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## A Conjunction of Mysteries

Tarkovskij's OFFRET and da Vinci's ADORAZIONE DEI MAGI

From the point of view of the philosophical interpretation, OFFRET („Sacrifice“) is Tarkovskij's most controversial film. Nietzscheanism, Gnosticism and Christianity, elements of Extreme-Oriental and archaic Scandinavian cultures, objective realism and onirism – all are hiding below the surface of the grandiose and terrifying Apocalyptic parable. Do these different substrata coalesce into a unitary ideatic structure and a coherent artistic discourse, or do they remain as separate semantic nuclei, providing spectators with different reading strategies different philosophical interpretations?

While most commentators perceive the film as a soteriologic parable with a Christian background and discourse, a more traditionalist (and less artistically instructed) part of Christians are blaming the film for heresy. Their voices are sustained by some Western commentators, who don't see the connection between the film's Christian and gnostic discourses. There are even very young american academic voices accusing the film (and the filmmaker) for logical incongruences!

But Tarkovskij asserted that „nothing in his films was hazardous“; he also stated his film OFFRET would be understood at its true value within many years after his death.<sup>1</sup> Has the time arrived for a proper understanding of the movie? If the discourses of all the film's substrata combine into a coherent, unitary and symphonic structure, if they form together a vivid organism, the answer has many chances to be positive.

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1 As Layla Alexander-Garett publicly sustained while her participation to Tarkovskij Days in Bucharest (Romania, December 2012).

While the obvious, epic structure of OFFRET relies on the motif of APOCALYPSE, seen firstly as the mythic motif of the End of the World and secondarily, as the worldwide Revelation of the Truth (μετάνοια – *metanoia*)<sup>2</sup> but the inner, symbolic film's structure relies on the Marial archetype. Thus mystically, the answer to the provocation of Apocalypse relies on the Holy Mother of God.

In OFFRET the Marial archetype is concentrated in Leonardo da Vinci's painting ADORAZIONE DEI MAGI („The Adoration of the Magi“), which insistently appears in the film.

While in his Soviet creation period, Tarkovskij conceived his films symphonically, as a musical structure (which is more obvious in ZERKALO [„Mirror“]), in his Western period he conceived his films as paintings. This happens both in NOSTALGHIA and OFFRET. NOSTALGHIA's dissipated narrative gravitates around the sober, simple and majestic MADONNA DEL PARTO, Piero della Francesca's pregnant Virgin, while in OFFRET, Leonardo da Vinci's enigmatic canvas reigns in the semantic centre of the film, molding its subtle structure. The Renascentist vibration of the half-shaded canvas overlaps with the cold monumentality of the mise-en-scène and the classicist manner of acting, creating a mixture of rational and emotional language so specific to Tarkovskij's poetics.

Read in an eschatologic key, the mystery of Leonardo da Vinci's painting clarifies the deep meaning of OFFRET. Like in NOSTALGHIA, it's about the mystery of the salvation of the world and the birth of „the new world“, of taking birth from a Virgin or an unordinary woman. But the mystery's decoding is different. In order to understand it, we must enter into the substrata of the great Florentine master's unfinished painting.

A fundamental imagistic theme of Christianity, LA ADORAZIONE DEI MAGI entered a long time ago into the iconographic program of Eastern and Western churches. The characters usually represented in the classic icon are the Madonna with Child, surrounded by the Magi. The canonic scene focuses on the Nativity Cave, therefore it usually includes cattle and Angels, sometimes the Righteous Joseph, shepherds and people – witnesses of Christ's birth. The scene is similar to that of Christmas, whose composition it sometimes includes. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance the composition begins to include heroes and architectural elements of the time, gaining a more worldly character. But almost always the scene has a peaceful and gentle air, of „pacifist“ and universal harmony. Basically, no version of the icon or of the religious painting contains any rattling of weapons or threat of the war. But at Leonardo all these exist! We shall not investigate the reasons of this compositional solution, adopted by the Italian master. For us only one fact matters: from the whole panoply of classic Nativity scenes, Tarkovskij chooses this quite encoded, faded and somewhat „unphotogenic“ painting. It is known even the director of photography Sven Nykvist proposed him to abandon

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2 While only through the spiritual change of his mind man is capable to see the Divine Truth.

shooting the painting, because he couldn't succeed to catch it on the frame, but Tarkovskij remained uncompromising.

