple pasts; they create from these shards numberless mosaics of past and present. They long not for the details typical of an era, but for those that have personal significance, idiosyncratic images latent in the mind and half-bleached by time. Sometimes one cannot find the image at all, only a yearning for a time before certain things became whatever they are. Reflective nostalgia, in this sense, is the creative ache of trying to remember that for which one has no memory-image, the flash on the horizon that disappeared before we could even be certain what it was.<sup>1</sup>

In *Andrei Rublev*, Tarkovsky summons this flash in many ways, most notably through the ambiguous use of natural images that exist both within Rublev's time and beyond it. At the conclusion of the film's prologue, just after the balloonist's fateful crash, Tarkovsky's camera lingers on a horse rolling over on the damp green riverbank. The scene that precedes the image of the horse has nothing to do with horses, nor do the scenes that follow. Yet the presence of the horse, so indifferent to the dreams of the balloonist and the suspicions of the villagers, is deeply affecting, a supra-rational invocation of the integrity of life beyond history, beyond the social and political norms that so often enclose our daily experience and sense of possibilities.

Tarkovsky will return to equine imagery throughout the film. In the devastating scene of the Tatar-Russian raid, his camera, in an early example of what would become the classic Tarkovskian long pan, will move left-to-right past a crowd of invaders slamming their way

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<sup>1</sup> Restorative and reflective nostalgia as discussed here can be seen as distant points on a three-dimensional matrix of *determinacy* (the precision with which nostalgia knows what it wants), *activity* (the aim to actually restore the longed-for place or time), and *totality* (the breadth of social existence to be concretely transformed). At intermediate points in this matrix lie such familiar nostalgias as the impulse behind Disneyland's Main Street USA, the passion for restoring classic cars, and the appreciation of vintage clothing. It should also be remembered that when we speak of *created things*, there are two instances of nostalgia—the nostalgia of the creator, who “encodes” his artifact with his or her own nostalgic longing, and the nostalgia of the person who beholds the artifact, which may be different than that of the creator (Hall, 1974). Reflective nostalgic encoding is likely to be more “open” and ambiguous than restorative-nostalgic encoding, and thus more inviting to a diverse range of affective and intellectual responses from the beholder.

through the cathedral doors behind which the townspeople hide, past the grinning face of the Tatar chieftain and the guilty grimace of the Grand Prince's younger brother, who has collaborated in this atrocity, and finally to the impassive and beautiful face of the young prince's white horse. At the start of the shot, the chieftain asks, "Aren't you sorry for the cathedral?" The prince does not answer, just scratches at his nose and stares into the distance as the camera moves by him and lingers on his steed. The horse, unlike its rider, is not a collaborator but a visual gateway to some undefined space beyond all this, a time both before and after, a moment worth longing for. The camera, as if awaking us from this brief dream, cuts to another horse being pushed from a wooden staircase, falling through the railing, writhing on the ground, where a raider plunges a spear through its heart; on the left side of the frame, a prostrate woman pulls her skirts down as a Tatar raider stands over her. There is here nothing historical worth restoring; there is only the endangered beauty that lies beyond history, forever inviting sad reflection upon our better angels.

### **Layers of Memory: Rublev and Rublev in Russian History**

Tarkovsky's depiction of the raid on Vladimir demonstrates his utter rejection of restorative nostalgia, his flat refusal to varnish a harsh historical epoch or portray it as the means to a glorious end. The 15th century is not presented as a steppingstone to Russian unity, and indeed, Tarkovsky does not confuse the moral category of *unity* with the political one of *unification*. Unification became a fact in 15th century Russia. Unity did not. In the heat of the raid, Tarkovsky shows us terrified face of Rublev's young apprentice, Foma, as he beholds an attacker. "Brother, what are you doing?" says Foma, "We're both Russians!" This plea for national fraternity earns a most un-brotherly response from the attacker: "I'll show you, you Vladimir scum!" Foma flees, but soon takes an arrow to the chest. Tarkovsky films him in slow motion as he takes his last strides, reaches desperately forward toward some indeterminate space

in the air, and falls alongside the riverbed. White paint flows downstream.

This is the third time Tarkovsky shows us the image of paint on the river. In an early scene, Foma washes his brushes while Rublev and Theophanes discuss the crucifixion; later, paint flows past the blinded masons after they collapse in pain by the riverbed, their eyes gouged out for the crime of accepting a commission from the Grand Prince's brother. Paint carries the promise of the creative act, but society is forever responding with acts of destruction—crucifixion, blinding, the torching of towns—that dissolve the dream of art, sending it downstream to be rediscovered by some later generation. Tarkovsky longed not for the mythological glories of national history, but for the promise of this flowing paint, for the imaginary possibilities represented by the path not taken.

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In 1962, the film critic Yuri Tiurin met with Tarkovsky and his cameraman, Vadim Yusov, and the three looked at Rublev's icons in a 1959 collection assembled by Mikhail Alpatov. The book, which had been given to Tarkovsky by the Polish director Andrzej Wajda, was in a dust jacket, and on the dust jacket was a reproduction of Rublev's icon of the Archangel Michael. The image, Tarkovsky told Tiurin, manifested a certain feeling—"the people's nostalgia for brotherhood" (Tiurin, p. 14). Just what kind of nostalgia was this that Rublev's work seemed, for Tarkovsky, to contain and evoke? Was it restorative, fixed and officially approved—the nostalgia of the symbol? Or was it reflective, multifaceted, and evoked by the art itself—the nostalgia of the image? If the film was born from Tarkovsky's perception of the images, and of the time in which Rublev created them, we must take a look at those times, as well as at the social meanings that through the centuries have gathered like barnacles upon both Rublev's images and his era.

Rublev's birth date is generally placed sometime between the late 1350s and 1370. He was

born in the vicinity of Moscow, and spent much of his life in the Moscow-Vladimir-Suzdal area of central Russia. (Sergeev, 1998, p. 32). This was also the center of Russian power during Rublev's lifetime, the field upon which Russian princes and Tatar Khans vied for dominance of the country. (The Tatars were the descendents of the Mongol invaders who had shattered the advanced Orthodox culture of Kievan Rus' in 1240 and who ruled Russia for more than 200 years, a period known as the "Mongol Yoke".) As a young man, Rublev became a monk and icon painter at the Holy Trinity Monastery in the forest in the outskirts of Moscow. The monastery had been founded by Sergei Radonezhky in 1340 as a center of ascetic worship. By Rublev's adulthood, it had already become one of the most important spiritual-political centers in appanage Russia. Before the battle of Kulikovo Field in 1380, Sergei himself had blessed Grand Prince Dmitrii Donskoi, who then rode into battle, the icon of the Vladimir Mother of God in tow, and secured the first ever victory by a Russian force over the Tatars.

