

THE BIRTH OF ART AND GENIUS IN ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S

ANDREI RUBLYOV

by

NATALIYA B. BRANT

(Under the Direction of Katharina M. Wilson)

ABSTRACT

There are few twentieth century films that have successfully inspired a complex combination of awe and controversy when socially and critically received. Among them are such canonical works as Goddard's Weekend, Fellini's Satyricon, Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin, and Bergman's Persona. Yet there is no film that can rival the exhaustive intensity of Tarkovsky's simultaneously brutal and lyrical narrative, Andrei Rublyov. A cinematic behemoth whose production was banned for over two decades, Andrei Rublyov is more than a mere quasi~historical chronicle of the Mongol domination in medieval Russia or a foray into the absurdity of the human condition, but rather, it is a film that probes the depths of human suffering and transgression against a backdrop of cultural, historical and spiritual devastation as seen through the eyes of a genius holy man.

Tarkovsky's acute attention to Rublyov's character development (a kind of cinematic *bildungsroman*), his obsession with historical detail, and his deft manipulation of the camera render an accurate but disturbing portrait of the

religious and individual spirit of Russia. It is precisely this detailed analysis of the diagesis, characterization and cinematography of Tarkovsky's narrative that will enable my discussion of the genesis of Russian iconography, and more specifically, the origins of Russian culture and society. So, while Tarkovsky's film is seems an account of the trials and tribulations of a monk and his extraordinary talent, it is really the story of the rise of Russian iconography and its emergence from the ashes of Mongol domination. More than anything, Tarkovsky's film elucidates the importance passionate suffering, or *passio* in the classical sense, as a necessary catalyst for great artistic expression. Filtered through Rublyov's gaze, we watch not only the transformation and reconfiguration of an artist's life, but more importantly, we bear witness to the rise of the Russian art and culture that manifests itself in this renaissance of Russian iconography.

INDEX WORDS: Tarkovsky, Rublyov, Russian Iconography, Medieval Russia, Mongol

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my handsome, brilliant, witty, talented and charismatic father, Boris L. Brant. If you can see me, I hope you're smiling.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 LATE BEGINNINGS	8
3 PROFILE OF THE ARTISTS: THE TALE OF TWO ANDREIS	64
4 RELUCTANT GENIUS: THE EVOLUTION OF RUBLYOV'S AESTHETIC	88
5 THE MUMMERS	97
6 THE PASSION ACCORDING TO ANDREI	128
7 THE BELL	142
8 EPILOGUE: SCULPTING IN LITERATURE AND FILM	158
WORKS CONSULTED	165

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For the most part, Western critics have been sluggish in recognizing Andrei Tarkovsky(1907-89) as one of the major forces in Russian filmmaking, relegating their discussion to the Dziga Vertov group and Sergei Eisenstein¹. However, due to fluctuating trends, Russian filmmaking has enjoyed a wave of resurgence in popularity, and now the old canon has started to breathe with some new life. More and more, Andrei Tarkovsky's cinematic achievements are being heralded as having both universal appeal and a certain timelessness that has set the director apart from the forefathers of Russian filmmaking.

In addition to his unexpected but ubiquitous resurrection in “Art House” movie theatres and University campuses, Tarkovsky has become popular among American filmmakers and actors alike. Still, despite the growing popularity of films like *Katok I Skripka(The Steamroller and Violin-1960)*, *Ivanovo Detstvo(Ivan's Childhood-1962)*, *Solaris-1969*, *Zerkalo(The Mirror-1974)*, *Stalker-1979*, *Nostalghia(Nostalgia-1983)* and *Offret(The Sacrifice-1986)*, it is the largely overlooked but highly underrated film *Andrei Rublyov(1964-9)* for

¹ Dziga Vhertov known for *Man With A Movie Camera*, as well as the group of filmmakers he inspired during the 1950's and Sergei Eisenstein, most famous for his epigrammatic baby carriage careening down the Odessa Stairs sequence in his film *Battleship Potemkin*, preceded Tarkovsky, and were no doubt an enormous influence on the young film student.

which I, as a Russian immigrant, have always had a peculiar though understandable fascination.

But if Western critics and viewers alike are guilty of sweeping *Andrei Rublyov* under the rug, then perhaps Tarkovsky himself is to blame. After all, *Andrei Rublyov* is the film where Tarkovsky makes his most ambitious excavation of Russian history, uncovering in epic scope the mythic beginnings of Russian art and culture in a manner that begets both controversy and devotion. An ambitious, behemoth of a film that takes historical and artistic liberties at virtually every turn, *Andrei Rublyov* is more than a medieval story about an iconographer. Rather, it is a story about genius, art, and the inimitable resilience of the Russian people as they rise from the ashes of more than a century of Mongol domination.

The goals of this dissertation are to explore the film *Andrei Rublyov* in the context of an established Russian tradition of iconography, to elucidate the dialectic between the modern genius of Andrei Tarkovsky and the medieval genius of Andrei Rublyov, and to provide a detailed examination of three pivotal episodes within the film that I believe illustrate the parallels between the lives of the two Andreis', and buttress the symbolic connection between the life of Rublyov and the life of a fledgling, medieval Rus'. Within a framework of six chapters, I will posit that, in as much as Tarkovsky's cinematic bildungsroman unravels in a complex tapestry of biting socio-political criticism, historical fact and fancy, and lyrical beauty, it is more importantly the story of the beginnings of Russian religion, culture and artistic representation.

Because even the informed reader may not be familiar with the origins of Russian iconography during the Middle Ages, I will devote the first chapter of my dissertation to outlining the various traditions of iconography that existed in medieval Rus', as well as the influential artists that were thought to be associated with those schools. Specifically, I will trace historical and temporal connections between regional movements of iconography and the integral characters of Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative. In this initial chapter, I will delineate between the disparate schools of iconography and their unique styles and techniques, as well as distinguishing the geographical implications of these eminent schools, which are divided into Pskov, Novgorod, and Moscow. The second chapter will offer a background of both Andrei Rublyov and Andrei Tarkovsky. The third chapter of my dissertation will trace the aesthetic education and influences of Tarkovsky and Rublyov. The following three chapters will be devoted to a detailed discussion of three episodes in Tarkovsky's film, in particular, their description, analysis and interpretation. The three episodes that I will examine have already been separated and dated by Tarkovsky himself, and represent roughly one third of the film, which is divided into eight episodes, as well as an epilogue and a prologue. These episodes are entitled *The Mummers (Molchyi)*, *The Passion According to Andrei (Strastii po Andreiyu)*, and *The Bell (Kolokol)*. While analyzing these three episodes, I will attempt to introduce critical theory that will support my comparisons.

In addition to examining Bakhtin's writings on laughter, and specifically how it relates to the episode about the *skomoroh*, or jester, I will suggest a symbolic connection between aesthetic activity and the oppression of a culture.

Finally, because Tarkovsky was a Russian born filmmaker who lived and worked through the very disparate regimes of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev², I will discuss the implications of these geographical and political boundaries, and the effect that they had on Tarkovsky's personal and professional accomplishments.

In addition to these specific areas of discussion, I hope that my dissertation will offer a greater understanding of the broader sense of Russian culture, from medieval times to the present day. Often misunderstood and even more often misrepresented, Russian culture appears to be a kind of *Schwartz Wald*, or Black Forest, for Western literary and cinematographic criticism. Still, this period of history (referred to by curmudgeons and ignorant skeptics alike as "The Dark Ages") is one of the richest and most underrated eras of European History. Certainly, Tarkovsky made a deliberate, albeit somewhat unusual, choice to make a movie about an artist that lived during the middle Ages. So, what was it about this mysterious monk³, and the time and space during which he lived that Tarkovsky found so compelling that he would spend six years struggling with the Russian officials and the powers that be at Mosfilm⁴ fighting for its release? This question, as well as the specific content that rendered the film so

² The difference in social and political climate between Khrushchev's term (referred to as the *ottyopol*, or "the thaw" that occurred during the years 1957-1964) which the president was more liberal toward artistic expression, and Brezhnev's, where censorship was common and constricting, and this aesthetic stifling no doubt contributed to Tarkovsky's eventual self-imposed exile.

³ So little is known about the life of Andrei Rublyov that scholars cannot even agree on his date of birth. Some historians suggest that he was born in 1360, while others maintain that he may have been born as late as 1370. Although this difference of opinion is formidable, the ten-year disparity in his birth is countered by a virtually undisputed year of 1430 (Green, 42).

⁴ Mosfilm is the Government owned film studio in Moscow.

controversial, are issues I will grapple with in my chapter devoted to the aesthetic development of the two Andreis. Also, I plan to develop the relationship between these two namesakes, and offer some explanation as to their unlikely aesthetic and spiritual connection.

While examining the disparate motivations that a modern filmmaker like Tarkovsky may have had for choosing to make a film set in the Middle Ages, I would like to explore the various ways in which his cinematographic narrative is filtered through the director's own gaze of modernity. It is this juxtaposition of the modern and the archaic that seems particularly significant, and Tarkovsky's deliberate decision to shoot the entire film (with the exception of the epilogue that consists of a montage of details from Rublyov's icons and frescoes and a scene of horses grazing in the rain) in black and white only serves to further enhance the dialectic between what was then and what is now. Perhaps one of the most disturbing theories that I hope this dissertation will suggest, although this may be the only instance where I am not elated to be in the right, is that the state of affairs in Russia today, socially, politically, economically and culturally, may have regressed to conditions that are oddly reminiscent of Medieval Rus'. Yet, like Tarkovsky's Rublyov, I am not willing to entirely give up hope.

Indeed, it is the hopeful culmination of Tarkovsky's narrative that leads me to be so brazenly optimistic. In part, Tarkovsky may be hopeful because, like most Russians, hope is the simply all there is. Still, his optimism appears to rest not only with the inextinguishable fire of the Russian people, but more importantly, with the spirit of the man himself. It is evident that Tarkovsky's affection for Rublyov goes beyond the typical fondness a director may develop for

an especially beloved character, and moves into the realm of personal and professional admiration. Perhaps Tarkovsky was fascinated by Rublyov's talent, or charmed by his stubborn perseverance. In the final chapter of my dissertation, I will posit the theory that it was the essence of the artistic process that so fascinated Tarkovsky, and it is his delicate attention to this process, whether in stages of fruition or unraveling, that becomes the genuine pulse of this cinematic narrative. After all, it is Rublyov's artistic awakening, development and perfection that Tarkovsky wants so desperately to capture, and the film is imbued with the many facets of such an aesthetic education. In my dissertation, I will examine the ways in which Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative brings to light the struggle for self-knowledge through aesthetic creation that is faced by both Rublyov and the director himself. By grappling with the tenets of the aesthetic process, or the creative process, Rublyov brings himself closer to an understanding of his God, but more importantly, to the ultimate understanding of himself, and his individual destiny as an iconographer. Similarly, Tarkovsky's methodical cataloguing of Rublyov's personal and professional trials and tribulations reveal his own desire to understand the elusive and ineffable nature of the artistic process. For Tarkovsky, the artistic process and the process of becoming, or knowing one's self, appear to be inexorable from one another. Clearly, neither one of the two Andreis' has any choice in the matter of their destiny: they have each been chosen by God to create. So, while the process of artistic creation serves to fulfill their respective destinies, it also acts as a catalyst for their, and our, invaluable introspection. In his cinematographic memoir

entitled Sculpting in Time, Tarkovsky describes the importance of artistic creation as being integral to self-exploration:

Artistic creation, after all, is not subject to absolute laws, valid from age to age; since it is related to the more general mastery of the world, it has an infinite number of facets, the vincula that connect man with his vital activity; and even the path towards knowledge is unending, no step that takes man nearer to a full understanding of his existence can be too small to count (63).

In this manner, the artist acts as an intermediary between the mundane and the divine while simultaneously encouraging both vital action and spiritual introspection. For Tarkovsky, and for Rublyov as well, it is the aesthetic process that makes the act of self-examination possible and tolerable but it is the actual work of art that can help to make the process of self-knowledge bearable.

CHAPTER 2
LATE BEGINNINGS

The city is caught in the grip of ice-
Trees, walls, snow, are as under glass.
Over crystals, I and the patterned sleighs
Go our separate, unsteady ways.
And above St. Peter's steeple-crows,
And poplars- a light-green vault that glows-
Blurred, lackluster, in the sunny dust.
The triumphant landscape blows into thought
This is where Kulikovo⁵ was fought.

-Anna Akhmatova, *Voronezh*

“Rus’...”, Andrei’s voice trembled, “She endures
everything, this country of ours, and she will

⁵ Here Akhmatova is making reference to the historic battle of Kulikovo Hill in the year of 1380, during which the Russian people joined together to rise up against their Mongol oppressors and defeated them.

endure to the end. But how long is it all going
to go on? Eh? Theophanes?”

“I don’t know. Probably for ever.”

-Andrei Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublyov*

Since their inception, the aesthetic of Russian film and literature alike has been imbued with the common theme of human suffering. This suffering, alluded to by the word Kulikovo in Akhmatova’s poem and the conversation between Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublyov in Tarkovsky’s cinematic narrative alike, defines the canon of Russian art and literature as well as the essence of Russian life. In his film *Andrei Rublyov*, Tarkovsky brilliantly captures the suffering of a medieval artist against a backdrop of Mongol terror while simultaneously revealing the inner workings of the artistic process. I propose that *Andrei Rublyov* is a film that goes beyond the scope of historical and aesthetic education by excavating the beginnings of art and culture in medieval Rus’. In order to support my claim that Tarkovsky’s film garners the origins of both artistic genius and Russian culture, I will discuss the mythic implications of Rublyov’s quest as it relates to art (in particular iconography and hagiography), history, early Russian geography and Orthodox Christianity. By analyzing specific episodes (*The Mummifiers*, *The Passion According to Andrei*, *The Bell*) I will explore the role of the artist in Russian culture, the synchronized rise of Rublyov together with the culture of medieval Rus’, and the evolving dialectic between the antiquity and modernity. In order to buttress my claim that the origins of Rublyov’s genius and the origins of Russian culture are inexorably

intertwined, I will discuss both the historical and geographic beginnings of Russia as well as the background of the two Andrei's.

Thus, section one of this chapter will offer a description of early Russian geography, culture and civilization. The following section will provide a detailed examination of the various regional movements of iconography, and the remaining section will delineate the specific stylistic and technical elements that differentiate Rublyov's painting. Perhaps the only truly effective way to examine Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative is to gain a better understanding of the time and place that the director found so compelling. Arguably, Tarkovsky's deliberate choice to juxtapose the surreal life of a medieval artist with the graphically real violence of Mongol domination palpably exudes liminality and encourages us to interpret the narrative according to a framework that allows for the incorporation of the historical with the mythical, the real with the unreal, and the ordinary with the divine.

Indeed, the notion of liminality is nothing new to Russian scholars and historians, as it is a nation whose factual origins are often obfuscated by its legendary ones. It was not until late in the 10th century that the Slavic people finally established a firm political and cultural identity. The influence of Empires like Byzantium and Islam resonated in the West, and Constantinople had replaced Rome as the Christian capital of the East. The Slavic people on the eastern European steppes witnessed the genesis of a formal and organized government when they asked Prince Rurik, a Viking, to assume imperial power of Novgorod, and the surrounding areas of the Baltic Sea.

The beginnings of an established Russian civilization were as primordial and uncertain as the terrain of Russian steppe land and forests. The symbiotic interaction between the steppe land and the forest was peppered with an archaic and frustrating history. Simply, the land was virtually impossible to farm not because the soil was not fertile, but because most attempts at tilling soil and planting crops were interrupted by the constant intrusion of nomadic wanderers who impeded these efforts at farming. In some sense, the conflict between these two disparate lifestyles planted the seeds for Russian civilization. While the often intrusive wandering of nomadic peoples was difficult to curtail, people with an interest in cultivating the land began to move away from the forest and onto the surrounding flatter lands, or steppes. The land on the outskirts of the Russian forests was extremely fertile and lent itself particularly well to civilized living, not only because of the vegetation and soil quality, but also more importantly, because it was punctuated by an enormous system of rivers. These rivers, like the Volga, the Dniپر, the Dvina and the Volkhov were wide and slowly flowing, with countless tributaries. While some of these rivers and their tributaries emptied into the Baltic or Black Sea, the ones that did not went on to penetrate the steppes and forests, and provided the Slavic people with an excellent means of natural self-sufficiency. Indeed, these natural river routes, which spread over the land like a system of veins and arteries, appear to mark the routes of Slavic migration and settlement (Billington, 16-8).

The inhabitants of these lands along the Slavic river routes were mostly of Scandinavian origins that came to the territory in search of open country, adventure, and procuring wealth, whether it was through legitimate means of

business, or through banditry and looting. According folk legend, the name “Russia” appears to have originated from these Scandinavian peoples, or Vikings, during their many passages south on the complex river system of the Russian steppe land. Historians posit another theory, which attributes the genesis of Russian civilization to three branches of eastern Slavs from the Caucasus that populated Russian, the Ukraine and Belarus (Channon, 18). Despite the fact that these Slavs inhabited disparate areas, they shared the use of a common Slav language, and it was the common use of this language that helped to unite and solidify the then Slavic, and later Russian, civilization. Somewhere around the time of 800 BC, China exerted palpable pressure to drive several nomadic tribes out of Asia and westward across the southern steppe. Among these peoples were a tribe called the Scythians, who settled north of the Black Sea, and by 600 BC, they had already subjugated the Slavs that had settled in the river valleys. These Scythians peoples essentially split into separate groups, known as “hordes”, which were all ruled by one king, or supreme leader (Channon, 18). Arguably, the Scythians were the earliest manifestation of a tyrannical rule that would culminate with the infamous Mongol or Tartar invasions of Russia. In this manner, the genesis of Russian civilization evolved as a kind of conscious, unified political entity in the ninth century AD, and this birth of the Russian nation was marked in no small part by the coming of the Vikings.

Indeed, it was the coming of the Vikings that shaped the early foundations of Russian commerce. These Vikings were roving bands of traders, pirates, and other types of businessmen eventually came to share a common and practical goal: political, economic and social unification by using any available catalyst.

One of those agents of unification was Islam. By the late ninth century, Islam had become by far more compelling than the realms of Byzantium. The culture and commerce of the rapidly growing cities of Islam had established themselves as the centers of philosophical, religious and theological study, and the busy markets full of spices, colorful textiles, and pungent incense must have been irresistible even to the most savvy of travelers. The Islamic empire had an enormous influence on life in the eighth and ninth centuries, and the realm of its lands spread from the Middle East, through the east, west and south of Byzantium, and across the face of Northern Africa, deep into the heart of Spain. It was not long before Baghdad, the capital of the Islamic empire, would lure the Viking traders to spread out into the realm of Islam. In fact, it was precisely this commerce that united the people of Northern Europe with the Muslim empire. So, when the need for commerce among these organized groups of Viking traders arose, it seemed only natural for them to dominate and profit from the Slav communities that had already, some four centuries ago, been subjugated by the Asiatic Huns. The disintegration of the Hunnish Empire, due in no small part to the death of the great Attila, resulted in the dissemination of Slavs throughout the north, south east and west. The scattering of Slavs, primarily in the east and west, is significant, as it was this cultural schism between the disparate branches of Slavs determined the cultural distribution of Slavs throughout Russia, and her surrounding lands. The Slavs who scattered to the east became the ancestors of the Russian people, those Slavs who moved to the west became the ancestors of the Czechs, Slovaks and Polish peoples. Meanwhile, these eastern Slavs began to

feel the pressure of a Byzantine society, and an Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity.

It is precisely this link to Greek-speaking Byzantium, and in turn to the Hellenistic history of the Middle East, that would prove to be so important for Russia, shaping her culture, religion and aesthetic values forever. Certainly, much of the art, architecture and religious philosophy of historic and contemporary Russia owes a generous debt to the Byzantine antiquity, and its classical traditions. According to most chronicles of Russian history and tradition, the Russians formally accepted Viking dominion in 862 AD (Billington, 111-13). It was during this time that the Vikings, in retaliation to the Khazar blocking of trade routes to Constantinople, began to sail out across the Baltic Sea in hopes of reopening the barred routes, as well as searching for new ones. In this manner, a man named Rurik, the first prince and founder of the original dynasty of Russian rulers, ushered early Russian statehood in. Soon after his arrival, he established a stronghold in the capital of Novgorod. But it was Kiev, known in folklore as the father of all Russian cities, that would become the touchstone for the numerous tribes of Slavs gathered along the rivers of the southern steppe land, and therefore, emerge as the first celebrated center of Russian civilization.

Still, it is difficult to construct a realistic model of old Kiev, as there is little reliable historical information about Kievan Rus'. Not surprisingly, this absence of concrete documentation has led to a general mystification and aggrandizement of early Kiev, and an air of glamour, extravagance and opulence seems to surround this 'mother of Russian cities'. For the most part, the first

three hundred years of Russian civilization centered on Kiev, and its inhabitants resiliently endured the Mongol invasions of the twelfth century. And it was Kiev, during the rule of Prince Vladimir that adopted Byzantine Christianity as the official religion of Russia.

According to Russian folk legend, Vladimir sent his emissaries on travels in order to sample different religions. His emissaries came to know Muslims, Jews and Western Christians, but they were filled with ineffable awe and wonder when they entered one particular church in Constantinople (Pratt, 23). The emissaries were reported to have stated that they were not certain whether they were on earth or in heaven, the beauty and magnificence not only of that church alone, but also the complex rituals, such as the fragrant censers of frankincense and myrrh, that transfixed their gazes. The church was Hagia Sophia, and because of its grandeur, Byzantine Christianity was brought swiftly to Kiev, and it has never left. It is this introduction of Eastern Christianity that prompted the creation of a written, literary language and contributed to the creation of the first examples of Russian art: Icons. In his brilliant and exhaustive work, The Icon and the Axe, James Billington cleverly suggests that all of Russian culture and history can be narrowed down to two items of symbolic and metaphorical importance; the icon and the axe. In many ways, he may be right. Despite the fact that Russian art and icon painting was heavily influenced by the Byzantine aesthetic, it seems reductive to view Russian art as a mere branch, or spin-off of Byzantine art. Perhaps the earliest Russian icon painters would not be able to defy this neo-Byzantine label, but it was not long before Russian masters began to shake off the Byzantine shadows, and develop a style and technique that was

unique to Russian icon painting. Soon Russian icon painting earned a place in the canon of art history that rivaled even their Byzantine predecessors.

All of these advances in art and culture, however, would be stifled during the years of the Mongol domination. And while the social and political governors of Kiev, the Grand Princes, had lost much of their territory and wealth to the Mongol invaders, these Grand Dukes had relinquished their true sovereignty long ago. Yet, despite the shaky political ground of young Kiev, the city continued to develop an authentic Russian culture that would inspire cities like St. Petersburg and Moscow. Indeed, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Kiev became the center of culture, commerce and art among all other trading cities in the Slavic community.

In as much as commerce lured the Vikings to Islam, so trade and commerce lured Eastern, or Greek, Orthodox Christianity into Kiev. During this time, Kiev and Constantinople maintained open and active trade routes, with slavery being one of the most lucrative commodities of import and export (Pratt, 26). The slaves of Kievan princes were a lucrative commodity not only in the marketplaces of Constantinople, but were becoming popular all over the vast markets of the Muslim Middle East. But the most formidable tensions arose when the Great Princes attempted to divide the land, and because neither of them could be honest, violent disputes often resulted. The warfare between the disparate princes was so frequent and savage, that the number of slaves that resulted in the form of political or geographic casualties began steadily increasing, and despite the growing advances in agriculture inside and outside of the Russian forests, slavery remained the cash crop of the Kievan economy. It

was not until much later, when the spread of Greek Orthodox Christianity and its accompanying ideals enveloped the rapidly evolving Russian sensibility that the archaic form of slavery was outlawed, and a new kind of slavery, known as serfdom, was introduced.

Certainly, one would be amiss not to recognize the profound influence that Christianity has had on the development of Russian civilization. Indeed, the history of Kievan Russia herself can be learned only by researching the ecclesiastical chronicles of churches and monasteries that were compiled during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, well after the rise of Russian civilization. In some manner, the early Russian church may have had a civilizing and tempering influence on the primitivism and barbarity of the times. Within its own governing body, the Orthodox Church maintained a strict theory of the rule of law, and offered a system of language. The Russian language itself arose from Greek influence, when a Bulgarian dialect that was popularized and circulated throughout Greek Orthodox Slavdom. This dialect, originally created by two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, gave rise to the modern Russian Cyrillic alphabet, as well as the Bulgarian and Serbian alphabets (Billington, 5).

Moreover, these Greek Orthodox religious leaders maintained that the lens of Greek interpretation, such as Greek Orthodox scripture, liturgy and song, must filter Russian religious and cultural expression. Later, these Greek Orthodox ideals began to be transmitted without the use of the original Greek language. Sadly, this inevitable shift away from Greek language to the Russian vernacular served only to divide Russia further from antiquity, as well as alienate her from later movements such as the Enlightenment and the Renaissance. While it would

be reductive to assert that Russia was completely severed from such literary and cultural phenomena, she was certainly lagging a few centuries behind the rest of Europe in terms of cultural, artistic and industrial development. Therefore, the tendency toward isolationism, which developed quite early in Russia, would serve to devastate and undermine, if not totally curtail, her growth as a religious, philosophical, literary and artistic superpower. As it was during the Middle - Ages, Russia was almost wholly dependent on the Church, Byzantine antiquity and Orthodox Christianity for its culture, art and literature.

Kiev, in its early stages of development, the population was scattered and unstable. Obviously, most of these inhabitants of early Kievan Russia were illiterate. So, when the Russian rulers embraced Christianity, most of these illiterate townspeople were strongly persuaded to receive baptism. Yet, despite the hope that the overwhelming majority of Russians would be lured to the Church, most of these masses would not be reached for several centuries to come. Certainly, the introduction of Church Slavonic, a clerical and academic language, rendered the sermons even more alienating since it sounded completely foreign to the common ear. The ornate and richly decorated costumes of the Orthodox priests were even more estranging and awe inspiring. With their jewel-encrusted, golden orbs and smoking censers, these High Priests must have resembled either gods or kings in the eyes of the commoners, and their influence over the majority of the population became intense. Probably, it was the combination of the unintelligible sermon, the powerful figures of the priests, and the threat of eternal damnation without salvation that made it possible for Christianity to exert such tremendous pressure on the population to adhere not

only to the rules of the Church itself, but more importantly, to the rules of life that the Church mandated.

Still, in spite of the restrictive essence of Orthodoxy, the Church provided Russians with a place to congregate, as well as a place to nurture art, theology, philosophy and literature. Indeed, the Russian artistic tradition, as well as the Byzantine tradition that inspired and informed it, grew out of its closeness to the art of Greek Orthodox antiquity. Because there were no art museums in Kiev at that time, one could not simply step downtown to the *Hermitage* for a healthy dose of art and culture. Yet, despite the lack of museums and galleries in medieval Russia, there was an Orthodox Church that contained at least one or more of the following; frescoes, mosaics, enamel work (*cloisonné*), jewelry, tapestries, paintings, stained glass portraiture, icons, and the most obvious, architecture. While the early Russian craftsmen were working primarily from models put forth by Greek and Italian artists, their work was marked by the characteristic Russian love for life, color and flair⁶. It was only later, when the Church solidified its hold on Russian daily life and culture, that Russian art took on the kind of restrained, meticulous, and static quality for which it is known. Undoubtedly, the influence of the Church on art was a tempering one, encouraging a kind of homogeneity and harmony that had as of yet been unattained. In appearance, these Orthodox churches are every bit as awe inspiring as the religious and material treasures which they housed. Presumably, the Slavs wanted to convey that very same feeling of awe and glory that was experienced by Vladimir's emissaries upon their fateful visit to St. Sophia, where

the boundaries between heaven and earth became exceedingly liminal. In order to achieve such grandeur, the architects designed these cathedrals with a large, central dome that was thought to symbolize not only the omnipotent nature of the Creator, but also the connection between heaven and earth.

Although the architecture of early Russia was ornate and awe inspiring, the literature of this medieval society was less than grand in scale, in other words, largely non-existent. Truly, it would be difficult to use the term 'literature' when referring to the works of medieval Russia, as most written texts were limited to historical chronicles and liturgical documents. In as much as art and architecture mirrored that of Byzantium, so Russian literature was a Byzantine interpretation of Greek standards, a situation made even more complex by the disenfranchisement Greek language in early Russia.

