

Bach and Tarkovsky¹

[DRAFT: please do not quote]

James Doyle

University of Bristol

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

Bach is relevant to an understanding of Tarkovsky's films and of his ideas about film in a number of ways. First, there is the obvious fact that several of Tarkovsky's films make use of Bach's music. A few examples: chorale preludes from the *Orgelbuechlein* play over the opening credits of *Mirror* (Das alte Jahr vergangen ist BWV 614) and *Solaris* (Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ BWV 639, recurring several times in the course of the film), and the terrifying opening chorus and a recitative from the *St John Passion* BWV 245 (Tarkovsky's favourite musical work) mark critical points in the former; the stalker in *Stalker* whistles part of an aria from the same oratorio. It is clear that Tarkovsky did not make repeated use of Bach's music merely because it enhanced his films *simply qua sound*, as perhaps might have been the case with the electronic music composed by Eduard Artemiev for *Stalker*. One might as well try to make out that he included a shot of a reproduction of the van Eycks' Ghent altarpiece under water in *Stalker*, or of the icons in the famous coda to *Andrei Rublev*, because he wanted to elicit an emotional response to certain colours and shapes. No: Tarkovsky's use of Bach is clearly intended to exploit *the meaning of Bach* as a supremely important figure in the history of western culture, as well as to create a particular musical-cinematic effect. In this paper I would like to say something about what that meaning may be supposed to amount to. In doing so I hope to shed some light on what it means to say, what I think is true, that Tarkovsky's films are philosophical.

Bach's music works in Tarkovsky's films, I will suggest, as an embodiment of 'high' art, and as an aural analogue of Tarkovsky's conception of the film image. I will explain each of these claims in turn.

Anyone who reads *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky's reflections on his own art and on art in general, is bound to be struck above all by something being laid bare which can be recognised as implicit in his films: namely, a totally uncompromising attitude to the value of high art (or, as we ought rather say, art) in its unique spiritually and ethically redemptive power – an attitude which is today out of favour, and even regarded with horror, among many artists and intellectuals. Tarkovsky returns the compliment: this attitude of his is self-consciously opposed to the spirit of the age:

Art is born and takes hold wherever there is a timeless and insatiable longing for the spiritual, for the ideal: that longing which draws people to art. Modern art has taken a wrong turn in abandoning the search for the meaning of existence in order to affirm the value of the individual for its own sake. What purports to be art begins to look like an eccentric occupation for suspect characters who maintain that any personalised action is of

¹ This paper is based on one delivered at the conference 'Philosophy and Film/ Film and Philosophy', Arnolfini gallery, Bristol, 6th July 2008. It has benefited from a conversation with Anthony Everett.

intrinsic value simply as a display of self-will. But 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 a miracle. Modern man, however, does not want to make any sacrifice, even though true affirmation of self can only be expressed in sacrifice. We are gradually forgetting about this, and at the same time, inevitably, losing all sense of our human calling... (Tarkovsky 1986, 38)

I think that one of the saddest aspects of our time is the total destruction of people's awareness of all that goes with a conscious sense of the beautiful. Modern mass culture, aimed at the 'consumer', the civilisation of prosthetics, is crippling people's souls, setting up barriers between man and the crucial questions of his existence, his consciousness of himself as a spiritual being. But an artist cannot be deaf to the call of truth; it alone defines his creative will, organises it, thus enabling him to pass on his faith to others. An artist who has no faith is like a painter who was born blind (42-3).

We can immediately see why Tarkovsky is a philosophical film-maker. In fact, in his view, the notorious Platonic opposition is dissolved, since all genuine artists are engaged simultaneously in poetry and philosophy:

When I speak of poetry I am not thinking of it as a genre. Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality. So poetry becomes a philosophy to guide a man throughout his life.

Poetry for Tarkovsky is simply the artistic mode of apprehension. Since the point of all genuine art is to concern itself with the meaning of human existence, all genuine art is automatically a philosophical enterprise – more specifically, an ethical enterprise, since when he speaks of the meaning of life, he clearly has in mind the fundamental question of ethics, which Socrates, according to Plato's *Apology* (29e), put at the centre of philosophy: *How should I live?*

[I]t is perfectly clear that the goal for all art – unless of course it is aimed at the 'consumer', like a saleable commodity – is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of his existence. To explain to people the reason for their appearance on this planet; or if not to explain, at least to pose the question (36).

So the essence of art, on this view, is to pose and perhaps to offer an answer to this fundamental philosophical question; and it is a defining characteristic of the present age that this essential function has been lost sight of, with disastrous consequences for the spiritual life of human beings.