What accounts for the crucial importance of the Italian master's youth painting for the dialectics of Tarkovskij's last film? What accents does it emphasize in the movie's internal structure? And what does Tarkovskij want to convey to the audience through this painting? First, the warning on the dangerous and self-destructive path that humanity is moving – most comments on the film refer exactly to that; but also the ardent and obstinate hope for the salvation of the world through the mercy of God, sacrifice and love, the hope of redemptive renewal of the world through the „birth of Infant Christ in our hearts“ (as Christians wish to each other on Christmas). This is the inner renewal of man. When the protagonist browses the album of Russian icons received as a gift, the first image we see is *THE RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS*. Alexander's birthday becomes the day of resurrection of his soul, but also the day of dramatic death of „the old man“!

On the background of Leonardo's painting clearly emerge the Holy Virgin with Child, the Magi and the two trees of Eden, placed right on the center line – a rare compositional solution for this iconographic theme.

But the Infant (or the child), The Tree of Life and the humble woman (not necessarily a virgin, but a chosen, uncommon woman) are the main characters of Tarkovskij's film; as well as, in a sense, the Magi and the scholars, who aren't exactly the ancient astrologers waiting for the Christ, but „men of desire“<sup>3</sup>, looking forward to *the end of the old world and the beginning of the new world*. It is true, we can't say that about all the male characters in the film (there are three), but only about Alexander, the „right and wise“, educated and talented Alexander, aged in the expectation of the great Revelation!

But justice and wisdom aren't enough for saving the world: it's also needed sacrifice and love. „And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing“ (Cor. 13, 3). The same Apostle Paul's verses have been heard in *ANDREJ RUBLEV*, but there everything was more clear and convincing: the level of the discourse was mostly straight, „realistic“ and not parabolic. While *OFFRET* is a parable, primarily addressed to the intellect. What else is needed for the salvation of the world? The persuasion of the divine mercy. All these can be made – claims the postman Otto – by the humble servant Maria! Therefore, prior to carrying out his sacrifice (renunciation to his family, burning his „body“, that is his „house-as-a-soul“, the adoption of the covenant of silence), Alexander ought to worship and bring his gifts – gifts of love – to Maria, so that at her turn she transmits the request of saving the world to God. This isn't a collage of Evangelical themes; the relationships between motifs and characters aren't copied from the *GOSPEL*, they are allegorical: direct meaning becomes figurative and parable becomes reality.

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3 See prophet Daniel.

This is the „geometric-alchemical“ law for the symbolic solving of the last two of Tarkovskij's movies.

The director frequently confessed that he buildt his films not by narrative laws, but by visual laws: his films should be read like paintings with a well-defined, multilayered geometric and vibrational structure, in which temporal and ontic levels communicate with each other according not to narrative principles, but to conceptual priciples. This is most obvious in his western films. Hence their formal difference from the movies made in his homeland. In those it was enough „to live“ (as both the director and his audience stated). Their semantic symphonicity was so perfect, that any of their lingvistic levels (or levels of experience) satisfied the spectators' needs.

While his Western films, being filled with a more discursive (rational) message, it's not enough to be just „experienced“ (lived), they must be properly understood!

Otherwise the multitude of ambiguities on the screen no longer blends into the crystalline polarities of antinomic perfection (the binding agent of their conjoining is the spectator's spirit), but agglomerates into cascades of inconsistency, until all becomes „confusion“, „chaos“, „fiasco“, as it happens in a lot of Western monographs, from the pioneering ones to the most recent. Despite the accuracy of the historiographic and academic language, which they generally prove, they decode many items according to their own, Western historical and cultural context, perceiving exclusively in a pragmatic way episodes with a heavy symbolic nature and missing the symphonicity of the film's deepest layers. Nor do Tarkovskij's Western movies, especially OFFRET escape from this kind of inadequate reading, subjected to compositional conventions which are alien to the grammar of the film.<sup>4</sup>

Like Stanisław Lem's Solaristics, the understanding of the Tarkovskij's western films seems to be, for more than a quarter of a century (at least in the West), at a dead end. But their proper comprehension is imperative. For their *semantic simphonicity* (rather than that of homeland films) grows around theses of maximum generality, just as religious experience develops around the dogma: the living should be experienced, but also the dogma requires to be well understood, as the two are mutually interrelated.

