SCULPTING IN TIME

Andrey Tarkovsky was born in Zavrozhie on the Volga in 1932. In 1960 he graduated from the Soviet State Film School with his first film *The Steamroller and the Violin.*


He died in Paris on 29 December 1986.
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Some fifteen years ago, as I was jotting down notes for the first draft of this book, I found myself wondering whether there really was any point in writing it at all. Why not just go on making one film after another, finding practical solutions to those theoretical problems which arise whenever one is working on a film?

My professional biography has been none too happy; the intervals between films were long and painful enough to leave me free to consider—for want of anything better to do—exactly what my own aims were; what are the factors that distinguish cinema from the other arts; what I saw as its unique potential; and how my own experience compared with the experience and achievements of my colleagues. Reading and rereading books on the history of cinema, I came to the conclusion that these did not satisfy me, but made me want to argue and put forward my own view of the problems and the objectives of film-making. I realised that I generally came to recognise my own working principles through questioning established theory, through the urge to express my own understanding of the fundamental laws of this art form.

My frequent encounters with vastly differing audiences also made me feel that I had to make as full a statement as possible. They seriously wanted to understand how and why cinema, and my work in particular, affected them as it did; they wanted answers to countless questions, in order to find some kind of common denominator for their random and disordered thoughts on cinema and on art in general.

I have to confess that I would read with the greatest attention and interest—at some moments with distress, but at others with huge encouragement—the letters from people who had seen my films; during the years I was working in Russia these built up into an impressive and variegated collection of questions addressed to me or things which people were at a loss to understand.

I should like to quote here some of the most typical of these letters in order to illustrate the kind of contact—on occasion one of total incomprehension—that I had with my audiences.
A woman civil engineer wrote from Leningrad: 'I saw your film, *Mirror*. I sat through to the end, despite the fact that after the first half hour I developed a severe headache as a result of my genuine efforts to analyse it, or just to have some idea of what was going on, of some connection between the characters and events and memories. . . . We poor cinema-goers see films that are good, bad, very bad, ordinary or highly original. But any of these one can understand, and be delighted or bored as the case may be; but this one!! . . . An equipment engineer from Kalinin was also terribly indignant: 'Half an hour ago I came out of *Mirror*. Well!! . . . Comrade director! Have you seen it? I think there's something unhealthy about it. . .1 wish you every success in your work, but we don't need films like that.' And another engineer, this time from Sverdlovsk, was unable to contain his deep antipathy: 'How vulgar, what trash! Ugh, how revolting! Anyhow, I think your film's a blank shot. It certainly didn't reach the audience, which is all that matters ...' This man even feels that the cinema administration should be called to account: 'One can only be astonished that those responsible for the distribution of films here in the USSR should allow such blunders.' In fairness to the cinema administration, I have to say that 'such blunders' were permitted very seldom—on average once every five years; and when I received letters like that I used to be thrown into despair: yes, indeed, who was I working for, and why?

I would be given some glimmer of hope by another kind of cinema-goer, full of puzzlement, but also expressing the genuine wish to understand what the writer had seen. For instance: 'I'm sure I'm not the first or the last to turn to you in bewilderment and ask you to help them make sense of *Mirror*. The episodes in themselves are really good, but how can one find what holds them together?' A woman wrote from Leningrad: 'The film is so unlike anything I've ever seen that I don't know how to go about it, how to appreciate either the form or the content. Can you explain? It's not that I lack understanding of cinema generally ... I saw your earlier films, *Ivan's Childhood* and *Andrey Rublyov*. They were clear enough. But this is not. . . . Before the film is shown the audience should be given some sort of introduction. After seeing it one is left feeling cross with oneself for being so helpless and obtuse. With respect, Andrey, if you are not able to answer my letter in full, could you at least let me know where I could read something about the film? . . . '

Unfortunately I had nothing to advise such correspondents; no articles came out about *Mirror*, unless one counts the public condemnation of my film as inadmissibly 'elitist', made by my colleagues at a meeting of the State Institute of Cinematography and the Union of Cinematographists, and published in the journal, *Art of Cinema*.

What kept me going through all this, however, were the comments which clearly showed that there were people who minded about my work, and were actually waiting to see my films; only it was apparently in nobody's interests to further my contact with that section of the audience.

A member of the Institute of Physics of the Academy of Sciences sent me a notice published in their wall newspaper: 'The appearance of Tarkovsky's film, *Mirror* aroused wide interest in IPAS as it did all over Moscow.

'By no means all who wanted to meet the director were able to do so; nor, unfortunately, was the author of this notice. None of us can understand how Tarkovsky, by means of cinema, has succeeded in producing a work of such philosophical depths. Accustomed to films as story-line, action, characters and the usual "happy ending", the audience looks for these things in Tarkovsky's films, and often enough leaves disappointed.

'What is this film about? It is about a Man. No, not the particular man whose voice we hear from behind the screen, played by Innokentiy Smoktunovsky:’ It's a film about you, your father, your grandfather, about someone who will live after you and who is still "you". About a Man who lives on the earth, is a part of the earth and the earth is a part of him, about the fact that a man is answerable for his life both to the past and to the future. You have to watch this film simply, and listen to the music of Bach and the poems of Arseniy Tarkovsky; watch it as one watches the stars, or the sea, as one admires a landscape. There is no mathematical logic here, for it cannot explain what man is or what is the meaning of his life.'

I have to admit that even when professional critics praised my work I was often left unsatisfied and irritated by their ideas and comments—at least, I quite often had the feeling that these critics were either indifferent to my work or else not competent to criticise: so often they would use well-worn phrases taken from current cinema journalese instead of talking about the film's direct, intimate effect on the audience. But then I would meet people on
whom my film had made an impression, or I would receive letters from them which read like a kind of confession about their lives, and I would begin to understand what I was working for. I would be conscious of my vocation: duty and responsibility towards people, if you like. (I could never really believe that any artist could work only for himself, if he knew that what he was doing would never be needed by anybody . . . But more of that later . . .)