Yet, while art and architecture were more adaptable to the artist's independent identity, literature was decidedly more dependent on social climate, symbolism, metaphor, and linguistic malleability. It was this interdependence on audience reception and participation that stifled the growth and development of early Russian literature, because there simply could be no literature in the absence of a receptive audience. The literary demands and desires of the Russian people were completely placated by the liturgical ceremonies of the Church Slavonic, and the Russian people as a whole did not crave any sense of universal ideology or philosophical truth. Even the great Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky affirms the satiating power of Christianity when he wrote, "I am a child of the age, a child of unbelief and skepticism; I have been so far, and shall

⁶ Russian art was first and foremost influenced by Byzantine art in the form of tapestries, icons

be I know to the grave...if anyone proved to me that Christ was not the truth, and it really was fact that the truth was not in Christ, I would rather be with Christ than with the truth"(Billington, 424). Still, despite a few notable exceptions, literature in early Russia consisted of sermons, ecclesiastic chronicles and mythologized lives of saints. Probably, early Russians were not familiar with secular Greek literature, or the pre-Christian epics of Greece, so it is not surprising that Russian literature, with few influences and even fewer readers, was so late to blossom. Although it may not be well known or epigrammatic, there is one celebrated prose-poem of early Russian, *The Saga of Igor's Host*, which may also be translated to mean *The Word of Igor's Regimen* that is thought to have originated around the eighth or ninth century, and was discovered near the end of the twelfth century. This poem deals with the origins of the Russian ruling class, or aristocracy, and its authenticity has been questioned by numerous critics and scholars, some of whom regard the poem as a mere forgery from the mid-eighteenth century.

The Saga of Igor's Host notwithstanding, Russian literature, philosophy and science were virtually nonexistent. Due to the relatively late standardization of the Bible in Russia, even the art and science of theology itself was relegated to the form of the sermon. Unfortunately, the delicate and complicated ancestry of Byzantine theology that had provided the very foundation for the dogma of early Christianity appears to have been neglected by early Russian clergymen in favor of Byzantine rhetoric. And while Russian preachers abandoned the sacred art of theology for the seductive power of rhetoric, the chronicles of theology were

and frescos.

replaced by stories commemorating the lives of the saints. Arguably, it was this strong clerical emphasis on the lives of saints, coupled with the people's fascination with the saints that contributed to the popularization of the icon. Of course, most common people had never seen a saint, so sacred edification was created through the aesthetic and spiritual contemplation of the artist, who was also influenced by the stories of hagiographers. Because the icon painter enjoyed such an integral connection to the church, his work was received by the people as the ultimate in theological and aesthetic expression by his audience.

Indeed, religion was integral to most arts in early Russia. On the one hand, the eye is seduced and transfixed by the overwhelming beauty of ornate Churches and the delicate, sweetness of the icons. On the other hand, the ear is charmed and the listener is entranced by the chanted liturgy. God, in this manner, appeals to all of our senses. Similarly, most of the artifacts in the church (tapestries, icons, mosaics, stained glass windows and frescoes) were useful not only to delight the eye, but more importantly, to seduce and charm the common people into attending the Church. The primary appeal of early Russian religion was less theological, and more ritualistic. Still, the people came in masses, and Christianity extended its influence into the aesthetic, cultural and personal realms of everyday Russian life. The universal tenets of Christianity encouraged a deep sense of history in conjunction with the primitive, or indigenous traditions. Christianity provided Russians with more than an explanation of Creation, but more importantly, with a complete assortment of sacrosanct heroes from the moment of Creation, through Incarnation and Resurrection, all the way

to the Day of Judgment. This complete and sacred lineage provided Russians with a seamless tapestry of faith, dogma and meaning.

The most abundant and evolved art form in Russia during medieval times was undoubtedly the sacred image, or the icon. The icon was no mere attempt at portraiture, but rather, a complex work of mythical, spiritual and aesthetic significance. The introduction of the icon into the art world came about in the middle of the ninth century as a result of an archaic Byzantine conflict, after the defeat of the puritanical iconoclasts in Constantinople, during which the icon was elevated to a higher art form. Yet, the link between Russian and Byzantine icons is undeniable. As early as the tenth century, Byzantine iconography had spread its influence in early Russia, and by the twelfth century, Russian iconography had already developed its own distinctive nuances. While the eagerness of Russian iconographers to break away from their Byzantine predecessors by developing their own styles and interpretation would come in due time, originally, Russian iconography was bound to Byzantium for a variety of reasons. The most obvious elements linking Russian iconography to that of Byzantium are style, type and subject matter, yet even these similarities would soon be subject to change. When juxtaposed, Russian and Byzantine iconography might well appear virtually indistinguishable, yet the differences are subtle but clear. In both, one can observe scenes depicting the gospel, the lives of saints, and the veneration of the Holy Mother of God.

Despite these ubiquitous similarities, the reality is that Russian and Byzantine iconography are a great deal more disparate than one may readily believe. True, the differences are subtle and nuanced, but they are nonetheless

manifested in form, concept, composition and color. These disparities become particularly apparent in the area of facial representation, as well as stylistic execution of stroke and color. In Byzantine iconography, faces are often tight and severe, with pure colors that further enhance the somber tone. Although Russian iconography is also precise in form and detail, faces appear to be kinder, the gazes seem gentler, and the shock of pure color is tempered by well-placed highlights, and smooth chromaticism. Another noteworthy distinction of Russian iconography can be observed in the brushstroke technique, which can be most simply categorized as "expressive"⁷. These expressive brushstrokes lent Russian icons a softness, or gentility that is absent in Byzantine iconography. In addition to the differences in color and technique, the Russian iconographers distanced themselves from their Byzantine forefathers by developing their own unique type of iconography. The most obvious manifestation of this new type can be observed by examining the subject matter of certain Russian icons began to incorporate local saints like Nicholas the Wonder worker, or Boris and Gleb, and it was this customization of iconography that further separated Russian iconography from that of Byzantium. These saints began to reflect the important aspects of Russian everyday life, as well as the needs of the people for whom the icons were created. Saints George and Nicholas were responsible for protecting the peasants, and the land on which they thrived. Conversely, the traders and the merchants were watched over by Paraskeva Pyatnitsa and Anastasia.

While this particular practice of associating certain saints with the specific regions or vocations of individuals may appear quite logical, and even natural, it

⁷ In terms of technique, Russian style of iconography can be most effectively categorized as

was virtually unheard of in Byzantine iconography. It is true that Byzantine iconography did venerate some of these same saints, but they were depicted in an austere and unapproachable manner that had little to do with the believers that worshipped them. Byzantine iconographers were not exactly in tune with the needs of the people, nor did they care to be representatives of the populous. Russian iconographers, on the other hand, were acutely aware of the social climate, and strove to satisfy the needs of the people by venerating those saints of particular interest to the community. This attentiveness to the needs of the people, particularly donors like traders and merchants but also rural inhabitants, often forced iconographers to move away from traditional representations of the Holy Mother of God, John the Baptist, and even Christ in favor of popular saints. In some manner, Russian iconographers, particularly those in the northern regions, were so eager to please their patrons and their audiences that they began to abandon the traditional canon of iconography.

Still, the powerful influence of the social climate in early Russia, or more specifically, the will of the people was virtually impossible for iconographers to ignore. More importantly, Russian people believed, as many still do, that iconography was the highest expression of art, and the most perfect of all the arts. Most Russians considered iconography to be a direct representation of God himself, and therefore refused to believe that the icon originated in Egypt, Byzantium or Corinthians, insisting that the icon was a form created by the Divine. For this reason, it was considered disrespectful to offer money for an icon. Usually, it was customary for icons to be exchanged for other works of art,

painterly.

or to be presented as gifts or donations. Because of the highly venerated place of the icon in Russian society, icons were treated with the utmost respect. For instance, icons could not be suspended from nails or wires, but rather, had to be leaning against a shelf or a bracket. According to the noted and respected Russian historian and author F.I. Buslaev, who refers to a chronicle entitled Council of the Hundred Chapters, iconographers themselves had to be pure of heart and mind in order to be respected. According to tradition, "Iconographers must be humble, meek, devout; they must not engage in empty talk; they must not be jokers, quarrelsome, envious, drunkards, thieves, or murderers. They must valiantly preserve their purity of body and soul with great fear of God" (Buslaev, 7-8). Certainly, many great iconographers, Andrei Rublyov included, have represented the above criteria without fault. Most iconographers were simple men that labored in artisan workshops that were not under the thumb of Russian aristocrats or highly appointed clergymen. For this reason, such characteristics of an iconographer were in no small part ideals, and since iconographers were mere humans, one may assume that such ideals could not be completely satisfied all of the time. Although the personality of an iconographer was intensely scrutinized, there were other aspects of iconography that were equally as important as high ethics and undaunted morality. Among these other attributes, the ability to render a portrait with detail and purity, not realism, was perhaps the most important. Arguably, the icons of the early fourteenth and fifteenth century are the best example of these ideals, because many of them were completed before the influences of westernization.

Yet, like most other art forms, Russian iconography could not resist the influx of Western ideas and techniques that began to seep in to style and technique. For many traditional Russians, and certainly for the ultra conservative and extremely traditional Old Believers, this intrusion of western, or Latin aesthetic was nothing short of scandalous. In the eyes of the Old Believers, whose religious beliefs were so rigorous, that even the manner in which they crossed themselves was to be performed according to an established and meticulously detailed ritual. Western innovations were perceived with extreme prejudice and suspicion, and this climate of hostility began to fade only towards the end of the seventeenth century. These Old Believers perceived icons that were created before the influx of Latin or Western to be concerned with the purity, morality and the ethereal, not chiaroscuro models concerned with earthly senses and realistic portraiture. While it is difficult for the untrained eye to discern between traditional icons and those created after Western influences, their differences are not impossible to distinguish. Western innovations were most apparent in the details of portraiture, or in the faces, hands and bodies of the saints, which the icons depicted. Icons created before the influence of Western and Latin artists bore faces of saints that appeared to be purified by suffering, fasting and exhaustive prayer, yet the icons created after the influx bore faces that were plump, rosy and peaceful. These later icons depicted saints that were healthy, not haggard, with combed, flowing hair, glowing cheeks, full, red lips and flowing cloaks. In short, the icons created after the Western influx were threatening not only to the traditional aesthetics of iconography, but more importantly, the ideals of social and religious life of everyday Russia.

Indeed, these new icons reflected the changing ideals of Russian society, which included a more integrated relationship between common people and the saints that they worshiped. Icons were moving away from the sublime and toward the earthly. Russian iconography, despite the profound attention to detail and expression, was luminous and passionate, and there was a tenderness that was absent in the more severe icons of Byzantium. For this reason, is not surprising that one of the most popular themes in Russian iconography was the now ubiquitous depiction of the "Virgin of Tenderness", which features a mother caressing her son. Icons created during the fifteenth century are particularly significant, because they are ideal representations of the luminescence and simplicity that characterized Russian iconography. The forms and compositions were simple, often including borders complete with scenes from the lives of the saints. While these icons contained an obvious narrative, they were not didactic or allegorical. Even hagiographic icons, those most directly inspired by a literary text, were simple and uncluttered by excessive detail. This simplicity was the earmark of Russian iconography, and the systematic rhythm with which the narratives are rendered suggests that iconographers were capable of mastering spatial and temporal intervals between bodies and objects in order to convey the illusion of weightlessness. The result is a kind of transcendence of dimension that occurs when the figures begin to float along the surface of the icon, pushing the already liminal boundaries between the spiritual world and the corporeal one. This division between the earthly and ethereal realms is found to be rather severe in Byzantine iconography, while Russian iconography posits a decidedly more permeable boundary.

Clearly, Russian icons still reflected the Byzantine influence, a fact most apparent in the stoic stylization of the icon's figures (who appear to be suspended in a motionless trance) as well as the deliberate attention to precise detail and vivid color. Yet, over time, Russian artists began to move away from the Byzantine colors and details, imposing their own color and style scheme over a faint Byzantine stencil. The Russian artists also rejected the caustic wax paints used by Byzantine iconographers in favor of egg-based tempera paints, whose richness and opulence was more aesthetically appealing. Also, the cypress and lime wood that had been used by the Byzantine iconographers was replaced by Russian pine and birch. The person who was commissioning the icons would often provide the wood for the iconographer, and the panels were prepared and finished by a skilled carpenter before they were presented to the artist. Because of the popularity of large icons that were inspired by the Russian's love for frescoes and friezes, artists often created long panels by joining two or more boards together with glue. The sections that were glued together had to be reinforced by fitted wood splints, or *shponki*. This system of reinforcement is relegated almost entirely to early iconography, or that of the twelfth and thirteenth century, while the iconographers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries preferred to use a technique called mortising, which entailed cutting contrasting grooves into the adjoining panels and fitting them together. In order to keep the panel, primer or paint from cracking, the artist would then stretch a piece of material, usually made of linen, canvas or hemp, over the panel. To avoid potential textural unevenness, the entire surface area of this cloth would finally be completely covered by a primer of either alabaster or gesso. Although

the materials involved in this process may have changed somewhat throughout the years, the technique for icon preparation has not been significantly altered. For this reason, it is not surprising that icons from varying regions, while having disparate styles and compositions, share similar techniques of craftsmanship.

Undoubtedly, separating icons according to region and date of production can be a very complicated business. Most early Russian icons of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are few in number, and sadly, have been rather poorly preserved. From this puzzle consisting of a mere handful of artifacts, art historians have attempted to piece together a regional and chronological history of early Russian iconography. In the laborious and painstaking process of dating and reconstructing icons, virtually nothing can be ascertained with certainty, and almost all findings are in some manner inconclusive. Yet, despite these uncertainties, scholars have managed to show that Russian iconography was divided into regions. Unfortunately, there is little left from the school of Kievan panel painting and hardly anything is known about iconography of Rostov, Novgorod, and particularly early Moscow. Since Moscow was not always the cultural Mecca that it is today, but rather, a city whose culture stagnated as the people struggled for centuries under the yoke of Tatar domination, there is little evidence to suggest that early iconography flourished there.

Still, historians boldly assert that these regions did exist and that icons were created there. Since then, scholars have offered some tangible proof to accompany their pudding. The icon of the *Virgin of Sven*, for example, has been linked with the region of Kiev, since it was taken from the Kiev Monastery of the Caves in the year of 1218, in order to heal a young, blind Prince Roman

Michialovich (Karabinov, 107-13). This icon, historically referred to as the *Virgin of Cypress* by N. Kondakov and *Platuterva* by the Greeks, is referred to by Russians simply as the *Virgin of the Caves*. This discrepancy in naming icons reveals just how difficult categorizing and dating icons can be, particularly when one icon can be referred to by as many as three disparate names. Regardless of these potential problems, historians still firmly maintain that this icon originated in Kievan Rus'. Like other icons of Kievan origin, this icon appears to be decidedly Byzantine in style and color, while the face of the Virgin bears some distinctly Russian characteristics, such as an open, gentle expression shown in a detailed portrait. Stylistically, this icon is significant because of its extremely flat composition, which harkens back to iconographic antiquity. Also, this early icon is important because it is said to have had real magical powers, making it capable of warding off disease, doom and even blindness⁸.

Similarly, Muscovite icons are revered for their miraculous powers, but they are as elusive and difficult to categorize as their Kievan counterparts, particularly if they originated during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Moscow was one of the first Russian cities to regain its independence after the Tatar domination, and it quickly replaced the bustling city of Vladimir as the center of northern commerce and civilization. Far from the behemoth that it is today, the Moscow of the Middle Ages was backward and provincial, with little room for artistic vision or representation. The obscurity of Muscovite culture in medieval times speaks to the lack of preserved icons from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but while there is little historical record of Muscovite art

⁸ The power of icons is described in detail by Russian poets like Akhmatova, Bunin, Pushkin,

during those times, it seems reductive to assert that Muscovite art and iconography were nonexistent. Rather, the iconography associated with Moscow during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries can be attributed to Muscovite artists precisely because of its regional distinctions, which are ascertained by examining color, style, composition and technique. For example, one particular icon, which depicts Joshua kneeling before the figure of the Archangel Michael, is associated with Muscovite iconography. Scholars believe that this icon is connected to a Muscovite Prince, Mikhail Yaroslavich Choroborit, who allegedly commissioned the icon between the years 1238 and 1248 (Lazarev, 43). The icon bears the dark colors of Byzantium, but it is highly ornamented and finished, complete with gold applied to the clothing of the figures.

Clearly, this icon is significant not only because it can be traced back to early Muscovite iconography, but more importantly, because it is an ideal example of the symbiotic fusion between the Byzantine style and the newly evolving style of Russian iconographers. While the faces and colors echo the severity and density so characteristic of Byzantine iconography, the subtle gold highlighting and the elegant ornamentation reveal the touch of Muscovite artists. Nearing the end of the thirteenth century, each of these disparate Russian regions began to develop their own styles of iconography, and other Russian cities swiftly followed. In Yaroslav, the figures were long and graceful, like a drawing by Amadeo Modigliani, while the Novgorod school favored the use of rich color and gold leaf. In Moscow, the artists rejected the Byzantine tradition even further by using colors even brighter and richer than those in Novgorod, and figures whose

Essenin, and others.

svelte, elegant and elongated forms rivaled those of the Yaroslav school, and sought to elevate iconography to a higher, unprecedented level of aesthetic and ideological perfection.

The Mongol invaders, whose cruelty and barbarity were countered and endured by the quiet grace and peaceful elegance of the icons, further catalyzed the evolution of Russian iconography. Religion, spirituality, and the communal bond of the people were enhanced by the strong influence of Russian iconography. It was later, at the end of the fourteenth century during the slow deterioration of the Mongol rule that Russian iconography came into its renaissance. The years of the Tatar domination brought Russian culture, religion and economy to a virtual standstill. From the time that these Mongol hordes invaded Russia in 1240 and until the time of their ultimate retreat in 1480, the Mongols were the dominant force throughout most of the Russian territories. Upon invading the regions on the steppes, the Mongols moved into the cities and set up administrations whose fruition appeared to depend more on their harsh style of military organization and less on their cultural savvy.

Within these Mongol hordes, perhaps the most infamous of which is the Golden Horde, the Mongol commanders secured strategic military and economic positioning between the southern regions of Islam and the eastern empire of China, and adjacent to the southwestern regions of Byzantium. With few notable exceptions like Novgorod and Pskov, most Russian regions were subordinate to Mongol khans. These Mongols, also known as Tatars, were primarily pagans, who later became Muslims like the Turks of Central Asia. In addition to owing a regular financial and agricultural "tribute" to the Mongol khans, but also had to

repress their own culture and Christianity under the choke hold of Mongol cum Muslim religious and cultural domination⁹. The Mongol khans established a capital on the Volga River, near the city of Sarai. Ghingis Khan, who had amassed a large empire during his brutish rule, witnessed the destruction, or fragmentation of his hegemony, as the empire broke off into disparate hordes. The famed Golden Horde, or the Khanate of the Qypchak Turks, was a racial potpourri of pagans. Because there was no written legal precedent, the Golden Horde decided matters such as who was fit to rule the city of Vladimir. An excellent example of the unshakable Mongol dominance was evident in the legislative decision making process of the Golden Horde, and in 1390, two princes traveled to Vladimir to dispute their rights over the throne. The battle for the throne ensued between the two surviving sons of the Grand Prince of Vladimir. Although there was some discrepancy regarding the heir, it was Prince Mikhail who finally received the crown and the throne, and the *yarlik*, or taxes, of Vladimir in the year 1305. Despite his seizing power of Vladimir, Mikhail still faced enemies in Moscow, Novgorod and Pereyasavl. It was because of this opposition that Mikhail staged a raid on the city of Moscow, and once Moscow had been defeated, a tenuous peace stretched between Novgorod and Moscow. Between the years of 1304- 1308, the Mongols strove to achieve a balance of power by supporting Mikhail's nemesis, Yuri of Moscow, and while this Mongol support undoubtedly weakened Mikhail's strong hold, it was ultimately Mikhail's strained and weakening relationship with the clergy that cost him the seat of power (Channon, 29).

⁹ While Mongols did not forbid Christianity, they discouraged worship through violence, like

Contrary to popular perception, this Golden Horde, unlike many of its Eastern Orthodox opponents, was rather tolerant of Christianity and decidedly not fanatical about Islam. Unfortunately, this Qypchak dissolved during the fifteenth century, leaving behind in a position to rule its somewhat barbaric and ruthless contemporaries. After the Mongol defeat at Kulikovo, this Qypchak moved down the Volga to the regions of Kazan and Astrakhan, where it would continue to flourish independently until the early eighteenth century. Because the long and debilitating presence of the Mongols lasted over two centuries, the Russian people had a long time to grow angry, indignant and ultimately, fed up. And while religion, culture and economy suffered, the overall fabric of Russian society grew stronger. Russians turned, often in secret, to the Orthodox Christian religion that had grown among the eastern Slavs¹⁰. Soon, when the centralized authority and the Mongol seat of power had sufficiently eroded, the Russian people joined forces and rose up to reclaim their land, their culture and their independence. The Eastern Slavs began to regroup around a new center of economy and politics; the state of Moscovia. So, after the physical triumph of Kulikovo and the spiritual rejuvenation of the people, Russian life became free not only of the stranglehold of Mongol and Turkish subjugation, but also from its suffocating ties with Byzantium. Not surprisingly, this golden age of Russian iconography occurred towards the end of the Tatar domination, and its coming would herald a new beginning for Russian culture, religion, philosophy and art. The moment of true emancipation came swiftly on the heels of battle of Kulikovo

destroying cathedrals.

¹⁰ This may be where the tradition of secret ritual worship began, continuing throughout the Communist era.

in 1380. It was this historic battle, where Russians defeated the Tatars that influenced and inspired Andrei Rublyov so profoundly.

While twelfth and thirteenth century Russian iconography had evolved greatly from its modest rise as an offshoot of Byzantium, the Russian icon achieved prominence during the time of Theophanes the Greek, whose unique approach to iconography established him as a leading artist in Moscow and Novgorod. Theophanes the Greek favored a technique relying of free brush strokes, and improvisation. It was precisely this brilliant style and technique that attracted young protégés like Daniel the Black, and of course, Andrei Rublyov, to seek out apprenticeships with the great Theophanes. Indeed, his mentoring was significant, and when Theophanes the Greek died, his magic lived on in the hands of his young pupils, whose own skills, styles and techniques were molded by his expert guidance. Arguably, the most magnificent Russian iconographer to emerge from the school of Theophanes the Greek is, without question, Andrei Rublyov, whose masterpiece, the icon entitled The Old Testament Trinity, is hailed worldwide as the paradigm for all of Russian iconography. Still, long before the triumphant emergence of Rublyov, Russian iconography was divided among disparate schools of style, technique and ideology. These different schools are most often separated according to regions, or cities, and the icons of each region resonate with varied themes and characteristics.

For the most part, little is known about the iconography of southern regions, like Kiev, but even if the south did not produce any great masters, Kievan icons did exist. Still, the major centers of iconography of medieval Russia were Moscow, Novgorod and Pskov. It is precisely these centers of art, religion and

culture that engendered some of the most notable icon painters of the Russian Middle-Ages. The Pskov movement occurred on the heels of the Novgorod school and its disintegration, and because Pskov lost its independence to Moscow in 1510, it is perhaps the least well known of the three. More importantly, it was the Novgorod school that brought fame to Theophanes the Greek, and the Moscow school, which defined Andrei Rublyov, so these two movements are of particular and primary significance.

With few notable exceptions, critics and historians have displayed a somewhat understandable tendency to overlook the Pskov school of iconography. Perhaps this slight is a result of the Pskov schools rather recent discovery. Indeed, the influence of the Pskov school has been literally and metaphorically "uncovered" only in the last century, when the icons in and around that region were undergoing the process of being systematically cleaned and restored. In a 1930 article penned by I. Grabar entitled "Die Malerschule des alten Pskow, or the "The School of Old Pskov Manners", it was not until the fall of the Russian Imperial Empire that the Pskov school, and its formidable influence on Russian iconography, came to be recognized. Around the time of the Oktoberist revolution and more than a decade before Grabar, a Russian historian by the name of Grishchenko discussed the importance of the Pskov school in his critical article entitled "*Voprosi Zhivopisi*", or "Problems of Art". Still, despite these relatively late and sparse accounts of the Pskov school, it is a movement that has been characterized by such revered historians as Viktor Nikitich Lazarev and Pavel Muratov as a significant contribution to the body of Russian iconography.

The city of Pskov was the capital of Krivichi, a northern region that had managed to avoid the oppressive and destructive Tatar domination. Pskov was not a young city, and what little Russian culture Pskov had cultivated was allowed to flourish into the late Middle Ages without being hampered by constant raids. After the Bolotovo agreement, a document that emancipated Pskov and other "dependent cities like it, Pskov achieved permanent independence from Novgorod the Great. Yet, despite Pskov's status as a free city, its governing body continued to mirror the tightly assembled ruling class of boyars that at one time controlled Novgorod, Moscow and Kiev. In addition to the aristocracy, the city developed a *veche*, or parliament, that governed the people, created and enforced laws, allocated funds and ruled as the supreme judges to princes, ambassadors, or other men of social, political and religious import. Although independent Pskov maintained the status of the elite ruling boyars, the emergence of an influential artistic community arose alongside the aristocracy. Like Paris at the turn of the century with its famous *Avenue de Monmartre*, independent Pskov was divided into artistic regions known as quarters. Artisans, merchants, painters and adventurers, inhabited these quarters and while the land was still owned by the *veche*, both artists and priests exerted a formidable influence on the socio-cultural milieu of the city.

This symbiotic relationship between artists and clergymen was significant in the development of the Pskov school of iconography, as well solidifying the already firm grip that the artistic and clerical community held on the social, financial and administrative pulse of the city. In Pskov, views on religion were becoming increasingly liberal, due in no small part to the heresy of the

strigolniki, whose bold refusal of paternalistic Orthodoxy challenged the high ecclesiastical powers at be, and shook the Orthodox foundation at its very core. This questioning of religion, and its stranglehold on creative living, played out in the aesthetic choices of Pskovian masters. Indeed, the redefined poles of art and religion play a particularly large role in the evolution of Pskov as a kind of bohemian city. The free wheeling and free thinking artists of the Pskov school abandoned the traditional and canonical model of established Russian iconography in favor of a simpler, less refined and almost raw style of representation. The colors of a typical icon from the Pskov school would most likely be dark and muted, with a predominance of a green so dark that it appears to be black, and a red of such portentous intensity that it is reminiscent of Aschenbach's overly ripe strawberries¹¹. While the requisite oranges, pinks and azure blues make an almost cursory appearance but the overarching tone is one of dark and fleshy moss. The predominant tones of green give way only to the backgrounds of the icons, which are often yellow, or a muddy gold. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Pskov school's use of color is the dark brown and olive flesh tones that are used to depict the saints. These dark faces, made even more intense by the addition of stark and surprising highlighting, provide a sharp contrast to the pale and ethereal visages of icons from the Novgorod and Moscow schools, and the rough, asymmetrical composition of the Pskov icons further buttress its distinction from the other schools.

Simply, the predominant artistic language, or style, of the Pskov school of iconography is extremely expressive, and lacks the subtle nuances of its

¹¹ The protagonist of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* whose death is catalyzed by plague infested,

Muscovite or Novgorodian contemporaries. The impulsive and brazen style of the Pskov school may have been a result of the early rejection of canon by so many of the anonymous Pskov masters. This disinterest in tradition may also account for the lack of refinement, detail and shading in the overly expressive icons of the Pskov school as well as characteristics of unevenly applied pigments and erratic brushstrokes.

Unfortunately, most icons that are thought to have originated from Pskov during the twelfth century have been neither authentically preserved nor positively identified. Despite the loss of such archaic icons, there are numerous important, early icons from the Pskov school that have been preserved. Perhaps most notable among them are the impressive *Dormition*, adorning the Church of the Landing Place, and the *Virgin Hodegetria*, which was painted for the Church of Saint Nicholas of the Pelts. Both of these artifacts are rather large icons that appear almost fresco like, exceeding one meter in height and length, and both are currently housed at the Russian Museum, in the Gallery Tretyakov, which is home to numerous other exquisite examples of Russian Iconography. Sadly, the faces of these icons have almost completely worn away so modern scholars can only imagine the stunning effect of the original masterpieces. Perhaps the most well executed, and simultaneously well known of the Pskovian icons is *The Prophet Elijah with Scenes from his Life*. This Old Russian masterpiece is also in the Tretyakov Gallery, and it provides the most crystallized example of the Pskovian style. Here, one can witness the local earmarks of the Pskov school

over-ripe berries.

manifesting themselves not only in the scenes from the prophet Elijah's life, but also in the chaotic and seemingly unrelated compilation of these scenes.

These radical and spontaneous distinctions, both stylistic and thematic, are perhaps the most tangible divisors of the Pskov school from the elegant Muscovites or the methodical Novgorodians . Still, despite these early masterpieces, the Pskov school of iconography evolved at a painfully slow pace, and it was not until the fourteenth century that Pskovian masters were beginning to innovate instead of merely trying not to imitate. By the fifteen century, the colors that had been so rigidly characteristic of a Pskov icon began to soften, and the heavy shadows began to lift, if only ever so slightly. The traditionally favored blackish greens and berry reds became brighter and lighter, but the intensely asymmetrical and expressive style, as well as the ominous and penetrating gazes of the saints steadfastly remained. Throughout the fifteenth century, Pskovian masters continued to pursue hagiographic iconography colored by stylized, individual interpretation, scattered, abstract composition and bold execution. Already, by the sixteenth century, the almost atavistic Pskovian style had achieved new heights, and what must have appeared at that time to be vulgar and primitive, was on the contrary, innovative, daring and completely organic. In some manner, the sixteenth century artists of the Pskov school were the Kandinsky's, Klee's and Pollock's of their time, but in the unforgiving mist of medieval Russian iconography, their spontaneous and radical aesthetic visions could not be embraced by those awash in the traditional artistic canon¹².