Around the turn of the 15th century, Rublev, already with some renown as an icon painter, left for the Spas-Andronikov monastery in Moscow. By 1405, he was painting the walls of Grand Prince Vasili I's new Kremlin chapel (Sergeev, 1998, p. 73). From 1408-1410, he was painting in the Assumption Cathedral (sometimes translated as the Dormition Cathedral) in Vladimir, which had been built in 1160. Between 1410-1420, he returned to his old home at the Holy Trinity Monastery and painted his masterpiece, The Old Testament Trinity. Rublev died on January 29, 1430 at the Spas-Andronikov Monastery, where he is buried (Sergeev, p. 316). In 1551, the great Stoglav church council met in Moscow and declared that all future icons should be painted in accordance "with ancient images such as the Greek artists painted and as were painted by Andrei Rublev and other highly praised artists" (Sergeev, p. 325).

Four hundred years later, the officially atheist Soviet regime would invoke Rublev as a symbol of national pride. During World War II, Stalin had instituted a policy of official

nationalism and framed the war not as a defense of Soviet communism but as a battle for the survival of Mother Russia. For obvious reasons, the legacy of Dmitrii Donskoi as a prince-liberator was useful during the war. But the age of sanctioned and selective mythological nationalism continued after the war and outlived Stalin himself, and the 1950s brought a sort of “Rublev boom”. According to longtime Russian journalist and film critic Yuri Tiurin, the most influential commentator on Rublev in the 1950s was Natalia Demina. Writing in a style that captures the burgeoning idealism, national pride, and lyricism of the Soviet Union’s Khrushchev-era cultural Thaw, Demina saw in Rublev’s work an expression of the classic Slavophile model of a Russia that may seem to be sleeping, but always rises to the occasion. In 1956 she wrote that Rublev’s work reflected “complete truthfulness and sincerity of feeling,” but that this sincerity did not belong to Rublev alone. “In the decisive moments of history,” Demina wrote, “the strength of the people’s soul is called into action and remarkably heroic deeds are accomplished.” In Demina’s view, Rublev’s great contribution was to instill in his creations the spirit of the Russian people, “through whom the highest truth of national character was expressed” (Tiurin, p. 15).

In this way, Demina affixed ultimate responsibility for Rublev’s images on “the people”. The artist himself was merely the medium; Rublev’s work expressed “the national self-consciousness of the Russian man.” An ambiguous historical figure is thus turned into a fixed national symbol, credit for a job well done is subtly transferred from the individual to the collective, and personal genius becomes a public commodity.

There was nothing hard-line or unusually nationalistic about Demina’s assessment. A good deal of literature was published on Rublev in the 1950s, and, by the early 1960s, Rublev had been adopted as an idealized nationalist symbol by everyone from the national-chauvinist artist Ilya Glazunov (who painted an angelic, blue-eyed Rublev,

remarkably different from the figure in Tarkovsky's film) to respected art critics and historians. Dmitrii Likhachev, perhaps the greatest of all Soviet scholars of Russian cultural history, had set the tone for looking at Rublev as a national treasure:

The time of Rublev was an epoch of rebirth of faith in man, in his moral strength, in his capacity for self-sacrifice in the name of high ideals. It was a time of the rebirth of interest in our own history, in the culture of the time of independent Rus' before the Mongol invasion. The time of Rublev was one of the flowering of literature, epics, and political self-awareness (Sergeev, p. 7).

The film critic Rostislav Iurenev, meanwhile, defended the contemporary relevance of Tarkovsky's antique subject on the debatable grounds that the film conveyed "the feeling of national pride in the unsinkable talent of the Russian people" (Tiurin, 2004, p. 11). He did not mention that one of the unsinkable talents the film conveyed was the talent for slaughter.

In the discourse of the 1950s, the figure of Rublev became entangled with the fact of the victory at Kulikovo Field, which took place when Rublev was between 10-20 years old, two decades before he would paint the first of his known icons. The victory, as we shall see, was hardly the end of the Mongol Yoke, and by 1382 the Khan's army had invaded Moscow and torched much of it to the ground. The battle of Kulikovo Field has, however, been widely interpreted as the flashpoint of a new Russian self-confidence that would play out over the next 150 years as the various Russian principalities were brought under unified Muscovite rule. The battle of Kulikovo Field is not only seen as the rebirth of Russian self-consciousness (a restorative-nostalgic glance back at the lost golden age of Kievan Rus'), but as the moment when Russia saved Western civilization from Mongol barbarism. Tiurin explicitly connects Rublev's legacy with Dmitrii's:

Rublev's historical assignment consisted in, first, the idea of the political unity of the Russian lands under the rule of the Muscovite Grand Princedom, and, second, in the necessity and possibility of complete

independence from the intolerable Golden Horde (Tiurin, 2004, p. 16).

Dmitrii Donskoi's victory was not only a political or martial event, but a cultural one, and in the mid-20th century, the best elements of the cultural epoch that followed Dmitrii's reign were symbolically yoked to the great victory. In 1960, the Soviet Union officially celebrated the 600th anniversary of Rublev's birth. That year, the Andrei Rublev Museum of Ancient Russian Art opened at the Andronikov Monastery, where the artist lived and is buried. The date of the opening was September 21 (September 8 old style), the day of commemoration of the victory at Kulikovo Field. Andrei Rublev had been drawn into the Soviet narrative of international struggle and encirclement, one of the central tropes of the Stalin years.<sup>2</sup>

The Soviet glorification of the age of Rublev willfully neglected the complications of that age. The period after Rublev's death in 1430 brought decades of savage civil war between the Russian princes. All the while, the Tatars, though weakened by their own internecine strife, continued to collect tribute from the Russian lands, conduct raids, play the Russian princes off of one another, and arrogate to themselves the right to anoint their favorite of the moment as Grand Prince. The Mongol Yoke would not be decisively thrown off until 1480. Meanwhile, the impressive cultural developments of the early 15th century—a “Russian Renaissance” embodied most notably by Rublev's icons and frescos—were unmatched by a similar spirit of innovation in the political sphere (Vernadsky, 1969). The Muscovite state that coalesced in central Russia

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<sup>2</sup> The nationalist appropriation of Rublev reflects not only instrumental politics but also the century-old Slavophile tension between the ancient concept of *sobornost'*, or conjunctivity—in which unique individuals cooperate seamlessly to shape a harmonious society that is enriched by their uniqueness—and Slavocentrism, which posits the world as an apocalyptic battlefield with Orthodox Slavs on one side and Everyone Else on the other (Riazanovsky, 1965). On one hand, Rublev's message was said to be one of love; on the other hand, it was interpreted by Soviet commentators as a call not only for harmonious national *unity*, but for the national *unification*, under the firm hand of the Muscovite Grand Prince, of a long-suppressed genius-people now ready to take on all comers.