A woman wrote from Gorky: 'Thank you for Mirror. My childhood was like that. . . . Only how did you know about it? 'There was that wind, and the thunderstorm . . . "Galka, put the cat out," cried my Grandmother. . . . It was dark in the room . . . And the paraffin lamp went out, too, and the feeling of waiting for my mother to come back filled my entire soul . . . And how beautifully your film shows the awakening of a child's consciousness, of this thought! . . . And Lord, how true . . . we really don't know our mothers' faces. And how simple . . . You know, in that dark cinema, looking at a piece of canvas lit up by your talent, I felt for the first time in my life that I was not alone . . .'

I spent so many years being told that nobody wanted or understood my films, that a response like that warmed my very soul; it gave meaning to what I was doing and strengthened my conviction that I was right and that there was nothing accidental about the path I had chosen.

A worker in a Leningrad factory, an evening class student, wrote: 'My reason for writing is Mirror, a film I can't even talk about because I am living it. 'It's a great virtue to be able to listen and understand. . . . That is, after all, a first principle of human relationships: the capacity to understand and forgive people their unintentional faults, their natural failures. If two people have been able to experience the same thing even once, they will be able to understand each other. Even if one lived in the era of the mammoth and the other in the age of electricity. And God grant that people may understand and experience only common, humane impulses—their own and those of others.'

Audiences defended and encouraged me: 'I am writing on behalf, and with the approval of, a group of cinema-goers of different professions, all acquaintances or friends of the writer of this letter. 'We want to let you know straight away that your well-wishers and the admirers of your talent, who await the appearance of every film you make, are far more numerous than might appear to be the case from the statistics in the journal, Soviet Screen. I don't have any comprehensive data, but not one of the wide circle of my acquaintance, or of their acquaintances, has ever answered a questionnaire about particular films. But they go to the cinema. Admittedly not often, but they always want to go to Tarkovsky films. It's a pity your films don't come out very often.'

I must admit it's a pity for me too. . . . Because there's so much I still want to do, so much to be said, so much to finish—and apparently I'm not the only one to whom it matters.

A teacher from Novosibirsk wrote: 'I've never written to an author to say what I feel about a book or a film. But this is a special case: the film itself lifts the spell of silence and enables one to free one's spirit from the anxieties and trivia that weigh it down. I went to a discussion of the film. "Physicists" and "Lyricists"* were unanimous: the film is compassionate, honest, relevant—all thanks to the author. And everyone who spoke said, "The film is about me."'

Or again: 'This is from an old man, already retired, and interested in cinema even though my professional field had nothing to do with art (I'm a radio engineer). 'I am stunned by your film. Your gift for penetrating into the emotional world of adult and child; for making one feel the beauty of the world around one; showing the true, instead of the false, values of that world; making every object play a part; making every detail of the picture into a symbol; building up to a philosophical statement through an extraordinary economy of means; filling every frame with poetry and music. . . . All these qualities are typical of your style of exposition, and yours alone . . .'

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* An expression coined in the late 1950s, referring to the debate between those who question the relevance of art to the modern age and those who see beauty as one of man's fundamental needs, and sensibility as among his most important qualities. (Tr.)
process, since it affords only emotional material with which to construct a—more or less well-ordered—framework for my ideas.

One way and another it was contact with audiences, by letter or in person, that pushed me in the direction of this book. In any case I shan't for a moment blame those who question my decision to embark on abstract problems, any more than I shall be surprised to find an enthusiastic response on the part of other readers.

A working woman from Novosibirsk wrote: 'I've seen your film four times in the last week. And I didn't go simply to see it, but in order to spend just a few hours living a real life with real artists and real people. . . . Everything that torments me, everything I don't have and that I long for, that makes me indignant, or sick, or suffocates me, everything that gives me a feeling of light and warmth, and by which I live, and everything that destroys me—it's all there in your film, I see it as if in a mirror. For the first time ever a film has become something real for me, and that's why I go to see it, I want to get right inside it, so that I can really be alive.'

One surely couldn't hope for greater understanding. My most fervent wish has always been to be able to speak out in my films, to say everything with total sincerity and without imposing my own point of view on others. But if your vision of the world turns out to be one that other people recognise as a part of themselves what better motivation could there be for one's work. One woman sent me on a letter written to her by her daughter, and the young girl's words are a remarkable statement about artistic creation as an infinitely versatile and subtle form of communication:

'... How many words does a person know?' she asks her mother. 'How many does he use in his everyday vocabulary? One hundred, two, three? We wrap our feelings up in words, try to express in words sorrow and joy and any sort of emotion, the very things that can't in fact be expressed. Romeo uttered beautiful words to Juliet, vivid, expressive words, but they surely didn't say even half of what made his heart feel as if it was ready to jump out of his chest, and stopped him breathing, and made Juliet forget everything except her love?

'There's another kind of language, another form of communication: by means of feeling, and images. That is the contact that stops people being separated from each other, that brings down barriers. Will, feeling, emotion—these remove obstacles from between people who otherwise stand on opposite sides of a door. . . . The frames of the screen move out, and the world which used to be partitioned off comes into us, becomes something real . . . And this doesn't happen through little Audrey, it's Tarkovsky himself addressing the audience directly, as they sit on the other side of the screen. There's no death, there is immortality. Time is one and undivided, as it says in one of the poems: "At the table are great-grandfathers and grandchildren . . . "Actually Mum, I've taken the film entirely from an emotional angle, but I'm sure there could be a different way of looking at it. What about you? Do write and tell me please . . . '

This book was taking shape all through my period of unemployment, an interlude which I have now forcibly brought to an end by changing my life; it is intended neither to teach people nor to impose my point of view on them. Its main purpose is to help me to find my way through the maze of possibilities contained in this young and beautiful art form—still, in essence, so little explored—in order to be able to find myself, fully and independently, within it.

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

The corpus of theory relating to cinema is still slight; the clarification of even minor points can help to throw light on its basic laws. This is what has prompted me to put forward a few of my own ideas.
The artist's responsibility

I want to begin by returning to the comparison, or rather the contrast, between literature and cinema. The one feature shared by these two completely autonomous and independent art forms, as I see it, is their marvellous freedom to use material as they will.