In other words, *the edifice built by Tarkovskij in each of his films* (which is better noticeable in his last two) *is structurally, semantically and functionally, a cathedral*: a theandric space for the encounter between man and God, an eminently living space, capable of self-regeneration, a pattern of any complete work of art. This is argued with the timer in one hand and the treaties of sacred space theory in the other by the reputed film theorist Dmitri Salynskij.<sup>5</sup>

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4 See: Skakov (2012); Martin (2011); Johnson & Petrie (1994).

5 Salynski (2009).

But let's look once more to da Vinci's painting. The diagonal between the seated Virgin and the knelt magician closest to Her on the right side, the only one gazing the divine couple into the eyes, dominates the picture. Exactly with this simple and enigmatic fragment the movie starts: the rectangular profile detail of the magician from the right side, offering his gift to the Divine Infant, persist on the opening credits more than 4 minutes!

It is important to observe the musical accompaniment of the opening credits: it is Bach's oratory *MATTHÄUSPASSION* („St. Matthew Passion“), in which Apostle Peter repents before Christ for his betrayal: „Erbarme dich, mein Gott, um meiner Zähren willen! / Schau hier, Herz und Auge / weint vor dir bitterlich. / Erbarme dich, mein Gott“<sup>6</sup>. The insistent association between soundtrack and image helps to relate Alexander to the magician on the right from Leonardo's painting. It is harder, however, to understand his close relation with Child Jesus. As a secular intellectual, Alexander seems embarrassed or even frightened of such a direct relationship with God, even if he longs to spiritually transform his life.

Once he finds out about the outbreak of the worldwide disaster, Alexander, who, according to his words, has not hitherto had any relation with God, kneels in solitude and clumsily prays for the first time in his life. Alexander's close-up, with his desperate, imploring glance, staring upwards, „to God“, seems a 90 degrees rotation towards the audience of the magus's profile from Leonardo's painting, insistently and imploringly staring at the Child Christ! But the sincere and desperate prayer of the righteous is not enough: the prayer has to be learned, and Alexander is in this sense a profane. That's why it is required the mediation of a chosen person, a close friend to God. Which means Alexander's relationship to God has to be mediated by a gift: the gift of prostration and love, which is received by the Child in the painting as a golden bowl. In the film, the gift is received by Maria, in order to privately deliver it to God.

Maria is called a witch, but she looks more like a humble Catholic nun or a simple church-goer: her behavior, her modest, blackened clothes and the covering of her head, as well as the decoration of her house with cheap Catholic icons, old family photos and crucifixes, testify exactly to this. Arkadij Strugackij's original script, written at Tarkovskij's request in 1981 for his future film *OFFRET*, was even entitled *VEDMA* („The Witch“). It should be noted that the Russian word *ved'ma* (one of the equivalents for ‚witch‘) has a certain noble connotation (‚clairvoyant‘), originated from the ancient, sanskrit root ‚to know‘, ‚to see (*vedat*)‘, which expands in a certain degree the semantic field of the word.

It is said Maria lives near an abandoned church – a typical dwelling of witches, but also of hermits. She is rather not a witch (just as Alexander isn't literally a magus, although it is exactly to a magus that Tarkovskij relates him), but a man

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6 „Have mercy, my God, for the sake of my tears! See here, before you heart and eyes weep bitterly. Have mercy on me, my God“.

with a special spiritual power. What kind of power? For the nonce we don't know: this is the reason for theological and moralist disputes around the film! All this ambiguity is intentional; however, discrete aesthetic signs help us decipher it.

The vicinity of the house with the church explains the presence of the organ<sup>7</sup> – an unusual object in a house of a humble servant. Maria's house belonged, most likely, to the church (which we don't see), it was probably a parish house sharing a wall with the church, so that the music produced by the organ was heard during divine service. The church is abandoned, but the organ still works. It means that not all is lost! For the organ is 'the voice of the angels' and 'the voice of the soul, calling to Lord', which means Maria's inner, supplicant voice is alive. The organ's functionality is a strong metaphor for the effectiveness of Maria's prayerful power.

