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A Recurring Theme in Tarkovsky's Cinema

The Window as the Entrance to Another Dimension

Windows are omnipresent in our lives. In Andrey Tarkovsky's cinema, when not hidden by curtains, they are often an opening towards a dimension different from the everyday one.

The word window has a second meaning. Leon Battista Alberti writes: „Vor-erst beschreibe ich auf die Bildfläche ein rechtwinkliges Viereck, von beliebiger Größe, welches ich mir wie ein geöffnetes Fenster vorstelle, durch das ich das erblicke, was hier gemalt werden soll“¹ (Alberti 1877, 79). The pictorial work appears to the Renaissance artist as a window, open on the object of his vision.

In the twentieth century, the Russian semiologist Yuri Lotman defined the artistic text as „an instrument of knowledge“ (Lotman 1993, 189) and at the same time, „a window on the future“ (Lotman 1994, 80), capable of introducing into life the freedom lost at the moment in which ideas are embodied in reality.

In his book about icons, Pavel Florensky writes:

[И]коностас же пробивает в ней окна [...] Окно есть окно, и доска иконы — доска, краски, олифа. А за окном созерцается Сама Божия Матерь [...] иконы неоднократно бывали не только окном, сквозь которое виделись изображенные на них лица, но и *дверью*, которою эти лица входили в чувственный мир.² (Florenskij 1994, 62, 67/68, 70)

1 „I draw a quadrangle representing an open window from which I observe what will be painted there.“

2 „[I]conostasis opens windows [...] The window is a window and the tablet of the icon is a tablet where the colors and paint stand out. Through the window we see the Mother of God (...). Icons are not only a window through which the faces depicted on them appear, but also a door through which they enter the sensible world.“

After *IVANOVO DETSTVO* („Ivan’s Childhood“), there is no artistic work by the Russian film-director where paintings or icons are not present. They are texts within the text, microcosms enclosing the principal themes of the film, and at the same time an opening towards a different dimension.

Concrete or metaphorical windows are often part of those moments in which Tarkovsky succeeds in doing what very few film-directors are able to do: making the immaterial material in the images of his film.

I shall begin with a clear, simple example: the open window in the childhood home in *The Mirror*, which appears twice: once in the episode following the prologue and the other in one of the last sequences.

In Aleksey’s recollection, while the out of field voice of his father, Arseny Tarkovsky, recites the poem *PERVYE SVIDANIJA* („First Encounters“), his mother enters the darkness of the house. The camera explores the room. It frames the little children, completely unaware of the difficulties they will have to face. They are sitting at the table, absorbed in eating and pouring sugar on the head of a black cat. Then the camera shoots the dark wall and finally the woman. We first see her standing in a dim corner and then seated in front of the open notebook of poems lying on the window-sill, overlooking some pines. Beyond the cornice is a wooden bench on which everyday objects are lying: a glass containing water, an iron, a piece of cloth. While we view this image, we hear Arseny Tarkovsky’s voice:

На свете все преобразилось, даже
Простые вещи – таз, кувшин, – когда
Стояла между нами, как на страже,
Слоистая и твердая вода.

In the poem, the encounter of the two lovers is compared to „a sacred epiphany“. The act of love is exalted to the point that it recalls, by means of a metaphorical link, the moment of consecration, when in Orthodox liturgy the doors of the altar are closed.

Когда настала ночь, была мне милость
Дарована, алтарные врата
Отворены, и в темноте светилась
И медленно клонилась нагота,
И, просыпаясь: „Будь благословенна!“ –
Я говорил и знал, что дерзновенно
Мое благословенье [...] ³

3 „When the night came / I received the gift of grace. / The altar gates did open, / And in the dark, slowly, aglow / Your nakedness arched upwards. / And on wakening: „Be thou blessed!“ / I said, aware my blessing was / Blasphemous.“

The window opens for a few seconds on the transfigured dimension in the poem, while the spectator listens to the verses recited out of the field and the mother recites them in her mind. It is as if the poetic world is materialized in the image framed by the window jambs.

Due to her husband's absence, when the voice ceases, the objects on the bench resume their simple practical function. Realizing that the transfigured world lives only within herself, the woman weeps. To hide this from the children, she turns her back and lets her tears run silently down her cheeks.

The same open window appears in one of the final sequences. The narrator's voice introduces memories of the past: „When I stop dreaming of the house and pines of my childhood, I am seized with the desire to be happy again, when everything lay ahead of me and everything was still possible“ (1h, 14m, 20–22 sec).