I wrote earlier of the mutual dependence of the cinematic image and the experience of author and audience. Prose too, of course, relies on the reader's emotional, spiritual and intellectual experience, as does all art. And the interesting thing about literature is that however minute the detail which the author puts into each page, the reader will still 'read' and 'see' only what he has been prepared for by his own—and only his own—experience, by the mould of his character, since these have formed the predilections and idiosyncrasies of taste which have become a part of him. Not even the most naturalistic and detailed passages of prose remain within the writer's control: whatever happens the reader will perceive them subjectively.

Cinema is the one art form where the author can see himself as the creator of an unconditional reality, quite literally of his own world. In cinema man's innate drive to self-assertion finds one of its fullest and most direct means of realisation. A film is an emotional reality, and that is how the audience receives it—as a second reality.

The fairly widely held view of cinema as a system of signs therefore seems to me profoundly and essentially mistaken. I see a false premise at the very basis of the stylistic approach. We are talking about the different kinds of correlation with reality on which each art form bases and develops its own distinct set of conventions. In this respect I classify cinema and music among the immediate art forms since they need no mediating language. This fundamental determining factor marks the kinship between music and cinema, and for the same reason distances cinema from literature, where everything is expressed by means of language, by a system of signs, of hieroglyphics. The literary work can only be received through symbols, through concepts—for that is what words are; but cinema, like music, allows for an utterly direct, emotional, sensuous perception of the work.

By means of words literature describes an event, an inner world, an external reality which the writer wants to reproduce. Cinema uses the materials given by nature itself, by the passage of time, manifested within space, that we observe about us and in which we live. Some image of the world arises in the writer's consciousness which he then, by means of words, writes down on paper. But the roll of film imprints mechanically the features of the unconditional world which came into the camera's field of vision, and from these an image of the whole is subsequently constructed.

Directing in the cinema is literally being able to 'separate light from darkness and dry land from the waters'. The director's power is such that it can create the illusion for him of being a kind of demiurge; hence the grave temptations of his profession, which can lead him very far in the wrong direction. Here we are faced with the question of the tremendous responsibility, peculiar to cinema, and almost capital in its implications, which the director has to bear. His experience is conveyed to the audience graphically and immediately, with photographic precision, so that the audience's emotions become akin to those of a witness, if not actually of an author.

I want to emphasise yet again that, with music, cinema is an art which operates with reality. That is why I am so against structuralist attempt to look at a frame as a sign of something else, the meaning of which is summed up in the shot. The critical methods of one phenomenon cannot be applied mechanically and indiscriminately to another, yet that is what such an approach attempts. Take a particle of music—it is dispassionate, free of ideology. So too one cinema frame is always a particle of reality, bearing no idea; only the film as a whole could be said to carry, in a definite sense, an ideological version of reality. A word on the other hand is itself an idea, a concept, to some extent an abstraction. A word cannot be an empty sound.

In Tales of Sevastopol Lev Tolstoy describes the horrors of the military hospital in realistic detail. However punctilious his account of these fearful minutiae, however, it is still possible for the reader to work on the stark, naturalistic pictures, to modify and adapt them according to his own experience, wishes and views. A text is always taken selectively by the reader, who relates it to the laws of his own imagination.

A book read by a thousand different people is a thousand
different books. The reader with a vivid imagination can see beyond the most laconic account, far further and more graphically than the writer himself has envisaged (in fact writers very often expect the reader to think on further). On the other hand, a reader who is restrained, inhibited by moral strictures and taboos, will see the most precise, cruel description only through the moral and aesthetic filter that has built up inside him. A kind of revision takes place within the awareness, however, and this process is inherent in the relationship between writer and reader; it's like a Trojan horse, in whose belly the writer makes his way into his reader's soul, and its distinctive function is to inspire the reader to have a part in the authorship of the work.

But does the cinema audience have any freedom of choice?

Each frame, each scene or episode is not just a description, but a facsimile of an action, or landscape, or face. Aesthetic norms are therefore wished upon the audience, concrete phenomena are shown unequivocally, and the individual will often set up a resistance to these on the strength of his personal experience. If we turn to painting, by way of comparison, we find there is always a distance between the picture and the viewer, a distance that has been marked out in advance and which makes for a certain reverence towards what is depicted, a distance that has in front of the beholder—whether he finds it comprehensible or not—is an image of reality: it would never occur to anyone to identify a picture with life. Obviously you can talk about whether what is on the canvas is 'life-like' or not; but in the cinema the audience never loses the feeling that the life being projected onto the canvas of the screen is 'really and truly' there. A person will often judge a film by the laws of real life, imperceptibly substituting, for those on which the author has based his film, laws derived from his ordinary, humdrum experience. Hence certain paradoxes in the way audiences appreciate films.

Why do mass audiences often prefer to watch exotic stories on the screen, things that have nothing to do with their lives?—They feel they know quite enough about their own lives, and that the last thing they want is to see more; and so in the cinema they want to have someone else's experience, and the more exotic it is, and the less like their own, the more desirable and exciting, and, in their eyes, the more instructive.

Of course sociological factors come into play here. Why else would some groups of people turn to art only for entertainment, while others look for an intelligent interlocutor? Why do some people only accept as real what is superficial, allegedly beautiful, but in fact vulgar, tasteless, inferior, hack—while others are capable of the most subtle, genuinely aesthetic experience? Where should we look for the causes of the aesthetic—sometimes, indeed, moral— deafness of vast numbers of people? Whose fault is it? And is it possible to help such people to experience inspiration and beauty, and the noble impulses that real art touches off in the soul?

I think the question answers itself; but for the moment I don't want to dwell on it, merely to state it. For one reason or another, even under different social systems, the general public are fed with appalling ersatz, and no one is concerned about instilling, or nurturing, taste. At least in the West the public are given the choice, and the great directors' films are at their disposal should they want them—there is no difficulty about seeing them; but the influence of these works can hardly be significant, if we are to judge by how often they perish in an unequal struggle against the commercial films that fill the screens.

