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Corporeality and Transcendence: Physicality, Suffering, and Eroticism in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*

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Abstract | This essay explores the relationship between the notion of corporeality in its various connotations, notably its aesthetic aspects, and the iconography of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966). The focus on the individual that struggles to achieve the desired transcendence through both artistic production and the gradual development of a conscious poetic relationship to everyday life has interesting philosophical connotations: our focus is not as much on the spiritual aspects of this exploration, as in the corporeal, sensual element that is carefully linked with natural environment in Tarkovsky's narratives. In Tarkovsky's films, and *Andrei Rublev* in particular, the desired transcendence is achieved through the flesh, through the focus on the human body. In this respect, phenomenology proves to be more than a tool for reading the film: the relationship between the present (difficult to approach) and the past (both collective, manifested in culture, and personal, approached through memory) lies at the heart of the film. The relationship between such philosophical concerns and the iconography of the film, the reconstruction of a medieval time, notably depicted as direct and approached through the senses rather than distant like an ideological construction, will be explored through the lens of poetry, perceived as a way to approach everyday life and an almost fetishistic visual and narrative emphasis on a physical violence, the other face of sensuality.

Keywords | Flesh, Corporeality, Transcendence, Violence, Phenomenology, Physicality, Perception, Eroticism, Andrei Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublev*

In the opening shots of *Andrei Rublev* (1966), a fantasy of the 15th century, in a yet unidentified time and place that already, in its ambiguity, seems to allude to the medieval past, an attack takes place near an abandoned church, in an isolated area by the river. A villager named Yefim attempts to fly in a primitive balloon, patched together out of skins and other raw material, to escape his yet unidentified pursuers, a group of attackers who follow him persistently by boat (*Andrei Rublev* 00:04:47–00:05:03). As he sets off, there is a sense of accomplishment, a dream-like quality, even if momentary (00:05:37–00:06:42); like Yefim's flight, an emphasis on the subjective feeling of transcendence overshadows what we would conventionally call suspense, a rational interest in his fate. His inevitable crash is followed by the shot of a horse, rolling over in slow motion, on the ground (00:07:01–00:07:16). The events, enigmatic in nature, are unrelated to the plot and, up to an extent, to the thematic heart of the subsequent events of the film.[1]

One would be tempted to interpret such vivid images through surrealism or psychoanalytic theory and indeed their sensual power and dependence on free association seem to encourage such readings, yet Tarkovsky's often stated skepticism towards both movements on the one hand and the recognition of a totally different cultural background on the other indicate that any reading founded in symbolistic principles could easily prove to be misleading.[2] Spirituality as an alternative interpretive lens is not safer for our purposes, in the sense that not only can the term be characterized as conveniently broad—in different contexts, the general idea of spirituality could mean almost anything—it also seems to be founded on the well-documented knowledge of Tarkovsky's Christian beliefs

[1]Both versions, the 1966 theatrical release *The Passion According to Andrei* and the highly edited 1969 *Andrei Rublev*, follow a fragmented structure consistent with phenomenology's emphasis on fleeting impressions, the often-fragmented character of Byzantine art, and the work of the historical Andrei Rublev in particular. The lifespan of the historical Andrei (often spelled Andrey) Rublev has notably been described as "an age of fragmentation and foreign occupation" in the recent 2023 book-length study *Andrey Rublev: The Artist and His World* (Milner-Gulland 30). See, Milner-Gulland, Robin. *Andrey Rublev: The Artist and His World.* Reaktion Books, 2023.

[2]Memorably summarized in *Sculpting in Time*:

> I have a horror of tags and labels. I don't understand, for instance, how people can talk about Bergman's 'symbolism'. Far from being symbolic, he seems to me, through an almost biological naturalism, to arrive at the spiritual truth about human life that is important to him. The point is that the depth and significance of a director's work can only be gauged in terms of what makes him shoot something: motivation is the decisive factor, manner and method are incidental. (149–150)

A more poetic phrasing of the same idea can be found in his published journals *Time within Time: The Diaries, 1970–1986*:

> The basic principle—as it were, the mainspring—is, I think, that as little as possible has to be shown, and from that little the audience has to build up an idea of the rest, of the whole. In my view that has to be the basis for constructing the cinematographic image. And if one looks at it from the point of view of symbols, then the symbol in cinema is a symbol of nature, of reality. Of course, it isn't a question of details, but of what is hidden. (65)

rather than Tarkovsky's films themselves which often contrast orthodox mysticism with 20th century psychological realism (both *Andrei Rublev* and *Sacrifice* carefully explore the theme of despair), naturalistic depictions of rural life, the motif of a latent but persistent eroticism, a consistent dialogue with different cultural contexts through allusions to eastern and European iconography and even some pre-Christian motifs. Indeed, an aspect often ignored, or at least played down, is that throughout Tarkovsky's oeuvre, and in *Andrei Rublev* in particular, sexuality, pagan elements, and an overall emphasis on the human body as an extension of the earth dominate the iconography. That is a corporeal sensual element, which has its roots away from the platonic and neo-platonic distrust in the flesh,[3] echoed in most metaphysical worldviews.

To address such difficulties, this paper attempts an alternative interpretive point of view; it explores the relationship between certain philosophical themes and motifs, namely the often-misunderstood *relationship between corporeality and transcendence*, a scene familiar to us from midcentury existentialism, both continental and Russian (I am referring here to thinkers like Lev Shestov and Nikolai Berdyaev) and the medieval iconography of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev*. The existential focus on the individual who struggles to achieve the desired transcendence through both artistic production and the gradual development of a conscious poetic relationship to everyday life has interesting philosophical connotations: our focus is not as much on the metaphysical aspects of this exploration, as it is in the corporeal, sensual element that is carefully linked with natural environment in Tarkovsky's narratives.

Andrei Rublev, rooted in various philosophical traditions, perceives the world not only through subjectivism but also as a work of art, as a field to be experienced. Memory, lust, the feelings of loss and grief, and other inner conditions are always attributed to corporeal expressions and the necessity of art; Rublev's yearnings are always to be understood in relation to a material reality, an outside situation. A current theoretical area that provides context for this often-radical approach is *phenomenology*, in its broader sense, in its emphasis on the notion of flesh and its subsequent interpretation of one's everyday perception of the world as a creative, artistic process, realized not intellectually but through the human body.

The research question I explore here is how the corporeal and the ecstatic are regulated narratively and thematically. Transcendence, even if given through a religious iconography and historical setting, is clearly approached in physical terms. This choice has a radical implication: the film expresses an interest not in cerebral or conventionally religious, but in haptic ways of approaching reality (exemplified through activities such as making works of art with one's hands, painting images, and constructing material objects like bells or walls, activities that the film presents in parallel and identifies with one another). It also carries a latent eroticism, closely related to physical pain. These two motifs structure *Andrei Rublev*, leading to a creative approach to life.