between 1450-1550 emerged only at an extraordinary price: brutal civil war, the subjection of all personal wealth and freedom to the will of the Tsar, the end of church independence, the subjugation of the arts to the preferred political narrative of the Muscovite principedom, and the general decline in the quality of iconography (Crummey, 1987, p. 192). Georges Florovsky argues that Russian art “definitely declined in the fifteenth and especially the sixteenth century and lost its originality and daring” and attributes this decline to the Muscovite penchant for top-down aesthetic system-building (the very phenomenon at play in the Stoglav pronouncement of 1551):

Cultures are never built as systems, by orders or on purpose. They are born out of the spirit of creative initiative, out of intimate vision, out of spiritual commitment, and are only maintained in freedom. It may be contended that Moscow missed its opportunity for cultural progress when it yielded to the temptation of building its culture on the social order of the day—*po sotsial'nomu zakazu*, as it were...(Florovsky, Andreyev, & Billington, 1969, pp. 217-218).

Against the historical background of 15th and 16th century Muscovy, it is difficult to read Rublev’s work—noted for its extraordinary gentleness of line and form—as an expression of the political thrust of his times or as a harbinger of political harmony and artistic effervescence to come. Perhaps one can more accurately regard it as the terminus of a particular path of cultural development, a historical dead-end, beyond which lay the ghost-path that Tarkovsky would reflect upon almost six centuries later.

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From the very beginning of *Andrei Rublev*, Tarkovsky lays down markers to this ghost path alongside images of the rougher historical realities that impeded its way. In the film’s prologue, he brings us memorable images of the Russian countryside from the point of view of a peasant’s jerry-rigged hot air balloon. The sequence is so visually breathtaking, and the parallels with the film’s primary narrative of an innovator finding his “voice” so powerful, that it is easy to look

past a key narrative element of the scene: In the opening shots, villagers, monks, and princely authorities are frantically trying to *prevent* Yefim's fateful flight. Thus in the film's opening minutes, Tarkovsky gives us both a reflective nostalgic vision of peasant ingenuity and a firm rejection of the restorative-nostalgic conception that the *nation* and *the historical epoch* were supportive of and responsible for such genius.

The scene is an echo of a historical tale, probably apocryphal, of the 18th century peasant Kriakutnyi flying in a balloon filled with black smoke. In the 1950s, the Soviet government seized upon the tale of Kriakutnyi as evidence that a Russian, and not the American Wright brothers, had made the first flight, and the tale was absorbed into the store of similar historical appropriations of the late Stalin era portraying the superior genius of the Russian people. In 1956, Kriakutnyi even wound up the subject of a postage stamp (Bird, 2004). The genius of the Russian people, of course, is not to be underrated, and Tarkovsky here likely has in mind that Yefim is a sort of peasant genius. But Yefim is also a Russian genius hounded by Russians themselves, and Russian authorities, to stop with his devilish innovations. Seen in this light, Russia is both a cradle of geniuses and a destroyer of them.

In the Soviet era (indeed, in the modern era, whether in the East or West), there was reason to be nostalgic for the anarchic, innovative spirit of a peasant like Yefim, living at a time when the flight was still a mystery, a dream, and a subject of creative speculation. This is the nostalgia that Boym sees as a prime symptom of modernity. It is a nostalgia not only for pre-industrial slowness, but for a time when the miracles of the machine age still resided in the realm of the imagination, when they were thrilling dreams rather than industrial efficiencies, when they belonged not to economics, or even to science, but to art. Tarkovsky expresses this reflective nostalgia through Yefim, with his childlike cry of wonder, "I'm flying! I'm flying!" Meanwhile, the people below grasp angrily at Yefim's friend, demonstrating that society, in the moment,

punishes its innovators. Only later does it appropriate them as symbols of national greatness and put them on postage stamps.

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In the introduction to their screenplay for *Andrei Rublev*, Tarkovsky and his co-writer, Andrei Konchalovsky wrote purposefully in the register of restorative nostalgia, a register that is completely absent in the film: “[The idea came about] from our profoundly conscious love for the Motherland, for our nation [*narod*], and from our respect for its history, which laid the way for the October Revolution, from true respect for the nation’s lofty traditions which are its spiritual treasure, which has been deeply imbibed by the new socialist culture.” Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky went on to note that Rublev was the first artist listed in Lenin’s 1918 decree, “On the construction of monumental propaganda” (Bird, 2008, p. 41). This was a purely instrumental approach, one that likely helped the young filmmakers win approval to start production. But the film itself, while expressing Rublev’s dream of brotherhood, of an end to the ceaseless violence of his time, offers no hint that such brotherhood was already developing, or that the culture was flowering, or that the Mongols were in retreat.

Tarkovsky’s comments to the Soviet film journal *Ekran* in 1965, while he was shooting the film, point more to a fascination with Rublev as an utterly sincere artistic innovator than with Rublev as a symbol of national greatness. “As a rule, icons in [Rublev’s] time were cult objects with conventional representations of the saints, nothing more,” Tarkovsky said. “With Andrei it was different. He strove to express an all-embracing harmony of the world, the serenity of the soul. . . . The main thing that I want to express in my film is the burning of a person in the name of an all-consuming idea, an idea that possesses him to the point of passion” (Gianvito, 2006, p. 15). In 1969, Tarkovsky again discussed Rublev not as a fixed symbol of the nation, but specifically as a self-reflective, spiritually self-reliant creative individual:

He looks for a moral ideal within himself, and thereby expresses the hope and love and aspirations of the people, born of their living conditions. He expresses the attraction towards unity, fraternity, love—everything that the people lack yet which Rublev feels to be indispensable. This is how he foresees Russian unification, a certain progress, and the hope in the only future that can get people involved by opening perspectives for them (Gianvito, 2006, p. 22).

At first glance, this statement resembles Demina's view that Rublev was a sort of medium for the people. Indeed, Tarkovsky shares with Demina and Likhachev a general understanding of Rublev's work as an expression of nostalgia for the lost unity and cultural richness of Kievan Rus'. But there are crucial phrases he uses that point to a vision of Rublev's "nostalgia for brotherhood" not as a national, shared, unitary vision—restorative nostalgia—but as an individual, idiosyncratic, open one—reflective nostalgia. For Tarkovsky, Rublev is less a medium for the people's aspirations than a prophet showing them what they can aspire toward. He gives them precisely what they *lack*. The moral idea is not borrowed from the people, but sought *within the self*. It is *Rublev's* insight that unity, fraternity, and love are indispensable.