Given the competition with commercial cinema, a director has a particular responsibility towards his audiences. I mean by this that because of cinema's unique power to affect an auditorium—in the identification of the screen with life—the most meaningless, unreal commercial film can have just the same kind of magical effect on the uncritical and uneducated cinema-goer as that derived by his discerning counterpart from a real film. The tragic and crucial difference is that if art can stimulate emotions and ideas, mass-appeal cinema, because of its easy, irresistible effect, extinguishes all traces of thought and feeling irrevocably. People cease to feel any need for the beautiful or the spiritual, and consume films like bottles of Coca-Cola.

The contact between film director and audience is unique to cinema in that it conveys experience imprinted on film in uncompromisingly affective, and therefore compelling, forms. The viewer feels a need for such vicarious experience in order to make up in part for what he himself has lost or missed; he pursues it in a kind of 'search for lost time'. And how human this newly gained experience will be depends only on the author. A grave responsibility!

I therefore find it very hard to understand it when artists talk about...
absolute creative freedom. I don't understand what is meant by that sort of freedom, for it seems to me that if you have chosen artistic work you find yourself bound by chains of necessity, fettered by the tasks you set yourself and by your own artistic vocation.

Everything is conditioned by necessity of one kind or another; and if it were actually possible to find a person in conditions of total freedom, he would be like some deep water fish that had been dragged up to the surface. It's curious to reflect that the inspired Rublyov worked within the strictures of the canon! And the longer I live in the West the more curious and equivocal freedom seems to me. Very few people are truly free, and our concern is to help more to become so.

In order to be free you simply have to be so, without asking permission of anybody. You have to have your own hypothesis about what you are called to do, and follow it, not giving in to circumstances or complying with them. But that sort of freedom demands powerful inner resources, a high degree of self-awareness, a consciousness of your responsibility to yourself and therefore to other people.

Alas, the tragedy is that we do not know how to be free—we demand freedom for ourselves at the expense of others and don’t want to waive anything of our own for the sake of someone else:

that would be an encroachment upon our own rights and liberties. All of us are infected today with an extraordinary egoism. And that is not freedom; freedom means learning to demand first and foremost of oneself, not of life or of others, and knowing how to give: sacrifice in the name of love.

I don’t want the reader to misunderstand me: what I am talking about is freedom in an ultimate, moral sense. I don’t mean to polemically, or to cast doubt on the unquestionable values and achievements which distinguish the European democracies. But the conditions of these democracies underline the problem of man’s spiritual vacuum and loneliness. It seems to me that in the struggle for political liberties—important as these are—modern man has lost sight of that freedom which has been enjoyed in every previous epoch: that of being able to sacrifice oneself for the sake of another.

Looking back now at the films I have made so far, it strikes me that I have always wanted to tell of people possessed of inner freedom despite being surrounded by others who are inwardly dependent and unfree: whose apparent weakness is born of moral conviction and a moral standpoint and in fact is a sign of strength.

The Stalker seems to be weak, but essentially it is he who is invincible because of his faith and his will to serve others. Ultimately artists work at their professions not for the sake of telling someone about something, but as an assertion of their will to serve people. I am staggered by artists who assume that they freely create themselves, that it is actually possible to do so; for it is the lot of the artist to accept that he is created by his time and the people amongst whom he lives. As Pasternak put it:

*Keep awake, keep awake, artist,*
*Do not give in to sleep . . .
You are eternity’s hostage
And prisoner of time.*

And I’m convinced that if an artist succeeds in doing something, he does so only because that is what people need—even if they are not aware of it at the time. And so it’s always the audience who win, who gain something, while the artist loses, and has to pay out.

I cannot imagine my life being so free that I could do what I wanted; I have to do what seems most important and necessary at any given stage. And it’s only possible to communicate with the audience
if one ignores that eighty per cent of people who for some reason have
got it into their heads that we are supposed to entertain them. At the
same time we have ceased to respect that eighty per cent to such an
extent that we are prepared to entertain them, because we depend on
them for money and for our next production. A grim look-out!

However, to return to that minority audience who do still look for
real aesthetic impressions: that ideal audience in whom every artist
unconsciously puts his hope—they will only respond wholehearted-
ly to a picture when it expresses what the author has lived and
suffered. I respect them too much to want—or indeed to be
able—to deceive them: I trust in them, which is why I dare to tell of
what is most important and precious to me.

Van Gogh, who declared that 'duty is something absolute'; who
admitted, 'no acclaim could please me more than to have ordinary
working people wanting to hang my lithographs in their rooms or
their workshops'; who identified himself with Heerkomer's dictum:
'in every sense, art is made for you, the people'—would never have
thought of trying to please anyone in particular or make anyone like
him. He took his work too seriously, fully aware of its social import;
and saw his task as an artist as 'fighting' with all his strength, to the
last breath, with the material of life, in order to express that ideal
truth which lies hidden within it. That was how he saw his duty to his
people: his burden and his privilege. He wrote in his diary: 'When a
man expresses clearly what he wants to say, is that strictly speaking
not enough? When he is able to express his thoughts beautifully, I
won't argue that it's more pleasant to listen to him; but it doesn't add
much to the beauty of truth, which is beautiful in itself.'

Since art is an expression of aspirations and hopes it has an
immensely important part to play in the moral development of
society—or at any rate, that is what it is called to do; if it fails, it can
only mean that something is wrong with society. Art cannot be
given purely utilitarian and pragmatic objectives. A film based on
such premises cannot hold together as an artistic entity, for the
effect of cinema—or any other art—on the beholder is far deeper
and more complex than such terms allow. Art ennobles man by the
mere fact of its existence. It creates those intangible bonds which
draw mankind together into a community, and that moral atmos-
phere in which, as in a culture medium, art will once again
germinate and flourish. Otherwise it will degenerate into a wilding
like an apple-tree in an abandoned orchard. If art is not used
according to its vocation, it dies away, and that means that nobody
has any need of its existence.