¹² Like these Russian modernist, Pskov's iconographers took chances by using unorthodox colors and compositions.

Yet while the rejection of canon by Pskovian artists reached its pinnacle in the beginning of the sixteenth century, the city of Pskov was annexed by Moscow in 1510, and although Pskovian masters still vehemently denied Muscovite aesthetic traditions, the new social, cultural and artistic majority thwarted their own artistic visions. The radical, freethinking citizens of Pskov were soon integrated into the warps and wefts of an already tightly woven Muscovite tapestry, as was their unique style of expressive iconography.

Not unlike the Pskov school, the Novgorod school, or the school of the North, was also based in a free city that had been built by the combination of a strong artisan class and the import/export society, which it encouraged, and an aggressive policy towards colonization. Novgorod was blessed, because it managed to escape the Tatar invasion. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Novgorod attained considerable economic, ideological and artistic prosperity that further buttressed its status as an independent, republican power fueled by private ingenuity. Novgorod had a rather progressive legislative assembly, a powerful governor whose position served to check and balance the power of the prince, and an elected archbishop. Despite the powerful interests of the boyars and military, which were frequent incompatible, it was the interests of the wealthy merchants, whose financial sponsorship enabled artists to produce, that were most significant. Yet, while Novgorod did not share Pskov's status as a free thinking, radical city in the sense of an aesthetic war waged stylistically and thematically, it was nevertheless similar to Pskov in its liberal views on the roles that religion and clergy play in one's daily life. Perhaps as a result of the heresy of the *strigolniki*, whose influenced seeped into Novgorod from Pskov, the

population enjoyed a freer approach to practiced religion during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The citizens of Novgorod came to approach religion in a particular manner, one that placed a heavy emphasis on rational, individual faith, not on the metaphysical. In short, the religiosity of Novgorod opened itself up to the practical, and the everyday. This freedom was reflected in the icons that came out of the Novgorod school of that time. Icons depicted the simple, often mundane, tasks of everyday life in Novgorod, and the saints who iconographers chose to revere came to reflect the needs of the people. Also, the golden age of iconography, as well as the age of cultural prosperity, coincided with the economic boon of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Because Novgorod was not affected by the Tatars, and since commerce or communication with Byzantium were at a virtual standstill, Novgorod iconographers felt free to develop styles that would reflect local motifs and popular forms. However, by the end of the fourteenth century, the masters of the Novgorod school began to manifest a dramatic shift in their aesthetic. Perhaps in response to conflicting dogmas or a general religious slack off, the aesthetic markedly shifted to reflect a renewed and more stringent individual faith, as well as a rational, strict and deliberate technique. Discipline was back in style, and by the beginning of the fifteenth century, the style of the Novgorod school so clearly reflected the popular taste for strong religiosity that even the selection of saints was a reflection of popular consensus. In some manner, these masters of the Novgorod school became the people's artists, and it is not surprising that people chose to venerate saints like Elijah and George. Elijah, as the lord of thunder and rain, seems an obvious choice for supplication as he has a direct relationship with

peasants, and their all-important crops. Likewise, George is the slayer of dragons, and therefore would prove worthy of veneration because he could protect the land, and the flocks that roam it. Saints like Nicholas the Wonder worker, another favorite among Novgorod icons, is the patron of carpenters, and should be appropriately supplicated to ensure commercial, industrial and architectural growth. So, while Pskov masters chose to depict saints through a series of erratic episodes, and the Muscovite masters chose to elevate and elongate, the Novgorod masters sought to reflect the will, hopes and needs of the people by whom they were surrounded. This wave of popular and practical aesthetic representation continued well into the fifteenth century, up to the disintegration of the city in 1510, when the Muscovites annexed Novgorod, like Pskov.

Of course, the aesthetic legacy of the twelfth and thirteenth century served to shape the icons of both the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Despite the gradual breakdown of Byzantine commercial and cultural influence, its remnants continued to linger well into the fourteenth century. This aftertaste resonates in the fourteenth and fifteenth century icons of the Novgorod region, and while the paintings are bright and elegant, they are also somewhat primitive. Indeed, the Novgorod frescos were decidedly more Byzantine, and clearly influenced by the works of two Greek masters of icon painting. These two painters, The Greek Isaiah and Theophanes the Greek, whose works are revered in the earliest Russian chronicles are among the most significant and legendary figures of medieval iconography. Amazingly versatile, these artists were as equally well respected for their magnificent frescoes as they were for their iconography. The

Greek Isaiah decorated the Church of the Entry into Jerusalem in 1338, and almost half a century later, Theophanes the Greek, whose brilliant and inspirational frescoes adorn the Church of the Savior of the Transfiguration in 1378, went on to inspire the infamous Andrei Rublyov. When one compares Novgorod's fourteenth century frescoes with the icons from that same period, one will inevitably note the similarities between the two disparate forms. Yet, perhaps even more compelling is the fact that icon painting, with its simple panels and modest execution, reflects the traditional and regional themes of the more grandiose fresco form. True, frescoes were often more elaborate (in scope and in size) than the smaller and more subtle icons, and their execution required a great deal more time, paint and other expensive materials. Yet, despite the awe-inspiring magnificence of these frescoes, icon painting began to enjoy an increase in popularity.

Not surprisingly, icon painting became increasingly popular because it was much less expensive to commission and create than its greater and grander cousin, the fresco. While the commissioning of a fresco was usually done by a powerful and wealthy group of merchants, who would then choose an appropriate church to which they would "donate" the fresco, the commissioning of an icon was a great deal less difficult, as well as decidedly less expensive. So, in time, the commissioning of icons became widespread in Novgorod, while painting of frescoes was relegated to individual cathedrals and monasteries. Yet, because of the relatively low cost of producing icons, the private corporations, individual businessmen and politicians of Novgorod began to commission icon painters to decorate their many stone and wood churches that had sprouted up all over the

northern territory. In addition to changes like the spread of vernacular, the gradual fall of the aristocracy also contributed to the popularity of the icon. Because princes were rapidly losing their power and money to the boyars, the expansive studios and buildings for court gatherings were sold, lost or repossessed, there was no more need for the enormity and expense of frescoes. Soon, the commissioning of art became a reality for smaller organizations, private landowners, and small corporations. It was this fervent and widespread commissioning of icons in Novgorod that led to the development of a solid and productive class of artisans. This artisan class was organized according to trade, but also according to district, street and region. It was not long after the increased popularity of icon painting that the people of Novgorod began to consider the possibility of exporting their local icons in an attempt to revive their fading status as an economic, social and political power in the face of such rapidly expanding regions as Moscow and Pskov. Almost immediately, the export of icons for profit became one of Novgorod's greatest economic boons, and the influences of the Novgorod style were thusly disseminated.

Yet, despite the spread of the Novgorod influence, the style of the Novgorod school remained somewhat elusive and paradoxical. It is particularly difficult to assess the characteristics of the Novgorod school simply because so few of the icons of fourteenth and fifteenth century Novgorod are still in existence. Furthermore, the few icons that remain from this period and region are so completely random in style and technique that their specific date of completion, as well as their origin has been eclipsed. Nevertheless, the influence of the Novgorod icon would continue to be felt by other schools of painting well

into the second half of the century. Not unlike Moscow, whose paintings could not escape the influence that was exerted by Byzantium, Novgorod was open to commerce and trade with outside cultures. The people of Novgorod actively sought sources of inspiration from external influences that were reflected in the local social, cultural and political climate. But the random and archaic compilation of Novgorod's icons that confounds scholars to this day was not the only representation of art in the middle ages, and another group of icons appeared in the middle of the fourteenth century that appeared to be more advanced than its Byzantine predecessors. Palaeologan Art, which emerged during the 1330's as a progressive anecdote to the stylistically archaic, influenced this style of iconography or hagiographic icons of Russian and Byzantine design. This style was named in honor of Michael VIII Palaeologus, whose rule of Constantinople from 1261 to 1262 marked the end of Latin rule and coincided with the gradual decline of the Byzantine culture (Onasch, 49).

In addition to the afore mentioned frescos done by the Greek Isaiah and his companions in the Church of the Entry into Jerusalem, the influences of Palaeologan Art could be seen in the figures that grace the doors of St. Peter's Basilica, as well as in the decoration of Saint Sophia, whose sublime and transcendent beauty gave Vladimir's emissaries pause to wonder whether they were in heaven or on earth. Perhaps it was the discovery of this new style that encouraged Novgorod icon painters to begin experimenting with new techniques. And while the first part of the fourteenth century bears witness to the archaic forms of the Novgorod school, other Russian iconographers were creating the hagiographic icons that originated in Byzantium. Because the sources of such

hagiographic icons were thought to be apocryphal, icon painters were therefore not bound by the traditional rules of interpretation. The subject matter of such hagiographic icons usually included full figures or torsos of saints in the center of the icon, and a surrounding border, which contained several episodic scenes from that particular saint's life. These episodes may have included specific cultural and historical details, such as the depiction of architecture and other recognizable landmarks. The inclusion of such natural and man made details in these scenes was in no way a trivialization of the icon genre, but rather, their incorporation is done in a manner that deliberately draws a boundary between the corporeal and the ethereal. These scenes of praying saints, in which time and space appear to be suspended, provided the worshiper with a sense of the saint and his ideology in an episode that was worthy of meditation, as well as spiritual and physical emulation. In this manner, the episodes resonate with elements of the didactic, and the lives of the saints serve to instruct and inform much in the same way as a sermon¹³.

So, in as much as Greek Orthodox priests could touch the lives of the Russian community, in a similar manner, icon painters like Theophanes the Greek brought religion, spirituality and culture to Russian people. Indeed, the contributions of Theophanes the Greek to the Novgorod school, and to icon painting as a whole, are more than formidable. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many icons Theophanes the Greek painted during his decade in Novgorod, because a great deal of his time was spent painting the extraordinary frescoes for which he was so well known. Theophanes the Greek was an extremely influential

¹³ In particular, scenes were meant to be both awe-inspiring and terrifying, in order to frighten

and revered artist among his peers, and it is probable that most of the fledgling iconographers in Novgorod trained in his studio. Likewise, most of the local fresco painters held Theophanes the Greek in very high esteem, often integrating his thematic and stylistic signatures into their own work. Still, it would be reductive to assert that the influence of Theophanes the Greek was enough to bring about a kind of revolution against traditional themes, style and technique that had defined iconography since its Byzantine inception. While Theophanes the Greek did usher in a kind of renaissance for religious art, whether it be frescoes or icons, his style proved to be resilient only in the hands of his protégés, and the aesthetic progress of iconography that was found at the end of the fourteenth century began to collapse into the stylistic traditions that regressed some hundred years.

Although the Novgorod iconographers may have ultimately chosen tradition over evolution and rejected the progressive style of Theophanes the Greek, there was one young iconographer who would embrace the tutelage of this renowned master. Young Andrei Rublyov was a man whose own painting was of such mythical and legendary proportions that even Theophanes the Greek is said to have been familiar with his work before making his actual acquaintance. Rublyov went on to inherit the traditional technique, style and ideology of Theophanes the Greek, integrating the teachings of his mentor into the trend and traditions of an already flourishing canon of Muscovite iconography. Although Rublyov went on to break away from his mentor, rebelling aesthetically against many of the traditional ideas held dear by Theophanes the Greek in favor of his

people away from sin.

own progressive and rather unorthodox style, the old master was an enormous influence on the young artist¹⁴.

Before one can engage in an analysis of these disparate styles of iconography, it is important to make some noteworthy distinctions between the Novgorod school of iconography and the Moscow school of icon painting. Muscovite icons, with few exceptions, were everything that the icons of Novgorod were not; subtle, nuanced, elegant and delicate, even aristocratic, with elongated figures and muted colors. The Novgorod icons, for the most part, favored flashy colors and terse, meticulous detail, stocky figures with large heads, and a low background. Interestingly, there is a category within the Novgorod school that may be distinguished as another style of iconography. Scholars as the school of Northern Manners referee to this unique division of the Novgorod school. Icons of the Northern Manners school are distinctive in appearance, and appear to have one or more of the following characteristics; strong figurative style, primitive realism, direct references to colloquialisms, soft tones and dark colors, flatter figures fixed in stiff poses. Icons of the Northern Manners style are almost primitive in comparison to icons from the Novgorod school, whose vivid colors and fluid, deliberate lines rendering solemn saints, stand out in stark contrast to the peasant-faced saints depicted by the Northern Manners school. Perhaps it is this primitive, archaic essence of the Northern Manners icons, and their raw connection to the origins of iconography that renders their coarse simplicity so palatably charming. These simple icons lack the expressive brush strokes or the deliberate shading of the Novgorod school, as well as the attention to details of

¹⁴Although Rublyov initially rebelled against the old Greek's style, he came to emulate

preparation, such as mixing paints smoothly and preparing the panel properly. Consequently, many of the icons in the Northern Manners style have deteriorated not only as a result of improperly handled materials, but also because of the poor craftsmanship of the artists. Yet, regardless of the contributions from the school of Northern Manners, the Novgorod legacy to icon painting was immense. By the end of the fourteenth century, the solid foundation of the Novgorod school was severely shaken by the disintegration of the city in 1478. Soon, Novgorod's economic and social importance had greatly diminished, and the political disinterestedness that followed, compiled with the rapidly growing influence of Muscovite iconography resulted in increasing liminality between the boundaries of Muscovite and Novgorod iconography.

These malleable boundaries must have been decidedly liberating for the icon painter, and the evolution and experimentation in artistic interpretation that followed the Novgorod school appears to buttress such a notion. The Moscow school of iconography emerged during the renaissance of the Pskov school, and relatively little is known about Muscovite icons and frescoes of the early twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Not unlike the twelfth and thirteenth century icons of the Pskov school, the icons of the early Moscow school have simply not been preserved, or identified with any certainty. Perhaps the lack of early Muscovite artifacts reflects the undeveloped and inconsequential status of Moscow as a social and political power. As Moscow began to flourish, strengthening its political and economic foothold as a developing city and shrugging off the grip of Tatar domination, the art and culture came to reflect the prosperity of the region.

Theophanes later in his career.

After the famous battle at Kulikovo, in which the Russians rose up victoriously against the Tatars, Russian art and culture began to flourish within a society that had been temporarily freed from oppression and domination¹⁵. Many Muscovite icons reflected the earlier Byzantine tradition both stylistically and thematically, while others were influenced by Palaeologan aesthetics and hagiography. In truly pivotal point in Muscovite iconography occurred in the mid fourteenth century, when a select group of Greek masters from Istanbul, then Constantinople, arrived in Moscow. It was around 1340 when these masters began to undertake the decoration of several new churches that were being built in Moscow. In 1344, a powerful Constantinople native cum Muscovite named Metropolitan Teognoste, entrusted these Greek masters to decorate his Metropolitan Church (dedicated to the Immaculate Mother) with frescoes and icons. Amidst such a pungent Greek climate, it is not surprising that the early masters of the Moscow school were so heavily influenced by the archaic Byzantine aesthetic.

It was not until several years later that the Moscow school began to evolve, adopting its own redefined and hyper elongated and super elegant aesthetic by which it is still characterized. The consequential development and refinement of the Moscow school was dramatically catalyzed by the arrival of Theophanes the Greek. After a decade working in a studio in Novgorod, where he created countless magnificent frescoes and an unknown number of icons and panels, Theophanes the Greek arrived in Moscow, bringing with him the incomparable traditions of Constantinople. During his years working in small colonies along the coast of the Black Sea, and later in the larger city of Novgorod, Theophanes

¹⁵ While Russians were not totally free after their victory at Kulikovo, the battle marks the

the Greek both developed and perfected his technique of iconography, so by the time that he arrived in Moscow, he was interested in extending his experimentation to other kinds of artistic endeavors. Although Theophanes the Greek made his reputation by painting icons and frescoes, he began his work in Moscow as a miniaturist and illustrator. Yet despite his uncanny and multifaceted talent, this archaic Renaissance man was inevitably drawn to his first love, icon and fresco painting. Indeed, the emergence of Theophanes the Greek as a leader of the Moscow school of iconography was impressive, but his stylistic and thematic impressions, which he made on the world of Muscovite iconography, were less than permanent. Despite all of his disciples and admirers, the influence that Theophanes the Greek had on Muscovite icons significantly dwindled after Andrei Rublyov's stylistic and ideological rebellion against his former mentor, and even more so after his death. Perhaps the most notable contribution of Theophanes the Greek, and later his protégé Andrei Rublyov, made to the stylistic and thematic canon of Muscovite iconography were the elegant, almost hyper-elongated figures, and delicate, subtle coloration. The icons that these two masters painted, among them the frescoes and the notable iconostasis entitled *Diesis and Feasts* that graced the Cathedral of the Annunciation, were monumentally influential for all of Russian iconography. Consequently, Muscovite iconographers began to replace their busts and torsos of saints with full, elongated figures. The iconostasis, a structure in orthodox churches separating the sanctuary from the nave, represents both this physical barrier between two parts of the cathedral, as well as the spiritual boundaries

beginning of liberation.

between the earthly and the ethereal, or between this world and the one that lies beyond our reach.

This iconostasis is a particularly important example of Muscovite iconography, because it is a complex work that was created by the cooperation of several masters. It is most probable that the old master, Theophanes the Greek, would have both supervised the project and made the necessary aesthetic corrections, as well as painting the most important icons. According to chronicle, the icons attributed to Theophanes the Greek in the *Diesis and Feasts* are *Christ in Glory*, *Saint John the Baptist*, *Saint Basil the Great*, *Saint John Chrysostom*, the *Apostle Paul*, the *Archangel Gabriel*, and the *Virgin* (Onasch, 79). In these icons, scholars can discern the style of Theophanes the Greek, easily recognizing his signature in the elegant, yet bright and clear colors, his exquisite sense of form, and the dexterous but passionate decisiveness of the old master. The rest of the iconostasis is said to have been completed by Andrei Rublyov, with assistance from Prochor of Gorodets, who was himself a teacher and contemporary of Rublyov.

Clearly, this iconostasis is significant because it is perceived as one integral whole, and yet it is the product of at least three of the great masters of Russian iconography. In this manner, the work comes alive not only because it is pure *ekphrasis*- showing the lives of saints and providing a narrative of Christ's interaction with them- but because it combines the artistic life forces of different masters into one unified work. The *Diesis* is a real monument to the harmony and integration of Rublyov's work with that of the starets Prochor of Gorodets. The magnificent union between the arts of these two monks is further enhanced

by the expertise of Theophanes the Greek, whose ultimate vision served to unify these various aesthetics. Also, the *Diesis* is an important work because it elucidates the disparity in styles of Andrei Rublyov and Theophanes the Greek. Theophanes the Greek's focus is not so much on the idea of universal redemption, but rather, on the idea of saintly supplication and a fairly severe and judgmental Christ, whose reluctance to forgive sin is being attacked by the desperate, pleading saints. Andrei Rublyov's interpretation of Christ sitting in judgment appears to be decidedly more delicate, humane and forgiving. Of course, these varying views on artistic representation must have reflected the individual personalities of each artist, and it is not surprising that Theophanes the Greek, with his strong character and his unwavering Byzantine traditions, was an enormous impact on the school of Muscovite painting. Tragically, his influence deteriorated shortly after his death, and it was then that Andrei Rublyov really began to work his magic. Arguably, Rublyov's training as a monk inspired his love of serene faces and languid, fluid figures, and the delicate, muted colors of the paintings reflect his fondness for the Russian countryside¹⁶.

Although there is some mystery surrounding the exact date of his birth, historians posit the theory that Andrei Rublyov may have been born in 1370, and he died in 1430 (Billington, 2). Rublyov's emergence on to the scene of Muscovite iconography may have lead to the solidification of a more autonomous school of iconography. Rublyov's emergence only served to further encourage the stylistic standardization of Muscovite iconography in a way that even Theophanes the Greek had failed to do. Although Andrei Rublyov undoubtedly owed a great deal

¹⁶ Some critics suggest that Rublyov's colors appear muted only because they have been faded by

to his mentor, who had influenced him in ways that perhaps even he could not imagine, Rublyov deliberately set himself apart from Theophanes the Greek because his individual, aesthetic vision was different. Since before classical times, young talent has rebelled against the traditions of the old masters, and it is natural and just that the new should overtake the old. Yet, it would be reductive to perceive Rublyov's rejection of Theophanes the Greek as a mere act of rash or insipid rebellion. Simply, Rublyov wanted to develop a style that belonged exclusively to him, and to the scope of his particular vision.

Undoubtedly, Rublyov's aesthetic, spiritual and cultural vision was decisively shaped by the Tatar domination. The Tatar influence affected Russia in a number of ways, but perhaps the most disturbing was its stranglehold on Russian art, culture and religion. While many artists were driven into hiding and forced to develop a sort of underground mentality, even more were tortured and killed by the brutish invaders. As they would do so often in the centuries still to come, Russian people repressed their love of art, literature and spirituality in order to survive the climate of oppressive, warlike domination. Yet, in as much as the Tatars contributed to the oppression and disintegration of Russian culture and society, the ubiquitous struggle against the Tatars also instilled Russians with the strength and solidarity that was instrumental not only to the Tatars' 1380 defeat at Kulikovo, but more importantly, to the resiliency and inexhaustibility of the Russian people.

In some manner, the presence of the Tatar domination forced Russian culture to develop at a rate that was incongruent with the rest of developing

light and time.

Europe. Indeed, while Italy was experience an artistic Renaissance, Russia was still wallowing in medieval Tatar rule and struggling to establish itself agriculturally, architecturally and economically. Having accepted Orthodoxy, Russian people rejected the existing strains of Islam that became so pervasive under the Tatar rule, Russian society as a whole still embraced both the rites and rituals of Christianity. Not surprisingly, the onslaught of violence and the cultural upheaval brought on by the Tatar domination, an increasingly unstable Russian society turned to the solace and stability of the Church, even if it was a Church that had been forced underground. The grip of the Tatars on the people of the southern Crimean and the Ukraine, did not dissipate until the reign of Catherine the Great (Billington, 198). Because Rublyov personally experienced the Tatar domination and the turbulent lawlessness that too often accompanied it, he also sought to escape this profane violence by turning to the sacred. Rublyov was compelled to pursue his interest in Christianity at a young age, and this interest was obviously heightened by the social climate of his time.

Still, while the facts surrounding Rublyov's life are at best uncertain, his contributions to Russian iconography are unparalleled. According to the famed Viktor Lazarev, a Russian art historian and an expert on iconography as well as on Rublyov, the young monk hailed from a hermitage called Radonezh, and entered the Trinity-Sergius Monastery during the fifteenth century. Obviously, Rublyov was greatly influenced by Sergius of Radonezh whose philosophy, not unlike that of St. Francis of Assisi, called for a complete rejection of private

wealth and ownership (Lazarev, 91)¹⁷. Rublyov developed an aesthetic vision both mediated by and infused with forgiveness, contemplation, serenity, using colors that reflected the harmonious nature of pastoral Russia, and were a stark contrast from the gold leaf, bright lapis lazuli and vermilion red backgrounds of Byzantine iconography. In Rublyov's work, there is hardly any trace of the grim severity of Byzantine iconography, and the motionless figures clad in bright, clear colors replace by rhythmic, fluid lines and the delicate, realistic colors of nature. Graceful, expressive faces and smooth parabolic lines replace the asymmetrical displacement and stoicism so ubiquitous in Byzantine iconography.

Unfortunately, the details of Rublyov's life are not as distinct as his artistic vision. Even his birth is a mysterious, and scholars cannot establish exactly when between 1360 and 1370 Rublyov was born. As a young man, Rublyov chose to become a monk. He spent his early years the Troitsa Monastery, which was located about forty miles outside of Moscow, before moving on to St. Sergius. He began to paint at the monastery, and went on to paint for the Grand Prince of Moscow, whose father Dmitry Donskoi was a hero of the Kulikovo battle (Lazarev, 22). Rublyov excelled as an icon and fresco painter, and after his work with Theophanes the Greek, and Prochor of Gorodets. Among Rublyov's plethora of masterpieces, it is the *Trinity* that stands out as his most phenomenal accomplishment. Once Rublyov had earned a reputation as a distinguished iconographer for his work in the Annunciation Cathedral at Moscow, Rublyov was selected to accompany another Russian iconographer to Vladimir in 1408. Rublyov went on to work with a fellow iconographer of some distinction, Daniil

¹⁷ Assisi and Sergius, two travelers, advocated long pilgrimages and a life spent in contemplation

Chorny, or Daniil the Black, for several magnificent projects. The two iconographers began work on a group of mural paintings, which would adorn the Dormition Cathedral. According to Lazarev, Rublyov is responsible for the execution of several icons in the iconostasis of the Dormition Cathedral. Among them, *Christ in Glory* with *The Virgin* and *St. John*, all of which are now in the Tretyakov Gallery (Lazarev, 85-96). A studied comparison of the Diesis created by Rublyov and the Diesis completed by Theophanes the Greek starkly exposes the dramatically different temperament, style and artistic vision of these two masters (Talbot-Rice, 103). While Theophanes the Greek created a Diesis that resonated with tones of somber severity, Rublyov's icons are radiant with the glow of inner peace and deep contemplation.

Unlike his mentor Theophanes the Greek, Andrei Rublyov painted icons that were infused with a kind of sweetness, or gentle sentimentality¹⁸. Of all of the icons that Rublyov completed with Daniil the Black, among the most significant of these is the Cathedral of the Trinity in the Monastery of the Trinity of Saint Sergius. The artists began work on the frescos in 1425, and the project, which was commissioned by the hegumen Nikon, was completed in 1427. According to a chronicle by Epifanii the Wise, Rublyov also spent time working in the Monastery of Andronik, where he is thought to have been more than a mere monk, but rather, one of the monastery's governing members (Onasch, 72). When Rublyov died on January 29th in the year of 1430, his tombstone was lost and then later recovered. Yet, the legacy he left was more than his name

while wandering.

¹⁸ Theophanes depicted intense and fear inspiring faces, while Rublyov favored peaceful and serene facial expressions.

inscribed upon a rock. Rublyov changed the face of Russian iconography, cataloguing an entire artistic tradition in the oeuvre of one career. Rublyov left no signed works, but he did leave, in the form of the icons and frescoes that can be attributed to him, a lucid artistic vision. Because Rublyov adhered to the same philosophy as his mentor, Father Sergius, his art reflected the need for spiritual rigor, poverty and tenderness. In short, his iconography resonates with a kind of humanitarianism and social consciousness. Rublyov iconography reveals a real maturity in his work, as well as a bent toward classical form and composition, which he perfected while working with the master Theophanes the Greek. Almost always, Rublyov favored drawing with a free hand on his icons as well as on his larger works, such as friezes and frescoes. Clearly, this reluctance to use a stencil indicates that Rublyov had become a true master, whose talent was so exquisite that his humility had to make room for his confidence. This mastery of free hand drawing resulted in a truly individual interpretation of imagery with a strong classical influence¹⁹.

In addition to his love of classical composition and form, Rublyov's real talent was manifest in his use of lucid and expressive color. Although he practiced the techniques used by other contemporary iconographers, he also modified and developed these traditional methods in order to achieve a more expressive composition. While other icon painters commonly built up the lighter tones of facial features such as the dark greens and grays, Rublyov tempered these dense tones with subtle highlighting of contrasting hues disguised by the expert brushwork of expressionism. His expressionistic style enabled him to

¹⁹ Most iconographers would use charcoal to trace the image prior to painting, Rublyov painted

express not only his highly individual interpretation of form and figure, but also more importantly, his ability to render details that transform his icons from ordinary to extraordinary. At first glance, one may note the harmonious colors of the Russian countryside in his icons, or perhaps the gentle and entreating posture of the figures. Yet, upon closer examination, his deliberate attention to detail becomes evident. One can clearly observe the disparate facial expressions on the faces of saints, some lit up by some kind of internal, spiritual glow, others luminescent and pure from fasting and prayer, and others still whose brows are furrowed by worry, or drawn in concentration and penitence. There are no frivolous details in the depiction of their garments, and their cloaks often linear in and flowing in composition. Indeed, these fluid lines are a characteristic feature of Rublyov's work. These strong yet flowing lines enabled him to render his figures with gently sloping shoulders and narrow torsos. Another characteristic of Rublyov's painting is his frequent use of the circular form in composition. Although his favoring the circle may be a result of his classical and Byzantine influences, it is also symbolic of his relationship with God, who was all encompassing and circular in His movement. Undoubtedly, Rublyov's deep faith, religiosity and spirituality are evident in his aesthetic expression. The serenity and humility that Rublyov himself embraced can be seen in the placid and gentle faces of the saints in his paintings. The will and the empowerment of the Russian people were never far from Rublyov's consciousness, and his art reflects the interests not only of the wealthy patrons by whom his work was commissioned, but more importantly, the people, which were at their mercy.

without sketching.