When it comes to the term "Transcendence," always difficult to approach, one can think of Kierkegaard's metaphysical, almost ecstatic, view and especially the later

[3]A notable example of this fundamental platonic belief can be found in the Plato's dialogue, *Phaedo*: "And, my friend, we must believe that the corporeal is burdensome and heavy and earthly and visible. And such a soul is weighed down by this and is dragged back into the visible world, through fear of the invisible and of the other world" (80b). See, Plato. *Phaedo*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube, Hackett Publishing, 1977.

20th century's connotations that the term took as it was gradually distanced from overtly religious references. Kierkegaard perceives transcendence as a desire to dance, to walk on the edge as if one were an acrobat in order to escape outward limitations and achieve a sense of fulfillment.[4] The focus on corporeality is mainly influenced by phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, a work that seeks the relationship between artistic creativity, perception of the world, and the dynamics of the human body. My main argument is that in Tarkovsky's films, *Andrei Rublev* in particular, the desired transcendence is achieved *through the flesh*, through the conscious focus on both the narrative structure and the imagery of the human body. The need for the artist to observe and inhabit the world *poetically*, in the literal verbal sense, that is *creatively*, is a natural extension of this corporeal priority. In this respect phenomenology, as expressed notably by Merleau-Ponty, a thinker who carefully links visual perception with creativity and even artistic production,[5] proves to be more than a tool for reading the film. Merleau-Ponty discusses visual perception as an attempt to *create* meaning rather than accept it inactively. The perception of isolated objects is impossible, inconceivable. Everything is related to a context, most of all the observer, in many ways described as if he were a poet. Watching reality, for phenomenology, is a procedure that closely resembles artistic production, particularly visual arts. Observation of the world is understood as a process that gives rise to meaning through the senses (the sensual character of observation—notably the often-neglected fact that the *eye* is also part of the human body—is underlined (Merleau-Ponty 38), as a goal in itself, rather than a practical procedure or an attempt to approach a pre-determined reality. Ambiguity for phenomenologists has positive connotations exactly because it indicates the idea that life is open to possibility and interpretation; it is in this spirit that observance of the world proves necessary, an active creative procedure. Works like *Phenomenology of Perception* share with *Andrei Rublev* a belief in materiality and sensual experience, and a trust in an intended reconciliation between the subject that observes and the world as the object of this observation:

> That is why we say that in perception the thing is given to us 'in person', or 'in the flesh'. Prior to and independently of other people, the thing achieves that miracle of expression: an inner reality which reveals itself externally, a significance which descends into the world and begins its existence there, and

[4]The literature is too broad for the scope of this paper, but two informative and sensitive books worth mentioning here are *Alterity and Transcendence* (Emmanuel Levinas, 1995), where metaphysics is combined with 20th century political concerns. Levinas focuses on one's subjectivity and personal struggles but emphasizes on an individual's relationship with another person, an emphasis which differentiates the thinker's understanding of transcendence to Kierkegaard's approach); and the more recently translated *Transcendence and the Concrete* (Jean Wahl, 2017), where various existential thinkers and their different approaches on the persistent and often misunderstood notion of transcendence are analyzed thoroughly. Collectively the studies of Levinas and Wahl present the continental understanding of the term Transcendence and the various dynamics it is built on, one of which is clearly corporeality. See, Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by Michael B. Smith, Columbia UP, 1999; Wahl, Jean. *Transcendence and the Concrete: Selected Writings*, edited by Alan D. Schrift and Ian Alexander Moore, translated by Ian Alexander Moore and Alan D. Schrift, Fordham UP, 2016.

[5]"A visual field is not made up of limited views. But an object seen is made up of bits of matter, and spatial points are external to each other. An isolated datum of perception is inconceivable, at least if we do the mental experiment of attempting to perceive such a thing. But in the world, there are either isolated objects or a physical void" (Merleau-Ponty 4).

> which can be fully understood only when the eyes seek it in its own location. (Merleau-Ponty 373)

The limits between materiality and sensual experience are sketched in *Andrei Rublev* as consciously fluid and ambiguous, a depiction that links the experience of life with a strongly ritualistic element, often revived in religious ceremonies or performative demonstrations, paintings, and other artistic explorations that tend to blur the lines between corporeality and the ecstatic. The term "ecstatic" at this point refers to an intended experience of sensual elevation that could be interpreted in erotic or religious terms, but always takes place at the realm of the flesh. A blurring of lines and certainties between corporeality and the ecstatic, an ambiguity that for phenomenologists has positive associations, is central to the structure and thematical concerns of *Andrei Rublev*. Cinema itself, based on close observation of reality and phenomenological in character, seems the natural culmination of this tendency in the 20th century. Observation, so important for the visual arts, is perceived in this context as a corporeal, almost sensual stance that calls for involvement in the material world—a world visually associated by the film with natural environments or pieces of architecture, like the destroyed church—rather than as a behavior that implies the need for detachment, as observation is often perceived in everyday life.

When it comes to *Andrei Rublev*'s understanding of the concept of corporeality, one can note three key factors that structure the film:

1. *Radicality of the Priority of the Flesh*

This is apparent when it comes to the phenomenological connotations of the focus on the human flesh. Subjectivity is understood only in a *dynamic* relationship with the outside environment and such a relation is physical by definition and revolutionary by extension, closely associated with the human body's need for revolt. Tarkovsky's narrative is not political in the literal sense of depicting social relations. It is actually rooted in subjective, often intuitional yearnings, and seems to consciously *negate* the kinds of historical allusions found, for example, in Eisenstein's dialectical editing. Yet this does not preclude radicality; rather, it is the natural continuation of the perspective he expresses. The revolt I hint at refers to the often-violent confrontation with the contradictions of reality when experienced directly, immediately, and through the flesh, without the safety nets provided by rationalization. It is an experience, not a doctrine. Sensuality, as a means of approaching the world, encourages doubt in intellectual certainties and gives rise to ambiguity. The natural culmination of this blurring of limits is a creative impulse that is often violent, yet liberating.

The phenomenological associations of Tarkovsky's fiction are most evident in his treatment of nature, which is consistently presented as a sentient entity, inseparable from those who inhabit it. Even if Tarkovsky's narrative consciously keeps its distance from possible political stances and ideological preferences as interpretive tools, there is an inevitable political extension, the recognition of a radicality that lies in the core of the concern that structures the narrative: I am referring to Rublev's desire to cultivate a more conscious relationship with the natural world, ideally achieving an identification with a pre-civilized, pre-rational realm of reality, exemplified by the trees and the earth themselves, which he seems to perceive as an extension of the human body. The Russian

villagers are likewise presented as inseparable from nature; they are interchangeable with it. The parallel editing of Yefim's fall and the horse's fall in the prologue of the film (00:07:01–00:07:16) offers perhaps the clearest illustration of this idea.