In the course of my work I have noticed time and again, that if
the external emotional structure of a film is based on the author's
memory, when impressions of his personal life have been
transmuted into screen images, then the film will have the power to
move those who see it. But if a scene has been devised intellectually,
following the tenets of literature, then no matter how conscientious-
ly and convincingly it is done, it will still leave the audience cold. In
fact even though it may strike some people as interesting and
compelling when it first comes out, it will have no vital force and will
not stand the test of time.

In other words, since you can't use the audience's experience in
the way that literature does, allowing for an 'aesthetic assimilation' to
take place in the consciousness of each reader—in cinema this is
actually not feasible—you have to impart your own experience with
the greatest possible sincerity. Not that this is easy, you have to steel
yourself to do it! That is why even today, when all sorts of people,
many of them barely literate professionally, have the possibility of
making films, cinema can still only count a handful of masters in the
entire world.

I am radically opposed to the way Eisenstein used the frame to
codify intellectual formulae. My own method of conveying
experience to the audience is quite different. Of course it has to be
said that Eisenstein wasn't trying to convey his own experience to
anyone, he wanted to put across ideas, purely and simply; but for me
that sort of cinema is utterly inimical. Moreover Eisenstein's
montage dictum, as I see it, contradicts the very basis of the unique
process whereby a film affects an audience. It deprives the person
watching of that prerogative of film, which has to do with what
distinguishes its impact on his consciousness from that of literature
or philosophy: namely the opportunity to live through what is
happening on the screen as if it were his own life, to take over, as
deeply personal and his own, the experience imprinted in time upon
the screen, relating his own life to what is being shown.

Eisenstein makes thought into a despot: it leaves no air, nothing
of that unspoken elusiveness which is perhaps the most captivating
quality of all art, and which makes it possible for an individual to
relate to a film. I want to make films which carry no oratorical,
propagandist speech, but are the occasion for a deeply intimate
experience. Working in this direction, I am conscious of my responsibility to the cinema-goer, and I think that I can give him the unique and necessary experience for the sake of which he deliberately enters the darkened cinema.

Anyone who wants can look at my films as into a mirror, in which he will see himself. When the conception of a film is given forms that are life-like, and the concentration is on its affective function rather than on the intellectual formulae of poetic cinema (where the aim is manifestly to provide a vessel for ideas) then it is possible for the audience to relate to that conception in the light of individual experience.

I said earlier that personal bias must always be hidden: making a display of it may give a film immediate topical relevance, but its meaning will be confined to that passing usefulness. If it is to last, art has to draw deep on its own essence; only in this way will it fulfil that unique potential for affecting people which is surely its determining virtue and which has nothing to do with propaganda, journalism, commerce, philosophy or any other branch of knowledge or other social phenomena.

A phenomenon is recreated truthfully in a work of art through the attempt to rebuild the entire living structure of its inner connections. And not even in cinema does the artist have freedom of choice as he selects and combines facts from a lump of time—however thick or extensive that lump may be. His personality, of its own accord and of necessity, will influence both its selection and the process of giving artistic unity to what is selected.

Reality is conditioned by a great many causal connections, and the artist can only grasp some part of these. He is left with the ones he has succeeded in catching and reproducing, which are thus a manifestation of his individuality and uniqueness. Moreover, the more he aspires to a realistic account, the greater his responsibility for what he makes. Sincerity, truthfulness and clean hands are the virtues demanded of him.

The trouble (or perhaps it is the first cause of art?) is that nobody can reconstruct the whole truth in front of the camera. As applied to cinema, therefore, the term ‘naturalism’ can have no real meaning. (This does not prevent Soviet critics from using it as a term of abuse for shots which they see as unduly brutal: one of the principal charges made against Andrei Rublyov was that of ‘naturalism’, that is, of a deliberate aestheticisation of cruelty for its own sake.)

Naturalism is a critical term used for a specific trend of nineteenth-century European literature and associated principally with the name of Zola. However, it can never be more than a relative concept in art, because nothing can ever be reproduced totally naturalistically. It’s rubbish!

Each person tends to consider the world to be as he sees it and as he is conscious of it. But alas, it’s not! And things that exist ‘in themselves’ only come to have existence ‘for us’ in the course of our own experience; man’s need to know functions in this way, that is its meaning. People are limited in their capacity for knowing the world by the organs of the senses that nature has given them; and if, in the words of Nikolai Gumilyov, we were to ‘give birth’ to an ‘organ for a sixth sense’ then obviously the world would appear to us in its other dimensions. Every artist is thus limited in his perception, in his understanding of the inner connections of the world about him. It’s therefore meaningless to talk about naturalism in cinema as if phenomena could be recorded wholesale by the camera, irrespective of any artistic principles, so to speak in their ‘natural state’. This sort of naturalism cannot exist.

Often enough the critics simply avail themselves of the term as a theoretical, ‘objective’ excuse for questioning the artist’s right to observe facts that make the audience shudder with horror. This is labelled ‘a problem’ by the ‘protective’ lobby who feel it incumbent
upon them to ensure that everything is easy on the eye and the ear. But Dovzhenko and Eisenstein, who have been put onto pedestals, could both be accused of infringing the rules in this respect; so could any concentration-camp documentary that was uninhibited in its portrayal of human suffering and degradation.

When isolated episodes were taken out of context from Andrey Ruhlyov in order to accuse me of 'naturalism' (for instance the blinding scene and certain shots in the sack of Vladimir) I genuinely didn't understand the point of the accusation and I still don't. I'm not a drawing-room artist and it's not up to me to keep the public happy.

On the contrary: what I have to do is tell people the truth about our common existence as it appears to me in the light of my experience and understanding. That truth hardly promises to be easy or pleasant; and it is only by arriving at that truth that one can achieve a moral victory over it within oneself.

If, on the other hand, I were to lie in my art while claiming that it was faithful to reality; to falsify my own purpose behind the facade of a cinematic spectacle in itself apparently true to life and therefore convincing in its effect on the audience—then I should certainly deserve to be called to account . . .