It is just this conception, then, Tarkovsky's own, which is given hyperbolic expression in *Nostalghia* by the disturbed character of Domenico, in his marathon address from atop the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Roman Piazza del Campidoglio, a scene which culminates in his horrifying self-immolation – the ultimate self-sacrifice: "There are no great masters left; that's the real evil of our time. Our heart's path is covered in shadow. We must listen to the voices that seem useless.... Just look at nature and you'll see that life is simple, that we must go back to where we were, to the point where you took the wrong turning. We must go back to the main foundations of life without dirtying the water. What kind of world is this if a madman has to tell you to be ashamed of yourselves?..." And more generally, Tarkovsky's films are *explicitly* about what, if he is right, all art is *implicitly* about. Think of the discussions of the nature of art in relation to the meaning of human existence in *Andrei Rublev*, the painstaking investigation into the meaning of the protagonist's life in relation to that of his family in *Mirror*, the role of the

fundamental desires of human beings in the mysterious parallel worlds of *Solaris* and *Stalker*. Essentially the same conception of art can be found in Wittgenstein.² It may be one of the things meant by the typically gnomic statement in the *Tractatus* that “ethics and aesthetics are one”; and Tarkovsky himself wrote

Art is realistic when it strives to express an ethical ideal. Realism is a striving for the truth, and truth is always beautiful. Here the aesthetic coincides with the ethical (1986, 113).

But the conception is certainly expressed in a number of the remarks of Wittgenstein’s collected together by Georg von Wright and translated by Peter Winch under the title *Culture and Value*.

People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc to give them pleasure. The idea *that these have something to teach them* – this does not occur to them (Wittgenstein 1984, 36e).

Now, Bach may be thought of as emblematic of art on this conception, and I want to suggest that this is one of the functions his music performs in films like *Mirror* and *Solaris*. Within the artistic modality of music, Bach is supreme and all-encompassing. He is in some respects a backward-looking artist: he was fascinated by musical forms, such as fugue and the so-called *stile antico*, which were already considered archaic when he was composing, and many of the hymn melodies he used as raw materials for his cantata choruses and organ preludes went back centuries – a number were written by Luther himself and some of them (eg *Christum wir sollen loben schon* BWV 121, 611) date from many centuries before music began to be written down. Yet he also exerted an incomparable influence on subsequent music. This is not just a matter of being “ahead of his time”; as Wittgenstein says elsewhere in *Culture and Value*, “If someone is merely ahead of his time, it will catch him up one day”(8e). Much of Bach’s music is highly abstract in a way that makes it, so to say, *permanently* avant-garde – paradoxically, this is often true of the very music he writes in a self-consciously archaic style. This is shown by the fact that all subsequent developments in music have centrally involved a reappraisal and reappropriation of Bach: the early romantics revered him and brought his work to a wider public for the first time (Mendelssohn conducting the *St Matthew Passion* in 1829, for example – the first performance since Bach’s second production of 1736); the opening of Brahms’ first symphony is a clear invocation of the opening of both of Bach’s great oratorios; Webern arranged Bach’s music; Berg quotes a cantata in his violin concerto, and so on. The point here is that understanding Bach is not a matter of understanding his ‘place in the history of western music’. It is rather something close to the other way round: one comes to understand the history of western music in part by seeing it in relation to Bach. He is not so much a representative or even a paradigm of western music as its embodiment. Bach is unique in this respect: there is no figure in the history of any other art in the west who exercises this kind of dominion over it. Furthermore, much of Bach’s music is explicitly intended to be ethically and spiritually edifying. So it is maximally well-suited as a means of invoking Tarkovsky’s conception of art in general.

I must confess that I am sympathetic to this conception, at least to this extent: if we are interested in spiritual, ethical and philosophical questions, it seems to me that the first thing we should do is to cast a very sceptical eye over the answers to them that are typical

² The conceptions may have a common ancestor in the frankly barmy Spengler; see (Monk 1991), and (Dunne 2008).

of our own time. Here the contrast with scientific questions is important, as Tarkovsky saw.³ In science, the most recent answers are more or less guaranteed to be the best ones available, since this is how science works: it does not (usually) go backwards. But this sort of philosophical question differs from scientific inquiry in just this respect. The crucial questions for science, even if couched in very general terms, change from age to age⁴ but, put with equal generality, the question of what counts as being good at being a human being is always the same. (The question must be asked anew in every age, but it is the *same* question that is asked.) The most promising answers, or rather, materials for our own answers, are those that have stood the test of time, so that the history of our attempts to answer them is directly relevant to our renewed efforts in our own time. This is why it is still possible to learn a great deal about philosophy itself, and not merely about its history, from reading Plato and Augustine and Spinoza.