2. Eroticism and Violence

The link between the two is unmistaken. Suffering is to be understood as erotic and sensual in its depiction and the intended transcendence (a word often associated with spirituality) always prevails in physical terms. *Andrei Rublev* is a story of redemption and violence (culminating in a murder committed by Rublev himself) but the protestant concept of guilt as a personal error in judgement is absent. Guilt is understood as a physical condition, thus often depicted visually through an erotic iconography. A physical masochism emerges as the natural continuation of this corporeal priority. In this context, voluntary suffering should not be understood, I feel, as a spiritual or inner condition (as it might be in, for example, Ingmar Bergman's existentialism or Martin Scorsese's Catholicism) but as a sensual reality. This tendency is evident in multiple moments: from the depiction of Andrei being tied to a tree and violently kissed by a girl during the pagan ceremony, (00:56:16–00:56:20) to his later enigmatic vow of silence, which functions as an act of self-punishment rather than an expression of religious trust in the future. A proclivity toward martyrdom is mirrored in other acts of hostility toward the flesh that the film memorably depicts, notably the murder of young Foma by the Tatars, shown to collapse in slow motion, hit by an arrow in an evocative, lyric scene (01:47:18–01:47:20) and the torment of an authority figure inside a church preceded by the blinding of the masons (01:45:37–01:45:40), an act of physicality and symbolic importance in a film so concerned with seeing and observation. Overall, an enigmatic sensual aspect in lyric violence is evident. Which brings us to the third factor:

3. Transcendence as a Corporeal Process

The platonic call for escaping physicality to elevate oneself has little to do with *Andrei Rublev.* Depicted visually in physical terms and understood philosophically as a physical reality (rather than a mystic one), transcendence as a procedure, as an *experience*, is closely related to embodiment and even natural environment. As we shall see, the final optimistic declaration, "I will paint and you will construct bells," (02:52:10) can be interpreted exactly as a return to a celebration of creativity and artistic expression, *through physicality*.

What these dynamic factors—corporeality, eroticism, violence, and the desire for transcendence—share is the fact that, even though they initially seek to describe one's solitary journey for identity and self-expression, when included in a fictional narrative they inevitably refer to a subject's journey—an attempt by a person to reconcile with exterior reality. This need to approach whatever surrounds us (natural environment or historical events) is carefully linked with the artist's attempt to reconcile a present, difficult to approach, with a past both collective, manifested in culture and simultaneously deeply personal, approached through memory.

Consider, for example, the Bacchic song of the street jester, (00:09:03–00:11:47) whose lyrics satirically target the morals of priests, authority figures, and sexual behavior. This performance is closely linked to the everyday life of rural medieval Russia, in its simplicity, poverty, and immediacy, and at the same time the very idea of the past,

evoking a pre-Christian carnival tradition. Such a combination of collective and personal experience defines *Andrei Rublev*'s view of the Russian medieval past, as a collective dream that also communicates with an artist's inner needs. The relationship between such philosophical concerns and the iconography of the film, the reconstruction of 15th century—a medieval period depicted as archaic, timeless, and yet concrete and physical, rather than presented as exotic or distant like an ideological construction, see notably the weathered faces of the peasants in the inn (00:14:13) or the simplicity of the ritual of the Calvary in the snow (00:46:13–00:49:20)—will be explored in three distinct areas: First, through the lens of Poetry, a term of utmost importance in Tarkovsky's theoretical writings, notably in his essay *Sculpting in Time.* Poetry, in this context, is not to be understood as a genre of literature but rather as a dynamic way for the individual to approach reality and reconcile itself with it, through trust in memory and through an active sensitivity to the outside world.[6] Secondly, through the almost fetishistic emphasis on physical *violence*, the other face of sensuality, closely related to a historical event, the destructive invasion of Tartars in medieval Russia, but also, in its extremity, closely linked to personal transcendence. Finally, through the *very idea* of reconstruction of the long-forgotten past as a vital need that echoes Albert Camus's and Søren Kierkegaard's interest in the very concept of narrative, in structuring one's lived experience through archetypes, existential heroes (the so-called "knight of faith," a term we will revisit soon), and stories that illuminate the subjective perception of reality.

Through the following open research questions, I intend to explore the nature of the relationship between the already mentioned scheme of corporeality and transcendence. Even if not strictly distinguished from one another, they could be organized in the following way:

- Do these two factors, corporeality and transcendence, form a dichotomy as opposite forces in *Andrei Rublev* in accordance with the traditional neo platonic reading, or is transcendence the natural continuation and culmination of the narrative's focus on the human body? The relationship between extreme violence, often sensualized and closely related to the film's perception of the medieval, and sensuality, the experience of the body in general, is clearly an area of interest when it comes to the study of this dichotomy. Is the emphasis on physical violence to be perceived as a form of transcendence in itself? Is it cathartic?
- Violence, a motif that dominates the narrative, is also sensual in its depiction. Its physicality is based on the fact that pain is also a corporeal experience. Even if it is immanent (in the sense of a direct feeling, an experience focused on the realm of everyday life), Tarkovsky also carefully links it with the historical events of the Tartar invasion—a transitional period that, like all transitional decadent eras, is not devoid of a lyrical aspect in its uncertainties and its apocalyptical tone.
- Is this narrative choice coherent with the already implied transcendental, cathartic power of physical cruelty and self-harm? And when it comes to the

[6]"There are some aspects of human life that can only be faithfully represented through poetry. But this is where directors very often try to use clumsy, conventional gimmickry instead of poetic logic. I'm thinking of the illusionism and extraordinary effects involved in dreams, memories and fantasies. All too often film dreams are made into a collection of old-fashioned filmic tricks, and cease to be a phenomenon of life" (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* 30).

> Middle Ages themselves, as a scenery and as a thematic concern for Tarkovsky, what is the importance of the coexistence of an oppressive violent physicality and a desire for the individual subject to transcend whatever persecutes it and reach accomplishment through reconciliation with the outside world? Can these desires be fulfilled, or does Rublev's journey indicate bitterness and constitutes the depiction of an absurd flight, not different from the one attempted by Yefim in his primitive balloon? I read such an attempt to fly, such a desire, in Rublev's need to live fully, passionately and creatively, to elevate and transcend himself to another realm, escape from bitterness, to lead a life as authentic as possible, by painting icons in the middle of chaos and foreign invasion, as if he lived in a peaceful environment, away from the struggles of a hostile reality. He is consistent in his spiritual (and sensual, artistic) yearnings. After all, there is something liberating in embracing irrationality.