It was no accident that at the beginning of this chapter I applied the word 'capital' to the responsibility borne by the cinema author. By pointing up the idea like that—even if the result is an exaggeration—I wanted to emphasise the fact that the most convincing of the arts demands a special responsibility on the part of those who work in it: the methods by which cinema affects audiences can be used far more easily and rapidly for their moral decomposition, for the destruction of their spiritual defences, than
the means of the old, traditional art forms. Actually providing spiritual weapons, of course, and directing people towards good, must always be difficult . . .

The director's task is to recreate life: its movement, its contradictions, its dynamic and conflicts. It is his duty to reveal every iota of the truth he has seen—even if not everyone finds that truth acceptable. Of course an artist can lose his way; but even his mistakes are interesting provided they are sincere, for they represent the reality of his inner life, of the peregrinations and struggle into which the external world has thrown him. (And does anyone ever possess the whole truth?) All debate about what may or may not be shown can only be a pedestrian and immoral attempt to distort the truth.

Dostoievsky said: They always say that art has to reflect life and all that. But it's nonsense: the writer (poet) himself creates life such as it has never quite been before him . . .

The artist's inspiration comes into being somewhere in the deepest recesses of his T. It cannot be dictated by external, business considerations. It is bound to be related to his psyche and his conscience; it springs from the totality of his world-view. If it is anything less, then it is doomed from the outset to be artistically void and sterile. It is perfectly possible to be a professional director or a professional writer and not to be an artist: merely a sort of executor of other people's ideas.

True artistic inspiration is always a torment for the artist, almost to the point of endangering his life. Its realisation is tantamount to a physical feat. That is the way it has always been, despite the popular misconception that pretty well all we do is tell stories that are as old as the world, appearing in front of the public like old grannies with scarves on our heads and our knitting in our hands to tell them all sorts of tales in order to keep them amused. The tale may be entertaining or enthralling, but will do only one thing for the audience: help them pass the time in idle chatter.

The artist has no right to an idea to which he is not socially committed, or the realisation of which could involve a dichotomy between his professional activity and the rest of his life. In our personal lives we perform actions, as honourable or dishonourable people. We accept that an honourable action may bring pressure down on us, or even bring us into conflict with our milieu. Why are we not prepared for the trouble that can ensue from our professional activities? Why are we afraid of being called to task when we embark on a film? Why do we start by taking out an insurance so that the picture will be as innocuous as it is meaningless? Is it not because we want to receive instant remuneration for our work in the form of cash and comfort? One can only be staggered by the hubris of modern artists if we compare them, say, to the humble builders of Chartres Cathedral whose names are not even known. The artist ought to be distinguished by selfless devotion to duty; but we forgot about that a long time ago.

Often people pay money in order to be given their little bit of entertainment by artists eager to oblige. Such eagerness, however, is based on indifference, for the artists cynically avail themselves of the spare time of honest people, of toilers, taking advantage of their gullibility and ignorance, of their lack of aesthetic education, in order to rob them spiritually and make money out of doing so. Activities of that kind are pretty unsavoury. An artist is only justified in his work when it is crucial to his way of life: not some incidental side-line, but the one mode of existence for his reproductive T.

Because of the often huge capital investment involved, cinema is uniquely aggressive and persistent in its methods of exacting the maximum return for a film. A picture is sold rather like standing crop, and this only goes to make our responsibility for our 'merchandise' the greater.

... I have always been amazed by Bresson: his concentration is extraordinary. Nothing incidental could ever creep in to his rigidly ascetic selection of means of expression; he could never toss off a picture. Serious, profound, noble, he is one of those masters whose every film becomes a fact of their spiritual existence. Apparently only in the final extremity of his own inner state will he be moved to make a film at all. And why?—who can tell . . .

In Bergman's Cries and Whispers there is one particularly powerful episode, perhaps the most important one in the film. Two sisters arrive in their father's house where their elder sister lies dying. The film develops out of the expectation of her death. Here, finding themselves alone together, they are suddenly and unexpectedly drawn together by their sisterly tie and by the longing for human contact; they talk and talk and talk . . . they cannot say all they want to . . . they caress each other . . . The scene creates a searing impression of human closeness . . . Fragile and longed for . . . And all the more so since in Bergman's film such moments are elusive and fleeting. For most of the film the sisters cannot be
Now summer is gone
And might never have been.
In the sunshine it’s warm.
But there has to be more.

It all came to pass,
All fell into my hands
Like a five-petalled leaf,
But there has to be more.

Nothing evil was lost,
Nothing good was in vain,
All ablaze with clear light
But there has to be more.

Life gathered me up
Safe under its wing.
My luck always held,
But there has to be more.

Not a leaf was burnt up
Not a twig ever snapped . . .
Clean as glass is the day,
But there has to be more.

Arseniy Tarkovsky
(Translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair)
reconciled, cannot forgive each other even in the face of death. They are full of hatred, ready to torture each other and themselves. When they are briefly united, Bergman dispenses with dialogue and has a Bach cello suite playing on a gramaphone; the impact of the scene is dramatically intensified, it becomes deeper, reaches out further. Of course this uplift, this flight into goodness, is patently a chimera—it is a dream of something that does not and cannot exist. It is what the human spirit seeks, what it yearns for; and that one moment allows a glimpse of harmony, of the ideal. But even this illusory flight gives the audience the possibility of catharsis, of spiritual cleansing and liberation.

I mention this because I want to underline my own belief that art must carry man's craving for the ideal, must be an expression of his reaching out towards it; that art must give man hope and faith. And the more hopeless the world in the artist's version, the more clearly perhaps must we see the ideal that stands in opposition to it—otherwise life would become impossible!

Art symbolises the meaning of our existence.

Why is it that the artist seeks to destroy the stability sought by society? Settembrini in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* says, 'I trust, engineer, that you have nothing against malice? I consider it to be reason's most brilliant weapon against darkness and ugliness. Malice, my dear sir, is the soul of criticism, and criticism—the source of progress and enlightenment.' The artist seeks to destroy the stability by which society lives, for the sake of drawing closer to the ideal. Society seeks stability, the artist—infinity. The artist is concerned with absolute truth, and therefore gazes ahead and sees things sooner than other people.