On this organ, before the night moment of love, Alexander will play a piece of elevated preclassical music. The lover plays the musical instrument of his beloved: here's a quite clear erotic sign, a transparent foreshadowing of the amorous embrace, but the musical instrument (therefore the love) is a ritual and religious one. This means the love meeting is spiritual, even religious. The noblesse of the music indicates the nobility of love and the lovers, even their election, for music (especially organ, religious music) is 'the song of the angels', 'the voice and the blessing of the Almighty'. Their embrace is a kind of hierogamy, because both are 'secretly anointed by the powers of heaven', and the eros moving them is not carnal, but spiritual, ritual, as well as the voice of the organ. Only the cinematic formula of its expression is corporeal: the metonymy, a procedure widely used by the filmmaker, inherent to the audio-visual expression of any spiritual concept.

Even the lovers' entering into the upper room, surprised in a mirror from the perspective of a modest crucifix on the nightstand, is seen as if the shoulders of both lovers bent down under the arms of the same Cross. The first gesture of the embrace also occurs on the background of the wall crucifix, as though the two lovers embraced together the Cross, or received its blessing.

Also the musical interpretation was 'ritualistic', for Alexander, before sitting down to play the organ, being soiled after falling off the bike, washes his hands – an ancestral prelude for approaching sainthood. When Maria pours water from a white porcelain pitcher<sup>8</sup>, its drawing can be clearly seen: it is a green branch – a repetition of the Tree of Life leitmotif –, indicating the quality of the water poured by Maria. The attribute of the myrrh-bearing women, under which the character of 'the witch' (or the deaconess) is directly placed, as well as her indirect and metonymic, Marial attribute (which hierarchically subsumes the first), are becoming more clear.

This type of associations is specific to Tarkovskij's representation of love. The erotic levitation of the main heroine in ZERKALO; the weightlessness experiment

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7 It is an organ or an harmonium? It doesn't matter, to us matters the type of sound produced by the instrument and its ritual-religious function.

8 Repeating the gesture of Kris's mother from the protagonist's dream (SOLJARIS).

scene in SOLJARIS, when Hari and Kris rise into the air, floating embraced among candlesticks with burning candles, accompanied by Bach's music; Alexander and Maria's erotic rotation. Although all these scenes are voiced differently or are almost not voiced (in OFFRET, with archaic shouts of Scandinavian shepherds, fallen as from the sky of the departed past into the hermitic silence of the Swedish island), the inner music they radiate is the same: the unearthly, smoothly enveloping Bach's 'music of the spheres'. It is suggested either by the rotation rhythm of the lovers, slowly rising into the air (in SOLJARIS and OFFRET), or just by the 'time-pressure within the frame', as Tarkovskij used to say in the static levitation, but the most visually refined, in ZERKALO.

The same silent music of the spheres, music of divine grace, of „the meek and quiet Spirit“ (1 Petr. 3, 4), which is eminently Marial, is concentrated in the weak-shiny mandorla of the Virgin with Child from Leonardo's ADORAZIONE DEI MAGI.<sup>9</sup> For the music of „the meek and quiet Spirit“ is the adornment of „the hidden man of the heart“, „which is in the sight of God of great price“ – Apostle Peter says, when he wants to give women a model of perfection (1 Petr. 3, 4). This brings us to the hidden music of GLYCPHILUSA, the Panagia icon of *Sweet-kissing* (or *Loving Kindness*): a music of the holy motherhood and virginity, of gracious and devoted womanhood, tenderness blessing tenderness, selflessness multiplying self-giving, a music of divine eros by excellence. And it is not a sacrilege to say that among the structural and musical correspondences within the movie, the central mandorla of the embraced Divine Couple from Leonardo's painting corresponds to the hidden embrace from Maria's house. Their musicality is the same.