The three queries lead us to *physicality*, *violence*, and *eroticism*, elements that structure the film both narratively and thematically. In line with Tarkovsky's belief in poetry, the film's plot, though closely tied to historical events and metaphysical beliefs and traditions, stems from an instinctive, childlike acceptance of the contradictions an individual encounters in life. In the context of the film, violence and suffering are almost indistinguishable from the erotic. The kiss the pagan girl gives to a tied Rublev (00:56:16) is a corporeal experience not radically different from the horrifying, realistic depiction of the blinding of the masons. Rublev's gradual acceptance of these contradictions builds to a climax in the Bell Scene, when, through the unexpected encouragement he gives the crying young boy, he turns to optimism, in the least optimistic moment possible (02:52:10). Corporeality and transcendence, when approached not as opposites, reveal a kind of ambiguity; an ambiguity the narrative constantly attempts not to resolve, but to embrace, *linking it* to poetry and creativity. Tarkovsky's alignment with philosophical traditions which are skeptical of rationalism—such as Russian Christian existentialists like Lev Shestov and Nikolai Berdyaev, and to an extent, Western phenomenology—supports this choice. The rational thinker according to Shestov is restrained to pre-determined ideas "Constrained by the truth itself" (24). Similarly, Berdyaev believes these self-afflicted constraints or self-imposed burdens limit western thought, in contrast to what he sees as a more liberating mixture of Bacchic and mystic elements in the Russian cultural tradition. Philosophy "in the west took on a character of rational abstraction. In Orthodoxy it preserved the inward integrality of the spirit" (Berdyaev 43).

The answers to such inquiries are interrelated and constitute interpretive attempts rather than absolute declarations. The medieval setting itself suggests the presence of a physical violence and an overall atmosphere of terror, imposed both by the foreign invaders and the Church authorities. At the same time the same medieval landscape that imposes suffering and fear, in its passions, superstitions and strong religious beliefs, often promises dream-like possibilities and liberating aspects. The medieval—always enigmatic and fetishized in the Western imagination as a time of extremities or mythic knighthood and often contrasted with rationalization and civilization in either negative or romanticized terms—is treated more literally in *Andrei Rublev*. The transition from paganism to Christianity is presented as an ongoing process, captured unforgettably in a pagan ceremony, depicted as sensual and haunting, yet *natural.* The threat this medieval ceremony poses for the monk Rublev is also an inner yearning or fear. This refusal to

project emotion inward and instead tie it to external realms of reality is closely linked to the very environment in which Tarkovsky sets the action: rural, transitional, *material*. The people who inhabit it—farmers and masons—are deeply connected to the land and to the physical world.

In this setting, *spirituality* (religious faith in its various transformations) and *artistic creation* (including manual activities, works that the average person would not normally consider poetic in this setting, such as the public's fascination with the bell in the climactic scene or the repairing of the walls of the Holy Trinity church), are both to be experienced instinctively and through sensory experience. By extension, Tarkovsky's general perception of the notion of "the medieval" has everything to do with the more concrete perception of an artistic production *based on the senses.* The three key forces we explore (Physicality, Suffering, and Eroticism) emerge as natural extension of this very world.

In the following paragraphs we will explore *Andrei Rublev*'s perception of corporeality and transcendence through the relation between these concepts and three distinct areas of existential interest: the presumed *revolt of the body*, a desire that echoes mainly Albert Camus's views on corporeality (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 20–21).[7] The trust in *irrationality* as a theoretical background related to poetry and artistic production in itself and finally Tarkovsky's *yearning for otherness* as expressed through fight motifs and other visual indications of the main character show a tendency towards transcendence.

The Priority of Flesh

As we begin to analyze the visual and thematic motifs and themes that structure *Andrei Rublev*, we notice, as their natural extension, the creation of a visual dialogue between the individual and the material, natural world. The emphasis falls on the corporeal element as an expression of violent contradictions. Flesh in *Andrei Rublev* is persistently depicted and understood not as an indication of a peaceful reality but as an entity in revolt, an entity that *tends to rebel* both against outside reality and the existing status quo. Human bodies are constantly depicted to be dancing (the jester), (00:09:03–00:11:47) struggling (the Russians during the apocalyptic invasions) (01:34:00–01:36:43), experiencing the world in a sensual way (the supporters of the lost religion notably as they run, like shadows, through the woods, holding torches (00:52:22)) and inevitably taking a stance against an oppressive reality (Andrei Rublev himself, combining elements of all these figures, through the film). In this process, transcendence and corporeality are linked, and the already mentioned *radical* character of this "revolution of the flesh," gradually revealed as Andrei Rublev's journey through its various phases unfolds: His passionate artistic creations, spiritual yearnings, erotic tendencies, and evolving

[7]It is noted at this point that Nietzschean ideas on the priority of the body and an overall communication with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological interest in the flesh could also provide contexts for future research. For a detailed structural description of *Andrei Rublev* that focuses on visual elements, the first important study in English can be considered to be Mark Le Fanu's 1987 *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky*, a work both historically important and sensitive in its observations. See, Le Fanu, Mark. *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky*. British Film Institute, 1987. For academically more informed, sensitive, and evocative descriptions, see, Bird, Robert. *Andrei Rublev.* British Film Institute, 2004; Johnson, Vida T., and Graham Petrie. *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*. Indiana UP, 1994.

relationships—including his ambivalent friendship with the cynic Kyrill and notably their later confrontation (2:38:29–2:40:00)—are all dramatized through the body. So too are his acts of violence like the murder of the soldier (01:39:50–01:39:51) and his self-imposed punishment, which carries a certain masochistic, corporeal sensuality. His vow of silence becomes not only spiritual but also intensely physical. All of this leads toward his eventual celebratory acceptance of life. The same dichotomy of corporeality and transcendence is evident in the depiction of the Russian lower-class people: presented as always prosecuted either by authorities or foreign invaders and visually linked to materiality, determined by the land and the natural landscape.

It is notable, as already suggested, that this dramatization of a corporeal revolution often takes the form of self-punishment or sensual elevation, often at the same time. In this regard, while the pre-Christian Witch celebration depicted in *Andrei Rublev* narratively serves as a temptation, it is also an iconography of religious ecstasy, not so different from the one suggested in the lyrical sex scene between Alexandre and Maria in Tarkovsky's later film *Sacrifice* (1986), a natural culmination of the same themes. In *Sacrifice*, a defeated or otherwise compromised male figure (Andrei is tied to a tree, (00:56:16) whereas Alexandre cries in agony, infantilized, during a post-apocalyptic time not so different from the timelessness attributed to medieval historical realities in *Andrei Rublev*) (*Sacrific*e, 01:53:32–01:54:44) and a subsequent erotic event are linked with a personal and even social dynamic rearrangement. The line between the educated spiritual tormented man and the "woman of the lower class" (these motifs, schematical as they sound, undoubtedly are perceived not as archetypes but as literal, distinct states of being in the context of the pre-modern literary tradition Tarkovsky follows here) is blurred; in both cases the male is depicted as vulnerable, compared to a fetishized femininity subtly linked with the earth and Russian paganism and implied to relate with a more authentic, even if dangerous state of existence. A state of being the male artists desires. Sexuality, once more, is bound up with acts of submission—ties that bind or other forms of self-compromise. Flesh, in both narratives, becomes a liberating force, albeit a contradictory one.