As for the results, we answer not for them but for choosing to fulfil or not to fulfil our duty. Such a starting-point lays on the artist the obligation to answer for his own fate. My own future is a cup that will not pass by me—consequently it must be drunk.

In all my films it seemed to me important to try to establish the links which connect people (other than those of the flesh), those links which connect me with humanity, and all of us with everything that surrounds us. I need to have a sense that I myself am in this world as a successor, that there is nothing accidental about my being here. Within each of us there must exist a scale of values. In *Mirror* I wanted to make people feel that Bach and Pergolesi and Pushkin's letter and the soldiers forcing the Sivash crossing, and also the intimate, domestic events—that all these things are in a sense equally important as human experience. In terms of a person's spiritual experience, what happened to him yesterday may have exactly the same degree of significance as what happened to humanity a thousand years ago . . .

In all my pictures the theme of roots was always of great importance: links with family house, childhood, country, Earth. I always felt it important to establish that I myself belong to a particular tradition, culture, circle of people or ideas.

Of great significance to me are those traditions in Russian culture which have their beginnings in the work of Dostoievsky. Their development in modern Russia is patently incomplete; in fact they tend to be looked down upon, or even ignored altogether. There are several reasons for this: first their total incompatibility with materialism, and then the fact that the spiritual crisis experienced by all Dostoievsky's characters (which was the inspiration of his work and that of his followers) is also viewed with misgiving. Why is this state of 'spiritual crisis' so feared in contemporary Russia?

I believe that it is always through spiritual crisis that healing occurs. A spiritual crisis is an attempt to find oneself, to acquire new faith. It is the apportioned lot of everyone whose objectives are on the spiritual plane. The soul yearns for harmony, and life is full of discordance. This dichotomy is the stimulus for movement, the source at once of our pain and of our hope: confirmation of our spiritual depths and potential.

This, too, is what *Stalker* is about: the hero goes through moments of despair when his faith is shaken; but every time he comes to a renewed sense of his vocation to serve people who have lost their hopes and illusions. I felt it was very important that the film observe the three unities of time, space and action. If in *Mirror* I was interested in having shots of newsreel, dream, reality, hope, hypothesis and reminiscence all succeeding one another in that welter of situations which confronts the hero with the ineluctable problems of existence, in *Stalker* I wanted there to be no time lapse between the shots. I wanted time and its passing to be revealed, to have their existence, within each frame; for the articulations between the shots to be the continuation of the action and nothing more, to involve no dislocation of time, not to function as a mechanism for selecting and dramatically organising the material— I wanted it to be as if the whole film had been made in a single shot.
Such a simple and ascetic approach seems to me to be rich in possibilities. I eliminated all I could from the script in order to have a minimum of external effects. As a matter of principle I wanted to avoid distracting or surprising the audience with unexpected changes of scene, with the geography of the action, with elaborate plot—I wanted the whole composition to be simple and muted.

More consistently than ever I was trying to make people believe that cinema as an instrument of art has its own possibilities which are equal to those of prose. I wanted to demonstrate how cinema is able to observe life, without interfering, crudely or obviously, with its continuity. For that is where I see the true poetic essence of cinema.

It occurred to me that excessive formal simplification could run the risk of appearing precious or mannered. In order to avoid that I tried to eliminate all touches of vagueness or innuendo in the shots—those elements that are regarded as the marks of 'poetic atmosphere'. That sort of atmosphere is always painstakingly built up; I was convinced of the validity of the opposite approach—I must not concern myself with atmosphere at all, for it is something that emerges from the central idea, from the author's realisation of his conception. And the more precisely the central idea is formulated, the more clearly the meaning of the action is defined for me, the more significant will be the atmosphere that is generated around it.

Everything will begin to reverberate in response to the dominant note: things, landscape, actors' intonation. It will all become interconnected and necessary. One thing will be echoed by another in a kind of general interchange: and an atmosphere will come into existence as a result of this concentration on what is most important. (The idea of creating atmosphere for its own sake seems to me strange. That, incidentally, is why I have never felt at home with the paintings of the Impressionists, who set out to imprint the moment—in art, but not an end.) It seems to me that in 

Stalker, where I tried to concentrate on what was most important, the atmosphere that came to exist as a result was more active and emotionally compelling than that of any of the films I had made previously.

What, then, is the main theme that had to sound through Stalker? In the most general terms, it is the theme of human dignity; and of how a man suffers if he has no self-respect.

Let me remind the reader that when the characters in the film set out on their journey into the Zone, their destination is a certain

From Alexander Pushkin's Letter to Pyotr Chaadayev

St Petersburg, 19 October 1836

... Of course the schism separated us from the rest of Europe and we took no part in any of the great events which stirred her; but we have had our own mission. It was Russia who contained the Mongol conquest within her vast expanses. The Tartars did not dare cross our western frontiers and so leave us in their rear. They retreated towards their deserts, and Christian civilisation was saved. To this end we were obliged to lead a completely separate existence which, while it left us Christian, also made us complete strangers in the Christian world, so that our martyrdom never impinged upon the energetic development of Catholic Europe. You say that the spring from which we drew our Christianity was impure, that Byzantium was despicable and despised, etc.—Ah, my friend, was Jesus Christ himself not born a Jew, and was Jerusalem not a laughing-stock among the nations? And are the Gospels any the less remarkable for that? We took the Gospels from the Greeks, and their traditions; not their puerile and contentious spirit. The mores of Byzantium were never those of Kiev. Until the time of Theophanes the Russian clergy were worthy of respect; they were never sullied by popish depravity, and would certainly never have provoked the Reformation at the very moment when mankind stood most in need of unity. I agree that our clergy today are backward. Do you want to know the reason why?—because they wear beards, that's all. They don't belong to good society. As for our historical significance, I can in no way share your view. The wars of Oleg and Sviatoslav, and even the wars of anpanage—were these not the signs of that very life of restless adventure, of raw, aimless activity, that marks the youth of every people? The Tartar invasion is a sad and impressive spectacle. The awakening of Russia, the emergence of her power, her progress towards unity (Russian unity, of course), the two Ivans, the sublime drama begun in Uglich and brought to completion in the Ipatiev Monastery—all this is surely history, and not some half-forgotten dream? And Peter the Great, who is a universal history in himself? And Catherine II, who brought Russia to the threshold of Europe? And Alexander, who led you to Paris? And—hand on heart—do you not discern something imposing in the present situation of Russia, something that will strike the future historian? Do you think he will put us outside Europe? Devoted though I am personally to the Emperor, I do not by any means admire all that I see around me; as a man of letters, I feel embittered; and as a man of prejudice, I am vexed;—but I swear to you that not for anything in the whole world would I change my country for another, nor have any history other than that of our ancestors, such as it has been given us by God...
How I love your eyes, my friend,
With their radiant play of fire,
When you lift them fleetingly
And like lightning in the skies
Your gaze sweeps swiftly round.