After a succession of dreams, the humiliating episode of the sale of the earrings and the return home of the mother and son with an empty stomach and without money, we see the still-small child drinking milk from a full mug, while white curtains flutter in the breeze. He drinks from a mug identical to the one we saw, half full, on a small table in the room where Alexsey was waiting for his mother and the doctor's wife. This is perhaps a reference to the opulence and wealth of the house of the doctor's wife, which the protagonist may have desired after that encounter, but which he never experienced during his childhood.

From black and white we come back to color. The young boy, here a bit older, is swimming in a pool, while his young, slim mother wrings out clothes after having washed them. Immediately afterwards, the camera frames the empty interior of the wooden house and the open window. On the window-sill still lies the notebook we saw at the beginning of the film. The camera, advancing, moves across the window-sill, beyond the pines, where an elderly woman is sitting next to a small girl. The boy, filmed outside the house, moves towards them.

In this episode, Alexsey's mental visions are materialized in the images of the film. Images of memory merge with those of the present in the mind of the protagonist, who relives the past to understand himself and those who love him. The dimension on which the window opens is a universe where his younger sister is still a child to take by the hand, while the elderly woman is the protagonist's (and the film-director's) mother at present, when she has already fulfilled her life's mission: totally dedicating herself to the task of lovingly bringing up her children, helping them develop their personality and their talents.

We find another meaningful window in *NOSTALGHIA*, in the episode in which Gorčakov enters, uninvited, Domenico's house. The character discovers a new dimension where nature is vibrant and alive and existence achieves a fascinating fullness. The camera frames what the character sees at this moment. The floor is covered with vegetation. The viewer has the impression that the natural world enters the room or rather that the trickle of water, the grass and moss covering the floor expand and spread until they take on the proportions of a landscape.

The color is black and white, used in the film for mental visions and dreams. The sounds are those of a storm concluding with drops of rain, finally giving way to the singing of birds. The last frame in the sequence is a close-up of Gorčakov-Jankovsky's extremely sensitive face. His intense gaze has the light and depth of a person who has just discovered something essential: the hidden essence below the surface of things. Entering the dimension in which Domenico lives, Gorčakov perceives the vibrations of life present even in infinitely small things (a trickle of water, a clump of moss, a blade of grass, a soft chirping), the unity of the living world or, using an expression of Tarkovsky himself, the experience of „finding oneself in everything and everything in oneself“⁴.

The encounter with Domenico and the new dimension, which he begins to discover while gazing at the open window, prepare the character to cross the slippery bottom of the pool of Bagno Vignoni carrying a lighted candle: which means to carry his own small interior light in an indifferent, nearly hostile world. This modest action, although extremely tiring, which the spectator experiences along with Gorčakov, leads us to understand how difficult, painful and sometimes exhausting it is to preserve, protect and share our interior light with others.

A meaningful window is also present in *SOLARIS*. At the beginning of the film, we are in a place immersed in vivid nature, in strong contrast with the characteristics of the city of the future to which the astronaut Berton returns. In one of the first sequences, the father of the protagonist Kris, conversing with his guest Berton, speaks to him from outside, through the open window, of the fact that wooden dacha was modelled on his grandfather's, according to a world vision respecting nature and beauty. At twilight on the same day, on the eve of his departure for a long space mission, Kris contemplates the silent natural setting from that window. He finds nourishment in the peace, serenity and contact with a world he will not see again for many years. The protagonist takes with him to the planet a metal box containing clods of earth and seeds from which will grow a small plant, which at the end we see placed in a porthole of the spaceship. From the zoomed shot of the small plant, we are transported to the place which we saw in the initial sequence. Like the protagonist Harey, this place is a „cruel miracle“ offered Kris by the planet to help him complete his journey of self-awareness. While we hear for the fourth time the *CHORAL PRELUDE IN FA MINOR* by Bach, to which electronic sounds, the voice of the planet, are added, Kris observes from outside, through the closed window, a dimension he was not able to love and to appreciate in the past, when he was negatively influenced by the environment in which he was living. With regret and a feeling of guilt, the character watches his

4 Tarkovsky, who uses these expressions to define Tao music, adds: „[T]his civilization constituted the final result summing up true knowledge, the salt giving flavor to the salt of the earth ...“ (Tarkovsky 1988, 199/200).

father, intent on putting his beloved books in order. The old man is wet with the water coming down from the ceiling, the sign of the imperfect miracle worked by the planet. The embrace between father and son which ends the film expresses the protagonist's gratitude and affection for the man who from childhood educated him to understand the meaning of life and its values, lost when he became an adult and rediscovered in the space station on the planet Solaris, which became his guide.