What else, than compassion and love receives Alexander from Maria in the night of the secret meeting? *Courage!* Since sacrifice requires heroism, but Alexander, an intellectual who thirsts for spiritual life, but a novice in matters of spirit, is not ready for sacrifice. His clumsy kneeling in prayer, immediately after hearing the news about the planetary war, doesn't have enough spiritual power. Prayer must be followed by deeds, but deeds require courage, which is far beyond the limitations of a novice. Alexander's weakness requires strengthening from the Holy Spirit, which he receives from the so-called witch, the servant Maria. „Don't be afraid, not of anything“ – whispers Maria twice in a 'female-like' way during their embrace (01:49:25). But not only 'female-like', because right after merging with the so-called witch, Alexander gains courage to act, as though his prayer for salvation of the world gains strength and is accepted by God only after the union with Maria.<sup>10</sup>

9 Leonardo's characters seem to shine because under the unfinished painting transpires the light background.

10 According to the laws of ascetics, the prayer of a novice is strengthened by that of an improved man of prayer, the first merging with the latter.

„How different things would be if only we could stop fearing death!“ (00:18:07), Alexander told his son Tommy, and his teaching transforms into deed. Since manhood is, in a spiritual sense, a sign of the fulfillment of the Holy Spirit. The fact that this happens exactly during the nocturnal meeting with Maria, and that Alexander follows the scenario of Christ’s sacrifice, is suggested by an almost unnoticed detail. The brief pre-classical prelude interpreted by Alexander is interrupted by a weak pendulum’s ding; Alexander winces and anxiously asks himself: „It’s three o’clock! We won’t have time ...“ (01:46:34). Of course, it is about the third hour of the night, and Alexander fears he will not have time to fulfill the ritual. But his observation also has another meaning: in the daily cycle of the seven lauds from the Christian-Orthodox tradition, the third hour is the hour of the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit’s Descend upon the Apostles, and after the third hour follows the sixth, that is, according to Holy Tradition, the hour of Christ’s Crucifixion!

Man is not capable of martyrdom as long as he’s not filled with the Holy Spirit. Therefore *the hours spent by Alexander in Maria’s house reenact two fundamental moments of the liturgic time of the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord*: the love bed becomes the altar of the ‚conception and birth of the new world‘, but also the germ of Alexander’s suffering and martyrdom. The austere stylistics, devoid of sensuality and almost hieratic of the love scene confirms this perspective.

Let’s look more closely to *Maria’s face* when, sitting on her bedside, she attentively follows Alexander’s speech. Only now she gets out from the field background of secondary characters and we understand her essential role in the dialectics of the film. It is the first time the heroine – an extremely discreet presence – appears in long close-ups and even utters a few phrases, drawing the spectators’ attention. Shot in a vibrant rembrandtian chiaroscuro (a specific lighting for the cinema of psychological analysis, which is atypical for Tarkovskij), Maria’s portrait is extremely expressive: a natural shyness, a gentle, sensitive and merciful glance, a total willingness to help. Nostalgically, Alexander recounts her about the former garden of his old mother, both now gone – a reminder of the primordial image of heaven, in all its forms, indicating in a parabolic key the real reason for his visit: the restoration of lost paradise! Impressed by the yet unconfessed disturbance of her visitor, the heroine, until then reserved, reveals her diaconal<sup>11</sup> profile, the profile of a watchful myrrh keeper of the divine love, thus revealing the heavenly pattern sustaining her: that of Mother of God.

Any ambiguity, so ably used by the director to embody femininity vanishes here. It is also the first time Tarkovskij proposes *another female model, except that of the woman-mother-and-wife: it is the modest hermit-woman, the solitary protectress and prayer for the whole world*. Maria’s diaconal profile makes us won-

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11 *Diacon* means the auxiliary personnel for Christian divine services, a ‚sacramental helper‘, so on the scale of divine functions the term has much in common with that of an *angel* (also a ‚helper‘).



der: in terms of drama, isn't she the grown up version of Stalker's daughter, the silent girl who translated the power of faith by moving three glasses on a table, the crucified supporter of her father's martyrdom for humankind? „If ye have faith ... , ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you“ (Mt 17, 20). This faith, desired by Stalker for his fellows and expressed not by moving mountains, but glasses, fully brings forth its fruits in the Revelation of the New World, born – how else, than from faith, love and sacrifice?<sup>12</sup> – between Alexander and Maria's arms. Here are two metonymies, as simple as they are challenging to the rigorists unaccustomed to symbolic language, which actually do not test the hermeneutical mastery, but the quality of the spectator's heart.