Rublev's breakthrough, then, *served* the people, but ultimate responsibility for that breakthrough lies not with their communal sensibilities, but with his uniquely individual perception of the world. The difference between the harshly beautiful angularity of Theophanes's work and the willowy curves of the hands, necks, and eyelids on Rublev's "Old Testament Trinity" are as striking as any abrupt transition in 20th century modernism. Individuality somehow shines through in an art form where the individual aesthetic was an afterthought—if indeed it was ever a thought at all. For Tarkovsky, Rublev's appearance on the historical stage was significant precisely because his icons encouraged *new ways of seeing*. The sense of "opening perspectives" is a key element in Boym's reflective nostalgia; it is the backward glance of the person willing to contemplate multiple paths, and the possibilities they might have offered (and may yet offer), not of those who seek a heroic narrative to validate and solidify their national identity. Tarkovsky's Rublev may indeed be the herald of better times to come, but it is

questionable, even after six centuries, whether those times have yet arrived. The film sees the “nostalgia for brotherhood” embodied in Rublev’s work not as an indication of the current of his times, but as a corrective to it.

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Against the backdrop of the medieval world, Rublev remains for most of the film an alienated figure, stymied not only by the horrors of his time but by the enforced disharmonies between the manifest pleasures of Creation and the instrumental demands of culture. He is, for instance, incapable of painting a traditional representation of the Last Judgment upon the newly whitewashed walls of the Assumption Cathedral in Vladimir. Iconography is, of course, a highly conventional art form; one does not simply change the meaning of a biblical episode. Rublev’s friend and mentor, Daniil, encourages Andrei to simply get on with it, to paint sinners boiling in pitch and a devil with smoke billowing from its nostrils. He says this in the cheery tones of a kindly uncle.

“Smoke isn’t the point!” Rublev shouts.

“Then what is?” Daniil asks.

“I don’t know! I can’t paint all that. It disgusts me. I don’t want to terrify people.”

Daniil, at once bemused and annoyed, answers calmly: “It’s the Last Judgment. I didn’t make it up.”

Rublev has reached an impasse. He cannot see the way he is expected to see, the way that makes it possible to live and work in harmony with unharmonious times. He is angry at the need to create angry icons, on strike against artistic conventions that no longer make sense to him. In a flashback that follows Rublev’s conversation with Daniil, the Grand Prince visits the cathedral. It is summer, and the unadorned white walls gleam in the sunlight. Andrei is cheerfully reciting a Bible passage to the Grand Prince’s daughter; poplar fluff fills the air; the little princess squirts

milk at Rublev, who laughingly scolds her. The scene is almost idyllic, save the brewing problem that there is a cathedral to be finished, a Prince to be glorified, a Last Judgment to be painted. The Grand Prince asks Andrei how he likes the cathedral. Rublev looks at the blank walls, turns to the Grand Prince, and answers: "It couldn't be better." The sensory harmony of the sunlit images reveal the deep emotional disharmony of the narrative situation. What on earth does this laughing little girl need with a smoke-blowing devil? How does one envision upon that sunlit wall a fresco of boiling men? How, surrounded by the poplar fluff of a perfect summer's day, does one preach the gospel of eternal judgment? Embedded in the images of this very scene, there is a world worthy of Rublev's talents, worthy of his longing, a world replete with the potential for brotherhood. It is a world still inaccessible to him, though, a perspective yet to be opened.

### **Nostalgia and Materiality**

Tarkovsky's bleak social history, with its strong implied critique of hegemonic glorification, hovers above a deeper history, a history of matter, which contains glories of a wholly different kind, the glories not of political centralization but of the existence we share (even if we most often fail in the sharing) with one another and with nature on an infinitely rich spiritual-material plane. The intense materiality of the images in *Andrei Rublev* was not a simple side effect of effective camerawork in shooting the script: From the start, Tarkovsky's goal was to reach beyond the *story* of life to behold the mysteries of the *stuff* of life. This goal caused Tarkovsky's co-writer Andrei Konchalovsky considerable frustration. In a 1987 essay, Konchalovsky writes,

Working on the *Andrei Rublev* script, we went to Georgia together. I can recall that while on a walk at night, [Tarkovsky] kept repeating: "I would like these buds, these leaves, the sticky ones, you know... And these geese are flying..." "What does he want?" I asked myself. "Let's be more specific. Let's get down to the script." But he kept driveling on about [the] buds and leaves among which his soul was wandering." (Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky, 1990)

In his reasonable professional desire for an efficient scriptwriting process, Konchalovsky failed to realize that it was precisely through such “buds and leaves,” through sensory images that at first glance seem incidental to the narrative, that Tarkovsky would bring his peculiar brand of hope to the bleak medieval world.

For most of *Andrei Rublev*, man cannot penetrate nature’s beauty. On the eve of the Tatar raid, for instance, the river hovers upon the brown land, silvery and inviting to the dreamy eye. But no eyes are dreaming here but our own. On one side of the river, in the foreground, are the Tatar warriors, on the other, in the background, the white tents of the camp of the Grand Prince’s jealous younger brother. We absorb the beauty of the shot in direct opposition to the narrative purpose of the shot. In a strictly narrative sense, the river “exists” in the shot strictly so that the Tatar chieftain can ask across it at the ford and obtain an answer from the Russian forces on the far side, forces who have no compunction about joining the “occupier” to savage their own people. The chieftain meets the young prince at the ford, greets him with a broad smile, and remarks with biting sarcasm, “You sure do love your brother!” Meanwhile, the sheer beauty of the river, of the horses, of the spectacle of riding, of the Tatar’s smile, more full of apparent joy than any other facial expression in the film, impacts us on a level beyond narrative. We are seized with the fatal disjuncture between the stuff of life and the story of life. It is a dialectic with no synthesis, no easy answers—at least none that Tarkovsky will provide. It is left to us to contemplate the simultaneous beauty and ugliness of existence.

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In his landmark work, *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson (1991) offers an extraordinarily rich model of human perception that aids our understanding of how Tarkovsky, even as he depicts in his narrative the essential bleakness of Rublev’s time, continually draws from those times discordant and oddly inspiring images of a world worth longing for: the glowing river; the

poplar fluff; the impassive face of the Prince's white horse; the flow of paint downriver; the mason who, even in his free time, carves stone for pleasure. Each of these images collides with contiguous images of shocking brutality. The painful images, for the moment, even overwhelm the pleasurable ones. But Tarkovsky has perceived in Rublev's world the most profoundly raw materials of worldly hope, the very materials that sustain the integrity of the artist through his darkest days.