There is another window in the film which opens up a new dimension for the protagonist Harey, at the moment in which the character is becoming more human. We see her immersed in contemplation of the copy of Bruegel's painting *HUNTERS IN THE SNOW*, hanging in the library. It is as if the woman has entered the painting to the point of hearing the voices, the murmuring, the sounds of the people and animals depicted there, busy carrying out a wide variety of activities on a cold winter day. The need this sensitive, creature feels to understand and fulfill herself as a human being leads her to concentrate on this small picture-window that allows her to see something of the world which she will never be able to visit, the one the man she loves comes from.

The detailed exploration of a painting carried out by the camera, bringing it to life, is a cinematographic choice that Tarkovsky uses in some of his films, particularly in his last one and in *ANDREJ RUBLĚV*.

The concluding sequence in the '62 film offers the spectator, after more than two hours of black and white, the colorful, luminous world painted by the great Russian artist „to bring people joy“. „We will go away together, you and I“, the painter says to Boriska. „You will create bells and I will paint icons [...] think what a delight for people! You have given them such great joy ... and you are crying.“ (2 h, 49 min).

Tarkovsky places the sequence dedicated to filming the icons at the end of the film, at the conclusion of the artist's existential journey, marked, after the naive vision of his youth, by interior conflict, sin and a sense of guilt.

As we have said, Pavel Florensky calls the icons „windows“ through which one gazes upon a world of harmony and beauty. The director chooses to move backwards through the scenes from the life of Christ, from his entry into Jerusalem to his birth in Bethlehem, finally arriving at the moment outside human and historical time which marks the beginning of everything.

To shoot the *TROIKA* (Troiza, „Trinity“), Tarkovsky begins with a close-up on the light, transparency and the splendid colors of the angels' garments. He then moves down to the hands and, by superimposition of images, to the feet, whose overturned perspective gives the impression of lightness devoid of weight. From here he moves slowly upward towards the chalice at the center of the altar, to which he dedicates a long close-up, underlining its importance. Regarding Rublev's *TROIKA/TROIZA*, Pavel Evdokimov writes:

The gift is represented by the cup [...] the Lamb was sacrificed before the foundation of the world ... With indescribable sadness the Father inclines His head toward His Son. He seems to be speaking about the sacrificial Lamb, whose sacrifice culminates in the chalice He blesses. (Evdokimov 1988, 55–56)

The vision of the icons is accompanied by soft music, then by a choir that contributes to rendering the atmosphere of spirituality and prayer more intense. They are the notes of a piece from the Oratory *SERGEJ RADONEŽSKIJ* by Vjačeslav Oščinnikov, which the film-director has chosen for the climax of his film. In this sequence, the painting seems to come alive, to tell a story centered on the chalice, which the camera always comes back to.

Pavel Evdokimov writes in *THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY*:

[E]ach instant can open from within on another dimension, thus making us experience eternity in that instant, in the ‚eternal present‘. (Evdokimov 1988, 138–139)

This is what Rublev and Tarkovsky accomplished using two different kinds of expression, the pictorial one and the cinematographic one, to provide their viewers with a window opening onto an experience of rare, profound beauty.

The title itself of Tarkovsky's last work, *OFFRET* („Sacrifice“; 1986), recalls Rublev's *TROICA/TROIZA* and its meaning. In this film as well, where the motif of the concrete or metaphorical window recurs several times, there are images of icons. They fill the screen when Alexander glances through the book received as a birthday gift. This is perhaps the only moment of color and bright light in a film which is quite dark, like the floor and the atmosphere of the cold, extremely orderly living room where the character finds himself. For him, those reproductions are like windows permitting access to a higher dimension, which for the moment he considers lost.

What a strange aristocracy, spiritualism, wisdom – and at the same time a purely child-like simplicity! Profundity and simplicity brought together. Unbelievable! It's like a prayer ... All this is lost nowadays! We have lost the knack of praying. (0 h, 22 min, 30–55 sec)

It will be Alexander himself who a few hours later will regain its essence, when he addresses a You infinitely greater than himself with an attitude of humility and abandonment.