Rublyov's vision is primarily manifested in his use of fluid form, luminous figures, and pure colors. He used colors favored by artists of the Impressionist movement; pink, green, lilac, silvery gray, ochre, and azure. Rublyov's use of color is as harmonious as his linear composition. Because Rublyov favored the use of pure colors, his colors are bright and intense. Still, the color maintains an integral connection with the images, and the placement of strong color works precisely because the placement is meticulous and deliberate. Also, Rublyov often softened these pure colors by mixing them with highlights and low lights. For example, the azure blue, or *golubetz*, that he used was mixed with emerald green, ochre, or a deep brick red. The browns and yellows used by Rublyov were infused with cinnabar or *golubetz*. The garments of Rublyov's saints are often colored mauve, or a pale, celery green and complimented by a soft, rounded, pale yellow highlighting that fades first from a solid color to a semitransparent one before fading away completely. It is precisely this expert use of highlighting that made Rublyov's deceptively simple icons so palpably complex, and his uncanny sense of sincerity in life was echoed in his painting. The *Transfiguration*, for example, is a study in silvery cool tones, saturated by pale lime and malachite green. Of course, the figure of Christ is clothed in white, tinged by pale, silvery lilac and rose, while his apostles are highlighted in ochre. The *Annunciation* has even more refined tones, with dominating colors like rose pink and cherry red, with emerald green as an accent. While *The Old Testament Trinity* is perhaps his finest professional success, it is also a very personal painting, as it was completed in tribute to Father Sergius. In this most remarkable work, *The Trinity*, Rublyov uses meticulous composition and linear rhythm to construct a painting that is as

perfectly harmonious and stylized as it is chromatically palatable. Rublyov constructed this painting using a circular composition, which resulted in an extraordinarily three-dimensional icon. The harmony of the circular composition is further enhanced by the presence of three angels, whose figures are all arranged within a tight and precise space. There is an exquisite symmetry and a chromatic subtlety present in the *Trinity* that renders it one of the most ideal examples of refined, progressive iconography. The figures are painted as pure, organic shapes and fleshed out by lines, or brushstrokes in colors that seem to be almost translucent. The unifying strand in the *Trinity* is the use of the color blue. Rublyov incorporates the blue motif in the clothing of each angel, distinguishing each angel by tones of azure, a muted teal and shades of lapis. The center angel is especially vivid because of his deep, red caftan, and his figure is slightly larger than those of the two angels that flank him on either side²⁰. Indeed, the chromatic structure of Rublyov's icons may be the most remarkable aspect of his style. There is a kind of calm harmony in the color scheme that is simultaneously compelling and soothing. The bright lighting, which Rublyov favors, is again reminiscent of the Impressionists, and his colors do not reflect harsh sunlight, but rather, the diffused and delicate light of dusk or dawn. There is a kind of luminosity to Rublyov's chromaticism, which is unprecedented in Russian iconography. The overall effect is so soulful, yet light, and so ethereal, that one feels as though these angels might float right off of the panel; pure, unadulterated *ekphrasis*, and pure genius as well.

²⁰ Note the particularly serene, placid and friendly facial expressions on all three of the angels, so typical of Rublyov.

CHAPTER 2

PROFILE OF THE ARTISTS: THE TALE OF TWO ANDREIS

I dreamed this dream and I still dream of it
and I will dream of it sometime again.
Everything repeats itself and everything will be
reincarnated, and my dreams will be your dreams.

-Arseny Tarkovsky

The purpose of art is to prepare a person for death.

-Andrei Tarkovsky

Look at this birch tree, for instance.
You can walk past it every day without
noticing it, then you realize you're not
going to see it again, and look at it
standing there... the beauty.

-Andrei Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublyov*

In his cinematic masterpiece *Andrei Rublyov*, Andrei Tarkovsky elucidates the importance of recognizing sublime and fleeting beauty in the objects that mark our everyday lives. Tarkovsky was a director whose father and mother bred him to be a connoisseur of beauty, literature and art. His father's poetry and his mother's own literary aspirations propelled an already destined prodigy to achieve greatness. Beauty, though often simple and natural, is by its very nature ephemeral, and cannot be flawlessly preserved. Like the birch tree, which is itself a symbol of Russia, an object takes on an aesthetic importance only when it becomes apparent that one may never see its like again, the icons of Andrei Rublyov appear all the more precious when one realizes that they were in danger of disappearing through either destruction or negligence, until scholars were made aware of their historical, social, cultural and artistic importance. Indeed, the layman chiefly through the hands, eyes and soul of the artist can experience this gift of recognition and awareness. Tarkovsky is precisely this type of artist, one whose own artistic vision and experience enhances, defines and calls attention to our own understanding and interpretation of the world that surrounds us. Although profoundly religious, Tarkovsky was not a fanatic, yet his art was often a vehicle for divine praise. For most of his adult life, Tarkovsky turned to God for artistic and spiritual inspiration, and Christianity had long been a touchstone during his personal and artistic development. Certainly, it could be said that Andrei Tarkovsky's protagonist Andrei Rublyov also feels that the purpose of art is to prepare a person for death, as it is his iconography that acts as a bridge between the realm of this world and the realm of the otherworldly. Through Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative, one is granted a glimpse

into the life of a man touched by genius, faith and spirituality, and although it is not the story of Tarkovsky himself, it does resonate with the somewhat universal elements of genius and its origins, and the manner in which it is nurtured, tested and changed by the experiences in one's life.

Andrei Tarkovsky was born in 1932, in the Zavrazhie district of Ivanov, whose strategic position on the Volga River made it a viable center for trade and commerce (Green, 1). Andrei and his family moved to Moscow, where he first attended school and the Orthodox Christian church. Of course, Tarkovsky's entire family was staunchly religious and fervent attention to their beliefs must have been a tremendous source of strength for Andrei. His father Arseny whose own poetry rose to great acclaim over the last several decades, encouraged his son to pursue not only religious study, but also art and music²¹. His family life, however, was not without turmoil. His father and mother had, at best, a strained relationship, and by the time that Andrei was four years old, his parents were already separated. In 1941, Andrei's father enlisted in the war, and in addition to losing a leg, he completely lost contact with his family, and left Andrei's mother to raise two young children by herself. Not surprisingly, Tarkovsky's mother, Maya Ivanovna, assumed an important role in the life of her son, and took charge of his religious, artistic and social development. Tarkovsky's mother profoundly contributed to her son's artistic education when she enrolled him in a conservatory for the study of classical music and art. However, the most profound influence on Tarkovsky's career may have been the troubled and cataclysmic history, and the uncertain future, of his own motherland: Russia.

As it happened, Tarkovsky's indoctrination into the world of cinema coincided with a kind of renaissance in Soviet cinema that came on the heels of the famed cinematic trailblazer, Dziga Vertov. In 1951, after dabbling in the study of classical music and painting, Tarkovsky enrolled at the Institute of Oriental Studies. His interest in Orientalism, a term coined by author and critic Edward Said, may have been a result of his restlessness and indecision than a particular enthusiasm for the disparate cultures of Asia. However, these academic pursuits did not hold Tarkovsky's interest for long, and by 1954, Andrei had enrolled in the Moscow Academy of Film, from which he graduated with honors in 1960 after completing his first feature film, *The Steamroller and the Violin*. While the films that followed were all relatively low budget, most of them were both popularly and critically acclaimed, and his introspective work entitled *Ivan's Childhood*, or *My name is Ivan*, won the coveted Golden Lion award in Venice.

Yet, despite the critical success of his first few films, Tarkovsky would go on to experience some devastating setbacks at the hands of Russian authorities, whose stifling grip on the artistic community began to tighten with every passing year²². In 1966, Tarkovsky completed his cinematic masterpiece which depicted the life and struggles of Russia's greatest iconographer, *Andrei Rublyov*, but the historical and ideological content of the film created controversy among the critical community, and more importantly, among the dominant Russian

²¹ Arseny Tarkovsky's poetry is often quoted by his son Andrei in his memoirs and in his cinematic narratives.

²² The years from 1957 to 1964 were particularly fertile for artistic production. Khrushchev's regime was more liberal, and this period (referred to as the *otyeopol*, or thaw), brought temporary freedom from censors.

authorities. Although *Andrei Rublyov* failed to gain the critical recognition that it so righteously deserved, the film brought attention to Tarkovsky's somewhat revisionist view of Russian history and religion. Still, Tarkovsky championed his effort as best he could, and although the project was initially plagued by financial difficulties, it was the popular objection to the subject matter of the film that was responsible for the considerable delay that preceded its release. Ultimately, five years passed before Tarkovsky could release the film in Russia, and the project's release was delayed another three years in the West. After the untimely release of *Andrei Rublyov*, Tarkovsky went on to make *Solaris* in 1972, and his rather introspective and autobiographical film, *Mirror*, in 1974. Not surprisingly, Russian authorities did not receive this subjective film warmly, and Tarkovsky found himself again at the mercy of the Russian government and its enforcers. Some four years would pass before the director would attempt to make another film, and the genre of the work would change somewhat in the course of his next production.

Although *Solaris* is a film that can be easily relegated to the science fiction genre, Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* is a tasty cocktail that is one part science and one part character study, and one part allegory with a twist of realism. Despite the fact that *Stalker* was released relatively promptly in 1979, its inception and production was marred by the same difficulties with Russian authorities, as well as directorial challenges such as frequent re-shooting and changing material. Finally, Tarkovsky grew tired of grappling with these various obstacles, and he began a formal application to make his next film, appropriately and ironically entitled *Nostalgia*, abroad, far from the oppressive gaze of Russian authorities.

Nostalgia was released in 1983, and shot in its entirety in Italy. Despite the fact that Tarkovsky completed this project in Italy, his new country of residence, he often maintained that he was a patriot, not a dissident, and that his self-imposed exile was of an artistic, not political, nature. Still, Tarkovsky would not return to his native land, and even when he was diagnosed with lung cancer, he left Italy to seek treatment in Paris, where he died in December of 1986. His final film, *The Sacrifice*, which Tarkovsky had already scripted and nearly completed in Sweden, was scored posthumously. The score was finished according to Tarkovsky's own elaborate and meticulously detailed instructions given from his deathbed. Ironically, Tarkovsky's death came at a time when the Russian authorities had begun to loosen their stranglehold on the artistic establishment, yet the freedom of expression, which Tarkovsky so fervently sought, would, for him, never be realized in Russia.

While all of Tarkovsky's films are formidable pieces of cinematic mastery, it is one of his maiden films, *Andrei Rublyov* that is particularly compelling, as it offers a historical, ideological and spiritual taste of Russia for an international palate. The film, like Rublyov's painting, embodies a kind of humanism and humility that sets it apart from his other creations. Written by Tarkovsky and his sometime partner Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky, *Andrei Rublyov* is based partly on real historical figures and partly on the director's own imaginative fiction. Although there are numerous historical, geographical and even ideological inconsistencies in Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative, his attempt to excavate both a physiological and a psychological truth is ultimately successful. The film itself is multifaceted, and seems by its very nature to defy

characterization. The film is a study of the genesis of a united Russian state under the stifling oppression of Tatar rule, as well as a depiction of early Russian religious and cultural history. Also, the film is a portrait of the icon painter himself, whose humility and talent were then, and even now, unsurpassed. Additionally, the film is an introspective study of the artist in society, and how he interacts with his God, his muse (for Rublyov they were one and the same) and the culture by which he is surrounded. It is a scrutinizing yet forgiving look at human nature, and not in the stale “man vs. Himself” mode that has been forced down the throat of every high school English literature student. Tarkovsky’s protest is a whisper, a narrative deftly woven in a subtle and elusive manner that defines the very schism between brotherhood and isolationism, universality and individuality, and spirituality and materialism. Finally, the film chronicles the importance of the quest, not only as the culmination of one’s own character development, but as a reminder that the meandering path one treads with weary feet may lead a weary soul towards the divine. And while the film may deal with Andrei Rublyov specifically, it speaks to every seemingly ordinary person that has been moved to extraordinary lengths in hopes of feeding an inner flame, a passion that both nourishes and destroys as it defines not only what we are, but what we are destined to become. In this cinematic masterpiece, Tarkovsky shows that it is enough, viscerally and spiritually, to stay true to one’s own calling. Whether it be painting, preaching or making films, it is enough simply to have desire, because once the seed of desire begins to germinate, it will give rise not

only to tenacity, purpose and unwavering fidelity, but to divine expression as well²³.

Tarkovsky's own artistic passion is evident in his cinematic narratives, and it burns brightly in *Andrei Rublyov*. Art, Tarkovsky believed, was not only the search for an aesthetic and ideological ideal, but also a chance to entertain the notion of an alternative reality, or a kind of parallel universe that could not, and need not, be held to the same standards as the 'real' world. Although Tarkovsky was not opposed to a bit of apotheosis, he did not completely reject the importance of the divine within the realm of the artist. On the contrary, while Tarkovsky realized the role of the artist as a vessel, or mediator, between the divine and the corporeal, he did not view art as the ultimate end. For Tarkovsky, the most significant element of artistic expression was the precise moment of creation born of divine inspiration. The act of artistic creation was intended to fuse the artist with God, or rather, to elevate the artist to a kind of Godlike status. Yet this was not mere apotheosis, because Tarkovsky believed the act of artistic creation to be a form of self-sacrifice, not self-realization or formation. This somewhat ascetic belief was perhaps most obvious in Tarkovsky's final film, *The Sacrifice*, whose title immediately calls to mind the humble yet essential role of the artist. Although Tarkovsky did not live to see the screening of his work or its consequential critical acclaim, it is presumable that he was aware of its significance and poignancy. Still, he could not have known that his final film would go on to win the Special Prize of the Jury at Cannes the very year in which it was released. In some manner, *The Sacrifice* was the culmination of a lifetime

²³ Tarkovsky examines fidelity to one's art in *Andrei Rublyov*, thereby equating Rublyov's

spent in contemplation of his relationship with divinity, and his responsibility to remain faithful not only to his own artistic vision, but more importantly, to God. Although fidelity was not routinely exactly endorsed by Tarkovsky's father, Arseny, it was nevertheless seen as a vital virtue by Andrei, whose films make no attempt to conceal his devotion to spirituality. The film *Andrei Rublyov* is an excellent example of Tarkovsky's belief that art should serve God, not the self.

The importance of self is discussed by the director in his self-indulgent but valuable memoir *Sculpting In Time*, Tarkovsky elucidates his ideas on the art of cinema, and more specifically, the role of the artist. According to Tarkovsky, the role of the artist goes far beyond his personal desire or his responsibility to his viewing audience:

In artistic creation, the personality does not assert itself, it serves another, higher and communal idea. The artist is always a servant, and is perpetually trying to pay for the gift that has been given to him as if by miracle...Artistic creation demands of the artist that he 'perish utterly' in the full tragic sense of those words. And so, if art carries within it a hieroglyph of absolute truth, this will always be an image of the world, made manifest in the work once and for all time.²⁴

While the devout monk and iconographer was indeed a brilliant artist, he too became frustrated by art, and vowed never to take up another paintbrush. In

struggle with his own.

²⁴ I translated the above quote myself, and in it Tarkovsky discusses artistic creation, inspiration, muses, technique and style at length in *Sculpting in Time*. In particular, the memoirs take up questions of aesthetic representation in Tarkovsky's own films, as well as those by which he was inspired. Here, Tarkovsky examines the illusory but divinely ordained nature of artistic talent.

a scene that is reminiscent of a Homeric epic, Rublyov makes this confession to the ghost of his mentor, Theophanes the Greek, who immediately helps Rublyov see that depriving God of his rightful praise by giving up iconography will not solve the young monk's problems. Indeed, Theophanes suggests that it is precisely the glory of God that must be praised through art, not the visions or ideals of the artist. Of course, Rublyov is then compelled to begin painting again, because not to do so would only be an act of impiety and impudence.

A few years before his death, Tarkovsky gave a lecture in London at the St. James Church in Piccadilly, regarding the Apocalypse and the Revelation of St. John (Green, 5). While the speech centered on themes of an apocalyptic and portentous nature, Tarkovsky was asked to reveal what made him want to persevere in the midst of such personal and artistic oppression and derision. The source of his strength, the filmmaker divulged, was not internal, but rather, came from an external force, or spirit that could be summoned only upon forgetting himself. For an artist, this act of forgetting, or losing consciousness of oneself may be the ultimate sacrifice.

Indeed, these motifs of sacrifice and forgetting, as well as the idea of redemption, are prevalent throughout Tarkovsky's entire oeuvre. These motifs are deeply embedded in the characters of *Andrei Rublyov*, as well as in *My Name is Ivan*, *Nostalgia* and *The Sacrifice*. At first glance, these concepts may appear a bit dark, or even fatalistic sentiment in Tarkovsky's artistic vision. Not surprisingly, there is an almost undeniable unifying strand between the darkness of the characters in Tarkovsky's films and the director himself. After all, Gorchakov, the main character in *Nostalgia*, spends his time in grueling survey of

the vast Italian landscape before him and completing his own sacrificial religious mission only to die in exile, a fate that is disturbingly reminiscent of Tarkovsky's own daunting efforts to regain a normal Russian passport and the rights of citizenship after his lengthy residence in Berlin, Paris and of course, Rome. Undoubtedly, his own experiences with living and creating while in exile were at times unpleasant, particularly because Tarkovsky's émigré status was that of artistic necessity and not of anti-patriotism. There is a palpable loss of innocence that accompanies this cinema of spiritual and corporeal exile, and it is the disintegration of innocence that ultimately threatens the scope of prophetic meaning for his characters. This loss of innocence is not necessarily of a physical, or sexual nature, but rather, can be most clearly understood in relation to the psychological and spiritual mores of the character.

Not unlike the poet and engraver William Blake, whose works *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience* depict the loss of innocence and the acquisition of experience as a move away from intuition and towards material worldliness, Tarkovsky's characters lose innocence when they embrace all and any things material. This abrupt turn toward vanity is manifest in the character of Kirill in *Andrei Rublyov*, whose hubris and intellect get in the way of his artistic vision, and ultimately impedes his ability to express himself to glorify god. Similarly, Alexander, the main character of Tarkovsky's final film *The Sacrifice*, identifies materialism and modernity as the genuinely sinful elements of life. The imbalance between materialism and spirituality, and the very manner in which it erodes us is very much at the heart of Tarkovsky's ideology. Piety and spirituality, for Tarkovsky, are ideas often reflected in his

films through silence. And while this absence of dialogue in his films may elicit a reaction of discomfort and frustration from his audience, it also imbues his films with a kind of tense and palpable sense of discombobulated reality. The utter lack of dialogue throughout parts of *Andrei Rublyov* reminds us that words can be not only empty, but more importantly, deceiving and manipulative. This point is manifest in the scene with Andrei and the simpleton, a mute and ostensibly deaf girl who cannot respond either to words, or with words. As she views the wildly scrawled lines on the wall that Andrei has painted in a mad and rebellious refusal of his delicate and sublime iconography, she reacts with unadulterated horror, responding only with a primal scream. Her reaction to his lack of symmetry, conceptual imagery, or simply, to the absence of a pictograph, is composed not of words but of a primordial utterance that transcends both language and culture. Certainly, it is no accident that the simpleton both perceives and responds to Rublyov's scrawl with the gaze and emotion of a child. This childlike reaction, or a conceptualization that is filtered through the gaze of an innocent, is a motif that is present in many of Tarkovsky's films²⁵. Words, a malleable tool for many a conniving adult, are simply not that interesting for a child, whose ingenuous gaze is peppered more by instinct than intellect. For Rublyov, words that are born of his painting have betrayed him. For Tarkovsky, words bear the potential to be not only duplicitous, but more importantly, ultimately destructive.

²⁵ Another point Tarkovsky makes here is that even a mute simpleton knows that there is something utterly sacrilegious about what Rublyov has done by defacing the pristine white walls of the cathedral with abstract scrawls. Her reaction to the mix of sacred and profane is genuine, as it occurs on a level that is instinctual, not intellectual.

Childhood, in conjunction with the inadequacy of language, and its ubiquitous breakdown are not the only themes revealed by the introspective and poetic director. Tarkovsky's films are equally redolent with such themes as war, Russian history, and the turbulent dialectic between East and West, and consequently, between the Oriental and the Orthodox. The latter is a theme that is played out in *Andrei Rublyov* in the form of the conflict between the Russian Orthodox Christian population and the invading Mongols. Despite his fervent efforts to remain loyal to his center of Christianity, Tarkovsky cannot help but to reveal the hollowness of certain Christian rituals, and the occasional yet distinct apathy of even the most pious members of the Orthodox faith. In this manner, Tarkovsky is not sanctimonious or even didactic in his attempt to recreate this time in Russian history, but rather, convincing in his temporal and spatial ambiguity. While the brutality of the Mongols soldiers is showcased by Tarkovsky in great detail, the brutality of the Great Princes is given equal playing time.

Indeed, time, and the manner in which it becomes fused with memory are implicit in Tarkovsky's films. In his memoir entitled *Sapechatlyonnnoye Vremya*, or Sculpting in Time; Reflections on Cinema, Tarkovsky elucidates his ideas about time and memory. "Time and memory merge into each other", he asserts, "they are two sides of the same coin" (57). The duplicitous nature of both time and memory presents a problematic yet interesting thematic concern in many of Tarkovsky's films. While the fixed and finite aspects of memory relegate it to a decidedly physical, or mortal realm, the ineffable and irretrievable essence of time can achieve permanence only in the house of memory. Yet time itself

acquires a complex system of meaning in the scope of Tarkovsky's cinematography, as he appears to be much more interested in the concrete and immovable nature of the past than he is in the elusive and transitory nature of time in the present. For Tarkovsky, the past can be compartmentalized and assigned value, while the present is too fleeting, and seems to escape both qualification and definition. Perhaps his disdain for the present stems from the absence of viable perspective. Simply put, the present is constantly slipping away at a speed both variable and undeterminable, and it is precisely this continuous movement that eludes us. Once the present retreats into the archives of memory, then the dissecting probes of perspectival analysis can harness time. Tarkovsky's fascination with time and memory becomes evident in his use of cinematographic techniques. His frequent and often erratic cutting between past, present and future scenes denotes his inability or unwillingness to place time and memory on the shelf. Rather, he vacillates between the past, present and future in a manner that is simultaneously dreamlike and visionary. While time is a decidedly finite and closed system for Tarkovsky, memory and dreams are open to interpretation.

While several contemporary directors have relied heavily on the montage technique, or the juxtaposition of disparate and often unrelated scenes in order to elicit a particular visual and emotional reaction in the viewer, Tarkovsky's technique stands apart from other masters. Despite the popularization of montage by the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, Tarkovsky's use of the montage technique varied greatly from Eisenstein's. In many of his silent films, Eisenstein used the rapid cutting between scenes and splicing of unexpected elements not only to surprise the viewer, but perhaps more importantly, to

extend the diagetic and rhetorical nature of the cinematic narrative. Tarkovsky, on the contrary, utilized the montage technique to confound the audience, further buttressing his belief that the primary source of cinema is not to inform and entertain, but to challenge and stimulate the viewer in a manner that sometimes resulted in the alienation and frustration of his audience. So, while the work of Eisenstein was undoubtedly influential for Tarkovsky, it may have encouraged him to explore the aspects of cinematography that were not relegated to mere eye candy or propaganda. Still, Tarkovsky benefited greatly from the innovations made during the 1920's, and pioneers like Eisenstein, Iosif Heifitz and Mikhail Romm (Tarkovsky's teacher at the Moscow State Film Academy) made sacrifices that would enable Tarkovsky to explore realms that could not have been otherwise possible (Le Fanu, 3).

However strong the influence of these early artist may have been, Tarkovsky did not embrace them without modification. Ironically, Tarkovsky seems to have been influenced by Eisenstein in much the same manner as Rublyov was by Theophanes the Greek. In as much as Theophanes the Greek represented a style from which Rublyov, despite his awe of the man, ultimately chose to break away, Eisenstein's influence on Tarkovsky may be most evident in the way Tarkovsky **doesn't** make films. While Tarkovsky favored Eisenstein's use of montage, or rapid cutting of carefully chosen elements that only appear to be random in their juxtaposition, Tarkovsky moved away from these quick shots after his first few films, choosing instead to focus on the complexity and symbolism of each individual scene. Tarkovsky's starkly autobiographical film, *The Mirror*, is filled with a series of quick cuts that contribute to the intensity of

the cinematography. Films that follow *The Mirror*, such as *Andrei Rublyov*, *Nostalgia*, and *Stalker* are almost completely devoid of montage, and by the time that Tarkovsky completes his final work, *The Sacrifice*, the entire composition of the film is a meticulous structuring of slow and deliberate zoom shots accompanied by a tense but rhythmic absence of movement. In addition to the disappearance of montage from his films, music also became superfluous for the master director.

While Tarkovsky turned to Vyacheslav Ovchinnikov to compose and execute the score for *My Name is Ivan*, *The Steamroller and the Violin*, and *Andrei Rublyov*, and chose the electronically synthesized music of Eduard Artemiev for *Solaris* and *Stalker*, he slowly abandoned the idea of a definitive score and began to rely on an aesthetic that was decidedly more minimalist²⁶. Ultimately, Tarkovsky's final effort, *The Sacrifice*, was completely without any musical score, with the exception of the opening and closing credits, which are shown with an accompaniment from Bach. The scarcity of sound in Tarkovsky's films undoubtedly added to the intensity and gravity of the cinematography, and in time, the only sounds heard during the films were directly integrated into the action of the film. Yet another scarcity in the tenor of Tarkovsky's films was the use of color, or more specifically, the lack thereof. In his first few films, Tarkovsky rejected the use of color completely, perhaps with the intent of creating films that were not only entertaining, but complex and intellectual, and above all, serious. It was not until *Andrei Rublyov* that Tarkovsky decided to use color, and even there it was used sparingly, appearing only at the end of the film

during montage sequence that showcased the many icons painted by the real Rublyov, as well as a final, melancholy depiction of horses standing in the rain. Clearly, Tarkovsky favored shooting in black and white not only because he deemed it to be superior artistically, but also because he believed that black and white film had the integrity that the often more popularly accepted commercial films lacked. Increasingly, in the spirit of expressionism, Tarkovsky began to combine black and white, color and even the pink and sepia tones so reminiscent of old archival photographs in order to achieve his ultimate world of fleeting reality and liminal consciousness. It is precisely Tarkovsky's deft manipulation of colors and angles that enables him, as well as his audience, to navigate the liminal boundaries between visions of the past, present reality and dreams²⁷.

Above all, Tarkovsky's use of dream sequences in juxtaposition with scenes from present and past realities is yet another example that fuses the otherworldly elements with those elements that exist, albeit in an ever fleeting and deteriorating manner, in the real world. Unlike his predecessor Eisenstein, whose films always seem to aspire to create a reality that embodies a kind of unwavering truth, Tarkovsky embraces changing truth as the only constant. So, while Eisenstein's films embrace an aesthetic truth that maintains a connective strand directly between the filmmaker and the film's subject matter and content, Tarkovsky's films recognize the malleability of truth and its relativity to history, religion, social and cultural climate, and the individual. Time, truth and reality are not mere constants for Tarkovsky, but rather, are susceptible to the personal,

²⁶ The score in *Andrei Rublyov* is virtually non-existent, appearing only during the prologue and epilogue.

social and political influences. Tarkovsky's personal aesthetic philosophy appears to be similar to that of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of a "polyphony" of artistic voices, or ideas, echoes Tarkovsky's idea of a multiplicity of times, realities and judgments. For Tarkovsky, film as a form of narrative must be primarily intellectually challenging and informative, in addition to being a source of informative entertainment. As a result of Tarkovsky's virtual disdain for the entertaining element of film, his attention to individual shots in order to maintain both a symbolic and realistic integrity was intense. Unlike Eisenstein, whose desire to achieve an overall "big picture", or rhythmic effect in his films often predicated his disavowal of individual symbols, signs and camera angles Tarkovsky was meticulous in his attention to each individual shot. In fact, Tarkovsky was so deliberate in his attentiveness to each shot that his penchant for slow, dead pans and zooms that would often last as long as six minutes, framing the single shot much like a still portrait, thereby allowing the audience to absorb both the individual frame as well as the so called "big picture". Still, his attention to detail only serves to enhance the realistic element of Tarkovsky's films. Reality, relative and malleable as it may be, was of acute importance to Tarkovsky, and his attention to the real time of a shot was one of his central preoccupations.