But there is charm more powerful still
In eyes downward cast
For the moment of a passionate kiss,
When through lowered eyelids glows
The sombre, dull flame of desire.

Fyodor Tyuchev, 1805-1873.
(Translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair)
room in which, we are told, everybody’s most secret wish will be granted. And while the Writer and the Scientist, led by Stalker, are making their hazardous way over the strange expanse of the Zone, their guide tells them at one point either a true story, or else a legend, about another Stalker, nicknamed Diko-obraz. He had gone to the secret place in order to ask for his brother, who had been killed through his fault, to be brought back to life. When Diko-obraz returned home, however, he discovered that he had become fabulously wealthy. The Zone had granted what was in reality his most heartfelt desire, and not the wish that he had wanted to convince himself was most precious to him. And Diko-obraz had hanged himself.

And so the two men reach their objective. They have been through a great deal, thought about themselves, reassessed themselves; and they haven’t the courage to step across the threshold into the room which they have risked their lives to reach. They have become conscious that at the tragic, deepest level of awareness they are imperfect. They had summoned the strength to look into themselves—and had been horrified; but in the end they lack the spiritual courage to believe in themselves.

The arrival of Stalker’s wife in the cafe where they are resting confronts the Writer and the Scientist with a puzzling, to them incomprehensible, phenomenon. There before them is a woman who has been through untold miseries because of her husband, and has had a sick child by him; but she continues to love him with the same selfless, unthinking devotion as in her youth. Her love and her devotion are that final miracle which can be set against the unbelief, cynicism, moral vacuum poisoning the modern world, of which both the Writer and the Scientist are victims.

Perhaps it was in Stalker that I felt for the first time the need to indicate clearly and unequivocally the supreme value by which, as they say, man lives.

. . . Solaris had been about people lost in the Cosmos and obliged, whether they liked it or not, to take one more step up the ladder of knowledge. Man’s unending quest for knowledge, given him gratuitously, is a source of great tension, for it brings with it constant anxiety, hardship, grief and disappointment, as the final truth can never be known. Moreover, man has been given a conscience which means that he is tormented when his actions infringe the moral law, and in that sense even conscience involves an element of tragedy. The characters in Solaris were dogged by disappointments, and the way out we offered them was illusory enough. It lay in dreams, in the opportunity to recognise their own roots—those roots which for ever link man to the Earth which bore him. But even those links had already become unreal for them.

Even in Mirror, which is about deep, eternal, abiding human feelings, these feelings were a source of bewilderment and incomprehension for the hero, who could not grasp why he was condemned to suffer perpetually because of them, to suffer because of his own love and affection. In Stalker I make some sort of complete statement: namely that human love alone is—miraculously—proof against the blunt assertion that there is no hope for the world. This is our common, and incontrovertibly positive possession. Although we no longer quite know how to love. . . .

The Writer in Stalker reflects on the frustration of living in a world of necessities, where even chance is the result of some necessity which for the moment remains beyond our ken. Perhaps the Writer sets out for the Zone in order to encounter the Unknown, in order to be astonished and startled by it. In the end, however, it is simply a woman who startles him by her faithfulness and by the strength of her human dignity. Is everything subject to logic, then, and can it all be separated into its components and tabulated?

In this film I wanted to mark out that essentially human thing that cannot be dissolved or broken down, that forms like a crystal in the soul of each of us and constitutes its great worth. And even though outwardly their journey seems to end in fiasco, in fact each of the protagonists acquires something of inestimable value: faith. He becomes aware in himself of what is most important of all; and that most important thing is alive in every person.

I was no more interested, therefore, in the fantastic plot of Stalker than I had been in the story-line of Solaris. Unfortunately the science fiction element in Solaris was nonetheless too prominent and became a distraction. The rockets and space stations—required by Lem’s novel—were interesting to construct; but it seems to me now that the idea of the film would have stood out more vividly and boldly if we had managed to dispense with these things altogether. I think that the reality to which an artist is drawn as a means of saying what he has to about the world, must—if you will forgive the tautology—be real in itself: in other words understood by a person, familiar to him since his childhood. And the more real a film is in
that sense, the more convincing will be the author's statement.

In Stalker only the basic situation could strictly be called fantastic. It was convenient because it helped to delineate the central moral conflict of the film more starkly. But in terms of what actually happens to the characters, there is no element of fantasy. The film was intended to make the audience feel that it was all happening here and now, that the Zone is there beside us.

People have often asked me what the Zone is, and what it symbolises, and have put forward wild conjectures on the subject. I'm reduced to a state of fury and despair by such questions. The Zone doesn't symbolise anything, any more than anything else does in my films: the zone is a zone, it's life, and as he makes his way across it a man may break down or he may come through. Whether he comes through or not depends on his own self-respect, and his capacity to distinguish between what matters and what is merely passing.

I see it as my duty to stimulate reflection on what is essentially human and eternal in each individual soul, and which all too often a person will pass by, even though his fate lies in his hands. He is too busy chasing after phantoms. In the end everything can be reduced to the one simple element which is all a person can count upon in his existence: the capacity to love. That element can grow within the soul to become the supreme factor which determines the meaning of a person's life. My function is to make whoever sees my films aware of his need to love and to give his love, and aware that beauty is summoning him.