

HUMANITIES INSITUTE
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ANDREI RUBLEV ¹⁹⁶⁹

Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986)

OVERVIEW

Andrei Rublev is an epic film (1969)—eight parts, prologue and epilogue—first screened in the Soviet Union in 1971—and based on an earlier presentation by Tarkovsky in 1966. The epic is loosely based on the life of Andrei Rublev, the most distinguished Russian icon painter of the earliest period, the fifteenth century. ('Loosely,' in a sense, but in historical detail carefully researched; for example a distinguished scholar of early Russian icon painting, Savva Yamschikov, served as consultant on art historical matters, during the filming.) Rublev is here conceived as a world historical figure, and the period, pre-Tsarist, mediaeval Christian, is viewed as representing the original and deepest foundation of Russian culture. No wonder that, even in the Khrushchev thaw, there should in Soviet Russia have been strong and effective critics of Tarkovsky, who effectively delayed the screening of many of his works—to the point where he (like Bergman, oddly enough), ended by doing some of his best work outside his native country, in this case in Italy and Sweden. In the world outside Russia, however, Andrei Rublev was popular, winning first prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969, the year of its first major release in Russia.

STORY

Birdseye. To track the plot narrative is one thing while to suggest the visual world of the film is quite another, and quite as important. Snow, vast fields, stark monastic settings, faces long and bearded, or weathered in worn shawls, horses stamped like logos on scene after scene. And not a moment of rest for the eye; no at ease panning shots, very little of the studied eye play of Bergman, and a confidence about mass action—like the attack of the Tatars on Vladimir—which makes today's contemporary mass action film look static and antiseptic.

Flying The aerial introduction socks us in the eye. We are in the midst of a guy's (Yefim's) effort to fly in a hot air balloon. We're up in the balloon with this scraggly wired character, floating back and forth across the high façade of a cathedral, while below us, swarm sharp small images, swarm boatsful of ignorant and malicious onlookers staring upward from all directions at the dizzying trajectory of the balloon, and the shouting Yefim, 'I'm flying, I'm flying.' Alternately we find ourselves immersed in Yefim's flight and in the observing pack that tracks him along the rivulets and sandbars, out into the countryside, over which, miles farther on, his balloon loses ballast, and he begins to drift toward the earth, where finally he collapses by a river bank. Where is this episode taking us? It is an episode, a paragraph. A thrilling, detached piece of the whole. Our overall motion is to the winds, outward, into a team of three monks making their way across the countryside, plying their trade—icon painters—and in search of customers.

Painters. Three wandering monks have just left the Andronikov Monastery, where they have been living for the past three years. (One of them, Andrei Rublev, is the observer of the group, the sharpest eyes). As they make their way they are assaulted by a violent rain storm, and take shelter in a village barn where a group of villagers are huddled. There pops us, to provide entertainment and make money, a local jester (*skomorokh*), dancing, cavorting, carrying on about the foulness and corruptness of the church, and generally delighting the crowd with a broad outflow of scatological recklessness. (The perspectives of Bakhtin, on Rabelais and the grotesque comedic of the Middle Ages, continually clarify Tarkovsky's visual world here.) As the scene ends, soldiers arrive, to beat the shit out of the *skomorokh*, whom we will see again later, after he serves a nasty prison term, again being beaten up.

Theophanes. Kirill, an icon painter and one of the trio we have been tracking, meet up with a characteristically complex Tarkovsky figure, the monk Theophanes, who is working on a new icon of Jesus Christ, at the Church of the Annunciation in Moscow. Kirill says he would be willing to serve as an

apprentice on the project--and Theophanes says he agrees--if a formal invitation for the work project is issued to Andrei Rublev—which is just what happens. In the last part of this episode, Rublev and Theophanes talk theology; we find in Theophanes a monk both cynical and worldly, and at the same time believing that he is living already in the world beyond.

The Passion. On a snowy hillside, as Andrei makes his way toward Moscow, the troupe encounter a redo of Christ's passion, replete with the weeping Mary Magdalene clinging to her savior's knees. The brutal ascent is played out toward the honored end of pain and release, which the travelers know how to relate to.

The Holiday. At this point Andrei and his assistant Foma find themselves wandering through a wood—still the same rather intermittent progress toward Moscow—when suddenly they see through the foliage the torchlight of a pagan Midwinter celebration. Naked bodies are intermingling in a diffuse love feast—a fifteenth century Woodstock?—when a rough pair comes on Andrei, who is looking in wonderment (and prurience?) at the scene before him. Andrei is manhandled, hoisted onto a makeshift cross—by these cross hating pagans—and told that by the morning he will be dropped in the river with a stone around his neck. In the end the life threatened, and terrified painter, raised in a nailed posture on the cross, is released by a naked woman, who brings life (and a throbbing monastic shock) back into him. In the last scene of the episode, this same very good looking naked woman is seen swimming effortlessly across a lake, escaping pursuers, while a group of monks on the riverbank avert their eyes, lest the forbidden scene be harmful to them.