Clearly, the importance of reality, both spatial and temporal, is what lies beneath Tarkovsky's palpable disdain for any sort of definitive symbolism. In Sculpting in Time, Tarkovsky distinguishes between image, which is experienced directly by the viewer on an emotional, or visceral, level and the symbolic, which

²⁷ Tarkovsky uses a seamlessly edited color montage of details from Rublyov's icons, resulting in a

was to be interpreted or deciphered on an intellectual or psychological level, and it is precisely this type of symbolism, that which is found in poetic cinema with its symbolism and allegory, that Tarkovsky finds to be incongruent with “natural cinema”(66). Although it is obvious that Tarkovsky did utilize symbolism in many of his films, even acknowledging in an interview in the German literary and theatrical magazine *Postif* that the horses in *Andrei Rublyov* were symbolic of life, he did not rely on symbolism to be the driving force in the diagesis of his films (*Dossier Postif*, 87-93). Instead, his cinematic narratives are a complex amalgamation of disparate techniques and motifs.

There are several significant, reoccurring motifs in the cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky. Among these are animal motifs, such as horses, dogs, birds and insects. In addition to these animal motifs, Tarkovsky often returns to the theme of ringing bells, flying and levitation, mirrors and of course, water. Yet despite the reoccurrence of these motifs, it is problematic to assign them with any sort of definitive symbolic value. While a mirror may recall youth, memory or a divided self, and flying or levitation may suggest man’s desire to rise above, both literally and metaphorically, the social, spiritual and political constraints of an artistically oppressive society, few if any of these interpretations are supported by the director. Although Tarkovsky himself seems to reject concrete symbolism, there are certain reoccurring motifs that cannot be ignored in their permanence and significance. Among these motifs, mirrors play an important role in the films of Tarkovsky, a fact evident in the title of one of his most autobiographical films, *The Mirror*. A long time symbol of vanity in medieval and Renaissance painting,

fantastic contrast.

the mirror is an item whose significance was not lost on the painterly and poetic director. The mirrors in Tarkovsky's work appear to be symbolic not only of physical and spiritual decay, but more importantly, of the divided psyche and the duplicitous reflection of the self. Another motif that bears significance in the films of Tarkovsky is water. Rain is a frequently reoccurring motif in the films of Tarkovsky, and although the rainfall may be symbolic of the cleansing and rejuvenatory powers of nature, it may also denote a considerable manipulation of atmosphere, mood and overall *mise en scene*. Certainly, the importance of water as a ritualistic element should not be overlooked, not only in the aesthetic sense, but also in the scope of Russian Orthodox liturgy and ceremony. Water, conventionally symbolic of life, rebirth and cleansing (both spiritual and physical), appears in Tarkovsky's films to be suggestive of all of these disparate elements, as well as harkening back to his own geographic and environmental origins. Moreover, the director's own complex and problematic understanding of his own use, or lack thereof, of any kind of intentional symbolism adds to the difficulty of applying and interpreting these symbols critically.

In addition to his confounding use of symbolism, Tarkovsky's view of women, both on screen and off, was in many ways archaic and even stereotypical. On some level, the women in Tarkovsky's life, not unlike those in his films, were relegated to the status of the old cliché, either the Madonna or the whore. In other words, they were either supreme, benevolent and long-suffering caretakers or objects of pagan sexuality and wantonness. Rarely, but evidently in the case of *Andrei Rublyov*, women could be the simpletons whose permeating gaze, of which especially they themselves are unaware, lends the artist some new

perspective on the importance of his own role in society. While there are a plethora of reasons, both psychological and material, on which one could speculate as to the origins of his subtle yet defined male chauvinism, perhaps the most obvious stems from his own troubled relationship with his deserting father and his consequent feeling towards his mother. As it is not uncommon for directors to use their own family in films (Martin Scorsese is particularly fond of casting his own mother), at Tarkovsky's request, his mother, Maria Ivanovna, appeared in his most autobiographical film, *The Mirror*. Not surprisingly, the role that she plays is one of a beleaguered caretaker whose wise gaze and leathery skin render her visage as virtually timeless. Apparently, it was precisely this look that Tarkovsky wanted to achieve, as he himself felt that his mother should ascend to a kind of immortal, or transcendent status. According to Maya Turovskaya, whose exploration of Tarkovsky's life and work is both exhaustive and accessible, the director perceived his mother as a force that would indeed be eternal. Turovskaya quite rightly points out that the first version of *The Mirror* was completely devoted to and inspired by his mother. "I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that my mother will ever die. I will protest and shout that she is immortal. I want to convince others of her individuality and uniqueness. The internal premise from which I started was my desire to analyze her character in such a way as to prove her immortality" (Turovskaya, 61). The former is hardly a simple or even realistic aspiration, but where Tarkovsky was concerned, it is an entirely essential one.

Because his father abandoned Andrei when the family moved to Moscow, he was primarily raised by his mother, in addition the other women in the family.

Undoubtedly, psychologists and critics could glean a great deal about his films based solely on his issues of abandonment, but such imposing criticism seems a bit reductive. Certainly, Tarkovsky's relationships with women were problematic and strained, and it is clear that Tarkovsky mimicked his absentee father's habit of familial neglect when he neglected his own eldest son. Yet, despite these evident shortcomings of character, it must be asserted that Tarkovsky was a volatile individual whose insatiable thirst for artistic expression and perfection thwarted his relationships with several of his close friends and colleagues of both genders. Still, however damaged Tarkovsky may have been by the premature departure of his father, whose subsequent fame as a poet came on the heels of his already critically acclaimed son, it is obvious that Andrei wanted nothing more than to possess the strength of character and personal integrity that he must have felt was so sorely lacking in the persona of his own father, with whom he attempted to maintain a relationship even after all of the turmoil that he had endured. In fact, Tarkovsky even pays homage to his father by including Arseny's poetry in his films, often in direct quotation, as dialogues or monologues to further propel the diagesis²⁸.

It is in his films that Tarkovsky's attitude toward women is perhaps the most problematic, because it is there that his attitude is, at best, traditional and at worst, stereotypical. Among the archetypes that the women in Tarkovsky's films represent are the Virgin Mary, a mother, a lover, a pagan, and a simpleton. In his film *My Name is Ivan*, or *Ivan's Childhood*, women are relegated to the roles of caretakers, such as mother and nurse, and while his treatment of the

²⁸ In truth, Tarkovsky's relationship with his father, not unlike the relationship with his own son,

nurse Masha (in particular her less than admirable relationships with men) is as ambivalent as his treatment of *Nostalgia's* Eugenia. In *Andrei Rublyov*, his treatment of women is almost non-existent, as there are very few female characters. The only two recognizable female characters in this film are a mute girl whose simple and atavistic gaze encourages the great iconographer to reexamine his initial dejection with his own painting, and a pagan woman, or witch, whose first appearance is a sacrilegious dance that transfixes Rublyov's gaze, and second scene chronicles her escape from persecution and certain death. In both scenes, the pagan woman is filmed completely naked, and the consequent effect is one of primal immediacy and subtle objectification. In *Solaris*, the female roles consist of, yet again, the mother of Chris and the wife of Harvey. It is worthy to note that the wife in this film is actually dead, and appears to Harvey only through flashes of memory. This is particularly significant, as the dead woman cannot satisfy any of Harvey's senses. So, since he is unable to smell or touch her and because he sees and hears her only in the recesses of his memory, she obtains an even more elusive and ineffable role. She is, for all intent and purpose, the archetype of the ideal woman whose essence cannot be contained, for she is simultaneously eternal and unattainable. In his autobiographical work, *The Mirror*, women play a decidedly more complex role, as they seem to mimic the status of women in Tarkovsky's own life.

Still, even in this painfully personal film, women cannot fully escape Tarkovsky's stereotyping and compartmentalization. The mother figure is not only portrayed by his real life mother, but also maintains an unwavering spiritual

was strained at best.

and corporeal strength that is unmatched by the other characters. The role of the wife is defined by her volatile relationship with her husband. The idealized and as yet uncorrupted woman is manifest in the young girl, whose bleeding lips render her a particularly pathetic and bizarre character. In his final film, *The Sacrifice*, the two leading roles of women as exemplified by Maria and Adelaide are a kind of amalgamation of all these disparate attributes, vacillating between opposite identities that ultimately converge into one another, making their doppelganger like roles even more problematic. Not only Tarkovsky the filmmaker, but even more disturbingly, Tarkovsky the individual embrace all of these disparate but constricting ideas of the roles that women play in society. When interviewed for a German magazine, Tarkovsky suggested that the inner workings, or inner world of a woman is completely dependent on her relationship with men, and that women who asserted their self-dignity could do so only in terms of their complete devotion to, and idealization of, men (Brezna, 3). Such a controversial and unpalatable notion is enough to alienate audiences of both genders, yet according to preceding and subsequent interviews, diary entries and cinematic narratives, it is evident that Tarkovsky's personal beliefs remained relatively constant throughout his entire life and career. So, despite his staunch male chauvinism and his decidedly off kilter sensibility to feminist issues, Tarkovsky maintained the integrity of his somewhat offensive personal beliefs.

CHAPTER 4

RELUCTANT GENIUS: THE EVOLUTION OF RUBLYOV'S AESTHETIC

The great careers are like that;
A slow burst that narrows to a final
release, pointed but not acute, a life
of suffering redeemed and annihilated
at the end, and for what? For a casual
moment of knowing that is here one
minute and gone the next, almost before
you were aware of it.

-John Ashbery

In his poem entitled *The System*, John Ashbery grapples with the idea of creative genius, and according to his assertion, it is as ephemeral and fleeting as it is intangible and unfathomable. In as much as *Andrei Rublyov* is a film about the birth of a Russian nation as seen through the eyes of a monk-iconographer, it is also a story about the genesis of creative genius, or the rise of the *faber*. Not surprisingly, the path of the *faber* is often an unyielding and impossible one to

follow, thus making the *faber's* quest for creation, expression and innovation all the more difficult. This was true not only for the master Andrei Rublyov, but also for his cinematographic creator, Andrei Tarkovsky. While Tarkovsky was certainly an ingenious artist, his path was strewn with a disparity of obstacles. He is not the first director to take up the question of a priest's integrity and spiritual development. Indeed, Rossellini did it in 1950 with his film *Francesco, guillare di Dio*, Bresson made the well known film *Journal d'un cu're de campagne* in 1951, and Bunuel offered the clerical bildungsroman *Nazarin* in 1959. All of these films were considered to be critically successful, and were relatively well received publicly. Still, the talent and vision of this unique director, Tarkovsky was not always appreciated by his peers, and often misunderstood by his audience. In addition to the palpable tension among his peers, Tarkovsky was consistently tormented by Russian authorities (particularly those at the Moscow studio, *Mosfilm*), which never tired of providing the director with a seemingly endless supply of obstacles²⁹. Certainly, one of the most flagrant displays of disrespect and duplicity became evident during Tarkovsky's attempt to release the controversial film, *Andrei Rublyov*. While many may be familiar with the fact that the movie was shelved for nearly a decade (literally shelved, as it sat on a shelf at *Mosfilm*), few are aware of the subtly underhanded manner by which authorities managed to delay the release of this film. The controversy surrounding the release of *Andrei Rublyov* was not the only subject

²⁹ Most notably, the official paperwork for the release of *Andrei Rublyov* was completed in 1961, but purposely left unsigned, resulting in the film being shelved for nearly eight years before it was finally released. The film was released in its complete form in Cannes in 1969, but edited for Russian viewers when it was finally screened in Russian in 1971. Among the scenes cut, most were of violent Mongol attacks, such as the sack of Vladimir cathedral.

of frequent discussion. Not surprisingly, the film was not well received by critics or peers, who panned it as somewhat ambitious, and decidedly violent. The violence was such a formidable issue that Tarkovsky eventually conceded to edit much of the violent content, particularly in scenes depicting the Tatar raid, perhaps hoping that the authorities, and their need for censorship control, would be satiated. Undoubtedly, the elements of accuracy and authenticity within *Andrei Rublyov* are two of the most frequently debated by critics and historians. This is unfortunate, as Tarkovsky himself was keenly aware both of the magnitude of the film's scope, as well as its limitations. While Tarkovsky may have wanted to achieve a substantial level of verisimilitude in his cinematic narrative, his desire to ensconce the image in sensual, naturalistic forms was often confounded by the difficulty to imagine, as he says "what it was like" during the fifteenth century. In her engaging book Tarkovsky; Cinema as Poetry, Maya Turovskaya garners some of the director's own ideas on the problem of creating a 'real' world based on archaic knowledge of medieval Russian architecture, iconography, hagiography, oral history and folklore³⁰. In as much as Tarkovsky relied on Orthodox texts, rituals and artistic traditions to illuminate the story of the beleaguered monk, in some manner, he is tempted to eschew these traditions in favor of a more personalized depiction of the truth. In response to a question about the difficulties of cinematic verisimilitude in *Andrei Rublyov*, Tarkovsky replied:

If we had decided to stick to a re-creation of the artistic tradition, to the world of paintings of that time, then we

³⁰ While verisimilitude may have been a concern for Tarkovsky, historical, temporal and spatial

would have given birth to a stylized and artificial medieval Russian reality...One of the things we were aiming for in our work was to re-create the *real* world of the fifteenth century for the audiences of today; in other words, to show that world in such a way that they could really feel what would otherwise be a shadowy world of museums and monuments. In order to achieve the truth of direct experience, what could be called a “physiological” truth, we had to break away from other truths which are archaeological or ethnographic in character. (Turovskaya, 50)

Indeed, Tarkovsky has succeeded in creating a new kind of truth within the parameters of his cinematographic narrative. Tarkovsky and Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky (the cooperating writer of the screenplay) sought to redefine the muddy and often obfuscated beginnings of Russia, by focusing specifically on her tremulous birth as a nation within the context of one monk’s story. Tarkovsky freely admits that neither he nor his writing partner were interested in recreating or uncovering the mystery that is Rublyov’s life, but rather, sought to illuminate the origins of the Russian people as a whole. The importance of Andrei Rublyov, as a spiritual icon and archetypal genius, serves not only to anchor the cinematic narrative in a historical context, but perhaps more importantly, in a personal and human context. Furthermore, because he had already conceded that Rublyov’s birth, life and death has been shrouded in mystery, Tarkovsky was determined to give the film another, more immovable, center. While commenting on the

accuracy was not.

screenplay for *Andrei Rublyov*, Tarkovsky directly responded to the question of verisimilitude, or rather lack thereof, in his memoir, Sculpting in Time:

Rublyov's life-story is a complete mystery, and we have no intention of unraveling the riddle of his life. We wish to see, through the eyes of a poet, that wonderful and terrible age when the great Russian nation was taking form and shape and coming into its own. (Turovskaya, 37)

In fact, Rublyov appears himself to be symbolic of the virgin nation, and his tender frescos are all too powerful a force against the drab backdrop of medieval Rus', as they emerge like a phoenix from the barren landscape of the Russian steppes and climb ever more steadily towards heaven. It is no accident that Tarkovsky chooses to begin the film with a scene of a peasant voyager about to take flight, his roughly hewn balloon of animal skins sewn together in juxtaposition to the chalk-white walls of a cathedral, and as the camera pans over the broad, unpopulated steppe, we begin to understand how the director feels about truth and verisimilitude.

Certainly, this opening sequence is of utmost importance, as it not only heralds the beginning of a new age for Russia, but more importantly, illustrates the importance of the artist as *Faber*, or supreme creator and inventor of things most unusual and often extraordinary. Indeed, this first scene illustrates more than the magnificence of flight; it elucidates the complex and sometimes dangerous role of the artist, or *Faber*. In as much as the peasant has flirted with apotheosis by creating a contraption that enables him to shrug off the shackles of gravity and take flight, he also flirts with the either possibility or the actuality that

he may be killed. Like a medieval, Slavic Icarus, the peasant soars above herds of galloping horses, river tributaries and a seemingly endless landscape shouting, “*Leetchoo...Leetchoooo!*”, or “ I’m flying...flying!”. Still, he is far from immortal, and despite his ability to create a contraption that defies all convention and allows him to be superhuman, if only for a brief moment, he is relegated to once again to his mundane humanity when he realizes that his balloon is about to crash. Of course, he dies once the balloon has crashed to the ground, but here the finality of his death is only the beginning. Perhaps the remainder of the film diminishes the significance of the peasant’s death, as it is a cinematic narrative that is both complex and exhaustive in nature, fraught with imagery that can be simultaneously overwhelming and disturbing.

Visual offenses notwithstanding, the action of the peasant’s flight is important, and it is necessary to examine this opening scene in greater detail. Why does this unassuming peasant fall so swiftly to his death? While it may be tempting to blame the peasant himself, or more specifically, his show of excessive pride as he taunts the galloping horses below with shouts of “*Eh-vih, doganiti minya !*”, or “Hey you guys, catch me !”, there is more at play here than a divine reaction to *hubris*. Although the peasant does attempt to rise above his corporeal reality by taking to the clouds, he is not a Faustian figure. In fact, it is questionable whether or not the peasant is even cognizant of his significance as a *Faber*. It may be more plausible to assert that his sudden and unexpected descent toward the patches of water and land that comprise the earth below him is manifest of his role as martyr, or a kind of sacrifice, whose death sanctifies the Russian earth with some bizarre type of baptismal ritual. He must die, it seems,

so that others may truly begin to live. In this opening sequence of flight, wonder and tragedy, one finds many of the motifs that are indigenous to the film as a whole. Here, one notices wild horses, water, fire, churches, peasants, and of course, the vast expanse of a then virtually unpopulated Russian landscape. Such disparate motifs as flight, cathedral walls, and moving water are so effortlessly presented by Tarkovsky in this opening scene that even unusual events appear completely normal. A man soaring in a hand made flying machine looks as natural gliding through the sky as the galloping herds below him, and his consequential plummet to the watery land below is no more disturbing than the hungry lion who finally catches the weakest gazelle in the herd. What is disturbing, however, is the virtual silence that follows the peasant's crash. Punctuated only by the soft sound of trickling water, the silence that engulfs the peasant as well as the audience is almost deafening. As the trickling water begins to fill the lifeless, amorphous pile of animal skins, we are forced to come to realization that our inventor has met his unfortunate end. Like young Russia herself, whose emergence as a nation is sharply curtailed by the years of Tatar domination, our young and courageous *Faber* is destroyed by the very contraption, which he so lovingly designed.

So, what is it about this scene that resonates with such poignancy? Is it the complex juxtaposition of palpable hope with impending desperation? In reality, it is both of these things and perhaps something else still. The point that Tarkovsky might want to elucidate is simultaneously simple and terrifying; that which a *Faber* creates may in turn be at the root of his destruction. In other words, that which nourishes the artist also destroys him. In some manner,

Andrei Rublyov (and in a lesser way, Tarkovsky himself) may be this peasant's doppelganger, or a kind of anima that represents the ultimate challenge to man-flight. The essence of flight, of course, could be seen as the literal flight of the peasant, or the symbolic flight of the soul as it relates to Andrei Rublyov. Still, regardless of the interpretation, this opening scene is significant even if viewed only as a means of establishing the *mise en scene* of the entire film³¹.

Clearly, the prologue of *Andrei Rublyov* was meant to function much in the same manner as a preface in a book. As the hero of Tarkovsky's film *Mirror*, Aleksei, tells us; A book is an action. While the flight of the peasant may not relate directly to the life and struggles of Rublyov, it does serve as a unifying thread for the film's motifs, as well as engaging the audience immediately by placing them directly in the center of the action. After all, the camera angle, in particular Tarkovsky's use of the nearly forgotten crane shot, is such that we feel as though we are up in that primitive balloon, ourselves flying with that antediluvian peasant, and when he begins to fall, we follow him all the way down. Indeed, as an audience, we have already invested something of ourselves in this film, and suddenly the stakes seem unbelievably high. Why should such an anti-biographical film elicit such a personal response from the viewing audience? Perhaps because there is a certain humanity that emanates from the peasant, whose childlike innocence and enthusiasm belies his apotheosis, which leads us to feel a kinship with him. Yes, we do cheer him on, this unlikely under-dog, this artist in rags and skins has captured our attention and rekindled our childhood

³¹ Also, this scene establishes the very real dangers that accompany artistic invention, creation and execution.

memories of wonder, awe and trepidation. Similarly, Andrei Rublyov himself resonates with a kind of gentle humanity, but unlike the simple peasant whose gleeful cries are muffled only by his own certain demise, there is a complex if diaphanous veil of melancholy that surrounds the young monk. To call Andrei Rublyov, or Andrei Tarkovsky, for that matter, a complicated man would certainly be an understatement. Both men lived lives that were, in some manner, ensconced in mystery. Historically, very little is known about Andrei Rublyov's life. But in Tarkovsky's film, the monk comes to life in a series of episodic encounters that reveal as much about his persona as they do about the Russian experience as a whole. When we first meet Rublyov, he appears to be at once confident and humble. While this may be a paradoxical combination, it is not unusual when one considers the historical and geographic context of the day. It is not unreasonable to believe that Rublyov was confident in his ability as an iconographer, yet he was also a monk whose vows had relegated him to a life of poverty³². His humble character, his propensity to question ecclesiastic authority, and his tendency toward introspection set Rublyov apart from the other primary characters in Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative.

³² At first reluctant to accept his gift as divinely ordained, Rublyov's confidence is temporarily eclipsed by his surroundings, as well as his own insecurities. Moreover, Rublyov's sin of murder (even though it is committed in defense of a holy fool) relegates him to artistic and literal silence that can only be broken by another artist, Boriska.

CHAPTER 5
THE MUMMERS

Are there sounds there I cannot hear,
do footsteps surround you which pound
the earth like drums, roll like thunder
round the dome of the world? Is the
darkness gathering in your head...Is
there now a streak of light at the end
of the passage, a light I dare not look upon?
Does it reveal whose voices we often heard,
whose touches we often felt, whose wisdoms
come suddenly into the mind when the wisest
have shaken their head and murmured:
It cannot be done³³.

-Wole Soyinka

³³ Soyinka, Wole. "Death and the King's Horseman". *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, Expanded Edition, Vol.2., New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995.

In this poignant monologue about history and heritage, Wole Soyinka makes reference the powerful and important role of ancestral voices. The mythic quality of such voices, whether they be chanting, singing or praying, simultaneously captures the significance of those who shaped our aesthetic and spiritual education, and those for whom we will leave a legacy. Like the embattled Rublyov, whose legacy can be found in the icons and frescos he left behind, the legacy of ancestral voices enriches both our powers of perception and expression, particularly during times of helplessness and desperation. In the case of Rublyov, whose art stands in testament to the resilience of his voice, the murmurs of those who say that it cannot be done must be relegated to the background in order to allow for the voices of hope and thoughtful jubilation. Perhaps the best example of such a voice is manifest in that of the *skomoroh*, whose rhymes and dances transfix Rublyov's gaze.

In this episode, which Tarkovsky has labeled "The Mummers" and dated c1400, Rublyov humbly enters the shanty, and quietly nods as he joins a group of peasants in their hut in order to seek refuge from an oncoming storm. Flanked by his two colleagues, Rublyov watches in amazement as the village joker, or *skomoroh*, entertains the citizens with singing and dancing, being careful not to pass up the opportunity to poke fun at the aristocracy with his humorous, rhyming tune. It is significant that we meet these three monks together in the opening of the film, because it is their relationship with each other (and with their faith) proves to be integral to the diagnosis of the film. Rublyov's two companions are *Daniil Chorny*, or Daniel the Black, and the rebellious and embittered Kirill, whose jealousy of Andrei becomes manifest during his

serendipitous meeting with Theophanes the Greek. Contrary to his name, Daniel the Black is a soft-spoken, fair man with a slight build and a pleasant face punctuated by warm, kind eyes. Conversely, Kirill is a gruff man with a sour expression and a passionate nature that proves degenerative due primarily to his lack of talent. Ironically, Rublyov's quiet stare suggests detachment and aloofness, but nothing could be further from the truth. While Kirill slips out to alert the palace guards to what he believes is the disrespectful and irreverent behavior of the *skomoroh*, the peasants transfix Rublyov's gaze. The *skomoroh* dances, sings, stands on his hands, and strums a primitive *balalaika*³⁴, but his playful rhymes are saturated with wry social criticism and an astute awareness of human nature. Like a court jester, the *skomoroh* uses his freedom of expression to say those things that others simply cannot. Yet unlike the court jester, whose role security enables him to speak without fear of retribution, the *skomoroh* in Tarkovsky's film enjoys no such luxury. Moments later, when the guards arrive and smash his instrument, he is temporarily silenced. Soon, we learn that his tongue was cut off in order to keep him from expressing himself too freely in the future. For the *skomoroh*, cutting off his tongue is analogous to smashing his instrument. His return, later in the film, is as profound as it is disturbing. As he publicly accuses Andrei of turning him over to the authorities, he becomes quite a pathetic spectacle. But what is most disturbing about the return of the *skomoroh* is that he appears to be a completely different character, at first being almost as unrecognizable to the viewer as he is to Rublyov. He is a mere shade of his once

³⁴ A traditional Ukrainian instrument. Like a guitar but in the shape of a triangle, the *balalaika* is made of wood and has three strings instead of six.

buoyant, lively and mischievous self because he has been robbed of his ability to cope; losing the freedom to express himself creatively, he deteriorates in silence.

The episode with the *skomoroh* further reiterates both the necessity and the danger of freedom and creative expression. Although the *skomoroh* dances, stands on his head and strums his primitive balalaika, his seemingly meaningless and playful rhymes are saturated with a wry and biting social criticism. Yet, unlike the typical court jester, whose role relegates him to the role of fool while simultaneously giving him the freedom to speak the truth without fear of retribution, Tarkovsky's jester does not escape punishment. Moments later, when the boyar's guards arrive, smash his primitive instrument and arrest him, the perils of creative expression become all too vivid. Soon, we learn that his tongue was cut off in order to keep him from expressing himself too freely in the future. For the *skomoroh*, removing his tongue is analogous to smashing his instrument, and so he is relegated to silence, much like the Russian people being silenced by the yoke of Mongol domination. His return later in the film is as poignant as it is disturbing. As he publicly accuses Andrei of turning him over to the authorities, he becomes quite the pathetic spectacle. But what is most disturbing about the return of the *skomoroh* is that he appears to be a completely different character, almost as unrecognizable to Rublyov as he is to the viewer. He is a mere shade of his once buoyant, lively and mischievous self because he has been robbed of his ability to cope; losing the freedom to express himself creatively, he deteriorates in silence. Rublyov too takes his vow of silence to the ultimate end when he goes so far as to repress and deny his willingness to paint. But while the *skomoroh*, whose clever chants are meant as much to amuse and to

distract from the mundane misery of his life as they are to satirize, Rublyov's gift is beyond reproach because it has been given to him by God. God, for his part in the scenario, most definitely makes Rublyov work for inner peace.

It is perhaps this experience that colors Rublyov's perception of the Russian people, and it is this struggle with the communal ideal, or concern for the hopes, feelings and faith of the common man that brings him such suffering. Also, his somewhat unorthodox and progressive ideas about the Russian common people leads him to argue with Theophanes the Greek, and it is this argument that delineates Rublyov's own philosophy. When Theophanes curtly poses the question, "Well, are the people ignorant or not!?", Rublyov passionately retorts, "Ignorant, Yes! But through no fault of their own!" (Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublyov*, 37). This interaction is important, because it elucidates Rublyov's stalwart refusal to blame Russia, and her people, for the circumstances that pervade. He is not content to relinquish hope, and unlike Theophanes, whose age and experience contributes to his fatalistic attitude, Rublyov wants to redeem Russia, and her people. Theophanes may simply feel that they are beyond redemption, and also beyond forgiveness. He can only remind Rublyov, as he does again later in the form of an apparition, that Russia and her people have always suffered, they suffer now, and they are destined to suffer for eternity.

It is this suffering, in the eyes of Theophanes, that has emerged as both the true ancestry and the portentous legacy of the Russian people. For Andrei, the suffering is virtually ever present, yet the potential for redemption and resurrection still linger just beyond the horizon. Because the film takes place over a period of twenty-three years, Rublyov's divine inspiration fluctuates,

disappearing and reappearing when he, and we, least expect. The life of this mysterious artist is so fraught with struggle, tragedy and weary traveling, one wonders how he had the time to create much of anything. Interestingly, the mythic scope of Rublyov talent had elevated him to an almost legendary status even during his own lifetime. It is no coincidence that our first introduction to Rublyov's legendary talent comes from his mentor and colleague, Theophanes the Greek, whose own reputation had already reached the level of fame several years before Rublyov ever took his first paintbrush in hand.