For Andrei Tarkovsky, the image of the human body, as a natural reality, a literal entity rather than a symbol, visualizes what Albert Camus poetically defines as the "revolt of the flesh"[8] (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 20–21). The body experiences the world as a field to be explored, literally a world of art. It protests the contradictions it senses, and through this struggle, again in erotic, sensual terms, finally embraces this irrationality instinctively but decisively. In this spontaneous protest, human body for Tarkovsky becomes a means of self-fulfillment and dynamic creation for the individual. Corporeal reality has, in this sense, a priority over the mental cerebral ways to approach reality; the latter are seen negatively by the tradition of philosophical thought Tarkovsky seems to follow here (I am referring both to western existentialism and the already mentioned Russian anti-rationalist sentiments expressed by Sheston and Berdyaev), in the sense that they can easily be influenced by ideological prejudice. *Andrei Rublev* can be read as a cry for living artistically, that is authentically. The most obvious example of this cry for

[8]Camus in his poetic style defines the so-called revolt of the flesh as a violent experience of alienation from one's natural environment and surroundings. The human body experiences itself as if it was not part of this world. This realization leads the individual to unpredictable, intense feelings and actions. (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 20–21).

authenticity and intensity of feeling, in the context of the film, is probably The Last Judgement episode, where Rublev even after having experienced all the horrors of the human pain his era presented, suffering both objective wounds and inner fears, and scarred by various moments—from witnessing the blinding of the masons to turning to crime himself—still chooses the humanist approach in art, depicting Judgement full of mercy and harmony. A harmony and a beauty that he accepts and recognizes not in contrast to reality (the platonic and traditionally Christian call for escaping the limits of the flesh and flying into a higher realm) but interwoven in those very extreme moments. The pessimistic views on humanity expressed by his master Theophanes (notably articulated by the older painter, while surrounded by ants, in the roots of a tree, as if already deceased) (00:40:31) are slowly undermined by life itself, in its wild beauty and complexity. Another image implying the same belief in art as creation is the humble white church itself, the lonely building waiting to be frescoed. The simple-minded girl who fascinates Rublev has many aspects analogous with the building, deserted by all and expressing both the Dionysian element (in her expression of wild joy) and saint-like perspective all bodies try to balance in the film.

This revolt of the flesh, a depicted transcendence towards the *material* world, is closely linked with artistic production and everyday life. Lived Experience is not distinguished from artistic sensitivity, as the world becomes an object of interpretation, touch, and meaning for the observer and at the same time defines the subject[9] that intends to experience. This dialogue between the living individual and its surroundings, in accordance with current, early 21st century post-human doctrines and mid-20th century phenomenological explorations, verbally denies the priority of the subject against the world, a priority that used to be taken for granted in Cartesian western philosophy and Hegelian rationalism. Sensual and poetic as it is, this model of living strongly resembles both cinematic creation and Rublev's brave attempts to approach the world through other visual means like painting, which is the theme of the film. Art and life become inevitably indistinguishable from one another and the linking factor between the two is clearly the human body in its sensual tendencies and violent contradictions. The corporeal element, it should be mentioned, is also in dialogue with the already mentioned broader theoretical tradition of Russian existentialism: the hostile attitude that thinkers like Shestov and Berdyaev express against the trust in rationalism suggested by European analytical cognitivism. These irrational tendencies lie at the heart of the story of the film, the passionate artist who intends to express himself, to fly using raw materials. Metaphorically, he constructs primitive balloons and wondrous flying machines with his own hands much like his model, Yefim the terrified villager from the film's first scene. Or even like Don Quixote, who Tarkovsky evokes again in *Solaris* (1974) during another moment of spiritual elevation and literal flight (*Solaris* 02:12:36). Rublev's journey is driven by instinct and yearning, as he blindly but deliberately pursues elevation, moving further and further away from the suspicious rationality embodied by both the cynic Kyrill and the melancholic Theophanes. The irrational narrative elements are carefully

[9]In phenomenology, as a tradition, subject and object both interact actively to create meaning. Observance is seen as a process of creation. In existentialism, on the other hand, the subject and subjectivism are generally perceived as more important and crucial in the construction of meaning. In phenomenology, it is the procedure itself of observing that gives rise to meaning.

built on a Russian existential tradition; but at this point it is important to realize them as conscious narrative and thematic decisions rather than abstract declarations.

Lived Experience and Perceptions of Reality: The Jester and the Knight of Faith

Being present in everyday experience, through poetry or memory, living authentically and faithfully to oneself can be seen as a very important concept in Tarkovsky's fiction. The whole attitude bears striking similarities both with the focus on action as a form of self-fulfillment, as expressed notably by Jean-Paul Sartre[10] and Henri Bergson's insistence on developing a sensitive attitude towards everyday life and one's surroundings's otherness, an "*attention to life*" (Lawlor 58). Sartre relates creativity to action and personal responsibility, a view he supports sometimes politically and socially (*Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946) and other times phenomenologically (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943). Bergson in *Matter and Memory* (1896) prefers an *intuitional* approach to life. Both views communicate with Rublev's struggle.

In contrast to Sartre's focus on the future, as a time of self-fulfillment, self-realization approached through action, *Andrei Rublev* focuses on the past, recreated through memory and through a highly idiosyncratic understanding of art, exemplified through Rublev's often fruitless attempts to re-construct reality during the terrifying foreign invasion. The idea of past time, as a personal oneiric point of reference, the intense experience of childhood and dreams, is carefully and systematically identified in the context of the film with Russian medieval reality, in its timelessness, primitiveness, and physical corporeal violence. Sometimes the same need, that is to live intensely through memory and artistic creation is expressed through inner states like fantasies or dreams, a tendency most notable in the two dreams that structure *Ivan's Childhood*. Memory for Tarkovsky, in itself is seen as subjective and dynamic, rather than simply representational, an approach evident in *Mirror*, in its use of free association and its unique structure, based specifically on the blurring of strict limits between autobiography and fantasy. What the idea of the past, as expressed in *Andrei Rublev*, seems to liberate in its relation to corporeality, is an expressive dynamic power, a poetic ability to interpret, redefine, and eventually alter everyday life. This authentic living even if associated with an iconography based on primitiveness and exploration of the past (thus, the emphasis on the medieval world) is experienced directly in the present, in nature, and in its natural extension, human flesh.

The radical idea that human flesh is at war with its surroundings—constantly in revolt, suspended in a tension between embodiment and environment, interiority and exteriority, self and world—yet, precisely because of its immanent physicality, becomes the most truthful mode of expression, lies at the heart of this vision. Unlike cerebral activity, the body directly engages with external reality, making it the most reliable vessel for performative, artistic, and (in the broadest sense) erotic self-expression. This embrace of the flesh as a means to approach otherness finds its philosophical roots in Albert

[10]Sartre showed active interest in Tarkovsky, providing a detailed analysis on his first film *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), a review first published in *L'unita* on 9 October, 1963 and later republished in the original French in his collection of essays *Situations* (334–342). Notably, Tarkovsky, when interviewed by Laurence Cosse in 1986, expressed vocal dissatisfaction with Sartre's reading: "I was looking for an artistic, not an ideological defense" (164). See, Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, edited by John Gianvito, UP of Mississippi, 2006.