But there is a difficulty in Tarkovsky's conception, whereby it is in the nature of what he calls poetry to have a philosophical function. For it seems to debase art by making it didactic. It is often thought that there is something aesthetically inferior about works that are designed primarily to instruct on ethical matters. There are dissenters from this view – in the last century, for example, Brecht in the theatre and Godard in the cinema sought to render their work didactic in aesthetic good faith, as it were – but for present purposes I shall assume that it is correct. How can art avoid the debasement attendant upon assuming a didactic function if, as Tarkovsky seems to suppose, it is necessarily engaged in a philosophical investigation? The answer to this question lies in Tarkovsky's conception of the film image; and certain works of Bach, I will argue, may be understood as musical analogues of that conception, as sharing its structure.

Here we appeal to an idea which seems to crop up wherever people are trying to understand how film achieves its distinctive effects, namely the distinction between *saying* and *showing*. Tarkovsky seems to contradict Wittgenstein's implication that poets and musicians have something to teach people:

It is obvious that art cannot teach anyone anything, since in four thousand years humanity has learnt nothing at all (1986, 50).

Tarkovsky's thought here recapitulates Socrates' argument in the *Meno*: virtue cannot be taught, since the children of virtuous people often turn out badly in spite of their parents' best efforts:

³ Eg: "By means of art man takes over reality through a subjective experience. In science man's knowledge of the world makes its way up an endless staircase and is successively replaced by new knowledge, with one discovery often enough being disproved by the next for the sake of a particular objective truth. An artistic discovery occurs each time as a new and unique image of the world, a hieroglyphic of absolute truth. It appears as a revelation, as a momentary, passionate wish to grasp intuitively and at a stroke *all* the laws of this world – its beauty and ugliness, its compassion and cruelty, its infinity and its limitations. The artist expresses these things by creating the image, *sui generis* detector of the absolute. Through the image is sustained an awareness of the infinite: the eternal within the finite, the spiritual within matter, the limitless given form" (1986, 37).

⁴ For example, it is my sense that "What's the universe made of?" is no longer really a fundamental question for physics, insofar as matter and spacetime themselves are now thought of as emergent phenomena.

It's ridiculous to imagine that people can be *taught* to be good, any more than that they can learn to be faithful wives by following the 'positive' example of Pushkin's Tatiana Larina (*ibid*).

But the appearance of contradiction here is only a consequence of Tarkovsky's meaning something very specific by *teaching*: given what he thinks art *can* do for one's spiritual life, in denying it a capacity to teach he must be effectively thinking of the conveying of propositional contents as such – of saying *as opposed to* showing. Here I would like to quote Stephen Mulhall:

[Baggini] recognises that what is at stake here [sc in our understanding of film's ethical possibilities] are visions of the world rather than individual judgements about elements of it; but he also seems to assume that such overarching ways of seeing are accurate or inaccurate to the way things really are in just the way that opinions about more local events and actions might be – as if one's way of seeing human life is just one very big opinion, or an opinion about one very big subject. And this encourages us to overlook the fact that we have rather more various resources for bringing about such fundamental shifts of ethical perception than we have for contesting specific ethical judgements about a well-defined set of possible courses of action (Mulhall 2008).

Tarkovsky certainly does not want to deny that the function of film, or of art generally, is to have a certain beneficial effect on the souls of those who experience it; but he insists that this effect cannot be understood in terms of the conveying of information, but must amount to what Mulhall calls a "fundamental shift of ethical perception":

The allotted function of art is not, as is often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as example. The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good (Tarkovsky 1986, 43).

The artist does not *tell* us anything; yet if she is successful she brings about a psychic transformation by other means – as a result, somehow, of her distinctively poetic engagement with the world and its re-presentation in transfigured images. There is an analogy here, which Tarkovsky does not draw, with psychoanalysis. For the analyst does not effect the desired change in the patient – the overcoming of neurosis, say – by simply telling him what his problem is. (Recall the old analysts' joke (Lear 2003): "I have figured out what is wrong with you. You want to kill your father and make love to your mother. That will be £100,000, and we don't need to meet again.") The analyst aims to effect a fundamental change in the structure of the patient's psyche by means of psychoanalytic techniques, such as the manipulation of transference, which cannot be understood in terms of the conveying of information, even though they are routed through the patient's consciousness.