As the envious and duplicitous Kirill happens into a cathedral, he sees the great master himself, Theophanes the Greek lying down on a bench admiring his own handiwork. When Kirill espies the fresco, he begins to undulate with praise and reverence, as he is so overwhelmed by the beauty he almost doesn't recognize the great Theophanes³⁵. When Kirill finally falls silent, the gray haired master speaks in a low and creaky voice, "Well, go on! Why have you stopped singing my praises?", at which point the astonished Kirill can only stare. Then, Theophanes sits up, and looking at Kirill asks, "Are you Andrei Rublyov? I have heard much about this man". Clearly, the jealous Kirill is less than thrilled to bear the brunt of this comparison, as he himself knows that he could never match Rublyov's talent. Instead of revealing this inner demon of spite and envy (which, in addition to his insidious will eventually destroy him), Kirill relishes the opportunity to discredit Rublyov in front of the great master and replies, "Yes, I know this Rublyov, but what can he do to compete with this...Oh, God, this

³⁵ Andrei Rublyov is played by Anatoly Solonitsin, Theophanes the Greek is played by Nikolai Sergeyev, Kirill is played by Ivan Lapikov, Danil the Black is played by Nikolai Grinko, and the female simpleton, or holy fool, is played by Irina Tarkovskaya.

beauty". True, Theophanes was a great master, but Kirill is too quick to dismiss his nemesis, and even though Theophanes entreats Kirill to accompany him to Moscow to paint the cathedral, he extends the offer as a means to open the door for Rublyov. As Theophanes himself must know, Rublyov is the blessed ingénue that can elevate the art of iconography and fresco painting to a level at once sublime and ethereal. So, when Theophanes the Greek dispatches an envoy of the Prince to summon the monks for work, it is Rublyov alone that he asks for by name, and it is to Rublyov that he gives instructions to choose the monks who will accompany him as his assistants.

Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative of Andrei Rublyov's life begins with an episode that is dated 1400. The hypnotic rhythm of the spattering rain, a favorite motif of Tarkovsky's, is the only sound. Rublyov, along with two fellow monks Daniil the Black and Kirill, approach a hut inhabited by peasants and inquire whether or not they may seek shelter. While inside, a jester of sorts, or *skomoroh*, diligently works up a sweat singing and dancing for the bemused crowd³⁶. Not surprisingly, the unwilling subject of his song is the aristocracy. The jester raves about the stupidity of the boyars, the sexual promiscuity and of their rotund wives, and the cruelty of the boyars somewhat twisted sense of justice and reprimand. Ironically, and perhaps somewhat prophetically, the *skomoroh* appears to portend his own future when he sings about a boyar who slit one jester from throat to stomach. Soon, the boyar's guards will arrive, knock

³⁶ The *skomoroh*, or jester, is a figure that is no stranger to medieval literature, and is often representative of the voice of the common people. Here, his boisterous presence and his astute social and economic criticism brings some much needed *levitas* to a situation that is palpably uncomfortable for both the peasants as well as the film's viewers.

him unconscious, break his lyre, and carry him off to prison, where he will spend the next ten years of life and lose half of his tongue. The significance of this scene is manifold, and the juxtaposition of barbaric cruelty and lighthearted laughter is both chilling and realistic. Primarily, this episode elucidates the profound importance of laughter, and the role it plays in the culture of Russian peasants. The robust laughter elicited by the *skomoroh* is not only a vehicle for catharsis and escape, but also the songs that he sings are perhaps the only acceptable form of social and political satire, commentary and criticism. Because this is arguably the only scene where laughter is so prevalent, the importance of laughter in this early episode is worth careful examination.

The history of laughter is a topic that should not be dealt with cursorily, as it has been studied by countless writers and philosophers. One particularly unusual and compelling study of laughter and its ambassadors comes from Mikhail Bakhtin, and his in depth study of Rabelais. In Bakhtin's book entitled Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin explores the history of laughter as well as its social and cultural implications. While Rabelais, the noted satirist and author who followed a path laid by the essayist Montaigne some forty years before, is an appropriate subject for Bakhtin's study, it is Bakhtin's observations about laughter, particularly during medieval times, that are so profound. In his book, Bakhtin points out that the laughter of the Middle -Ages is characterized by specific tenets, and stands out distinctly from the laughter of the Renaissance. Bakhtin suggests that Renaissance laughter is characterized by philosophical relevance, and is directly connected with essential truths about history, humanity and psychology. According to Bakhtin, "Certain essential aspects of the world are

accessible only to laughter”(66). Such a claim is powerful, as it establishes the serious and formidable place of laughter in literary canon.

Yet, in as much as the Renaissance established laughter as a kind of universal, philosophical barometer, it also grounded laughter in classical modes of theory and interpretation. Bakhtin , for example, asserts that Rabelais developed his own ideas about laughter according to the model set forth by Hippocrates(67). Later, the Renaissance belief that laughter was a universal and essential aspect governing history, philosophy gave way to the ideas of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These centuries saw laughter as anything but serious, and moreover, relegated laughter to represent the concerns, experiences and behavior of lower social classes. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, laughter began to take on the familiar aspects of Shakespearean comedy, where stock characters like Yorrick and Falstaff were brought on stage in order to relieve tension and illuminate the serious action that revolved around the lead players. Laughter quickly begins to lose its profundity, and approaches the farcical. So, while the Renaissance propelled laughter to an almost theological position, the following centuries relegated laughter to an almost bathetic role in the everyday musings of the aristocracy as well as the other higher social classes.

Still, if the role of laughter in the sixteenth and seventeen centuries was somewhat fixed, then the role of laughter during medieval times was even more immovable. As Bakhtin suggests, the presence of laughter in the Middle- Ages was almost wholly relegated to the external sphere of daily life. Laughter was not, as it had been during the Renaissance, integrated into the realm of the social,

political, philosophical or religious. Bakhtin also elucidates the place of medieval laughter as a directly conflicting element to the pervasive ideology of the time. Certainly, for a society whose ideals were as serious as stoicism, suffering and atonement, laughter was hardly an appropriate addition. Yet it is precisely these rigid social boundaries that render laughter so powerful a force in the climate of the Middle- Ages. Indeed, laughter simultaneously held elements of danger, revelation, and of course, freedom. As posited by Bakhtin, “Medieval laughter, when it triumphed over the fear inspired by the mystery of the world and by power, boldly unveiled the truth about both. It resisted praise, flattery, and hypocrisy. This laughing truth, despite the fact that it is expressed in curses and abusive words, degraded power. The medieval clown was also the herald of this truth(92-3).

Clearly, Bakhtin’s description of the role of laughter during the Middle-Ages, particularly regarding the undeniable power and freedom enjoyed by the medieval clown, is relevant to Tarkovsky’s portrayal of the *skomoroh*. Not unlike a medieval clown, the *skomoroh* was also granted a certain amount of freedom to engage in the song and dance of satire and astute social criticism. Yet, unlike the medieval clown, whose rightful place at the foot of the king shielded him from the fodder of aristocrats and noblemen, the *skomoroh* was not granted similar asylum. Much like the holy fool, the medieval clown was usually forgiven for his scathing commentary on court life simply because one could not take his criticisms seriously. Interestingly, the medieval clown was not persecuted for speaking out against god, king or country precisely because he was perceived as a joker, or an amusement to be regarded merely as blithe chants and chatter.

While the medieval clown spoke freely, even of the most controversial topics, his songs and dances were most often performed directly in front of the royal family, the surrounding aristocracy and other nobility. If, or more likely when, the medieval clown satirized the nobility, he did so to the king's satisfaction and approval. In other words, the freedom enjoyed by the medieval clown rested precisely in the overtones of his actions. He did not, nor did he have any need to, conceal his true feelings from the nobility. On the other hand, the *skomoroh* was not a legion of the king, nor did he belong to any established court or kingdom. Instead, he was a kind of freelance jester, moving from hut to hut or from marketplace to bazaar, engaging as many peasants as he could along the way. While he may have been perceived as the harbinger of satire and social criticism, he was, in no uncertain terms, a risk taker. The *skomoroh* knew that his songs and dances would not be well received by members of the ruling elite, and it was this fear of persecution that encouraged him to perform, if not exactly in secret, then certainly within the close confines of a peasant hut that was in no danger of being occupied by any members of the aristocracy. His witty and entertaining social criticism was meant for the common ear, and it was in front of this audience that he felt the most adoration and respect.

Indeed, these common people were accepting and encouraging of the *skomoroh* not only because he was, for all intent and purposes, one of them, but also because he frequently represented their point of view. For many, the *skomoroh* had the courage to say out loud what many of his fellow peasants were thinking. He was first and foremost an entertainer, and then, quite remarkably, an astute critic of social inequity, public immorality and the dismal state of

national affairs. Unlike the medieval clown, whose laughter was solicited from the very persons of whom he was making fun, the *skomoroh* worked for the laughter that purged and soothed the souls of the weary and impoverished. Perhaps for this reason, the role of the *skomoroh* is not only more dangerous than that of the medieval clown, but also, a great deal more important. After all, it is one kind of success to get the aristocrats to laugh at themselves, but quite another to bring hope, joy and a fair amount of catharsis to a crowd that may not have much else.

In the case of Tarkovsky's *skomoroh* in *Andrei Rublyov* is precisely this type of freelance comedian, who performs a sort of medieval stand-up comedy routine that includes the physicality of a gymnast. Standing on his head, walking on his hands and engaging in various other kinds of acrobatics, he sings and dances for the peasants until he is drenched with his own sweat. Leaving no one unscathed by his sharp wit and even sharper rhythm, he criticizes everyone from the boyar, to his wife, to the three priests who have sought shelter in the crowded hut. Not surprisingly, Tarkovsky chooses to title this initial episode "The Mummers". Here, one can witness the awe that the *skomoroh* inspires, and it is his song and dance alone that has transfixed their gaze. In this scene, the peasants appear to be engaged in what Bakhtin may refer to as "carnival" laughter, or the unified laughter of a communal group of individuals who enjoy a similar social status. It is not the laughter of an individual, but rather, the kind of laughter that denotes belonging, or laughing at the world while still being a part of it. This sense of sharing is pervasive throughout the scene, and it seems particularly fitting that the *skomoroh* is rewarded with a cool drink from a mug, a

hunk of bread and a leek, all of which are shared with him by his elated audience. Yet, despite his hard work, not everyone feels a part of this community of laughter. Turning to Andrei Rublyov, Kirill says “God sent the priest, but the devil sent the *skomoroh*”. Later, after Kirill has quietly slipped out into the rainstorm to ostensibly inform the boyar’s men that the *skomoroh* is out of control, the silence that follows this savvy jester’s song and dance is even more eerie and foreboding than the rainstorm itself. What follows is still more upsetting, although hardly surprising when one considers the oppressive climate of fear and subjugation. As the boyar’s men descend on the hut, the *skomoroh* turns around to face his audience, who appear to be filled with a paradoxical mix of gratitude and trepidation. Then, he smiles and shrugs, seemingly relinquishing himself to his irrevocable fate. Such a simple motion has never before appeared to be redolent with so much heartache and responsibility. While the Grand Prince’s men quickly render him unconscious by slamming him head first into a tree trunk, the peasants stand in a hushed awe. Carrying him off to prison, one of the guards returns to the hut and demands to be handed the *skomoroh*’s lyre, which he promptly smashes into so many splinters. Now, just as the voice of the *skomoroh* has been silenced, so has the voice of the Russian people.

It is precisely this type of relationship between the Russian commoners, or peasants, that defines the important position of the *skomoroh* in Rus’ society. For obvious reasons, perhaps most notably the distinct possibility of violent retribution, the Rus’ people were less than comfortable voicing their opinions on politics, religion or nationalism. Because of their constantly subservient role in

the everyday workings of medieval life, common people were subjected to indignities not unlike those of slave laborers. Under the system of feudal law, the peasants, or serfs, were expected to fulfill obligations that were nothing less than unrealistic. In most cases, these people had to perform beyond the realm of physical and spiritual limitation, often pushing themselves to the brink of exhaustion. In exchange for planting, tending and harvesting the fields, the peasants were given the freedom to occupy meager huts built on the boyar's land. Most of the crops that were harvested through the diligent work of the peasants were offered to the boyar and their family, which meant that often times the peasants themselves were left with the dregs. Even the animals on the feudal lands cared for by the serfs were slaughtered when ordered by the boyars, and it was the family of the boyars that enjoyed the leanest cuts of meat. While this arrangement is undoubtedly unfair, it was *de rigueur* of most feudal societies. Yet it was this arrangement that dictated the status, or lack thereof, of the common people and it was the feudal system that necessitated the tacit compliance of the peasants with the aristocracy. Because they were often afraid, inarticulate and simply exhausted, the common people were more concerned with living through the harsh winters than becoming active agents to catalyze socio-political change. For the common man, survival was the most important goal to be accomplished, and it is not unreasonable to presume that achieving this simple goal was often impossible to guarantee.

Certainly, this climate of oppression and fear resonates in Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublyov*, and it is this climate that ensures the permanent position of the *skomoroh* as the voice of the people. It was his singing and dancing that brought

humor and light into an all too gloomy reality, and his ultimate sacrifice to the Grand Prince that saves the remaining peasants in the hut who may have been accused of and punished for enabling him. Not unlike Rublyov himself, whose self-sacrifice in the face of adversity leads to his and Russia's salvation, the *skomoroh*'s unwitting sacrifice allows the others that surround him to go unpunished. Yet despite the hard working *skomoroh*, whose tireless effort to entertain the peasants in the hut is met with cheers and adulation, not everyone appreciates his satire.

In addition to Kirill, who stealthily slips out to inform the Grand Prince's men, two drunken peasants flail around in the mud outside of the hut wielding wooden planks and swinging them around like primordial weapons. While this scene may appear to be inconsequential, those who know Tarkovsky's work are somewhat reluctant to dismiss this episode as merely screen filler. Instead, this fight scene speaks to the futility of satire, laughter, song and dance in the scheme of medieval life. Because they are writhing around in the mud, and because they are drunk, there is an obvious comparison to the overall status of the Russian people. Drinking to block out the absurdity and hopelessness of their existence, they search for an escape only to find themselves, as a culture, writhing in the muck. Oblivious to the goings on inside the hut, these two hooligans can only reconcile themselves to the most basal form of expression. These two men represent the remainder of Russian society. They are indicative of the portion of the population who had chosen to relinquish all hope in the face of Tatar domination and cruelty at the hands of the Grand Prince and his minions. The two drunkards are as oblivious to the plight of the *skomoroh* as they are to the

presence of the three monks inside the hut, and they carry on with their business. Similarly, the guards who work for the Grand Prince approach the *skomoroh* in a completely detached, emotionless and business like manner. One may assume that in their eyes, they have not silenced the voice of the people or stifled their freedom of expression, but rather, they have simply done their job. Indeed, it is cold and detached manner of personal and public relations that characterizes not only this episode, but also the attitude of Rublyov himself, who spends most of his time as an astute observer of human nature and its inherent evil and inadequacy. The moment that Andrei Rublyov begins to actively participate in the events that color his life, he is transformed into someone decidedly more human and less ineffable. He begins to move through the space of this circular narrative with determination and awareness, emerging as an agent of change and reform among those who are paralyzed by tradition and complacency. For Rublyov, the purpose of art appears to be inexorably linked with the perpetuation of freedom, and it is this idealism that renders him temporarily unwilling and unable to create.

Like the *skomoroh*, whose singing and dancing holds the promise of better days ahead, Rublyov's reluctance to lean on traditional form and representation heralds a new age of religious artistic expression. Rublyov's reality is one that is decidedly less concerned with fire and brimstone, and more conscious of empathy, reconciliation and forgiveness. He is a new iconographer for a new Russia, and his paintings must reflect this sense of rebirth. Still, it is certain that Rublyov could never have expressed himself in such a manner if he had not experienced the suffering, penance or the vow of silence that he imposed upon

himself. It was during these personal trials and tribulations that Rublyov found it almost impossible to reconcile himself to living in an evil world. In the beginning of the film, Rublyov possesses a genuine faith in people and their inherent goodness. His belief manifests itself most lucidly in his argument with Theophanes the Greek, where Rublyov articulates his faith in people, and assures Theophanes that the people are ignorant through no fault of their own.

As Rublyov makes his way through the countryside, he encounters several disparate types of people. By the time he arrives in Moscow to paint the Trinity, he has lost virtually all of his faith in humanity. Once fearless and idealistic, Rublyov becomes stricken by guilt, disillusionment and trepidation. Yet it is precisely this change in his manner that marks his transition from an amateur iconographer to a full-fledged master. During “The Mummery”, Rublyov regards the *skomoroh* with curiosity and interest, but he is not afraid of him. Nor does he exude any fear at the sight of the Grand Prince’s men when they come to remove the *skomoroh* from the hut. Later, when Rublyov kills a soldier in order to stop him from raping a simpleton, his face flashes with a combination of fear and disbelief. It is perhaps this scene that marks the beginning of his transformation.

The episode that follows “The Mummery” is appropriately entitled “Theophanes the Greek”. It is here that the audience is first introduced to one of the first, if not the greatest, masters of Byzantine iconography, Theophanes the Greek. Although Rublyov is not the one who initially meets the great master, it is Rublyov that Theophanes already regards with respect and curiosity. In this scene, Kirill enters a cathedral and his gaze is immediately transfixed by what he sees. As he peruses the frescos on the walls, he becomes aware of the presence of

the old master, who is lying on a stone bench and looking up toward the ceiling. Immediately, Theophanes the Greek mistakes Kirill for Andrei Rublyov, and asks if he is indeed the young iconographer whose fame is on the rise. Somewhat taken aback and palpably irritated, Kirill asserts that he is not Rublyov, and begins to praise the incredible frescos that surround him. “Well”, Theophanes asks, “why have you fallen silent? Go on, keep singing my praises”. And while Kirill stood in awe of Theophanes and his work, Theophanes again perturbed him by inquiring after Rublyov. Kirill replied that he did indeed know Rublyov, but insisted that Rublyov’s work could not be compared to that of Theophanes. Most importantly, Kirill specifies the nature of Andrei Rublyov’s aesthetic deficit, attributing his less than masterful iconography to a lack of fear, awe, and faith. This scene is integral to the thesis of Tarkovsky’s cinematic narrative, as it simultaneously elucidates the character attributes and weaknesses of our beleaguered protagonist. Indeed, Andrei is more than merely talented, he is chosen by some sort of divine intervention to share his gift with the world.

Yet, despite his apparent destiny, he does lack the essential depth of soul to be as accomplished as Theophanes the Greek. Because of his idealism and his somewhat naïve, less than worldly personality, Rublyov does not yet possess the maturity of character that is required for one to become a great master. In some manner, he has simply not yet enjoyed the disparate life experiences that would render him more than an ingénue. Kirill, despite his tendency toward jealousy, vanity and selfishness, manages to make an astute observation regarding Rublyov’s inadequacy as a master. In order to acquire this particular kind of awe, fear and faith, Rublyov must travel throughout the countryside and experience

everything from sexual enlightenment to murder. Because his status as a holy man renders him almost invisible throughout his travels, with the exception of one particular encounter with some very unhappy pagans, Rublyov traverses the countryside with little interruption. Not unlike Aeneas, whose magical diaphanous mist envelops his body like a cloak and makes him invisible, Rublyov enjoys the anonymity of an unencumbered traveler.

But although his corporeal load may be light, he is far from spiritually unencumbered. As Kirill has already realized, there is a great deal more to being a master iconographer than mere talent or prodigy. Kirill himself is kept from greatness by his overarching intelligence and unraveling ambition. Still, when he meets Theophanes the Greek amidst the great master's frescos, Kirill is hard pressed to justify his place among all of the wondrous art. When Theophanes the Greek asks Kirill to join him in Moscow as his assistant and offers him half of his payment, Kirill initially refuses. Again, vanity engulfs Kirill and he agrees to accompany Theophanes on the condition that the great master himself would come to the Andronikov monastery in order to entreat him in person to serve as his assistant. Because Kirill is vain and somewhat manipulative, it is important to him that Theophanes approach him under the watchful eye of the entire brotherhood of priests. Ironically, and much to Kirill's chagrin, Theophanes does not come himself, but rather, sends a messenger of the Grand Prince to entreat Andrei, not Kirill, to come to Moscow and help the great master paint. Initially, Andrei agrees immediately. Perhaps because Rublyov doesn't hesitate, and fails to ask his long time friend, roommate and mentor, Daniil, to join him, one could presume that Rublyov himself is guilty of vanity.

After all, it is not surprising that the young ingénue would have such a reaction to being recruited by one of the greatest masters of Byzantine iconography. Here, it is vanity and pride that Daniil accuses Andrei of when Rublyov comes to say his final goodbye. As the two monks reconcile, Andrei shows his humility by appealing to Daniil. He tells Daniil that he can only see the world through his eyes, hear life through Daniil's ears. This scene is peculiar, but significant because it elucidates both the pure heart of Andrei, and the importance that he places on his relationships with people during the beginning of his life. Conversely, Kirill reveals his feelings of insecurity and inadequacy both as an artist and a monk. As the scene comes to a close, Kirill condemns his fellow monks and criticizes them for becoming landowners and attempting to buy their place in line for salvation. When he bludgeons his own dog ostensibly because he resents not only his loyalty and innocence but also the responsibility of caring for a being that will repay one with unconditional love, the cruelty of the world and its inhabitants, even those who ensconce themselves in the garb of holiness, becomes painfully palpable. His long beard and his holy robes do little to obfuscate the darkness that lurks in Kirill's heart, and the manner in which he denounces even the archbishop of the monastery cannot be fully believed.

It is when the inner schema of two personalities such as Kirill and Andrei are juxtaposed that the true ingredients of artistic genius begin to manifest themselves. Indeed, Theophanes the Greek is an undisputed master both in the beginning and the end of Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative, but the nature of his genius is not eluded to or analyzed. Still, it is not unrealistic to perceive Theophanes as a kind of complex combination of all Andrei, Kirill and Daniil.

Theophanes paints in a style that is ultra traditional and far from idealistic, reminiscent of Daniil and his strict adherence to traditional form, subject matter and color palette. Self-important and often frustrated by people who he sees as inherently inferior, Theophanes reflects Kirill's pompous integrity and superior intelligence. Finally, Theophanes is compassionate, observant and intense, with a gaze that peers beyond a person's visage, appearing to seer into their psyche. In this manner of human observation and psychological introspection, Theophanes resembles Andrei.

This parallel, most lucid during the episode entitled "Theophanes the Greek", in which Tarkovsky subtly outlines the parameters of creative genius and spiritual enlightenment. What is it that renders one man a genius and relegates another to a life of endless frustration and fruitless wandering? Perhaps the answer lies not only in the caliber of the individual spirit, but also, in the intervention of a divine presence that touches one man with ethereal talent and vision while depriving another of greatness by making him spiritually blind. While one sees everything, the other gropes through life in the dark of his spirit, like some medieval Oedipus after his tragic self-mutilation. So, while the primary struggle between Andrei Rublyov and his contemporary, Kirill, is a struggle between the virtues of intellect and the virtues of the heart, Theophanes and Andrei seem to part on the subject of vision and faith.

It is precisely this struggle with faith, its complexity and interpretation, which lies at the core of this polyphonic cinematic narrative. In as much as Andrei must grapple with his own increasingly malleable faith in things both earthly and divine, Theophanes, Kirill, Daniil and even Boriska have also

invested themselves in this dialectic. Similarly, the fate of the medieval Russian people as a whole seems to teeter between the edges of orthodox faith and paganism. Yet, while Tarkovsky does devote an episode to a somewhat sympathetic exploration and aggrandizement of the power of pagan rituals, it is Andrei Rublyov who is willing to temporarily suspend the stringent stipulations of his holy faith in order to immerse himself in the inner workings of this equally faithful group. His innate sexuality and passion, which he had previously channeled into his artwork with relative success, had now begun to seep out into his everyday life, so his atavistic display, and ostensible fulfillment, of lust are released not so much because of his previously repressed persona, but rather, because of his austere and unwavering faith in humanity. Indeed, toward the beginning of Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative, Andrei Rublyov is brimming with idealism and faith in the redemptive aspects of humanity³⁷. Later, as he travels through the countryside, and as his blind faith is challenged by his experiences, Rublyov comes to reevaluate his unquestioning beliefs in the inherent goodness of human nature. One salient turning point in Rublyov's formidable quest for the essence of divine and corporeal faith occurs during his philosophical discussions with Theophanes the Greek.

Rublyov's suffering is the stuff of quests, and it is no accident that the original title of Tarkovsky's film was once *Strastii Po Andrei*, or the Passion of According to Andrei. Indeed, Rublyov recounts his interpretation of Christ's judgment and consequential crucifixion as though he were recounting a story from his past with acute attention to spatial and temporal accuracy, even taking

³⁷ It is this faith that leads him to be both frequently disappointed and ultimately redeemed.

care to describe the snow covered ground as it crunches under Christ's worn out *lapti*, or birch bound slippers³⁸. In some way, Rublyov is himself a Christ figure, whose quest for truth, faith and salvation can be satiated only posthumously. In fact, it is certainly no accident that the man who Tarkovsky chose to represent Christ in the vignette that Rublyov imagines resembles the icon painter more than a little.

In this manner, Tarkovsky is able to further buttress the obvious comparison that is to be made between the icon painter and the figure of Jesus. Still, Rublyov's talent, faith and spirit are not enough to render him immortal. Instead, he is a kind of intermediary between the world of the divine and the world of the mundane. Like an interpreter, whose otherworldly talent opens the door to the sublime, Rublyov translates the essence of divine grace using tempera paint, egg yolk and sable haired brushes.

Indeed, Rublyov may be worthy of more christological comparisons than even Tarkovsky could have imagined. Like Christ, whose mission to show the people that they worthy of redemption and love even if they are inherently flawed introduced the common man to grace, Rublyov elevates the spirit of his fellow man by enabling them to have contact with the essence of divine grace. It is through these visual narratives of the divine, these frescos and icons of Rublyov's, that the common man could escape the burdensome constraints of mundane life and gain a deeper understanding of the spiritual world, and thereby gain a more profound understanding of their own soul, mind and spirit. He gave them not only a glimpse into the world of God and the angels, but more importantly, a

³⁸ Tarkovsky uses a slow pan on Christ, and a series of quick, seamless edits to juxtapose Christ

glimpse into their own consciousness and spirituality. Rublyov may not have been divine, but he certainly had privileged access to the portal that connects this corporeal realm to the spiritual realm of the otherworldly. Rublyov was a mortal man whose artistic genius enabled him to render conventional boundaries of reality and spirituality malleable. In other words, his artistic genius appears unrelated to his personality, character or disposition, but exists as proof of a kind of symptomatic acknowledgement of his divine inspiration. He is touched by divinity, yes, but while he may have more in common with the people that he paints than with those who are privileged enough to receive them, he is in every definitive sense, human. This point of mortality is particularly significant, because it not only buttresses Rublyov's similarity to Christ, but also elucidates their shared vulnerability as well as suggesting the possibility of their yielding to temptation. Clearly, this humanization of Christ is important for several reasons, not the least of which that his mortality renders him a particularly easy figure for one to relate to, as well as making his humiliation, public ridicule, flogging, and crucifixion appear both extraordinarily cruel and palpable. Rublyov, too, has a quest that brings him personal spiritual and physical pain and suffering. While he may not suffer to the extreme that Christ is thought to have suffered, Rublyov feels the pain of yearning for truth, faith and inspiration. Also, Rublyov feels a tremendous sense of guilt that stems from his having committed the ultimate sin-murder. Rublyov killed a Tatar during their sack of the cathedral, and it is this transgression that leads him to take a self-imposed vow of silence. Despite the fact that he did this in order to keep him from raping and killing a simpleton, or a

with Rublyov.

kind of “holy fool”, Rublyov is profoundly devastated by his grave transgression. In addition to his suffering and penance for a carnal crime, Rublyov is in constant pain because he cannot reconcile his ability to create with his understanding of the human condition.

In many ways, *The Passion According to Andrei* is as important to the diagnosis of the film as it is to the elucidation of Rublyov’s personal ideology³⁹. In this episode Tarkovsky reveals the contradictory views of the two men who have been heralded, in no uncertain terms, as the most revered and influential icon painters of all time; Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublyov. Here, we see not only the unique interpretation of Andrei’s own vision of the crucifixion (which is cleverly marked by a Russian *mise en scene* complete with birch trees and pristine, crunchy snow), but more importantly, reveals the personal, aesthetic motivations for each of these holy artists. In some manner, the emergence of this unlikely Christ moving towards his crucifixion, as well as the preceding prologue that depicted an ill fated flight, appear as reminders of the fragile and tenuous line between life and death. According to Peter Green, such *vanitas* motifs appear most often in episodes specifically related to the icon painter’s world-view, and are emblematic of Tarkovsky’s own obsession with the dimensions of the visual image, or creating “tableaux-like scenes in his own medium” (Green, 50-1). This seems to be a particularly astute criticism in lieu of Tarkovsky’s own admitted reluctance to recreate the essence of a painted image into one that is moving. In his autobiographical, or rather ‘cinematographical’ work Sculpting in Time, Tarkovsky reveals:

I have never understood, for instance, attempts
to reconstruct *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. (78)

Still, despite this fervent claim, it seems as though the director may be protesting too much. Indeed, *Andrei Rublyov* is a film saturated with painterly images, as well as dialogue that directly relates to such aesthetic tenets as perspective, subject matter, and of course, the application, presence and absence of color. Also, and perhaps more importantly, there is much attention drawn to the philosophy behind the aesthetic as exemplified in the dialogues between Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublyov.