The Last Judgment. Commissioned to paint The Last Judgement on the walls of the church at Vladimir, Andrei is unable to proceed—despite the fury of the Bishop, who demands that the job be completed by autumn. We shift to the scene of Andrei walking in a field of poppies, reflecting on the distaste he has for the various biblically based passages of Scripture, that underline the difficulty of passing into God's presence at the Final Judgment of the world. Andrei's other worldly optic, and his gentle unlimited love, leave him excessively compassionate on behalf of those 'who have lost their way,' and been excluded from the kingdom.

The Raid. Tarkovsky's skill at depicting mass actions—think of the boat crowd scene that forms in the area of the hot air balloon, at the start of the film—contrasts startlingly with the paucity of crowd action scenes in the work of, say, Ingmar Bergman. From the outset of 'The Raid,' we hear whispers that the Tatars are coming on horse, to take Vladimir, where Andrei has been creating some of his greatest work. This is just what happens, hordes of beautiful stallions, ridden by heartless warriors, burn and slash the church to pieces, and in the process create atrocities which are unforgettable. The bishop's right hand man, who knows where the gold of the church has been hidden, is wrapped in gauze, beaten half to death, then covered with boiling oil. And so on. In the midst of the lethal arson, the milling mobs, the horses stumbling off ladders, a life changing event overwhelms Andrei himself—in addition, that is, to the destruction of his altarpieces.

Holy Fool. A holy fool woman has been drifting through the mayhem during the raid, and seems to be moving into the orbit of Andrei himself, who is just one more moving human on the insane chessboard of the raid. As one of the Tatars seizes Durochka, and heads up a wooden ladder with her over his shoulder, Andrei—as he has never before done—shoots up the side of the ladder and kills the Tatar. Durochka is saved, but for this act of killing a man, Andre instantly makes a double decision: never more to paint, to maintain silence. He closes down his person.

Silence. From this point on Andrei is silent. He—and with him, also in silence, the Holy Woman Durochka—return to the Andronikov monastery where we first met him. He performs a single important job for the monastery, transporting hot coals for the 'heating system' of the community. Finally Durochka grows fascinated with a Tatar group that passes through the monastery, and after much confused flirtation she leaves with the leader of the horsemen, to be his eighth bride, but his first Russian bride.

The Bell. The final episode concerns the finally successful efforts of a famed bellmaker's son, to cast a huge iron bell for the monastery. The feat of daring and risky construction inspires Andrei to agree to go back to painting. In the background we see a pregnant Durochka, leading a horse.

Epilogue. The epilogue, which is in color, offers a gallery of Andrei's lifetime painting. No sound. After the gallery has been scrolled we are given a scene of several horses gathered by a river, in the rain.

THEMES

Cruelty. The worst cruelty in the film is that enacted in the Tatar Raid, carried out to support one of two brothers with claims to the ownership of the Vladimir Church. The Tatar horsemen invade the very private and organized space of the church, and trample it to bits, in the midst of rape, murder, and torture.

Freedom. The hot air balloon experiment with which the film opens—Yefim flying—is a symbol of the high spirits, chance taking, and personal energy that infuse the whole film. Then there are the three monks who begin their walking trip toward Moscow, and on the road—for a while—with high hopes of catching some painting commissions. Finally consider the Tatar horsemen who incarnate a dreadful freedom, a contempt for settled communities and human achievement.

Religion. The values and structures of early Eastern Christianity permeate the entire film. Christ's passion, which is shown and discussed often, serves as central event for reference. Churches and cathedrals are the structures of consequence, and the works of value, throughout the film, are the arts devoted to celebrating the Christian experience.

Morality. The midsummer pagans espouse a cult of free love, though we have little evidence of their morals in general. The monastic community is quite naturally shocked by this simplistic ethic, and clearly follow the Christian injunction to follow Christ in the way of self-sacrifice. There is little, in the film, concerning daily spirituality among the laity or the clergy.

CHARACTERS

Andrei Rublev An outstanding icon painter and muralist of the pre-Tsarist fifteenth century in Russia. Despite the ravages of time and the Tatars, a strong sampling of his work remains in Russian museums.

Kirill A close monastic associate of Andrei, periodically part of the icon painting troupe that head toward Moscow, seeking work contracts for their painting, after several years in the Andronikon monastery.

Theophanes Senior monk and renowned artist of the Vladimir Church. He commissions Kirill to work for him at the Cathedral in Moscow, and discusses at length with Andrei, about the nature of God.