Camus's exploration of the absurd.[11] Camus, describing his archetypal "absurd heroes," dedicates a whole chapter of the *Myth of Sisyphus* to the *actor*, the individual who re-invents itself, through physical performance, through corporeality and dance, every night (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 73). In Tarkovsky's oeuvre a similar concern focuses on the idea of *imagination.* As Maya Turovskaya beautifully summarizes "One thing in Tarkovsky that always strikes the viewer is the unfailing power of the imagination, directed towards what Kracauer terms the 'redemption of physical reality' […]. The slow-flowing, swollen rivers with their low banks, the moated meadows with grazing, unsaddled horses, the low hills" (Turovskaya 43). Thus, the natural physical reality is closely linked to imagination and imagination, in its turn, is related to the immanent world.

In Tarkovsky's already mentioned *Sacrifice*, a film that in many ways can be read as a natural continuation of *Andrei Rublev's* thematic concerns, the main hero, Alexandre, comes from a theatrical performative background, being a retired actor, famous for his interpretation of both the Machiavellian Richard the third and the angelic Prince Myshkin (*Sacrifice* 00:26:49). A suffering physical being, Alexandre himself, very subtly seems to embody (literally) the struggle of those only seemingly opposite characters. His final extreme action, his burning of the beloved family house (02:17:10), a sacrifice, as the title indicates and by extension an act of self-destruction is not to be read as a masochistic impulse; the absurd action gradually gives rise to *creation*, an idea evident in the last shot of the blooming tree. Physicality is extended to the natural environment, an extension that reminds us strongly of the observations made by the Finnish architect and film theoretician Juhani Pallasmaa, who interestingly focuses on the tensions between the notions of *house* and *home* in order to conclude that "Tarkovsky's films are about the perpetual search for home, the lost home of childhood" (92). Home is once again to be understood as literal, rather than inner situation, a physical location. The fact that Tarkovsky's protagonists struggle to approach physical realities (idealized locations that, though elevated, are still filmed and depicted as elements of nature, as environments composed of trees, water, and other manifestations of material presence) reveals his underlying concern and sheds light on his oft-stated disbelief in symbolism:

> There is a term which has already become commonplace: 'poetic cinema'. What is meant by it is cinema that boldly moves away, in its images, from what is factual and concrete, as pictured by real life, and at the same time affirms its own structural wholeness. But there is a hidden danger for cinema in moving away from itself. 'Poetic cinema' as a rule gives birth to symbols, allegories and other such figures—that is, to things that have nothing to do with the imagery natural to cinema. (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* 66)

When it comes to philosophical and literal references, it should also be noted that Alexandre faithfully echoes Kierkegaard's *knight of faith* (Kierkegaard 38), another model for the authentic absurd hero of existential literature. Alexandre's *performative* approach to life, the actor's link to an oppressed sensuality that needs the mediation of the servant Maria (a woman directly identified as a witch, by Otto the messenger) in order to express itself and lead to the desired transcendence through sexual intercourse and through literal flight, in a scene that once more evokes the ecstatic element already

[11]An often-ignored aspect of Tarkovsky's relationship to existentialism is his intention to shoot a film based on Camus's *The Plague*, a desire expressed in detail in his journals (*Time within Time* 14; 21).

discussed in the description of the breathtaking scene of Yefim's elevation is associated again with medievalism. Maria directly embodies not only the idea of witchcraft, first depicted in *Andrei Rublev*, but also a general link between violent corporeality and expressive accomplishment.

The performative aspects of reality and their link to corporeality are embodied in the liberating, terrifying, and politically radical (as proved by his later punishment) dance of the street jester, in the second episode of the film. He leaps around singing provocative sexual lyrics in a Dionysian beat, the rhythm of his words, palpating and quick, mirrored in his ecstatic violent movements (00:11:30). His tongue that through its song offends and provokes and brings the audience to a deeper consciousness both of the material character of an oppressing outside reality (being such a physical being in himself) and by extension of the state violence, often tolerated or even orchestrated by the Church, will later be ripped out. The act mirrors Rublev's vow of silence and links the two as outsiders, artists, and individuals cast out against the realm of history. It is notable that the jester who literally lives through his body echoes Dionysian pre-Christian ideas in a Christian world: He expresses repressed yearnings and social desires, yet he remains unmistakably a modern creation, his physicality evoking phenomenological and even posthumanist approaches to art and communication with the world. Visually connected to the earth, nature, and materiality, the presence of the eccentric dancer subverts rational anthropocentrism and suggests a surrender to intuitional sensuality as a path to experiencing creativity. Human artistic activity, in this sense, is constantly interpreted as a process of creation, generating new and emergent meanings through a haptic engagement through one's interaction with what is seen and touched. Artistic creation is carefully and systematically linked with passionate living. Of course, passion for Tarkovsky is not devoid of an experience of suffering, a destructive element. In *Andrei Rublev*, pain is not devoid of sensuality and ecstatic elements and passionate living is not devoid of physical suffering. The film focuses thematically on the idea of *passion* (the original title being *The Passion According to Andrei Rublev*) and is deeply concerned with the motif of the suffering human body; an iconography that is medieval in its connotations and culturally familiar to us mainly through its association with Dostoyevsky and also Kierkegaard's individualistic and highly poetic re-reading of biblical narratives.[12]

Passion, in the context of the medieval world of archetypes that the film adopts, could bear two different verbal meanings: an expression of personal emotions that lead to revolt; and passion in the etymological, literal sense associated with the biblical Passion of Christ, echoed in the snowy Calvary scene, as a synonym for suffering. What takes place during the scene is a transportation of the lonely agonizing event to a Russian medieval landscape, complete with peasants standing in for the weeping mother, Jesus, and other archetypal figures from the New Testament (00:46:13–00:49:20). A subtle declaration of the relationship between the realm of the divine and everyday life is expressed in the context of medieval times, 15th century rural Russia.