Bergson starts out from the scandalous proposition that the world exists. There is indeed "matter," and everything we perceive is derived from matter. We call perceivable matter *images*. Every image is infinite in its content; there is more in an image than we can ever perceive. In order to make life livable—that is, in order to *act*—we must *subtract* from these images when we perceive them. We always see less than the full image. This fractional perception is the result of the *determinacy* of our perception—the unavoidable fact that we perceive in a more or less goal-oriented way. We take what we need from infinite matter.

Our memories of previous perceptions shape the way we recognize matter; they determine the particular significance or meaning we see in it. Some memories are clearly, directly, *usefully* related to the object we perceive—a narrow, functional plane of memory that helps us recognize our world and act upon it. However, lingering at the flanks of these useful memories are vast networks of associations, seemingly useless and related vaguely at best to the image at hand—a broad plane of memories that facilitates contemplation of the depth and multiplicity of the world of images we perceive. The narrower—that is, the more narrowly goal-oriented—the plane of memory we invoke in perceiving matter, the more determinate our perception. The broader—the less directly goal oriented—the plane of memory we bring to the act of perception, the more indeterminate the perception. Indeterminate perception is perception that subtracts less from an image and sees more.

In cinema, there are two stages of perception. First, the filmmaker perceives the world, and then we perceive the film. A filmmaker who perceives and processes the world in an indeterminate way will present us with open and ambiguous images, which in turn invite our own indeterminate perceptions. The degree of determinacy at these stages, in turn, informs the nature of nostalgic longing for the filmmaker and the viewer. Looking through the Bergsonian lens, restorative nostalgia is a determinate perception of historical imagery—of buildings, books, costumes, festivals, and borrowed practices. It places the bric-a-brac of history in a totalizing contextual mold by subtracting the ambiguity. Perception is filtered by hegemonic convention. Such convention is not simply disembodied ideology. It *is* memory, cobbled together from our perception of our way of life: its practices, its use of symbols, its rituals, its examples of discipline and punishment, whether perceived on the street, in the apartment block, or through media channels. Hegemonic convention is the one of the uppermost layers of memory—second, perhaps, only to the layer of basic physical recognition and immediate physical need. It is a scrim that facilitates highly determinate perception; seeing according to convention permits us to move more easily through life, to function without constant discord between private consciousness on the one hand and public space and time on the other. If we train our eyes to see only the most “useful” colors in the spectrum, we don’t have to worry about the internal discord created by seeing and appreciating “useless” colors. Of course, this self-training, aided by social discipline, is always incomplete, and we never do completely lose the capacity to see the useless colors. However, *seeing*, and then privately and publicly acknowledging what we have seen, requires effort, reflection, and courage.

In the Soviet context, perception through the hegemonic scrim was a matter of survival, relative freedom, employment, advancement. Tarkovsky could have made his life much easier, for instance, had he brought to bear on his perception of medieval Russian history only the

hegemonic plane of memory—that is, the well-trained social memory that has learned to read the age of Muscovite centralization as one of unity and glory, and Rublev specifically as a herald and embodiment of that glory. Such determinate perception of history could have created a tidy and forceful restorative nostalgic narrative equally useful to cynical Communist Party nationalists and sincere Great Russian chauvinists.

For Tarkovsky, though, the cinematic image is the residue of reflective nostalgia. His perception, processing, and presentation of the image is shaped by a vast and indeterminate plane of memory, by a longing for the sundered spiritual materiality of the stuff of life, for the integrity of Creation (in the sense both of the act of creation and the thing created). His memory extends well beyond the political and social; it draws (as we see in his 1974 film, *The Mirror*) on highly personal, idiosyncratic childhood images of capricious nature and conflicted parents and wartime tension, memories that merge and collide in the mind and fill one's dreams and offer access to the uncanny. In *Rublev*, Tarkovsky does not perceive a river as simply a thing to be crossed, but as an infinitely meaningful, infinitely ambiguous material flow that is supremely indifferent to human action. On a spiritual timeline extending back beyond human history, Creation precedes man and his willful abstraction of and alienation from the images of the world. It extends across all of history, hidden in clear sight, obscured by our determinate need to see only what is useful in our movement from here to there; it is the *stuff* of life, buried by the *story* of life.

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The film's final episode, "The Bell," offers a striking illustration of the infinite spiritual-creative possibilities embedded in worldly material. Boriska, the young bellcaster, has promised the Grand Prince's men, and all of his assistants, that he knows the "secret" of bellcasting, that he has inherited it from his father. The truth is, his father told him nothing before dying, and if Boriska knows a secret, it is a secret that remains secret even to him. He believes, though, with

fierce and uninformed intensity. He consistently rejects the “wrong” clay, even as more experienced men tell him it is the clay they always use.

The men have hollowed out a deep pit. Boriska is at its bottom, among the others, digging for clay. He hits a root, bends down, grabs it, and pulls. He keeps pulling, follows the root across the pit, up its steep side, clear out of the pit, and stops. He looks up in awe at a towering poplar. Tarkovsky has not shown us the poplar before; he does not work in the simple grammar of establishing shots. The tree is new to us, and, it seems, to Boriska: until we see the root, we are unready to appreciate the tree. Boriska lets go of the root, lies down in the mud at the pit’s edge. Below him, the diggers go on digging. We look down at him from above as he gazes upward in awe at the bare but living branches, at the ancient and enduring promise of nature.

In the next shot, Boriska descends to the pit, grabs a handful of clay, rubs it between his fingers, smells it, listens to it, looks for what is hidden, embedded in matter, the secret of bellcasting that his dying father never told him. This is perhaps the most optimistic moment in the film. With utter confidence, he says, No, it's not the right clay. The optimism here is the happy stubbornness of faith, even the faith that this is NOT it. Somehow embedded in Boriska’s utter confidence that this is NOT the right clay is a companion confidence that the right clay really exists, down there, in the eternal and infinite soil. The sight of the tree has been pivotal for Boriska, at once humbling and emboldening: Man is dependent on nature not just for physical but for spiritual survival. There is no human creativity without nature’s example (the tree) and its blessing (the clay). Boriska has tapped into the stream of nature, whose origins predate culture, whose gifts create culture, whose promise is ignored at culture’s peril. It is not a moment of permanent inspiration; Tarkovsky well knows that in the artistic process every inspiration is followed by frustration and desperation that such moments will ever occur again. But Boriska has made his connection with the world, and has readied himself to make it again. He has

“remembered” a thing he never even knew, a connection with the kind of secrets that preceded him and his father and his father’s father, a never-truly-lost thing from a never-truly-lost time, the time of the image.