But what happens with the other magi? Does the director ignore them? In the film there are only three men: Alexander, doctor Viktor and postman Otto, a retired history teacher, passionate about Nietzsche's philosophy with his theory of ‚eternal return‘, ironically called „the stupid idle whirling“ (00:11:44).<sup>13</sup> They are all worried about the inconsistency of this life, and expect something true and important, which, however, as in Beckett's *EN ATTENDANT GODOT* (‚Waiting for Godot‘), doesn't happen. They all feel the pressure of the existential vacuum, like the vicious metempsychosis circle, mentioned at the beginning of the film, out of which they don't know how to get out. All three are trying, in one way or another, to overcome their horizon (at least the geographic one, like Viktor). All three are, in a way, ‚wise men‘, philosophers of this world, sharing somehow (in secular terms) something of the monastic state. Two of them appear to be single, but also Alexander seems more attracted to the condition of celibacy experienced in the family, as a higher loneliness state for the searchers of the true Bridegroom.

Seeking a higher worshiping altar, ‚the magi‘ don't build their homes on Earth ... And all three are bringing *gifts*: Viktor and Otto offer to Alexander on his birthday an album of icons, a bottle of wine and an old map of Europe (‚of Europe, which no longer exists‘, as Sokurov would later say). In terms of narrative, Viktor and Otto have the function of Alexander's helpers. Doctor Viktor provides services to the ‚body‘ of the family, taking care of Tommy and comforting Adelaide's hysterics and Martha's boredoms (hence the ironic Freudian vision of nude Martha chasing a cock – a metonym of the disoriented and snobbish sterility of both women); while Otto takes care of Alexander's ‚soul‘. A collector of paranormal stories and a transmitter of news, he is a sort of a contemporary Hermes, competent in invisible worlds and therefore a close neighbour to Maria, whom he knows better than anyone.

12 Repeating, therefore, Apostle Paul's commandments from the hymn of love, also invoked in ANDREJ RUBLEV.

13 Translation of the author of this article from the Russian (original) version, which is very expressive: „нелепое коловращение“. The English English subtitles reduce the plasticity of the text: „Sometimes I get silly things in my head, things like this eternal rotation“.

While in the text of the Gospel and in the traditional icons illustrating it, all three magi are bringing their gifts to God, in Tarkovskij's film the offering algebra is different: the gifts are collected by Alexander, the most spiritually advanced of the 'sages', in order to be submitted, along with his own, to Maria. But the essence of offering is the same.

Let's look at more details which shed light on *Maria's identity*. While in the first part of the film, the heroine rarely appears and is almost missing in collective scenes, from the moment of the burning of the house till the end she is practically always in the frame. Her gray and fragile silhouette, filmed in wide shots, most often from behind, lost in the sloughy landscape of the green island, is hardly distinguishable. She now is trying to help Alexander, who strives to run away from the ambulance workers that arrived after him, then, after he was taken away, thoughtfully pursues Tommy when the boy restarts watering the thinnish 'Tree of Life'. In the final frames Maria appears in the same landscape with Tommy, watching him carefully from afar with an almost maternal glance, but never getting too close to him.

In fact, *the intimacy between Maria and Tommy* can be observed even earlier. At the end of the first half of the film, when Maria accidentally meets Alexander in the pine grove, she shows him the gift the boy has prepared to his father: a miniature of the parental house; „Please don't say that I told you, he wanted to show it to you himself!“ (00:46:21). Lonely Tommy trusts Maria and reveals her his little secrets! The two are close! The same moment in the pine grove, after Maria's entering into the action, her words are immediately succeeded by the first wailing-ascetic, otherworldly call of the Japanese flute, which thus is from the very beginning related to Maria.