The Myth of Sisyphus discusses existential angst as well, as Camus explores absurdism in all its incarnations, but in *Andrei Rublev*, pain (passion as suffering) is not so much to be read as an abstract state of being, as it is to be experienced as a sensual

[12]Notably, the story of Abraham, the main theme in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard).

state of being, a corporeal experience: a passion of the body[13] in the literal sense. Tarkovsky seems to *believe* in pain and link it directly with the ecstatic. Pain, in the context of the film is to be read as an inner condition but also a road to elevate oneself, an ideal familiar to us from Dostoyevsky and various religious traditions. When it comes to its sensual aspects (elaborated upon in many instances in this paper) there is also the element of its latent association to erotic pleasure and intense experience in general. For Camus, by contrast, pain (that motivates several of his heroes, notably Caligula in the same-titled play) has the character of an intellectual struggle. The fact that it is indeed expressed corporeally seems first and foremost, a source of *amazement*, of surprise:

> Oh, Cæsonia, I knew that men felt anguish, but I didn't know what that word anguish meant. Like everyone else I fancied it was a sickness of the mind—no more. But no, it's my body that's in pain. Pain everywhere, in my chest, in my legs and arms. Even my skin is raw, my head is buzzing, I feel like vomiting. But worst of all is this queer taste in my mouth. Not blood, or death, or fever, but a mixture of all three. I've only to stir my tongue, and the world goes black, and everyone looks … horrible. How hard, how cruel it is, this process of becoming a man! (*Caligula and Other Plays* 24)

How different is Caligula's expressive speech on pain to Tarkovsky's documentation of a rather physical naturalistic violence. Scenes depicting physical violence, particularly associated with the medieval setting like the passion of the artisans who are blinded with daggers, during the civil unrest, and already mentioned torments imposed on the street jester, all sensual in their detail, indicate this philosophically interesting difference between Tarkovsky's Russian existentialism in its transcendental quality and Camus's equally passionate absurdism. And yet, Tarkvovsky's already mentioned interest in an adaptation of *The Plague* (see footnote 11) suggest a dynamic, complicated relationship between the two thinkers.

The slightly erotic character of the iconography and the motif of a passionate sensuality, evident even in acts of self-punishment and self-destruction (for instance, the monk's vow of silence, the priority of guilt through the film), links the experience of pain and suffering in the flesh with the inner, spiritual quest undertaken by Rublev, through the artistic experience of the world. It is certainly intentional that both the street Jester and the masons, victims of corporeal punishments, are creators of works of art: The blinded eyes of the artisans and the cut tongue of the performer indicate also the *haptic* character of artistic production as the most menacing dimension for the status quo. The jester's dance threatened the authorities not because of the intellectual subtext of the lyrics but because, like all Bacchic manifestations, it seemed to imply uprisings, distrust for the existing order, and the need for carnival-like revolt and a trust in the instincts. Similarly, the moral ideas and often libidinous social ways of the rural class of medieval Russia (the pagan ceremony and the production of the artisans both are born out of this

[13]Allan Casebier in his study *Film and Phenomenology: Towards a Realist theory of Cinematic Interpretation* uses the term "fantasmatic body" (Casebier 91). The body is not just represented on screen but *felt* through cinematic perception. Sensuality, by extension, is a way to participate in artistic creation and identify with the heroes, get involved actively in what is represented. Pain and pleasure are experiences for phenomenologists like Casebier, not abstract ideas. The whole idea of the fantasmatic body perfectly describes Ruvlev's passion. See, Casebier, Allan. *Film and Phenomenology: Toward a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation*. Cambridge UP, 1991.

world), and their association with the earth and nature, makes them uncontrollable, a social factor possibly dangerous for the church authorities and, by extension, the structures of power in general. These artistic expressions (haptic, immediate, rooted in primitiveness, but authentic) will ironically find their culmination in Rublev's sensitive paintings. A more sophisticated and spiritual but surprisingly similarly passionate mode of artistic expression.

It is exactly in this enigmatic setting that Rublev's ambivalence towards speech (exemplified in his vow of silence and his general distrust for articulated speech) becomes the main concern of the plot. Such an approach suggests a radical interrelation between the need for artistic production which is defined by Camus as an "absurd action" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 21), the often erotic in character acceptance of physical pain, and Tarkovsky's interest for corporeal sensuality. The importance of painting as a possible metonym for cinema has also been noted by Peter Green who reminds us, in a poetic yet clear way, that despite his rejection of parallels between paintings and cinema, Tarkovsky's films abound in images and conventions derived from the visual arts, and *Andrei Rublev* is certainly no exception (Green 49). In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky expresses a belief in the autonomy of cinema, specifically referring to *Andrei Rublev*. He actively avoids turning to a literal imitation or visual reconstruction of other works of art, such as paintings in film (a technique often found in mid-century European cinema, notably in the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini): "I have never understood, for instance, attempts to construct mise en scene from a painting. All you will be doing is bringing the painting back to life, and duly being rewarded with superficial acclaim: 'Ah, what a feeling for the period!' 'Ah, what cultivated people!' But you will also be killing cinema" (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting* 78).

A vocal call for a conscious return to a visual rather than cerebral approach to life and art, visualized as a corporeal, haptic communication with reality, that is a communication that transcends the barriers of rational strictness and puts into question the forced need to result in predetermined ideals, closely resembles the same procedure that Tarkovsky, in *Sculpting in Time*, defines as poetry.[14] The motif of poetry as an often transcendental way to bravely interpret and radically interact with outside reality, the very moment when all hopes seem to be lost can be beautifully summarized in the reassuring promise Rublev gives to Boriska, the crying 14-year old son of the bell-maker, during the unforgettable epilogue: "I will paint, and you will construct bells." A negation of the need of scientific knowledge and a preference for authenticity is implied once more. Boriska, in his youth and sentiment, motivates Andrei to return to the very life he once tried to escape from. Irrationality (how are the bells to be constructed without knowledge? What is the point of painting in such an apocalyptic environment after all?) becomes a creative, powerful force. This haptic approach to art, a persistence on artistic

[14]"But to return to our theme: I find poetic links, the logic of poetry in cinema, extraordinarily pleasing. They seem to me perfectly appropriate to the potential of cinema as the most truthful and poetic of art forms. Certainly, I am more at home with them than with traditional theatrical writing which links images through the linear, rigidly logical development of the plot. That sort of fussily correct way of linking events usually involves arbitrarily forcing them into sequence in obedience to some abstract notion of order. And even when this is not so, even when the plot is governed by the characters, one finds that the links which hold it together rest on a facile interpretation of life's complexities" (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* 18–20).

creation despite the oppressive outside reality and an often-irrational belief in *creation* is poetry in the very literal sense, of constructing new realities as a way to go on.

In the following paragraphs, let us look more closely on this aspect of irrationality, that links corporeality and transcendence in an organic way.