Soon we see him walking moodily alongside the riverbank. He turns to face the water, kicks out his foot; his bast sandal flies down the embankment. Boriska rushes down to retrieve it but falls and slides along muck and through brambles and, scratched and bruised, comes to a stop in the mud. He puts his hand to the soil. Once more, he rubs his fingers together, sniffs them, listens to them, and this time he exclaims: “*I FOUND IT!*”

Here Boriska has made contact with the immeasurably ancient time of Creation, but this time does not exist as a discrete “period” of time separate from the present and the future. It coexists with the present, inextricably interwoven with it. Time, for both Bergson and Tarkovsky, is indivisible; the duration of matter is infinite and the whole of the past is accessible in that matter. Tarkovsky does not have an “archaic” ideological program; his focus is precisely on the integrity of Creation that runs throughout time, underlying everything we do and say, and thus providing the inspiration and working material for new acts of creation. There is no contradiction in Tarkovsky’s intense focus on the stuff of nature and his use of a technological apparatus, the camera, to perceive and process that nature.<sup>3</sup> As a reflective nostalgic, Tarkovsky does not reject technology and modernity outright; what he rejects is the positivist *replacement* of humanity with science, materiality with materialism, and questions asked with questions answered. The spirituality of Tarkovsky’s images resides at the nexus of humanity, materiality,

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, to a degree unusual among directors, Tarkovsky acknowledges his dependence upon the camera itself to organize his vision of the world. In working on Tarkovsky’s final film, *Sacrifice* (1986), the great Swedish cameraman Sven Nykvist, who had worked with Ingmar Bergman, was at first shocked when Tarkovsky moved him aside and looked through *his* camera prior to shooting each scene. Soon, however, Nykvist understood that Tarkovsky was not usurping the photographer’s duty, but rather that he needed the camera to truly *see* matter, to choreograph its flow within and across the frame (Nykvist, 1990).

and reflection, and the past has no exclusive claim on this nexus.

Tarkovsky does not argue that any pure state can be restored to man—the “noise” that separates us from Creation is an inescapable element of our existence. Cultural producers, thus, wind up with a choice: they can simply add to the noise, perceiving the world in a determinate way and passing on conventional visions. Or they can see the noise as a creative challenge, a set of limitations to work around and beyond. Tarkovsky chooses the latter path; his images contain the tantalizing possibility to see both the noise and what lies beyond it: Life has given us history and power and culture and chaos and the capacity for determinate, instrumental use of the material image. But it has also given us the allied capacities to *see* the world—to stop and reflect and perceive and remember a “time before” that is unknowable to history but readily available in the existence of things if only we take the time to apprehend them. Man’s great gift is the capacity to build upon this apprehension, the ability, in our awe of creation, to *create*. For Tarkovsky, our great hope in life lies in our understanding that beneath the historical, determinate layer of our perception lie these deeper capacities, the ability to remember matter, in its infinite meaningfulness, to see beyond the noise and create based upon what one has seen.

Both Boriska’s non-discovery of the “right” clay beneath the poplar and his subsequent discovery by the riverbed point the way past our mere consideration of 15th-century bellcasting techniques and Boriska’s role—in some ways easier to argue for than Rublev’s—as an expression of Russian national self-consciousness. The soil Boriska tumbles into is supranational and transhistorical; it is the stuff of the world rather than the story of the world, an almost tactile visual image unburdened by dramatic hints at the “Russianness” of the soil and the secret. If there is a certain patriotism in the film, it lies precisely in its willingness to grant Russian nature its place on the universal stage as simply Nature, and Russian genius its place as plain Genius, without the forced limitations of a national modifier. As Robert Bird (2004) argues, the

materiality of Tarkovsky's images "neutralizes historical clichés". The materiality of the image clears the field of blunt symbolism.

Tarkovsky himself has left a considerable record of his preference for the self-contained image to the symbol, which attains significance only through imposed meanings. "Everything is real," Tarkovsky told Hervé Guibert of *Le Monde*. An image, he continued, "possesses the same distinguishing characteristics as the world it represents. An image—as opposed to a symbol—is indefinite in meaning. One cannot speak of the infinite world by applying tools that are definite and finite" (Bielawski; Gianvito, 2006, p. 86).

The Tarkovskian image—sometimes a long take with an immobile camera, at other times an extensive tracking shot along a terrain of enigmatic details and varied textures—is ambiguous, but not in the postmodern sense that it has no independent meaning until an arbitrary meaning is imposed. Instead, the image's ambiguity lies in its patient awaiting of the viewer's choices from among its many inherent meanings. In Tarkovsky, a bell is a bell, not a fixed symbol of some abstract notion. At the same time, a bell contains within it the capacity to evoke an infinite number of associations in the viewer.<sup>4</sup> In his comments on Lev Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilich," Tarkovsky makes explicit his belief in the constitutive relationship between image and memory. When Tolstoy's dying protagonist sees a glimmer of light, he wants to say to his wife and daughter, "Forgive me" but instead says, "Let me through." For Tarkovsky, this is the essence of the open image that reveals itself in countless ways depending on the memories of the beholder. "Clearly that image, which shakes us to the very depths of our being, cannot be interpreted in one way only," he writes. "Its associations reach far into our innermost feelings,

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<sup>4</sup> We find here an affinity not only with Bergson's theory of the material image, but also with the ideas of the Russian philosopher Aleksei Losev, who wrote brilliantly about the material thing that contains *within itself* the entire idea-thing dialectic, upon which no meaning needs be imposed from outside, and within which reside an infinite number of diverse meanings (Lossky, 1952, pp. 292-295).

reminding us of some obscure memories or experiences of our own, stunning us, stirring our souls like a revelation” (p. 108).

After the horrific scene of the blinding of the masons, Tarkovsky cuts to a blotch of dark paint splattered on the white wall of the Vladimir Cathedral of the Assumption. There is a handprint in the center of the blotch. The print at the center of the blotch resembles the earliest cave paintings; it is a wordless, codeless statement that says, simply, “I am.” What it says beyond that is a matter for reflection. The blotch, left by the Rublev himself, may be seen by some viewers as a visual cry of abject despair; others, such as Bird (2004, 2008), may see it as a breakthrough in Rublev’s blocked efforts to envision the Last Judgment. The blotch is at once despair and breakthrough and declaration of being; it is the simultaneous rejection of and embrace of art. It is, in short, many things, and while it may be a bit pat to compare Rublev’s blotch to a Rorschach Test for the movie-going public, the reference is not entirely inapt.

Tarkovsky often spoke of his films as “co-creations” with the viewer; this was not an admission that images were arbitrary, but that they were ambiguous: the director’s fabled long take emerged from a desire to let the image speak to the viewer and await the associations it would evoke. The viewer is rewarded for close observation of the film, and the film is enriched by the associative pathways the viewer has discovered (Tarkovsky, 1986). The work of grasping the tensions between the story of life and the stuff of life is left to the viewer. Paint on a river, a blotch on a wall, and the gaze of a horse—these are not readily decodable conventional images. Nor is their meaning yoked to the unfolding plot. Rather, they are evocations of the infinite, and, we, like Tarkovsky himself, must carve from them a perception of our own. In this way, Tarkovsky’s images ask us to take responsibility for what we have seen.