While Theophanes undoubtedly feels for his *rodina*, he does not have much faith in her people. Taking a kind of Homeric stance, in which he wishes to distance himself both physically and spiritually from the common man, Theophanes is reluctant to offer Andrei any glimmer of hope regarding the future of Russia and her people. Theophanes insists that Russia, who has suffered for centuries, will most likely suffer for eternity. Unlike Theophanes the Greek, whose somewhat nihilistic attitude belies his exquisitely hopeful creations, Andrei Rublyov begins his life’s journey full of hope and optimism, both for

³⁹ Rather, an elucidation of what Tarkovsky’s interpretation of Rublyov’s ideology, eschatology

Russia and for her people as well. While he may agree with Theophanes when the Byzantine iconographer claims that the people are indeed ignorant, he insists that it is through no fault of their own. Instead, Rublyov seems to be holding out for some kind of mass redemption and resurrection for his people, and their homeland. His optimism is temporarily dashed by his own irrevocable sin, but it is inevitable that hope must return. Still, even Rublyov cannot deny the physical and spiritual devastation brought to medieval Rus' by the Tatar invaders, as well as by the system of boyars and other aristocrats whose own selfish desires consistently supercede those of their constituents. When he kills the Russian-Tatar soldier in defense of the young girl who is both deaf and mute, he does so not only as a monk defending the cathedral, but also as a man defending that, which is supremely right. Yet, because it is this action that causes Rublyov to take a vow of silence in penance, it becomes clear that Rublyov does not hold himself to the ordinary standards of a mortal man⁴⁰. On the contrary, any other common man might look to his conscience to justify the killing as defensive, unavoidable or even necessary in the face of such extenuating circumstances as a Tatar sack. Clearly, while Rublyov may be mortal, he is anything but common. His inability to reconcile the depraved aggression of the outside world with the inner workings of his conscience serves to further buttress his alien status, elucidating his difference not only from the common men of Rus' that surround him, but more importantly, from other fellow monks and holy men of the day. While Kirill, Daniil, and even Theophanes the Greek seem willing to relegate medieval Rus'

and personality.

⁴⁰ Clearly, Tarkovsky too wants to portray Rublyov as special, or 'un-common' in his approach to sin and penance.

and her people to a kind of substandard existence steeped in ignorance and fear, Andrei is reluctant to relinquish all hope. Despite the territorial and spiritual devastation of the land, Rublyov appears to be cautiously optimistic, or at the very least, compassionately hopeful. In the pivotal episode that Tarkovsky labels “The Last Judgment”, Rublyov keeps his mentor, Daniil, his assistants, and the entire Russian aristocracy (from the Prince to the Archbishop) waiting for months while he ponders the subject matter and stylistic execution that he will adopt for this apocalyptic scene. Unlike his stonefaced mentor Theophanes the Greek, whose aesthetic interpretation of the last judgement resonates with his pessimistic view of Rus and her people, Andrei Rublyov is reluctant to make suffering the primary focus of his painting. According to Theophanes, as evident in the dialogue between Rublyov and his mentor in a previous scene, suffering and anguish are instrumental to the repentance and redemption of the Rus’ people. Yet, even the dour and stoic Theophanes fails to convince Rublyov of the people’s ignorance, and Andrei steadfastly maintains that the people of Rus’ are innocent, or rather, that their ignorance is no fault of their own, but stems from a collective mentality of imposed anguish and oppression. Still, in order to understand Rublyov’s ideology and make use of his legacy, one must trace the entire length of his inward journey. Rublyov’s story is one that begins with a double pilgrimage, where the realms of inside and outside are deftly interwoven. Rublyov’s internal journey coincides with his external journey, and as he walks along rivers, across the steppe, traversing the lands of medieval Rus’ , he is encountered with a plethora of trials and tribulations. His inner strength, and his holy moral resolve, are tested not only by the seemingly unfathomable and

impossible task of completing a fresco of the last judgment, but also by the physical temptations of lust, hunger, and perhaps most importantly, his own imagination. While Rublyov's external journey transports him from his meager monastery along rivers that flow with the blood of stonemasons to witness atrocities committed by the Tatars during their sack of the cathedral, to participate in pagan rituals that compromise his holiness, to the burden of death, and finally, to the miracle of rebirth, his internal journey propels him with dead reckoning. In some manner, Rublyov's actions are emblematic of an epic hero. His story is most certainly a quest, involving a journey that spans some twenty-three years. His moral and physical fortitude are tested, and he emerges triumphant, humble, though scarred. Yet unlike wise Odysseus, whose identity is revealed to his old nurse Anticlea when she sees the scar on his leg, our beleaguered protagonist bears his scars on the inside. On the most basic level, Rublyov is tested; he travels, he fights, he loves, he kills, he mourns, he is reborn. And while it ceases to matter whether or not Rublyov's epic quest has been successful, one thing is certain; it is precisely the trials and tribulations which are endured by him are not only a catalyst to his artistic and spiritual rebirth, but also metaphorical of the rebirth of Russia. The yoke of Tatar domination did cripple medieval Rus', but it also made necessary the birth of nationalism and an indigenous culture. Similarly, it is the devastation, violence, injustice and pain experienced by Rublyov throughout his lifetime that made it possible, if not essential, for him to create his unparalleled masterpiece, *The Trinity*. So, just as Rublyov is awakened from his vow of silence and artistic abstinence by the triumphant chiming of Boriska's bell, Russia, her eyes sleepy and her joints stiff

from years of Tatar domination and subjugation, cautiously stretches up with hope and indignation to meet the rising sun. If one is to accept that the genius Rublyov's quest in some way mirrors the turbulent rise of the Russian state, then one must concede that the story of Andrei Rublyov's life is a very important one. Certainly, it is not surprising that Tarkovsky would be compelled to interpret the passion and suffering of Rublyov, as the mysterious monk marks a pivotal time in the birth of the Russia. So, by telling the story of Rublyov's rebirth, Tarkovsky is also recounting the birth of his motherland. But Tarkovsky is bound to tell this story, just as Rublyov was destined to glorify god with his painting, a purpose far greater than any other, according to Theophanes. Even when Rublyov thought that he was being true to himself and his higher ideals by abstaining from painting because he was himself unworthy to glorify god, the ghostly appearance of his mentor proved to challenge this conceit. Theophanes the Greek, whose wispy apparition ostensibly returns from the other world to remind Andrei of his place and purpose in this world, suggests that the biggest crime and the most flagrant sin is not the murder which Rublyov has committed, but his refusal to accept his responsibility as one who has been touched by god, chosen and gifted. And while Rublyov may be unwilling or unable to grasp this idea initially, he must eventually succumb to his destiny. Still, for both Andrei's, even succumbing appears to be a struggle. In the directors own words:

A true spiritual birth is extraordinarily hard to achieve. It is all too easy to fall for the 'fishers of the human souls'; to abandon your unique vocation in pursuit of loftier and more general goals, and in doing so to by-pass the fact that you are

betraying yourself and the life that was given to you for some purpose. (232, Sculpting in Time)

Clearly, the significance of purpose, destiny and design cannot be ignored in the scope of Tarkovsky's cinematographic narrative. His acute attentiveness to such themes as fate, providence, suffering and redemption is indicative of his interest in the idea of purpose, and again raises the ubiquitous question; what is it precisely that each one of us is on earth to accomplish. It seems reasonable to assume that Rublyov's purpose was to act as an intermediary, a kind of interpreter, between the common and the divine. Tarkovsky's art allows one to temporarily suspend the knowledge of this world, and it is precisely by examining his magnificent paintings that one is offered what should be forbidden; a rare and unobstructed glimpse into the otherworldly and the ethereal. Filtered through the lens of Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative, traces of the otherworldly become virtually imperceptible. With the notable exception of such apparitions as Theophanes the Greek and Rublyov's conjured Christ, the focus rests on the corporeal reality and the unmitigated violence and beauty of this world. Still, the story of Rublyov, no matter how visceral, is somehow not of this world. It is a story that, like the man himself, transcends such already liminal boundaries as reality, time, history and imagination. It is a story that begins with a journey, and ends with spiritual and artistic rebirth.

CHAPTER 6

THE PASSION ACCORDING TO ANDREI

In the next episode, which Tarkovsky has appropriately entitled “The Passion According to Andrei”, dated 1406, Rublyov outlines his theory on the events that surround the crucifixion with alarmingly vivid imagery and an eerie omnipotence. He recounts the story of Christ, describing his uphill trudge with the double burden of his heavy cross and still heavier heart. Astonishingly, Rublyov tells the story of Christ’s Passion and Suffering with the acuity and perception of a spectator. Passion and suffering, it seems, are inexorably intertwined in Tarkovsky’s cinematic narrative. The episode that Rublyov recounts resonates with *pasion*, and his rendition is simultaneously romantic and tormented. Not surprisingly, the Christ that Rublyov remembers, or perhaps more accurately, the Christ that Tarkovsky chooses to show us, strongly resembles Andrei Rublyov himself. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of this calm yet disturbing narration is the reason behind Rublyov’s imaginings. In order to disprove the great master’s assertion that the Russian people are primarily ignorant and therefore not particularly worthy of salvation, and in an effort to furnish Theophanes the Greek with proof that human nature truly is

inherently good, Rublyov looks to the most legendary sacrifice and betrayal of all time. Even Theophanes must find this example ironic, as he points out that the very people who elevated Christ to the status of divinity were the same people who ultimately came to betray him in the end.

How then, Theophanes as well as Tarkovsky's viewing audience are left to wonder, can Rublyov still believe in the goodness of human nature. Still, Rublyov's faith appears not to waver, and he goes on to explain that while Christ's supporters did go on to betray him, they were also the ones who went on to worship Christ as divine. In some manner, Rublyov's argument with Theophanes may be indicative of his own emotional and psychological insecurity. Clearly, his faith in human nature remains intact throughout his discussion with Theophanes the Greek, but he is still unsure about the place of the divine in the realm of the everyday. According to Theophanes, the role of the iconographer is to glorify that which is divine in the realm of the mundane. In the opinion of the great Byzantine master, an iconographer does not have any obligation to the public, but rather, his responsibility is to praise god and illustrate that which is divine in origin and nature. Yet, in the opinion of the young Rublyov, the responsibility of the iconographer is precisely to his viewing public, and therefore, the role of the artist is twofold. In the eyes of Rublyov, the artist must simultaneously glorify the divine while pleasing the common people who were, for the most part, illiterate. Because a majority of the common population could not read scripture or interpret theological doctrines, they were completely dependent on the artistic renditions of divine entities, and they learned about Biblical anecdotes, happenings, stories and miracles only by deciphering the

stained glass pictorials and tempera painted icons that graced the walls of their local cathedrals. In fact, the job of the iconographer was in some way more important than that of a stained glass artist, in that icons enjoyed a life outside of the cathedral, often times making their way into the home of common people.

In addition to this, icons were in many ways more personal than architecture or stained glass, because they included not only the interpretation of the artist, but often the particular saint which had been chosen to represent a family. In some cases, a family would choose a specific saint to whom they would direct their prayers, and it was this particular saint that would go on to be associated with this clan for many generations to come. Although it is not clear what initially attracted a family to any one particular saint, perhaps the reasons had to do with the individual attributes of each saint (some were said to help heal sickness, others to ensure fruitful harvests, and so on), but whatever the motivation, it is clear that each individual could cultivate their own personal relationship with the divine. For this reason, the role of the iconographer was not only that of artist, but also that of intermediary between the everyday and the divine. Ostensibly, Rublyov may be aware of his responsibility to the people, but he is less than savvy when it comes to his responsibility to the divine. As Theophanes would remind him later, Rublyov's primary responsibility is to the gift with which he has been divinely blessed. In the opinion of the Byzantine master, the reaction that the common had toward Rublyov's icons was to be seen as rather cursory.

For Rublyov, aesthetically, it was precisely this dialectic between the earthly and the divine that he found so perplexing. This is hardly surprising,

because Rublyov could not reconcile his own place between these two immovable poles. Despite the fact that Rublyov saw himself primarily as a humble monk whose talent lead him to find a considerable amount of pleasure in painting icons, he is also aware of his spiritual calling as an artist. Still, his divine calling as an artist, or *faber*, is often not strong enough to override his guilt, piety and naiveté.

As an artist, Rublyov is dedicated to his craft, but as a monk, he is even more conscious of the needs, fears, weaknesses and dreams of the people by which he is surrounded. It is precisely this alignment with the collective consciousness of the common man that sometimes interferes with his ability to express himself artistically. While his adherence to the tenets of orthodox Christian faith is strong, he cannot recognize that, clearly, the greatest sin that he could commit would be to turn his back on his art. When Rublyov retells his account of the Passion, he is transported back both temporally and, in some manner, spatially to time directly preceding Christ's crucifixion. Although he cannot possibly know with any authority what exactly took place, despite what he may have learned in seminary school or at the monastery, he recounts the episode as though he is describing events from his own memory. Rublyov speaks with an unwavering certainty, his voice is even and sure, his demeanor is peaceful and focused. As Theophanes watches him, it becomes clear to him that the young monk's idealism will get in the way of his greatness. Unlike Kirill, whose intellect overshadows the depth of his creativity, Rublyov's talent is obfuscated by his virtue and idealism. Similar to Christ, whose unwavering belief was eventually rewarded by the adoration of millions, Rublyov's idealism arose from his formidable faith in the

loving and compassionate facet of humanity. Yet unlike Christ, whose death marked the genesis of a new western religion, Rublyov's death did not herald in a new era of spirituality, but rather, a new era of Russian civilization, culture and spirituality.

Through his iconography, Rublyov elevated the Russian collective spirit and encouraged people to focus their attention on divinity, repentance, faith, hope and the eventuality of their own redemption. For the first time in a very long while, Russian people had begun to rise up from their previously trampled existence as a subjugated society. Finally able to shake off the yoke of Tatar oppression, the Russian people embraced orthodox Christianity and all of the relics and accoutrement of this fledgling religion. In as much as Russia is reawakened, Rublyov's own spirituality is awakened during his traverse across the Russian countryside. The exploration of Rublyov's own spiritual and personal quest is rewarded not only by his ultimate mastery of iconography, but also by his reinforcement and revitalization of a culture that was on the brink of extinction. In this manner, the passion according to Andrei resonates with the brilliance of resurrection. Tarkovsky's inclusion of the episode that he has entitled "The Passion According to Andrei" may be indicative of a need to examine his own spiritual and artistic awakening.

The director not only transcends his own spiritual and cultural boundaries by living vicariously through his beleaguered protagonist, but he also finds a way of grappling with the somewhat problematic nature of organized religion. Although Tarkovsky's relationship with Orthodox Christianity may be obfuscated by his aesthetic expression, Rublyov's relationship with Christianity is relatively

clear. In his tender and deliberate recollection of the events that lead up to the crucifixion of Christ, which is sparked by Theophanes the Greek's pivotal question, "So, are the people dark or aren't they", Rublyov offers a description that surpasses a mere retelling of the corporeal tribulations of Christ. Instead, Rublyov includes a keen examination of the emotional anguish that Christ experienced, and this is suffering made palpable for the viewing of audience as well. His acute attention to the precise detail, from the beginning descriptions of the woeful march uphill and heavy wooden cross that Christ "meekly" is destined to bear to the "silent and patient" manner that he carries it, further buttresses the possibility that Rublyov recalls the passion not only through imagination, but rather, through his own personal experiences. In this scene, the dialectic between Theophanes and Andrei that Tarkovsky uses is particularly humorous and ironic. When the ghostly Theophanes reminds Andrei that Christ's followers betrayed by him, Andrei answers sardonically, "Sure, the people sold Christ, but who bought him... the people!" The fact that Theophanes appears to be an apparition whose feet are covered with swarming ants only serves to affirm the otherworldliness of their encounter. It is this rendition of the passion told through the eyes of Andrei and Theophanes, or his ghost, that Tarkovsky reveals both Rublyov's piety and his extraordinary relationship with the divine⁴¹. Certainly, Rublyov is a Christ figure himself, and the figure of the ghostly Theophanes is his heavenly father. Their interaction may be a metaphor for the ubiquitous and timeless struggle between the real and the unreal, the relationship between the father and the son in this world and in the next.

⁴¹ It is Theophanes the Greek, after all, who appeals to Rublyov's divinely ordained responsibility

In as much as Andrei is the intermediary between the narratives of this realm and the narratives of the other realm, Theophanes represents the voice of the transcendent and the divine. It is Theophanes who must remind Andrei where his genuine responsibilities lie by asserting, “I serve God, not the people. As for the people, today they love you, tomorrow they forget you, the next day they love you again”. This portrayal of Russian society as fickle, ignorant (or “dark”, as a literal translation would reveal), is initially rejected by Andrei, who claims that he is still unsure as to the potential compassion and understanding of which people may be capable. For him, it is in some manner easier to have faith in that which is palpable. Later, this faith is tested when Rublyov discovers that the Grand Prince has ordered his men to gouge out the eyes of the artists who have built his palace⁴². Yet, despite his faith in the common man, Andrei admits to Theophanes that he does not know for certain why the people matter to him in the context of his faith, to which Theophanes sardonically replies, “Well then, if you don’t know, be quiet and listen to me”! For the most part, this passage as told according to Rublyov is primarily a moral dialogue between Andrei and Theophanes.

But in addition to elucidating both men’s views on the various aspects of faith, Tarkovsky also uses this episode to manifest Rublyov’s sincere and tangible vision of Christ’s tribulations, which are in no uncertain terms a mirror of his own. When he describes the path which Christ walks, in his rag wrapped feet, he

to paint.

⁴² In a particularly gruesome scene, guards on horseback overcome the guild of artists who are walking through the woods. As they are brutally blinded, their blood mixes with their paints and flows into the river.

gives us insight into more than Christ's manner and appearance. Certainly, he does depict both of these afore mentioned details, telling us that Christ was patient, silent and contemplative as he humbly carries his cross and stoically awaits his fate, but he also tells us exactly what Christ is thinking. Rublyov muses, or perhaps recalls, that Christ's only thoughts were not contemptuous or vengeful, but instead, that he only paused to ask God to grant him the strength to continue. Ironically, this is precisely the same request that Rublyov utters throughout disparate episode in this cinematic narrative. In several instances, when Andrei is particularly overwhelmed by his travels and experiences, he sighs and pleads, "*Gospodi*", which can loosely be interpreted to mean, "God almighty, help me". It is this parallel thinking of Rublyov, and the Christ character that he seems to channel, that allows Tarkovsky to posit a kind of mirror image between these two holy beings. So, while Rublyov may not be divine, he is certainly portrayed as being distinctly separate from other human beings, and even other monks and holy men, as well. Rublyov's peculiar type of divinity enables him not only to hold repeated conversations with what appears to be the ghost of Theophanes, but also to directly interpret the thoughts of the persecuted Christ as he makes his way through the Russian countryside among a throng of ragged followers. In this manner, the viewer is constantly reminded to make the necessary and inevitable connection between the passion of Christ, or as Tarkovsky has called it, the passion according to Andrei, and the passion of Andrei himself. In this episode, it is notable that Theophanes and Andrei could differ staunchly on the idea of what it means to be an artist.

While Theophanes claims to serve God, Andrei is more conscious of the common people, and their dialectic not only with his iconography, but also with religion and spirituality as a whole. Perhaps the best example of Andrei's almost unnatural preoccupation with humanity can be seen in his unwillingness to depict the Russian people in the throes of suffering and anguish in his rendition of The Last Judgment. In this case, Rublyov takes his responsibility as an artist quite seriously. It is precisely this that transforms the character of Andrei into more than a mere artist, into a spiritual, though not always moral, heroic voice of the Russian people. For much of the film, Rublyov travels through the countryside in pursuit of a higher spiritual path while remaining a passive observer to the action surrounding him. Yet, after he recounts his version of the passion, a pagan ritual in progress transfixes his gaze⁴³.

Still, the role of the artist is integral to the diagesis of Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative. The trinity of artists in Tarkovsky's story are the peasant whose primordial ingenuity results in the satisfaction of man's timeless obsession with flight, the iconographer/monk Rublyov and his two contemporaries, Daniil and Kirill, and of course the revered and aged mentor and master of Byzantine iconography, Theophanes the Greek. All of these artists can be distinguished according to the disparate characteristics with which Tarkovsky has endowed them. In some manner, Theophanes appears to represent the ethereal, and otherworldly side of art, as well as its philosophical side. In addition to this, Theophanes reminds us of the commerce that is associated with art. He is, when Tarkovsky initially introduces him, an artist who is looking for paid and capable

⁴³ Tarkovsky cuts away before the viewer can ascertain whether or not Rublyov has committed the

apprentices who are willing to join him in the creation and distribution of a product. Clearly, Theophanes is less concerned with using his art to change the economic, political or spiritual world of the people around him, and more engaged in using art as a vocation to glorify that which is divine. Although Theophanes does not explicitly tell Rublyov that he does not hold out much hope for the future of the Russian people, his art does carry along with it certain didactic qualities.

For the most part, Tarkovsky's Theophanes sees the common Russian man as ignorant sinners whose own inevitable and quickly approaching destiny was to continue sinning. It is perhaps for this reason that the faces of Theophanes' icons are fraught with anguish and suffering, and it becomes clear that for all intent and purposes, the caustic and unrelenting Theophanes is in every way the opposite of the tender, humanitarian that Rublyov so fervently, yet ultimately fruitlessly, tries to remain. Even Theophanes' ghost is incapable of consoling a visibly frazzled and increasingly desperate Rublyov when he asks his diaphanous mentor to describe his experiences in Heaven. So, it is not surprising that Rublyov's question regarding the future of Russian and her suffering is met with a portentous prediction that Russia will most likely endure such suffering forever. Perhaps the only thing of which Theophanes manages to convince Andrei for certain is the fact that Heaven is nothing like he had imagined. It is also important to note that Theophanes attempts to further encourage Rublyov to accept his destiny, which the ghostly mentor believes can only be fulfilled if Andrei continues to paint in order to glorify God. Echoing Ovid's ageless credo of

carnal sin of sex.

ars longa, vita brevis, Theophanes is well aware that, while the human experience may be of aesthetic importance, it is destined to run dry, but art is the product of this experience, and art is itself eternal.

A virtually complete opposite to the divine Theophanes, Kirill best represents Tarkovsky's vision of the imperfect artist. While Kirill is mildly talented, his intellect, envy and inadequacy lead him to resent those who are more blessed than him. He is cocky, cold and arrogant, and despite his egotistical and spectacular display in front of the monastery is no more than a front to obfuscate his own lack of faith, integrity and talent. Although his reintegration into the familiar fold of the monastic order suggests some redeeming possibility of catharsis, Kirill is perhaps more valuable in the end as yet another of Andrei's contemporaries who urges Rublyov to be true to his God given talent and destiny to paint. Unlike Kirill, Daniil is a quiet, pious and humble traditionalist, whose loyalty and devotion to Andrei are made repeatedly clear by his patient and respectful indulges of many of Rublyov's whims. While he does seem to be able to muster the conviction to engage in a somewhat heated and emotional argument with Rublyov regarding the subject matter and representation of the Last Judgment, he does not have the strength to override Andrei, nor does he push Rublyov towards any type of aesthetic interpretation. Like Theophanes and his traditional aesthetic, Daniil is incapable of perceiving the Last Judgment as anything but anguished. Clearly, he does not share Rublyov's desire to illuminate the faces of the sinners with peaceful contemplation, but rather, Daniil believes that art should serve the purpose of reminding the Russian common man that

spiritual and physical transgressions will indeed be observed, judged and eventually punished by the God of Christian Orthodoxy.

While Daniil is undoubtedly more talented than Kirill, he is a hardworking artist whose association with Andrei has been more like that of blood brothers than that of fellow monks. Still, despite Daniil's traditional adherence to style, technique and subject matter, his art lacks the fear and awe with which Rublyov's work is infused. Although Daniil is a capable and talented iconographer, he does not enjoy the privilege of communing with the essence of the divine spirit because he has not been chosen by the hand of God in the same manner that Andrei has, and therefore, he is unable to produce the kind of iconography that can act as a bridge in between that which is corporeal and that which is sublime. In this way, Daniil is like Kirill, in that their art continues to evolve in a manner that lies completely within the parameters of the real, while the art of Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublyov transcends the tenuous boundaries between real and unreal.

The third member of this trinity of artist, Rublyov himself, treads the liminal border between being divinity and fallibility. He is humble and self-effacing, but he is also thirsty with desire to learn about those things that lie beyond the realm of organized religion. He is unafraid to participate in a pagan ritual, and his growing awareness of human differences, inadequacies and darkness reflects his own spiritual malleability. In many ways, Rublyov's faith in the inherent goodness of human nature is tested, and his increasing understanding of evil only serves to enrich the complexity, texture and poignancy of the artistic voice through he speaks. In this film, Rublyov is not only the

ultimate Russian artist, but the ultimate artist in general, whose own Trinity is born not only out of the depths of his divinity soaked consciousness, but also out of the plethora of diverse experiences, trials and tribulations that he has undergone in the last twenty plus years during which the narrative takes place. The Trinity that Rublyov creates is simultaneously a penultimate example of the evolving face of Russian iconography, and also the thematic touchstone, or motif, for many of the relevant episodes in the narrative.

In addition to the main characters being a trinity of artists, Tarkovsky appears to string together all of the disparate episodes of this film according to the specific “poetic logic of the need for Rublyov to paint his celebrated Trinity”(Tarkovsky, *Sculpting* 35). And although the primary structure of Tarkovsky’s cinematic narrative is circular, the trinity is an important motif throughout the entire film. The Trinity must be completed to glorify God, but also because the people need Rublyov to create the Trinity as much as they need for him to act as the intermediary between the world of God and the world of the common man. In this aspect, Rublyov’s responsibility is twofold. On the one hand, he must serve the higher power and paint to praise the divine, but on the other, he must paint in order to make it possible for the common man to nurture their own genuine relationships with God. If this is true, then the role that Rublyov plays is an important one, as it is his art that unites the higher ideal with the mundane, and satiates the desire of the people to interact with what they believe to be essentially a paradoxical God, capable of both benevolence and retribution. And while it is important that Rublyov’s faith in the redemptive

value of human nature is finally restored, it is perhaps more important that the faith of the Russian people has been rejuvenated⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ If we accept that Rublyov is symbolic of the Russian people as a whole, than his rebirth must in turn herald theirs.

CHAPTER 7

THE BELL

We were not born for barter or for strife,
For marketplaces or for battlegrounds;
To heed the Muses were we given life,
To pray and sing in harmony of sounds.

-Alexander S. Pushkin

Look how your eyes have cracked from so much crying.
What are you doing dragging it along,
Looking at it in the night,
The bleeding skeleton written on your face?
Sit Down. Only God wins.
Have you measured the reach of that statement?
Repeat it until those words are white,
Without relief—death is a part of life—,
Like your face upon a mouldy coin.

-Severo Sarduy

Even though Pushkin may have us believe differently, it becomes evident through viewing *Andrei Rublyov*, that Russian people were indeed born for strife. Still, despite this disheartening realization, there is an inordinate amount of strength that can be gained from constant adversity. It is this strength under pressure that Tarkovsky's captures so gracefully in *Andrei Rublyov*, and it is this strength that defines the Russian people. Interestingly, this strength can be found obtained from the most unusual sources, and often, these sources are simply the result of serendipity. Such is the case in Tarkovsky's episode entitled *The Bell*.

The eighth and final episode, *The Bell* is important for many reasons, perhaps the most significant being the manner in which Tarkovsky presents the relationship between young artists and their aging, often curmudgeon mentors. In this episode, a small group of soldiers set out to find a well known bell caster named Nikolai, only to find out from his son (the only living member of the village that remains) that the old master has died of the plague. In hopes of securing a future for himself that exceeded famine and pestilence, the young boy, Boriska, begins to plead with the soldiers to take him in place of his father. Upon convincing them that Nikolai had revealed the secret on his deathbed, Boriska is taken to town where he begins preparations for a process about which he has been taught absolutely nothing. Soon, his authority is questioned by several of the participating artisans, who believe that Boriska has no idea what to do or how to do it. Although he placates temporarily placates his skeptics, he is acutely aware of the seriousness of the task which he has been called to perform. He fully understands that his life depends on the quality and volume of that bell's ring,

and he is not thwarted by this frightening realization. Still, the young Boriska puts everyone off, refusing to begin work on the bell until he finds just the right clay. When he does find the clay, he does so completely by chance (or is it divine intervention), and under the watchful eye of the still silent Rublyov. As Boriska slips and slides down a muddy embankment, he squeals in delight, calling to his assistant in frantic tones that they may finally begin.