What corresponds, in the case of film, to these psychoanalytic techniques? How is it, according to Tarkovsky, that film achieves its own transformative effects? Here we must understand his conception of the film image and, more generally, of the poetic image. And here Tarkovsky cannot avoid a certain obscurity, for it is in the nature of the image, as he conceives it, to strive to express the inexpressible:

The image is an expression of the truth, a glimpse of the truth permitted to us in our blindness. The incarnate image will be faithful when its articulations are palpably the expression of truth, when they make it unique, singular – as life itself is, even its simplest manifestations (1986, 106).

One model, in *Sculpting in Time*, is the Japanese haiku: “The lines are beautiful, because the moment, plucked out and fixed, is one, and falls into infinity.” Perhaps his conception is clearer if it is contrasted with what he rejects, namely *symbols* in film, or in art more generally. The idea that something presented in a film ‘stands for’ some other idea is anathema to Tarkovsky, an outright denial of film’s true function. Part of the problem seems to be the finitude of such an arrangement: the initiated viewer finds the key to the symbol, unlocks its meaning, and so has grasped the whole of what is going on. Whereas for Tarkovsky the function of the film image is precisely to resist such self-contained interpretation. Concerning the final words of Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilych, he writes

Clearly that image, which shakes us to the very depths of our being, cannot be interpreted in one way only. Its associations reach far into our innermost feelings, reminding us of some obscure memories and experiences of our own, stunning us, stirring our souls like a revelation. At the risk of banality – it is so like life, like a truth that we had guessed at, that it can rival situations that we have already known or secretly imagined (1986, 108).

Here we may see another way in which on Tarkovsky’s conception art is inherently philosophical: it supplies life in a concentrated form, as an inexhaustible source of material for philosophical reflection. The idea has been cleverly described from the opposite direction by Bernard Williams:

Even when philosophy is not involved in history, it has to make demands on literature. In seeking a reflective understanding of ethical life, for instance, it quite often takes examples from literature. Why not take examples from life? It is a perfectly good question, and it has a short answer: what philosophers will lay before themselves and their readers as an alternative to literature will not be life, but bad literature (1993, 13).

If we ‘reverse-engineer’ this thought, as it were, and generalise it to all forms of art, we arrive at Tarkovsky’s conception of the poetic image: it is human life, *presented in such a way* as to provide an object for ethical and spiritual reflection as inexhaustible in its significance as the most highly-charged moments of our own lives:

The function of the image, as Gogol said, is to express life itself, not ideas or arguments about life. It does not signify life or symbolise it, but embodies it, expressing its uniqueness (1986, 111).

Again:

The image is not a certain *meaning*, expressed by the director, but an entire world reflected as in a drop of water (110).

And compare, again, Wittgenstein:

You might say: the work of art does not aim to convey *something else*, just itself. Just as, when I pay someone a visit, I don’t just want to make him have feelings of such and such a sort; what I mainly want is to visit him, though of course I should like to be well received too (1984, 58e).

(Kafka seems to provide a distillation of this conception; as Peter Heller says of his works, “[they] seem to be recordings of apparitions – not construed to convey a message” (Heller 1974, 381).)

When Tarkovsky's films succeed, it seems to me, they succeed in terms of the criteria determined by his conception of art: that is to say, the images do seem imbued with a numinosity which has some obscure but insistent relevance to the meaning of our lives. And when they fail, this is still what they seem to be striving towards. This is what makes him controversial. His films themselves point toward the conception of art in relation to which they are best understood. (Not: are best *experienced*; the films don't *express* this conception – that would be another instance of the image being degraded to a symbol.) And that conception is high-minded in the extreme. He is therefore a very courageous film-maker, because he continually and knowingly runs the risk of massive bathos. Whether he pulls this off is the main issue that divides his admirers from his detractors.

Earlier I argued that Bach's unique relation to the history of his own art, and the explicitly spiritual content of much of his music, meant that Tarkovsky could use his music to invoke his own (that is, Tarkovsky's) conception of art and its history. But if this is part of what Tarkovsky is doing, is he not violating his own strictures against symbolism? We saw that part of his objection to symbols in art is that their meaning can be *given*, once for all, while the image is ultimately inscrutable, can never be made fully explicit. Doesn't my interpretation purport to *give the meaning* of Tarkovsky's use of Bach's music? Perhaps so; but this does not itself invalidate the interpretation. For, first, Tarkovsky did not always practice what he preached:

After being questioned about the final scene of *Nostalgia*, in which a Russian landscape is montaged [*sic*] into the ruins of a Gothic cathedral [*sic*], a considerable moment of silence followed, before he revealed that in this case, he had, in opposition to his artistic credo, intentionally created a poetic symbol (Menzel 2008, 383).