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*Andrei Rublev* is legendary for its visual images, for the kinetic energy of the raid, the stillness of Rublev's gaze, and the deep-focus shots of the great brown Russian land. But the film's richness also flows from its dialogue and monologues—what we might call its “sound images”. Here, as with his visual images, Tarkovsky explores the differences between expression that is rooted in the deep experience of time and matter, and that which is subordinated to or rendered meaningless by the instrumental task at hand. We can, for instance, compare the nature of unreservedness in some of the film's most verbal characters. The words of the princes, the Tatar chieftain, and the monk Kirill are by turns self-serving and empty. Meanwhile, Boriska, Theophanes, and the jester speak, in their different ways, with deep commitment; insistently, stubbornly, they speak words that make their own lives more challenging; something beyond instrumental determinacy, some grasp of the meaning of soil or paint or rough-hewn humanity, calls upon them to follow their voices down difficult paths.

Boriska, by turns desperately affirmative and painfully anxious, pronounces and pouts and rages for his chance to make the bell, for his vision of the right clay, for the early firing of the clay cast despite the warnings of his elders that it will break. With each sentence he throws himself still harder against the gates of convention. Theophanes, meanwhile, speaks wisely and patiently with Andrei of his own internal struggle with convention: he appears to condemn man in his work, but he is full of love. Indeed, his condemnation springs from his love; he cannot bear to see the torture on Red Square, yet he believes in the torments of the Last Judgment. His warmth is conveyed in the tones in which he speaks to Andrei, the joy he takes in the act of human communication. Theophanes cannot share Andrei's iconoclastic propositions on the nature of Christ, and yet he delights in Andrei's presence, his mind, his soul, his passion to find his way. The contradictions in Theophanes are partly resolved when his ghost appears in the ruined cathedral after the Vladimir raid and announces to Andrei, who has now lost hope in

mankind: “I was wrong then, and you are wrong now.” Man is redeemable, says Theophanes’ shade, and one must look upon him with charity and hope for his soul. And yet when Andrei, the detritus of the raid piled around him, asks Theophanes, “How long will this go on?” Theophanes answers, “Probably forever.” Even after death, Theophanes is torn between a longing for the good and a saddened belief in the inevitability of evil. The jester, meanwhile, speaks to a different tradition, one that also sharply grasps man’s hypocrisy and punishes it not with brimstone, but with wit. His words are at once impromptu and rooted in centuries-old tradition. His performance is a riot of disciplined indiscipline. He puts his life at risk, flagrantly belittling his betters, because *his* truth lies with neither church nor state but with a tradition of buffoonery that long preceded the Grand Prince and will long survive him. The jester’s brand of spontaneity is far from unthinking: It is hard-earned and well-learned, an art that gives people access to a corner of the soul where misery cannot reach.

When Rublev takes his vow of silence, the importance of the sound-image is underlined by its absence. The vow is not the act of a man who has given up, but of one who, cornered by life, insists above all on maintaining his integrity. Bewildered by his world and by his own human sinfulness, he will not speak of holy things while he cannot be sure of the meaning of his words. Such total commitment, in which word *is* deed, presents a stark contrast with the empty chatter of the film’s authority figures—the Grand Prince, his brother, and the Tatar chieftain—and with the tendentious, self-serving blather of the quotation-mongering monk Kirill. Consumed with jealousy of Rublev, Kirill pretends at commitment, but cannot live it. When he meets Theophanes, he quotes Epiphanius the Wise and Konstantin Kostenecki on holiness and art and uses their words to criticize the work of Rublev. But when Theophanes invites Kirill to be his assistant, he first refuses and then agrees only on the condition that Theophanes send a messenger to the monastery to announce the summons in the presence of Rublev. The younger

prince and the Tatar leader, meanwhile, outdo Kirill in dissonance between word and deed, lobbing pleasantries about as their men lay waste to the people of Vladimir.

Chatterboxes are the sound-embodiment of the unreliability of the world. Sound without meaning is the aural texture of alienation from nature. Some voices arise from the soil, a necessity of the creative unfolding of the universe, and their words, being more than words, return to matter as creative acts, balloons and bells and bricks and little woodcarvings and icons and the momentarily smiling mouths of the jester's audience. Other voices seem to come from nowhere and go nowhere. They seem not to be drawn from nature, and to nature they will not return. They violate the law of conservation of matter and energy. They, like the bloodshed that unfolds around their empty chatter, are acts of waste, of dissipation of the energy of the world. Through these aural images of negation we get a deeper sense of Tarkovsky's longing for that energy which precedes all, gives rise to all, and will outlast all. As in Boym's reflective nostalgia, the emphasis here is not on the return or recapitulation of a bygone epoch, but on the creative act of reuptake and reuse of the energy of loss.

Early in the episode of *Boriska the Bellcaster*, Tarkovsky uses the borders of the frame to capture the emptiness of royal words. The event in the scene is simple: An emissary of the Grand Prince arrives at a village on horseback in search of Boriska's father, Nikola, apparently a renowned caster of bells. Boriska informs the emissary that his father has died from the plague. The emissary asks for another bellcaster, and then another, and another. Dead, dying, dead, says Boriska. Then he asks the prince's man to take him instead. The prince's man laughs. Boriska says he knows the secret of bellcasting. This begets still more laughter.

The conversation would appear to put the prince's man in a position of power, but Tarkovsky's framing cuts the legs, and pretty much everything else, out from under the emissary: Boriska is on the right side of the frame, leaning on the wall of his log house. To his left is a

rooster in the window square, like a picture in a picture, proud, as roosters will be, somehow elevated above the whole miserable human drama. On the left side of the frame all we see is the rear end of the messenger's horse. We hear the messenger's voice, but we do not see him—just the horse's backside, unbothered by flies and apparently matching the rooster in its supreme indifference to princely power.

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As we have seen, the visual imagery and verbal textures in Tarkovsky's film repeatedly undermine conventional symbols. Evgenii Margolit has pointed out that one of the innovations of Thaw cinema is the use of the "subjective camera," which "deconventionalizes...traditional, familiar conceptions of the world" (Margolit, 2001, p. 37). This deconventionalization permits a form of longing different from, and opposed to, the hegemonic forms. There are many things from the past one can long for, and many ways to long for them, but conventional symbols of the past are encoded with preferred meanings that attempt to restrict the viewer's reading.