But the nature of the relationship between Maria and Little Man is revealed only at the end. Tarkovskij knows like no other how to handle *the technique of maieutic suspense*. Like in a detective story, the most important mystery must be hidden as long as possible and revealed only at the end: that is the keystone of the entire film, and the spectator must be brought in a state of maximum receptivity in front of the mystery, to receive it. At first faded and impersonal, with the development of the story, Maria goes out of the stigma of ambiguity assigned to her by the script (the strategy of tightly controlled ambiguity is typical for Tarkovskij) and approaches her iconic archetype: that of the myrrh bearers, the handmaids of Christ and the Holy Virgin. As the subject develops, the main heroes clarify their relationship with Leonardo's painting, drawing closer to their iconic archetypes, without fully identifying with them – the film is a parable, not a fable –, but keeping their own status of individuality, as a terrestrial projection of the archetype.

Like in a thriller, the director intentionally throws at the spectator stumbling stones, hindering him from recognizing *the iconic models behind which the main characters are standing, especially Maria*: seen either walking or, despite

all iconographic models, on bike,<sup>14</sup> either a devout woman or a witch. The night of Alexander's visit, along Maria's house facade an agitated flock of goats come and go back and forth. Goats..! Judging by medieval bestiaries, here's another stumbling block – Tarkovskij surely was aware of that! What ,function' has a goat in a Tarkovskij's movie? A goat also appeared in IVANOVO DETSTVO! To the tiny explorer of the forest, the unexpected appearance of the white goat with its hypnotic, motionless eyes, in the sunshiny glade, was almost an epiphany – a ,natural epiphany' of wildlife, but not hostile, unpredictable but innocent, undomesticated but capable of tenderness, opening its secrets to children and pure hearts. But these are the attributes of STALKER's *Zone*, a part of the attributes! This means that, like the miraculous phenomena from the *Zone* protected the *Chamber of Wishes*, in the same way the herd of goats running here and there at the descent of the evening protects Maria's house, the house in which the despairing man can find comfort and the most entrenched and selfless desires come true! Maria's house is a sort of *Chamber (or well) of desire*, a kind of communication tunnel with Divine will! All these are impressions which the spectator easily overlooks, without giving them any importance, when he first watches the movie: they are nothing but signs, clues, outlining the depth layer of the film.

Let's return to Leonardo's painting, for Tarkovskij also insistently returns to it through Alexander's eyes, whose face frequently mirrors into the painting's glass when he obsessively gazes into it. From the same diagonal, behind the Divine Pair rise the two Trees of heaven – a compositional detail virtually unencountered in the iconography of ADORAZIONE DEI MAGI (and almost absent from Christian iconography), introduced, doubtless, by no accident by the Florentine master, as though he would whisper to us that the access to spiritual knowledge and eternal life are conditioned by the right worshiping of mind and self-giving to God. The two Edenic trees, clearly outlined by the brilliant artist in the center of the painting, are highlighted by Tarkovskij by a close-up slowly tilting-up on the trunk and crown of the first tree, ever since the opening credits. An identical camera movement upwards, slowly following in close-up the thin trunk of the little Japanese tree in front of the shimmering sea, appears in the final frame.

Not only the magi, but also lots of people, gathered around the core group from Leonardo's canvas, worship the Holy Virgin.

But the air of mystery of the painting is given by the almost faded and, therefore, more enigmatic background battle scenes with fiery horses: somewhere in a citadel outside the circle of worship is waging a war. Then Florentine master allegorically represented the *Mother of God reigning over the earth, which is split between adoration of God (the magi group), indifference to God (the semicircle of characters around the central triangle discussing among each other, unaware of the Divine Pair) and destructive fratricide battles*. The quiet and elevated musica-

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14 The bike is the only means of transport on the island, which has no paved roads.

lity, irradiated by the central figure of Madonna with Child, surrounded by the triangle of the magi, vanishes towards the margins of the picture and is finally suppressed by the noise of arms and the horses' hoofbeat in the background. The painting seems equally divided between the silent, glorifying prayer, the zone of religious indifference and controversies, and the deafening noise of armed confrontation.

*All this complicated composition of young da Vinci's painting shapes the structure of Tarkovskij's last film.* Alexander's expiatory action and his prayer for the salvation of the world have to take place in the midst of the indolence of his family and the roar of the planetary war. Now we understand why Tarkovskij chose for his parable about the end of the world exactly this version of the acknowledged scene of the Worship of the Magi: only at Leonardo the divine couple of Madonna with Child reigns so sublime and dramatic at the same time in the midst of the apocalyptic chaos. For this is the theme of Tarkovskij's testamentary film.