Secondly, Tarkovsky's strictures against symbols should anyway surely not be understood as prohibiting him from presenting in his films objects or events which would reliably make the discerning viewer think of something in particular. What he objected to was the case where this was the *whole point* of what was presented: where everything is understood once the symbol is decoded. But this is emphatically not the case with a Bach chorale prelude – or, for that matter, with the Tuscan Abbey of San Galgano (the “Gothic cathedral” referred to by Menzel). For as successful works of art these are *already images* in Tarkovsky's sense; and their status as images is not threatened by being embedded in his film.⁵

Yet in the case of the film image (as opposed to an embedded image from another medium) the original subject matter is simply an object or event in the world: a jester beating a drum in a medieval tavern, underwater plants swaying slightly in the motion of a river, a barn on fire, a young woman gazing at a fresco of Piero della Francesca, three men riding on a rail trolley, to take some of the particularly unforgettable instances from Tarkovsky's own films. Everything depends on the mode of presentation: this is what transfigures these otherwise ordinary objects and events into exalted poetic images. And here again, it seems to me, the music of Bach has a special importance.

Two musical genres had a particular spiritual significance for Bach: the chorale prelude for organ, which he composed throughout his working life, and the large-scale ‘chorale’ cantata opening chorus, most of which he composed in Leipzig in the 1720s. The basic

⁵ In this respect the Tarkovskian image is like the categories about which Jasper Johns seems to be making the point (in passing): a depiction of a flag *is* (in some loose but legitimate sense) a flag; a depiction of a numeral is a numeral; of a map a map, of a target... etc.

idea behind these two types of piece is the same. Bach begins with a musical image, but a *quotidian* one: a chorale (that is, hymn) melody, typically from the sixteenth century, which would be utterly familiar to the congregations who constituted the original audience for his music. He then effects an extraordinary process of musical transfiguration. He *embeds* the familiar tune within a completely independent (or, occasionally, complexly imitative) musical texture – a texture that could have been the basis of a completely separate orchestral or keyboard work, but whose contours are gently warped in such a way that it now serves as the setting, or vehicle, of the chorale tune. It is as if, to borrow an image from Cronenberg’s *The Fly*, the chorale tune has jumped into the independent material’s teleportation beam. The relation between the elements is asymmetric: the chorale melody is (roughly) a constant, while the ‘background’ material seems to accommodate itself to it; as if, in virtue of its proximity to the melody, it is irresistibly attracted to its shape, and expresses this attraction by yielding to co-operate with it, even to *fuse* with it. The effect on the congregation must have been electrifying: a melody familiar since childhood suddenly, miraculously, appearing over the top of dense material that they never could have guessed had any musical connection with it.

This confirms our earlier judgement that Tarkovsky was not violating his own strictures against symbols when he made images out of images. Bach is doing the same, and while, like Tarkovsky, he may be using the content of his image – itself an image – to allude to a system of ideas (roughly, Lutheran Christianity), this comes nowhere near exhausting his image’s significance. In embedding the chorale melody in this way, he shows us something profound about its meaning, but no-one could say what this is.

The structure of Bach’s musical images in these genres thus reveals the nature of the artistic image *per se*. Bach is the supreme exponent of these genres because, more than any other composer, he treats them as a means of raising music to a new level of self-consciousness.

Tarkovsky uses organ chorale preludes throughout *Solaris* and over the opening credits of *Mirror*, as I mentioned at the outset. Whether he is deliberately alluding to the connection or not, this music is especially apposite given his distinctive conception of the film image and the poetic image more generally: something long familiar to everybody is transformed, by the supernatural agency of the artist, into something radically new, with an inexhaustible significance for the lives of human beings.

REFERENCES

- Dunne, N (ed). 2008. *Tarkovsky*. London: Black Dog.
 Heller, Peter. 1974. On not understanding Kafka. *The German Quarterly* 47, no 3.
 Lear, Jonathan. 2003. *Therapeutic Action: an Earnest Plea for Irony*. New York: Other Press.
 Menzel, Birgit. 2008. Tarkovsky in Berlin. In (Dunne 2008).
 Monk, Ray. 1991. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
 Mulhall, Stephen. 2008. Film as philosophy: the priority of the particular. Typescript of talk delivered to ‘Philosophy and Film/ Film and Philosophy’ conference, Arnolfini gallery, Bristol, July 5th, 2008
 Tarkovsky, Andrei. 1986. *Sculpting in Time*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

- Williams, Bernard. 1993. *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1984. *Culture and Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.