The Importance of Irrationalism: Flight and Transcendence

Tarkovsky tends to follow a tradition of distrust towards scientific objectivism, both in his fictional expression and theoretical writings. An interesting context for this view can be found in the already mentioned explorations of Russian existentialist thinkers from the beginning of the twentieth century. Nikolai Berdyaev's study *The Russian Idea*—a work whose slightly rhetorical tone could be interpreted as nationalistic in character in a modern context, but whose influence on Tarkovsky and mid-century Russian cultural environment is evident—indicates that historically, two opposing principles lie at the heart of the structure of the Russian mentality and cultural identity: a "natural, Dionysian, elemental paganism" (Berdyaev 3), and an ascetic esoteric religious orthodoxy and tendency towards mysticism. In *Andrei Rublev* we can easily define both these elements in various scenes and personalities, albeit not necessarily in contradiction to one another. A notable example of the coexistence of these seemingly contradictory elements is Andrei's belief in, and adoration of, a key character, the simple-minded mute girl raised in the rural areas of Russia. The elemental, precious quality the painter discovers in her, his source of inspiration, rests on the way he perceives her as an almost symbolic figure, close to a more natural state of being. This perception is shaped both by Christian mystical beliefs and by a Bacchic, passionate element evident in her joyful appearance. Yet it is striking that he is ultimately abandoned by her; "betrayed," precisely because she reveals herself to be an independent human being, rather than the embodiment of an abstract idea. Berdyaev's term, "elemental paganism,"[15] describes perfectly the role and appearance of the simple woman, in the context of the film's narrative.

In the same vein Lev Shestov's *Athens and Jerusalem* glorifies irrationality in its distrust for the Apollonian so-called "Athenian" positivism and its impact on Hegelian philosophy through its focus on the need for systematical knowledge. What the two Russian thinkers share, a view echoed in *Andrei Rublev*'s sensuality, is a belief that positivism has something inherently inhuman and misses art's more sensitive care for subtle needs, desires, and inner situations of the individual through its emphasis on general abstractions and axioms. The meditation on factors like poetry, instinct, creativity, and an artist's creative tendency to the world of the senses and intense experience in general is essential for overcoming the limits of what is perceived as a narrow-minded empiricism.

Art, associated with the corporeal experience and the needs of the suffering body, is glorified as transcendental, therapeutic, and powerful in *Andrei Rublev*, while the agents of intellectualism, most notably for our study, the character of Kyrill the monk, defined by his opposition to liberty and his hostility to the rebellious corporeality expressed in popular art, as in the Bacchic dance of the jester, are all associated with fanatism, seen as alienated from authentic life and depicted in a negative light. The deeply

[15]A paganism based on a simple, elemental perception of nature and life rather than a sophisticated Dionysian belief (Berdyaev 3).

personal and at the same time social character of those explorations has often been noted, notably by Pétursson, when he argues that Tarkovsky utilizes this film as a kind of mirror for himself as an artist and as a mirror for his contemporaries (189).

It should be stressed at this point that what moves forward Tarkovsky's narrative is *not* an inclination to flee from the bitterness that is inevitably felt by the individual as Theophanes reminds Rublev and us, while quoting Ecclesiastes: "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (*Ecclesiastes* 1:17–18 King James Version (KJV); qtd. in *Andrei Rublev* 00:22:55–00:22:57); *Andrei Rublev*, despite its irrational and even mystical visual elements does not stand against education or intellectual activity *per se*. On the contrary, western scientific positivism is seen in the context of the film as limited *exactly* because of what is understood in Russian existentialism as a *lack of depth*, as a thinly disguised contempt towards individual experience. In the film, Kyrill, the skeptic and rational voice, is clearly painted in a negative light. The same pattern can be noticed in the unnamed Scientist of *Stalker,* an insensitive person who wishes to destroy the geographical Zone that provides hope. This tendency bears some striking similarities with western Romanticism, in its prioritization of subjectivism. In radical contrast to the neo-platonic Christian theoretical school of thought that obviously influences Tarkovsky's spiritual tendencies and beliefs, we note that, in the context of the film and its narrative, in the depiction of Rublev's attempts to live passionately yet sensitively, there is no apparent disapproval of the haptic element, of touch, of the cultivation of a poetic (creative) relationship between the experience of individual bodies and the trust in an empirical reality. Irrational aspects of subjective experience like the impact of the images that appear in our dreams, or the need for reconciliation with the distant objects of our yearnings are reconciled with reality in the sense that subjective experience is interpreted as an integral part of everyday life, not excluded from the realm of a dynamic, conscious living.

The *flight* motif, one of the most recognizable of Tarkovsky's images, visualizes the natural continuation of this aesthetic concern, the need to reconcile corporeality and transcendence, to read them not as opposing forces but as links of a common process in an often agonizing but brave attempt to find fulfilment. And as this reconciliation, this elevation, is attempted through the flesh, the ideal of flight is depicted as erotic in character: think of the two couples, Kris and Harri elevating above the earth in *Solaris*, two bodies embracing one another in a way that echoes Marc Chagall's 1942 painting *Au-dessus de la Ville* (02:12:36) and Alexandre and Maria in *Sacrifice* flying after the sexual act, over the bed (01:54:46). *Andrei Rublev*'s prologue, poor Yefim's attempt to metaphorically become a bird through his self-designed hot-air balloon, his short elevation and inevitable collapse, visually expresses the same passion that will haunt Andrei Rublev through the course of the film.[16]

Returning to the Human Body: An Interpretation of Corporeality and Transcendence in *Andrei Rublev*

The "medieval" as a thematic concern and not necessarily in its literal sense as a specific era lies at the heart of *Andrei Rublev.* The narrative of the person who, against all the

[16]Notably in the original screenplay, published in English in 1991, Yefim attempts to fly with wooden wings, like the mythical Icarus (Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublev: A Screenplay* 7).

extremities of the historical reality around it, struggles for self-expression while at the same time being deeply concerned about communicating with Otherness in all its manifestations (God as Otherness, Society as Otherness, the yearning for the body of the other, nature as an external reality, etc.) can only be resolved through transcendence. Through a trust in irrationality as an undeniable aspect of everyday reality, Rublev achieves the desired reconciliation, through an unexpectedly optimistic ending; that is, through his communication with the young boy who instinctively, rather than cognitively, constructs the precious bell.

We explored this journey through the analysis of aspects closely associated with corporeal sensuality in itself as a way for the individual to achieve accomplishment: the phenomenological trust in poetry as a means to perceive reality; violence as a cathartic and ecstatic factor at the same time; and, most importantly for our purposes, memory in itself, the re-construction of a past through narrative (by narrative we could refer to painting in its association to cinema or even memory). Is this imaginary medieval Russia a stand-in for a present reality? Not necessarily, as in a literal sense. Through inner contradictions and instincts attributed to the iconography of the medieval, *Andrei Rublev* seeks to reconcile the individual with outside reality, that is to exist.

Corporeality and the intended transcendence coexist in the context of the film. The latter is depicted as a natural continuation of the emphasis on the human body—a body that is sometimes depicted to be tied to a tree, mutilated by foreigners, blinded, or imprisoned in self-punishment (the vow of silence)—but at the same time glorified as the only way to approach otherness. “Love is always the same” claims the pagan girl to objections of the young artist (00:56:08). The narrative seems to support the same view. In this optimism that echoes existentialism’s declarations, in this absurd victory, we can define *Andrei Rublev*’s perception of corporeal materiality as a liberating impulse.

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