There is another secret link between the topic of OFFRET and the celestial world towards which Leonardo's painting opens. This is music, specifically, the musical arrangement. The soundtrack of the film where music is almost absent consists of short excerpts from Bach's MATTHÄUSPASSION at the beginning and the end, *hotchiku*<sup>15</sup> Japanese flute, and traditional shouts of Swedish shepherds. They are diegetically motivated by the presence of flocks of sheep, scattered in the desert landscape of the island and apparently don't play any role in the set design. If Bach's oratorio leads the viewer into a world of religious experiences, popular in European Christian culture and therefore 'spiritually trustworthy', the Japanese flute and the archaic cry of the shepherds are odd, cries from a world, respectively, calls towards a world that is far and unknown.

The first incantation of *hotchiku* flute is related to the character of Maria, but the time global war was declared, the lower, plaintive-threatening sounds intensify and multiply. The diffuse and imprecise notes of the bamboo flute, resorbed into vacuum like a primordial blow, seem to pour from heaven the prophecy of the imminence of the global catastrophe and dissolution of this world into nothingness, arguing therefore for the ritualistic function of burning Alexander's house. The immaterial, grave, 'masculine' sound, as if coming from immemorial depths of the earth, bears the fundamental, but still amorphous vibration of the yet undefined word, the call of primordial paradise, *the 'alpha-sound'*.

But at the same time there appears another call, as ancestral and unearthly, but encouraging, 'positive', also related to the image of Maria. It can be clearly distinguished during Otto and Alexander's dialogue, when the first is trying to convince his friend about the need to visit Maria. They are prolonged shepherds' and spherdesses' shouts calling their flocks from the mountain pastures. Often female calling voices can be heard. Cries of shepherds, coming as if from heaven,

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15 Long and thick bamboo flute used in Zen meditation.

calling their flocks home. Heavenly, but immaterial, high and bright voices, centripetal, soothing and warm – the vibration of post-historical paradise: the ‚omega-sound‘. They barely distinguish during Alexander and Maria’s love moment, blend easily with the sounds of the Japanese flute during Alexander’s apocalyptic dream (the second one) and reappear at the end, accompanying Little Tommy when he waters the Tree of Life. The film’s sound designer, Owe Svensson stated Tarkovskij deliberately chose women’s voices, because they are comforting, opposing the threat of war.<sup>16</sup>

Shouts out of an unknown or forgotten sky, male and female shouts, forewarning and encouraging, calling the flock home during apocalyptic threat. Calls that almost nobody hears anymore. *The motifs of the Good Shepherd and the Heavenly Patroness, Theotokos*, outline more clearly.

The ‚alpha-sound‘, negative and slightly frightening by his gravity, somehow rebarbative, of the forgotten primordial paradise, constrains and warns, urging repentance. Despite its formal opposition to the latter, the vibratory similarity allows it to easily blend with the ‚omega-sound‘ of hope, of the New Heaven, to unite into a single voice. (Which means between the two vibrations, masculine and feminine, ‚alpha‘ and ‚omega‘ of archaic and post-historical paradise there is an essential consubstantiality). A single call, Alpha and Omega, addressed to ‚those who believe and those who believe not‘, to the witnesses of the great Revelation and to those who ignore it, to all cultural and spiritual mankind’s geographies.

But why doesn’t Tarkovskij remain in the area of Christian culture, if the message he wants to transmit is Christian? Why does he depart so far away beyond the borders of Europeanism and Christianity – the historic and ritual ones, not the dogmatic ones – up to the ambiguous, uncontrollable, uncertain worlds of archaic heathenism? Why does he have to mix everything? No, Tarkovskij doesn’t mix nor confound anything. His withdrawal into ancient non-Christian worlds or into science-fiction aren’t errancies, but self-knowing spiral movements of creative consciousness, movements of enlargement and deepening around the same axis of the Divine Logos, in order to achieve the fundamental sound, inscripted together with God’s Word in the genetic heritage of all – humankind and entire creation – and bestow this calling sound of life-giving Logos on everyone.

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16 Salvestroni (2007, 193–194).

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