Doruchka The Holy Fool woman who first falls into orbit around Andrei, in the crazed crowd in the Tatar-ravaged church of Vladimir. She moves with him back to the Andronikon Monastery, then leaves Andrei to become the first Russian wife of a Tatar leader.

Boriska The son of a bell maker, who takes on the challenge of casting a huge iron bell for the Grand Duke's bell tower. Though working intuitively, and often against his fellow artists' advice, he comes through in the end, and the bell rings perfectly.

The Jester (*skomorokh*) The jester plies his entertainment trade from village to village, dancing, presenting his goofy and scatological stand up routine, and staying one step ahead, if he's lucky, of the military and the cops.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ANDREI RUBLEV

Character In Tarkovsky's film, Andrei is a multi dimensional figure—observant, spiritual, and idealistic. Having killed a man—in the melee with the Tatars at Vladimir—Andrei takes a vow of silence. Having encountered the holiday love feast of the pagans, Andrei refuses to submit to the love feast, and to accept the blandishments of the secular world. Arguing with Theophanes, about the nature of Christ's passion, Andrei maintains that the men who put Christ to death in fact loved the Savior, and were doing so because that was the way to follow God's word. Faced with the command to complete his mural of The Last Judgment by autumn, Andrei walks introspectively in a field of flowers, and admits to himself that he cannot carry out this depiction of a cruel and exclusive judgment.

Illustrative moments

Traveling We first meet Andrei in a blinding rain, as he is walking across the countryside, with two friends. He is looking for work, as an icon painter. With his two traveling companions, he ducks inside a shelter, where a crowd of villagers is avoiding the downpour, and at the same time enjoying the act of a reckless standup comedian (*skomoroch* who is singing, dancing, and mocking the hell out of all the authorities in the land—from the church down. Andrei, as ever, observes, the artist, the withdrawn.

Peering. After leaving Theophanes, Andrei wanders on with his assistant Foma, until they come, accidentally, onto a copse of trees and bushes from which they can see in the distance a river bank and naked figures. Andrei is transfixed by the extraordinary (and forbidden) sight. For a moment, he simply peers, affectless, startled, stunned; he peers similarly when the naked woman swims through the water in front of him.

Discussing. Andrei is embedded in the world of orthodox Christian interpretation, and when he discusses theology with Theophanes, he is wholly at the center of his life. Their conversation concerns Christ's passion, and whether the accompanying suffering was part of a world-plan. For Andrei it is.

Intervening. Much as Andrei hates violence of any kind—recall his disinclination even to portray *The Last Judgment*—he cannot resist saving Durochka from the brutal Tatar who is making away with her. Andrei kills the beast, for which he is glad, but immediately afterward suffers pangs of conscience which force him to stop painting and to stop talking.

Supporting character

KIRILL

Character Kirill is one of Andrei's fellows in art, a member of the same monastery, a shadow who often adopts a complex attitude toward Andrei. At first, as they begin their travelling icon-painter wanderings, Kirill seems a true buddy to his more skilled master, Andrei, but as the film unfolds Kirill's relation to Andrei grows increasingly dubious. Kirill is inferior to Andrei in artistic skill, and serves as apprentice for Theophanes, while Andrei is given the large scale commissions. Eventually, in disgust with his monastic brethren, Kirill abandons the religious life, and wanders out into the secular world. However he misjudges his real needs—while perceptive and highly intelligent, Kirill is underconfident, needs support and teamwork, and needs to find a reasonable-modest level for the exercise of his real talents. In the end he confesses that his jealousy of Andrei's success has led him to minimize his brother's ability, and to urge his brother to abandon painting. The same Kirill who makes this confession is doing so as preface to telling Andrei to continue painting. So duplex and hard to deal with is Kirill.

Illustrative moments

Walking We first meet Kirill as he is walking with Andrei and Daniil, a trio looking for commissions for their work as icon painters. The group is hit by a heavy downpour, and takes shelter in a village building,

where they are 'entertained' by a scatological *skomorokh*, a jester who scornfully mocks anything to do with church or clergy. Kirill makes a brief exit in which he informs the authorities of this performance—which will net the jester a significant prison term.

Jealous. Theophanes takes on Kirill as an apprentice, but meanwhile a summons comes from Moscow, to the monastery from which Andrei comes, inviting him to take on a major commission at the Vladimir Church. When Kirill hears of this honor he is beset with jealousy and even hostility.

Monastic. Ultimately, Kirill tires of the secular world, and wants to return to the monastery complex, but the director of admissions is doubtful about this applicant, who seems untrustworthy. Kirill is contrite, and accepts his punishment, to copy out the whole of Holy Scripture fifteen times.

Advising. After Kirill realizes that Andrei has renounced his painting career, he strongly advises Andrei to return to painting. We know that Kirill is giving this advice because he no longer feels threatened by Andrei's reputation. This is vintage Kirill, driven by jealousy, though intelligent and sensitive.