While the boy seems relatively confident, his exhaustion and fragility are palpable, despite his repeated orders to whip his assistants for not listening, or simply not working. Boriska's physical and emotional fragility serves to further buttress his underdog status, therefore making his ultimate triumph even more fantastic and powerful. The significance of the bell is apparent, and is alluded to from the very beginning of the film by the ringing of a bell that is barely audible over the softly playing music of the opening scene. It heralds a new beginning not only for Boriska, but for his country as well. The motif of silence that was established by Tarkovsky and acted out by Rublyov represents an escape from the reality of history, society and culture. Conversely, the ringing of the bell symbolizes a new start for medieval Rus', as well as the birth of a new life for all artists; Boriska, Rublyov and even Tarkovsky himself are eligible for resurrection. In addition to the rebirth of Russia and her artist, the ringing of the bell is symbolic of the potential for a new voice of the people. Certainly, it is no coincidence that Boriska's tearful confession finally moves Rublyov to words. From one artist to another, Rublyov consoles Boriska in a manner that appears to transcend the boundaries of a mentor-protégée relationship. Here, it becomes evident that Tarkovsky sees himself in Rublyov, who in turn has seen himself in

the young but already beleaguered countenance of Boriska. As he reassuringly repeats the words “*Budyet, budyet*”, or “there, there” to console the boy, his own spiritual walls begin to crumble, and presumably, his own artistic calling is reawakened. In this film, Tarkovsky’s dramatic motif of silence is symbolic not only of the duplicity of words, or stagnation of the aesthetic process, but also of a need to return to the essence of purity and simplicity. Here, the breaking of silence is representative of the rewards gained through sacrifice and perseverance. In *Andrei Rublyov*, the breaking of silence is representative of rebirth, rededication and, most importantly, a movement away from the passive pursuit of contemplation and the active process of creation.

Arguably, Tarkovsky’s cinematic narrative is in many ways the story of the various stages of creation experienced by Andrei Rublyov, and exemplified by his physical and spiritual journey, hibernation, and awakening. Still, Tarkovsky is also concerned with the type of corporeal reality that is so pervasive throughout the film. Tarkovsky’s acute attention to cinematographic details in order to ensure the rhythmic flow of the narrative is one of the reasons that *Andrei Rublyov* resonates with such dramatic verisimilitude. In as much as Tarkovsky relies on his character actors to communicate his aesthetic vision, he also employs subtle nuances of alternating perspectives made possible by his deft manipulation of the camera. It is on this type of cinematographic subtext that Tarkovsky builds his broader narrative, one that traces not only the physical movement of Rublyov across the craggy Russian countryside, but also his evolution from ingénue iconographer and humble monk to a legendary artist.

In his book Notes on the Cinematographer, filmmaker Robert Bresson elucidates the tenuous dialectic between cinematography and story telling:

Gestures and words cannot form the substance of a film as they form the substance of a stage play. But the substance of a film can be that...thing or those things which provoke the gestures and words and which are produce in some obscure way in your models. Your camera sees them and records them. So one escapes from the photographic reproduction of actors performing a play; and cinematography, that new writing, becomes at the same time a method of discovery.

(68-9)

In this manner, Tarkovsky is able to use his camera much in the same way that an author would use the written word to tell a story that goes beyond mere words and gesture, but delves into the murky world of the protagonist's consciousness. Nature, and the ruggedly textured Russian landscape that appears to swallow up the main characters in one spectacularly scenic episode after another, make the distinctions between the real world and the spiritual world all the more palpable. From the initial visceral experience of flight that we share with the peasant cum inventor as his awe, elation and hubris turn to realization, fear and ultimately, peril, to the cathartic and heart wrenching cries of Boriska as he listens to the first bell that he has ever made being rung to usher in the beginning of a great and holy feast, Tarkovsky takes the viewer on a ride that can seem at times to bring one dangerously close to sensory overload. For this reason, Tarkovsky's choice to shoot in black and white is understandable, as it serves to endow all of

the fantastic and dreamlike experiences that Rublyov has with some essence of realism and authenticity.

Similarly, the dialogues that he shares with Theophanes in later episodes, as well as the dialogue that he shares with Daniil, and later with the true hero of the film, Boriska, that Rublyov exemplify another kind of authenticity; a genuine excitement, a kind of internal fire, that resonates with all of the intensity of a man touched by something all together divine. Indeed, there is something peculiar about the dialogue in this cinematic narrative. This is partly because there are so few episodes where the spoken word dominates, and partly due to the intrusion of the rugged landscape of the Russian steppes emerges as the forgotten character whose battered visage is worthy of attention. It is no coincidence that the majority of the film is shot outside. The rivers, mountains and countryside serve as the magnificent backdrop for Rublyov's journey, and the landscape provides the viewer with a privileged glimpse into the capriciousness and extremity of weather and terrain of the Russian countryside.

Interestingly, the outside landscape is so important to Tarkovsky, he frequently succumbs to his urge to bring it inside. Some of the most compelling scenes in the film occur when Tarkovsky juxtaposes the external elements with the internal realm of the ritualistic and traditional. Perhaps the most poignant example of this is the scene taking place inside the Vladimir Cathedral after it has been sacked by the twin brother of the Grand Prince, whose betrayal of his own brother echoes a betrayal of Russia, and his Mongol cohorts⁴⁵. It is precisely this

⁴⁵ This scene is particularly poignant, as it elucidates not only the duplicity of the Grand Prince, but more profoundly, the duplicity of a nation where a climate of corruption and terror would lead to such a betrayal.

scene that Rublyov himself calls on profane, as he comments on the sacrilege of the snowfall as begins to fall inside the cathedral. The fact that Rublyov is speaking to what appears to be the ghost of Theophanes the Greek seems to be of less significance than the fact that his unabashed horror and awe at the sight of white flakes fluttering onto the church altar. In Tarkovsky's narrative, this sublime experience marks the moment when Rublyov embraces a vow of silence, but even more importantly, it is the beginning of an internal metamorphosis that is mirrored by the intrusion of the external elements into the sacred realm of the internal. Here, Tarkovsky's use of nature as a unifying motif is both playful and serious.

In as much as the craggy, wooded landscape of medieval Russia serves as a backdrop to Andrei's internal and external wanderlust, it is also the essential ingredient in his quest for self-actualization as an artist. For Rublyov, nature is, in the words of Shelley, the unacknowledged legislator of his time. As an artist, Rublyov asserts not only his intimate knowledge of the natural colors of a landscape, but more importantly, the subtle but integral relationship between his subject matter and his ever-changing audience. Certainly, the dialectic between art and audience is as complex as it is formidable. In many ways, Rublyov's painting of icons and frescos is a kind of story book that simultaneously conveys religious imagery, personal and political commentary on medieval Russian, as well as a clear depiction of who and what are being glorified, and why. In particular, these images serve as a historical, social and political explanation of events both fantastic and plausible for the illiterate audience, which comprised

more than two thirds of the medieval Russian population. Unable to read the Bible in order to learn about the passion of Christ, his resurrection and our ultimate redemption through him, peasants relied primarily on the icons, frescos and mosaics to fill them with fear and wonder by tell the stories of creation, miracles, or the severity of the last judgment through the magic of *ekphrasis*. In every sense, Rublyov's images enabled a collective society to become a part of that ethereal and illusory world, while also grounding them in the reality of their situation. Although the images often resonated with a certain diaphanous veil of light, they are also the product of human suffering.

It is precisely Rublyov's suffering that imbues his images with a paradoxical mixture of awe and realism, while maintaining the authenticity of the ritual that they represent. In his careful but somewhat reductive study of images, W. J. T. Mitchell examines the meaning behind image and audience according to Jacques Derrida's notion of "grammatology". "Grammatology", as Mitchell sees it, is Derrida's way of loosening the spoken language from its firm roots of communication, and replanting it in the rooted graphic image, such as a trace, character or sign. This image, or *graphein*, emerges as the primary mode of language. While Derrida's own word play appears to relegate the audience to a kind of helpless ambiguity that only he himself could successfully decode, Mitchell suggests that is does precisely the opposite:

This realization can lead us to a perception of the *mise en abyme*, a nauseating void of signifiers in which a nihilistic abandonment to free play and arbitrary will seems the only

appropriate strategy. Or it can lead to a sense that our signs, and thus our world, are a product of human action and understanding, that although our modes of knowledge and representation may be “arbitrary” and “conventional”, they are the constituents of the forms of life, the practices and traditions within which we must make epistemological, ethical, and political choices. (Iconology, 29-30)

Here, Mitchell posits the idea that the image, whether moving or still, cannot be evaluated and interpreted if it is separated from the individual who created it, or the individual who is perceiving the image. In other words, an image that is created by a human being cannot be extricated from the reality of human consciousness, or for that matter, sub-consciousness. For this reason, it is virtually impossible to discount the “Rublyov factor”, as it were, from the entire *oeuvre* of his work. If we are to understand his paintings, then we must make an attempt to decipher the mystery that is Andrei Rublyov, and although Tarkovsky’s film makes no claim to historical, political, or temporal authenticity, it does transport us into a Rublyov’s world. It is a world, regardless of Tarkovsky’s assertion that historical verisimilitude was not a primary aesthetic or thematic concern, which resonates with a fierce spirituality that feels distinctly real.

The world in which Rublyov’s lives is one filled with violence, cynicism, hopelessness, and a corrupt power structure that is evident in the ranks of the Russian royals, as well as hierarchy of the priesthood. Still, it is also a world of ephemeral beauty and tangible possibility, and it is this splinter of goodness that

Rublyov captures in his paintings with such aplomb. Rublyov's paintings transcend culture and class because they speak to the universal spirituality, or the collective soul of all people. As Tarkovsky's film reveals, the world in which Rublyov lived and the people by whom he found himself surrounded were rather harsh. Yet, in as much as Rublyov the man is oppressed by his surroundings, Rublyov the artist is in many ways inspired by the upheaval that surrounds him. The trials and tribulations that Rublyov encounters directly affect his artistic process. Whether this is manifested by Rublyov's vow of silence and his adamant refusal to paint, or his inspirational moment of epiphany in the cathedral of Vladimir, the artistic process is undoubtedly affected. The importance of this process, and all of the disparate elements that factor into it, is at the heart of Tarkovsky's narrative. Tarkovsky's concern with the creative process is evident from the first moment, when the film's prologue shows the creative process at work as a peasant rises toward the sky in his hand-made hot air balloon. This primitive *faber* and his ill fated flight herald the coming of a new age in which artistic creativity is often rewarded by glory, and just as often punished by death.

The significance of the artistic process is elucidated brilliantly in the fourth episode of Tarkovsky's film, entitled "The Last Judgment". It is during this episode, which Tarkovsky dated 1408, that Rublyov struggles so fervently with his own artistic process and its impact on his creativity. Not unlike Tarkovsky's other episodes, "The Last Judgment" is a cinematographic study in light and dark, *levitas* and *gravitas*. Because Tarkovsky chooses to shoot virtually the entire film, with the exception of the epilogue, in black and white, it is often difficult to glean exactly when shadow, light and color become symbolic of more than just an

aesthetic of staunch minimalism. Still, in the episode entitled “The Last Judgment”, Tarkovsky makes such dramatic use of light that it is impossible not to notice that he is deliberately attempting to juxtapose light and dark in order to elucidate the psychological condition of our beleaguered protagonist. Tarkovsky opens this particular scene with a wide pan shot of the stark, white walls of the Vladimir cathedral, which serve as a vast and pristine backdrop for the dark rows of scaffolding, and the artist monks who stand in the foreground. Not surprisingly, the bare, almost illuminated white light of the walls is immediately striking, and they appear to glow as they go on endlessly from left to right and top to bottom. Here, it is this contrast of stark white wall against the darkly dressed Rublyov, whose furrowed brow reveals the magnitude of the project that awaits him, that appears most striking.

Undoubtedly, Rublyov feels the weight of responsibility, not only to the people, whose vision of the last judgment will be forever filtered and colored by Rublyov’s representation, but more importantly, to his own sense of the aesthetic process and vision. His unwillingness to compromise this vision is emblematic of several things, not the least of which are Rublyov’s higher calling, or divine inspiration, and his unwavering, almost stubborn bent on perfection. There can be no question of the fact that Rublyov was determined, almost to the point of obsession. Perhaps the most lucid example of this is the vow of silence that Rublyov imposes on himself after he kills a Tatar prior to the raider’s attack on the beautiful holy fool who has become enamored with Rublyov. As a form of self-prescribed penance, Rublyov refuses to speak for several years, and as an

additional spiritual and physical burden, he chooses to take the holy fool along with him as a kind of spiritual albatross.

Although Rublyov is determined to pay for his primal transgression by disassociating from society when he relinquishes language, he also disassociates himself from his divine artistic calling. When the holy fool that Rublyov rescued chooses to ride off with one of the Mongol raiders because he has thrown her a piece of horsemeat, one can only wince at the palpable irony and pathetic desperation. At this point, it is both ludicrous and inconceivable for the viewer to think that this Mongol horse-man, whose countryman had nearly raped and killed her before Rublyov's homicidal intervention, will adhere to his promises of showering the young innocent with fine silk robes and gold coins for her hair. Rather, it seems more likely that she will be lead into a life of servitude and degradation, or perhaps eventually be killed by her brutish captors. It is this thought that must torment Rublyov, and the cragged Kirill's attempt to placate him is ostensibly in vain. Here, Tarkovsky ups the pathos quotient considerably, by emphasizing the absurdity of the human condition, and in particular underscoring the difficulty of living under Tatar domination. Although Kirill's naive consolation that it would be a sin to harm a holy fool is hopeful, it is hardly realistic to believe that the same Mongols who would use a battering ram to knock down the walls of the Vladimir cathedral and proceed to enter the church on horseback would adhere to any concepts of social or moral law⁴⁶. The blatant disrespect and Godlessness of the Mongol raiders is a noteworthy detail, as it is

⁴⁶ This scene is ironic, as she leaves with the same tribe of Mongols that attempted to rape her earlier in the film.

one of the prominent reasons that Tarkovsky experienced so much resistance to *Andrei Rublyov*'s release.

These scenes of sacrilege, as well as the episodic torture, including a rather graphic depiction of molten metal being poured into the mouth of a priest who is then attached to a horse and dragged out of the cathedral, were a catalyst for controversy that eventually resulted in the film being shelved for five years. Still, it is the controversial nature of the film that makes it such a formidable addition to the canon of Eastern European film, and it is the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane that has made the film so palatable to audiences. Here, Tarkovsky's use of excruciating imagery of unthinkable atrocities may reflect his own disappointment with the Russian society in which he lived, and it is more than plausible that the director's own struggle with the Soviet government and their oppressive control of his art is reflected in the tribulations of Rublyov himself⁴⁷. In as much as *Andrei Rublyov* tells the story of a an artist who struggles to accept his own divine gift in the face of a turbulent social, religious and political climate, it also speaks to the difficulty that Tarkovsky encountered as an artist in post cold war Russia. Tarkovsky's own politics may bubble beneath the surface of this cinematic narrative, and his personal stake in the telling of this story is impossible to ignore. Tarkovsky is inexorably tied to the questions of artistic creation, freedom of expression and individual aesthetics, and his interest in these questions plays itself out on the big screen in *Andrei Rublyov*.

Earlier in his film, Tarkovsky elucidated the importance of Theophanes the Greek's portentous warning to Andrei regarding the ill-fated future of Russia and

her people. It is precisely this warning that resonates with Tarkovsky's hopeless optimism. Not unlike some absurd Samuel Beckett character who repeatedly mutters, "I cannot go on, I must go on", Tarkovsky examines a situation that is seemingly impossible but still somehow brimming with the hope of a resilient people who refuse to give up on themselves, or their country. While the words of Theophanes the Greek may have been chosen by Tarkovsky in order to achieve some artistic goal of sentimental pathos or cathartic effect, they are also deeply relevant to the situation of both medieval and present day Russia.

In as much as *Andrei Rublyov* is a film about an iconographer and his adventures, it is also a film that is deeply concerned with the relationship between Russia and the outside world, as well as the relationship between Russia and her people. Although it is the story of an artist monk, it is also a story of a people rose up against formidable odds to build their own culture and community. In more ways than one, *Andrei Rublyov* is a film that explores the infinite possibilities engendered by freedom of expression and creativity. In Sculpting in Time, a work where Tarkovsky is at times incisive and epiphanic and at times pretentious and obtuse, he critically discusses the film *Andrei Rublyov* in such a manner that his motivations become rather transparent. According to his own admission, *Andrei Rublyov* is a film that is greatly concerned with the task of tracing the origin, evolution and culmination of artistic genius, and the impact that this type of genius had not only on medieval Russian culture, but also on the culture of present day Russia.

⁴⁷ Tarkovsky was in exile, avoiding artistic censorship by Russian government, when he died of cancer in Paris.

During the course of Tarkovsky's cinematic *bildungsroman*, Rublyov's religious and artistic pilgrimage to glorify God through painting is impeded by a veritable plethora of roadblocks, among the most notable a pagan celebration on the night of St. Ivan of the Cupoala, the murder of a Mongol and a visit from the ghost of his mentor Theophanes the Greek. Yet despite all of these formidable obstacles, perhaps the most difficult obstacles for Rublyov to overcome are his own religious skepticism, his stubborn self-righteousness, and his unyielding curiosity. He is reluctant to give himself completely to his art, and he is suffocated by the traditions and constraints of his religion. He is flawed by his inability to relinquish control, either spiritual or artistic. Still, the traditional and somewhat antiquated element of the tragic flaw that plagued the epic heroes of the past, these flaws do not necessarily lead to Rublyov's untimely and violent demise. On the contrary, it is precisely these flaws that act as catalysts for his illumination, and lead to the acceptance of his divinely ordained gift. Regardless of his heroic shortcomings, Rublyov does not shrink in fear at the prospect of a journey fraught with violence, uncertainty and most significantly, temptation and impending sin. During the two decades that Tarkovsky captures, Rublyov's sins include but are not limited to; envy, vanity, lust, blasphemy and murder. From a medieval perspective, it is fitting that a young monk should be tested along his pilgrimage in order to prove himself worthy of God and to the community in which he would serve. Even more plausible is the idea that the trials and tribulations Rublyov faced were simply a reality of unavoidable in a climate of fear, oppression and Mongol tyranny. In other words, it is just that Rublyov

should suffer since everyone else in thirteenth century Russia appeared to be suffering right along with him.

For Rublyov, struggle marks not only his initiation into the realm of adulthood, but also reinforces the kind of solid, spiritual and aesthetic morality that can so easily be obfuscated by a full belly and a slack mind. It is precisely because he shivers, starves and exhausts himself physically traversing the Russian landscape that he is able to transcend his corporeal boundaries and bridge the gap between heaven and earth. He is the translator of an otherworldly language that ordinary men cannot understand. His gift is divine in origin, and for this reason it is not only his responsibility, but his obligation and even his destiny to nurture it to fruition, even under the yoke of Mongol domination and cultural deterioration. Both Rublyov and Boriska are proof that adversity breeds genius and creativity, and for Rublyov in particular, his ultimate embrace of artistic creation as divinely ordained destiny is instrumental to his enlightenment, and the culmination of his legacy. Now, an entirely new generation of scholars, authors, poets, painters and musicians must rise from adversity and attempt to leave their mark, just as Rublyov and Tarkovsky have done before them, and we, along with future generations that follow, are merely left to wonder in awe.

CHAPTER 8

EPILOGUE: SCULPTING IN LITERATURE AND FILM

In Andrei Tarkovsky's cinematic behemoth *Andrei Rublyov*, the director has garnered the origins of Russian iconography against a backdrop of graphic violence painted in a palette of stark black and white. By offering intimate insight into the life of one man, a monk iconographer, Tarkovsky reveals the bitter price of divine genius by dissecting the spiritual and physical journey of one man. In addition to elucidating the manner in which genius and the artistic process both originate and manifest, Tarkovsky provides us with a detailed albeit biased history lesson that makes evident the importance of art to the genesis of culture, thought and artistic expression in medieval Rus'. What this cinematic bildungsroman does, in addition to tracing the evolution of Russian religion, architecture and art (specifically iconography), is outline the significance of human nature and its workings are inexorable from genius and the artistic process.

It is precisely this paradoxical juxtaposition between the modern genius of Tarkovsky and the medieval genius of Rublyov that makes this study of the artistic process, as well as all of the trials and tribulations that the divinely

inspired artist must transcend, so palatable. While the film is saturated with historical relevance, astute socio-political criticism and provocatively sensual imagery, it is also strangely didactic in its treatment of the artist, or *faber*. Although *Andrei Rublyov* is a film about the life of an artist, it is also a film dealing with the complexity of the creative process, and the various factors that encourage or inhibit said process. In the very beginning of the film, we witness the awe inspiring and palpable euphoria when a creation succeeds, as well as the terrifying and deadly consequences when it fails. As our doomed faber races effortlessly upward, he taunts the galloping herds of horses below, filling the sky with his cry of “catch me if you can!” Like a medieval Icarus, his flight ends with a deadly crash into shallow water. Yet, surprisingly, Tarkovsky’s aim is not to deter the artist from creating, but rather, to alert him to the potential for his own undoing that is inextricable from the potential for greatness. So, even though Tarkovsky’s peasant faber ultimately dies, his death serves to cement the notion that creativity is so powerful, that it can lead to the spiritual and corporeal deterioration of the artist.

From the crane shot that the director uses during the prologue to depict a peasant falling from the skies in his own ill-fated invention to the monk who must pay for his divine gift with endless travel, selfless denial and self-imposed silence, Tarkovsky makes his point: the artistic process often leads to the untimely destruction of the artist, but this is irrelevant, because the artist has no choice other than to be true to his divinely bestowed destiny to glorify God

through art⁴⁸. In his own critical discussion of an artist and his inescapable responsibility to their craft, Tarkovsky appears to have no trepidation when it comes to relinquishing individual desire to the forces of fixed fate:

In artistic creation, the personality does not assert itself, it serves another, higher and communal idea. The artist is always a servant, and is perpetually trying to pay for the gift that has been given to him as if by miracle...Artistic creation demands of the artist that he 'perish utterly' in the full tragic sense of those words. And so, if art carries within it a hieroglyphic of absolute truth, this will always be an image of the world, made manifest in the work once and for all time⁴⁹.

Still, his understanding of the artist and his role does not predicate his belief that, while the artist himself shrugs off individuality in favor of divine inspiration, it is the artistic product that matters. But despite Tarkovsky's conscious disavowal of an artist's personality as playing a role in the artistic process, the action in *Andrei Rublyov* suggests something entirely different.

In this dissertation, I have posited the idea that the life of one artist can profoundly alter the aesthetic development of an entire culture. If Tarkovsky's own narrative journey makes manifest the undeniable impact that an artist can

⁴⁸ This seems particularly relevant in the case of Rublyov, whose own divine gift is seen by others as an awesome and enviable blessing but by the artist himself as an irreconcilable burden.

⁴⁹ In Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, the author/director makes a deliberate distinction between the artist who creates as avocation, and the artist who cannot live unless he is constantly ensconced in the artistic process.

have on people, then certainly, Rublyov's journey achieves a decidedly similar goal. For Tarkovsky and Rublyov both, the role of the artist as an individual personality does seem to be of some significance, but that does not mean that the artist won't have to suffer. On the contrary, Tarkovsky's film buttresses the notion that artistic genius is born from the spilled bloods of war, the insidiousness of guilt and the depravity of Mongol domination. Art, as Tarkovsky posits in this film, is born from a classical kind of *passior*, or suffering that acts as a catalyst for the creative impulse. Still, if Rublyov suffering elicits in us a catharsis, then it is equally effective as a metaphor for the crippled facade of medieval Rus'. In as much as the protagonist of Sculpting in Time, Tarkovsky himself, serves as both a catalyst and a barometer for the social, political and ideological evolution of Russian culture, Andrei Rublyov steps in to bridge the gap between the realm of the mundane and the divine. Filtered through the lens of Tarkovsky's keen and often unforgiving gaze, we watch Rublyov's transformation from a doe eyed young monk into a grizzled but saintly master iconographer.

By exploring both Rublyov and Tarkovsky's aesthetic education, I have proposed that the evolution of the artist mirrors the evolution of Russian culture, past and present. Moreover, I argue that this parallel can be most effectively examined by three disparate chapters, or episodes, in Tarkovsky's film. In the episode entitled *The Mimmers*, Rublyov is a passive observer whose gaze is transfixed by the performance of another artist, the *skomoroh*. In the *Passion According to Andrei*, he actively recounts the story of Christ's passion with details so painterly and personal, that one feels that he is giving an eye witness

account. In *The Bell*, Rublyov breaks a lengthy vow of silence to console a fledgling artist. All of these episodes (imbued with Tarkovsky's own perception of the artist's role) share the unifying thread of Rublyov's sensitivity, compassion and understanding toward the artist, as well as his personal devotion to the artistic process. In a particularly thoughtful critique of *Andrei Rublyov* entitled "Andrei Rublyov: Religious Epiphany in Art, Nigel D'Sa explores what he refers to as Tarkovsky's "fundamentally Christian view of the role of art and artist"⁵⁰:

His aesthetics of time, iconic composition, and a fusing of naturalism and the numinous, work with his thematic vision to involve the audience in a cinema of total experience. In a word, we are transported. (D'Sa)

D'Sa goes on to talk about his personal experience viewing *Andrei Rublyov* in a theatre full of Russian-Canadians, whose reaction when the screen faded to black was a silence that was "like a spell that lasted where subject and object needed time to disassociate after a period of intense connection"(6).

As an artist, Rublyov acts as a kind of interpreter, a middle man between the divine and the mundane, whose painting illuminated the darkened face of medieval Rus'. As a man, Rublyov represents the kind of paradoxical combination of strength, stubbornness and vulnerability that has for so long characterized the Russian people. He is unexplainably invincible and annoyingly calm, yet he is thwarted by his sensitivity. He strains to continue his pilgrimage, but he is regularly seduced by a variety of temptations, most of which he manages to escape. It is at these times, when the divinely touched Rublyov is at his most

⁵⁰ The especially thoughtful article, "Andrei Rublyov: Religious Epiphany in Art" appeared in

human, that he mirrors the collective consciousness of medieval Rus'; a society whose only choice was to persevere in a time when survival was not always the most attractive option. For Rublyov, a lifetime of hardship and sacrifice is rewarded by a sublime communion with his gift, and consequently, with his God as well. In the eighth and final episode, *The Kolokol*, Rublyov takes over the role of Theophanes by acting as mentor, when Rublyov casts off his shroud of self-imposed silence to embrace a sobbing young artist named Boriska⁵¹, medieval Rus' responds with polyphony of voices. Like a Balm of Gilead, Rublyov's rhythmically melodic voice soothes the cries of the young artist, whose own spectacular achievement has only moments ago propitiated a cluster of curmudgeon clerics, royals, and merchants. The resounding ring of Boriska's painstakingly crafted bell announces the end of Rublyov's silence and the awakening of hope for medieval Rus'. In turn, Rublyov's spiritual and physical awakening heralds the renaissance of his artistic career, and more importantly, serves to symbolize the resurrection of the Russian culture.

In this dissertation, I have suggested that Tarkovsky's cinematic narrative is unique precisely because it traces the development of Russian art and culture by filtering it through a paradoxical double lens: the eyes of Rublyov, whose gaze is medieval, and the director himself, whose gaze is modern. Moreover, I have proposed that Tarkovsky uses stark contrasts like black and white, sacred and profane, and righteousness and debauchery in order to shock, but more

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⁵¹ In the episode entitled *The Bell (Kolokol)*, Rublyov comes upon Boriska, the young bell caster, crying. Without prompting, Boriska confesses that he lied to the men when he said that his father had told him the secret to casting the perfect bell on his deathbed. Admitting to Rublyov that the

importantly, to symbolize the complex dialectic that exists between all facets of art and life. In some manner, what began as a look at art history evolved into an image study. In my dissertation, I have suggested that Tarkovsky sees Rublyov as not only as a man, but as a symbol of a fledgling Russian culture. Furthermore, I have posited the idea that Tarkovsky's Rublyov represents not merely an iconographer, but rather, an epoch in history for which we have become nostalgic. By using Rublyov to symbolize the crossroads of Russia's cultural evolution, Tarkovsky reminds us that if Rublyov's Russia was capable of pulling herself up from the ashes, then perhaps Putin's Russian will be able to as well. Ultimately, I assert that the film is remarkable because it resonates with a three-fold purpose: to examine the role of artistic genius and the aesthetic process in the history of medieval Rus', to trace the origins of Russian iconography and religion, and to parallel the creative rise of one man to the Phoenix like resurrection of a culture stunted by oppression and barbarism. Like Rublyov's most famous work, Tarkovsky's film posits a new kind of Trinity that is composed of Theophanes the Greek, Andrei Rublyov and Andrei Tarkovsky: a timeless trinity of artists that bridges the gap between antiquity and modernity with elegant force.

old man told him nothing, taking the secret to the grave, one is awe struck by the intuitive talent that is inborn more than it is learned.

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