One powerful example of the use of the subjective camera by Tarkovsky and his cameraman, Vadim Yusov, comes near the end of the film, when Boriska's bell is nearly complete. He has won the trust of his assistants, and, it seems, of hundreds of workers. He gives the word, and with a massive communal effort, the townspeople raise the bell from the casting pit. There is jubilation, choral singing, an air of *sobornost'*—the ancient Kievan notion of communal unity, or "conjunctivity". The Grand Prince arrives with foreign ambassadors to hear the first ringing of Boriska's bell. The prince's aide asks if all is ready, and then he swears at Boriska's foreman, "If not, you better f---ing watch out." The arrival of princely authority breaks the spirit of the moment; the tattered, disjunctive social fabric is revealed. The bell turns slowly to reveal the seal of St. George, Moscow's patron saint, trampling a serpent. But the bell is high in the frame; only the serpent is visible. We do not even see the hooves that are ostensibly trampling it.

Tarkovsky most memorably defamiliarizes the familiar in the film's epilogue, a long, gorgeous meditation upon Rublev's work. We have never seen one of Rublev's icons up until this moment, when the film transitions from a black-and-white shot of embers on a dying fire to glorious color close-ups of the icons. Even here, though, "glory" is not offered up in the restorative-nostalgic sense. Tarkovsky does not restore the walls of the Trinity cathedral for his audience. (Rublev's Old Testament Trinity had been long since transferred from the Holy Trinity Monastery to the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.) He does not give the viewer the opportunity to relish the cultural symbolism of the Great Man's Work. The icons are never presented as complete images, and for the first five minutes of the sequence we never see a segment of an image large enough to gesture toward the composition of the whole. Instead, Vadim Yusov, Tarkovsky's cameraman, shows us the paintings in extreme close-up, panning slowly across the images, showing us a tiny dove, the graceful arch of an ancient building, the intricate folds of diaphanous cloaks. We see Rublev's brushstrokes, but we are denied access to his grand image, the image that has taken on so many layers of ideological meaning over the centuries. Tarkovsky goes out of his way to demonstrate the sheer beauty and materiality of the images by defamiliarizing them. This defamiliarization is heightened by the mixing of images from different icons. Thus we see parts rather than entirety, collage rather than singularity, textures rather than symbols.

One by one the images reach our eyes and replace themselves before we can jigsaw them into the familiar mental image of a full icon: stripes, squares, arms, hands, cupolas of a churches, fragments of buildings, a hand over a bowl, a pair of rust-brown feet, the branches of tree. Only near the end of the montage do we see the face of Christ from Rublev's "Savior", and even then the image is transformed by sheets of sudden rain and replaced by an extreme close-up detail of chipped paint on wood. As the rain falls, the color shifts from pale, piney tan, the wood grain

visible beneath the paint, to a rusty red-brown similar to the color of Christ's skin. Is it his right cheek? The left side of his neck? The icon's time-damaged edge? The image dissolves to a grassy riverbank, where horses graze as the rain pours down. We have seen brushstrokes through raindrops, culture through nature, the ancient work of man through the even more ancient matter from which it emerged. Tarkovsky has presents us with the tactile work of a man rather than the cultural artifact of a national hero. He has displaced the restorative-nostalgic discourse of Rublev as a symbol and offered instead a reflective-nostalgic meditation on the polysemic images of a half-lost culture.

The icons do not pull us away from the image of Rublev as a man, but move us still closer. They mark Rublev's emergence from silence and invite reflection upon the meaning of that silence. What becomes evident is that Rublev has never really lost faith. Through 15 years of silence he remains watchful, taking in the matter of his world, hunting the bitter landscape for icons of hope, guarding his integrity, waiting, yearning. Rublev's ability to long for something more creates an ineffable hopefulness that resonates through the film's most brutal moments. He himself is the image at the heart of Tarkovsky's counter-history.

### **Conclusion**

Andrei Tarkovsky's 1966 film *Andrei Rublev* presents a strikingly independent vision of Russian history and Rublev's place in it. In the 1950s and 60s, Soviet commentators presented Rublev as a symbol of resistance to foreigners, national self-consciousness, and unification under the gathering hand of Moscow. This type of appropriation of the past, calling for a single dominant interpretation, is strongly indicative of what Boym has called "restorative nostalgia." Tarkovsky's vision of Rublev, on the other hand, proceeds in the open-ended register of "reflective nostalgia." For Tarkovsky, Rublev's work evokes "a nostalgia for brotherhood," but Tarkovsky is unwilling to pin upon that nostalgia the full weight of Russia's unification process

and successive authoritarian ideologies. Instead, he poses to himself, and to the audience, a trio of questions—*What is this longing for brotherhood? Where does it come from? And what does it mean for us?*—and has the restraint not to offer monolithic answers.

Tarkovsky did not work in the language of symbols, but of images. The image, for him, was a captured reflection of reality itself, with all the ambiguities of reality embedded in it. Symbols attempt to sell a fixed encoded message to the viewer. Images await the viewer's choice among infinite embedded meanings. Tarkovsky's shots are patient; they allow the viewer to absorb and contemplate the materiality of each image. The gaze of Tarkovsky's camera embodies a heightened attention to life, an indeterminate longing for the world that slips through our fingers while we busily make our way through history. Tarkovsky pits the yearning to remember the damp chill of the soil against the desire to recapitulate a world described in fixed narratives *about* the soil. He challenges the narratives and plunges his hand ever deeper into the cool mud.

Tarkovsky was able to simultaneously embrace Rublev and reject the tendentious historical symbolism that had grown up around him. Instead of a mythical giant, he presents us with an enigmatic, spiritually troubled man trying his best to live with integrity through a brutal age. Tarkovsky invites our co-rumination on history's rough treatment of the creative spirit, and on what might be gained through the reintegration of that lost spirit into our lives. He rejects the hegemonic, restorative-nostalgic encoding of Rublev's life and, through reflective-nostalgic encoding, opens up a rich terrain upon which viewers can reexamine their national and human heritage. Tarkovsky's labors were not without resonance in Russian culture: Years after the opening of the Andrei Rublev Museum of Early Russian Art in Moscow, a statue was placed before the building. It was sculpted in the image of Anatoly Solonitsyn, the actor who portrayed Tarkovsky's Rublev (Bird, 2004, p. 8).

This paper offers a case study of the uses of nostalgia in a challenging social context. Boym's

notions of restorative and reflective nostalgia provide a framework that allows researchers to go beyond the lay conception of nostalgia as a conservative social force and explore the ways in which, in its reflective form, nostalgic longing invites not a recapitulation of or retreat to the past, but a creative appropriation, reexamination, and reprocessing of its lost and neglected gifts. Reflective nostalgia can mount a spirited challenge to hegemonic cultural assumptions, and merits further study in diverse cultural and historical contexts.

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