OFFRET opens in the prologue with a detail of Leonardo's *ADORAZIONE DEI MAGI* („Adoration of the Magi“). We are shown the cup offered as a gift, the beseeching face of the kneeling king, the small outstretched hand of the infant,

who bears on his infantile shoulders the weight of an extraordinary and at the same time cruel destiny. When the titles have rolled by, the camera moves upward starting from the cup to the gloomy astonished faces, to the roots of the tree of life, to its trunk, and finally to its lush foliage.

On the tragic evening when the world experiences the danger of atomic war, the protagonist gazes several times at Leonardo's painting, protected by glass, hanging in his study on the wall above the couch. It opens a window on a dark, gloomy world illuminated only by the central figures. The light enveloping them depends not on a choice on the part of the painter but rather on the fact that they are unfinished: they are still only sketched on the pale canvas.

Before going to the servant Maria, who will give him the courage to carry out his offering-sacrifice, the protagonist stops to gaze upon the painting. We see his image reflected on the glass, placing itself over that of the woman and child along the central axis of the painting. In the prologue, the view of this painting-window is accompanied by an excerpt from Bach's MATTHÄUS-PASSION („Passion according to Matthew“) in which a female voice asks forgiveness for Peter's betrayal.

In SACRIFICE, another meaningful window is present in Alexander's dream, after the prayer. The character is seated in the dark in an empty room with a wet floor and damp walls, as if his house itself were decaying. The only light comes from a window covered by a white curtain, fluttering in the wind. The camera advances toward this bright opening, which occupies the whole screen. The window opens on the crossroads awaiting the protagonist. With a sudden change in time and place typical of dreams, Alexander finds himself outdoors on treacherous ground. His feet sink into earth covered with rotten leaves and snow. The servant Maria's house is in front of him, a place he is not yet ready for. Instead, he turns onto a cold, slippery path. The dream is interrupted in front of a wooden door opened by a violent gust of wind. It is a door closed by a brick wall. Here the dreamer experiences the distressing situation of one who feels he has no way out.

After the dream, instead of using the inside stairs leading to the living room and entryway to go in and out, Otto and Alexander use only the French window, against which a ladder is leaning. It is evident starting from Otto's speech that the dimension in which the two find themselves is not an everyday one.

„There is still one chance. It is the last one [...] You have to go to Maria, your servant [...] Don't you want all this to end? [...] You have to go to Maria and sleep with her“ (1 h, 21 min, 50 sec) Alexander accepts this paradoxical proposal. He exits through the window to go to meet a simple, human woman, filled with compassion and love, whose name, Maria, is the same as the woman in the painting.

After the night, in which he receives the support and courage to carry out his offering-sacrifice, the character sets fire to his elegant villa, which in the course of events showed itself to be an empty shell, poisoned by the selfishness and destructiveness of the members of his family.

According to Tarkovsky, Alexander's gesture in the final scenes of the film appears absurd and ridiculous only to those who confine themselves to the superficial level of the story. „First of all and above all“, he writes,

I am interested in whoever is ready to sacrifice his own position and name regardless of whether this sacrifice is carried out in the name of spiritual principles, to help one's neighbor or save oneself, or for a combination of the two. An action of this type totally contradicts the selfishness inherent in normal logic; it contradicts the vision of the materialistic world and its laws. It is often ridiculous and absurd from a practical point of view. (Tarkovskij 1988, 201)

When everything is finished, the Kid and Maria say goodbye to Alexander, shut inside the ambulance, taking him to a humiliating place of segregation. The farewell scene is accompanied by the same Bach piece played in the prologue. Thanks to the synthetic power of cinematographic language, Leonardo's painting and Bach's music elevate the spectator's soul, giving depth and importance to the images. The film ends with the shot of the dry tree, planted by the protagonist in the first sequence. In this immobile scene, the sea in the background creates slight movement, accentuated by the tenuous shining of the sun on the water. It is as if the music made flower the bare trunk with hope and trust, the same given by Leonardo to his painting-window, obscure and tormented and yet illuminated by the central figures, bearers of goodness and light.

Tarkovsky himself explains the meaning of this final scene:

I am in favor of art that gives man Hope and Faith. And the more desperate the world of which the artist is speaking, the stronger one must perceive the ideal opposing it. Otherwise it would simply be impossible to live. (Tarkovskij 1988, 1749)

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