The Dialectic between Onscreen and Offscreen Spaces in Andrei Tarkovsky's Films

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Abstract
Two of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's works, namely, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966), are both set in the background of battles and turbulent periods in Russia. Instead of the traditional discourse on war heroes, Tarkovsky examines an individual's internality with a humanistic perspective. When there is violence, suffering becomes unavoidable. Tarkovsky believes that a certain force within a human being supports him/her consistently to restore the belief in the world and recognize that life is a journey to seek meanings. This work argues that Tarkovsky uses three methods to approach the significances: (1) using the offscreen space to progress the narrative; (2) using the collapse of diegetic space to interpret the indifference between outside surroundings and inner psyche; (3) condensing one's life-long sufferings and experiences into images of figures and faces. The three methods, which not only enhance the dramatic aspect of film but also reveal the individual's unspoken dilemmas and sufferings, are Tarkovsky's specific approaches.

Keywords: Andrei Tarkovsky, Ivan's Childhood, Andrei Rublev, onscreen and offscreen spaces, diegetic space

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Introduction

This work discusses Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's two major films, namely, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966). Both films are set in the turbulent periods in Russia. However, Tarkovsky is interested not in the military honors but in the characters' inner reality and their unspoken dilemmas. In *Ivan's Childhood*, the young boy loses out on the "bright and natural world of childhood"[1] and faces the inevitable tragedy of the horrors of war. As Sartre wrote to his friend, "*Ivan's Childhood* reminded us…not that these proud and tough pioneers died but that, on the contrary, their childhood had been shattered by the war and its consequences."[2] *Andrei Rublev* tells the story of Russian medieval icon painter Rublev and his experiences during the Tartar invasion of Russia. Despite Rublev being a painter by profession, Tarkovsky makes no attempt to depict how Rublev worked or any of his sketches. Instead, the most artistic aspect for Tarkovsky is Rublev's inner state. Rublev is undoubtedly a gifted artist. However, from Tarkovsky's perspective, Rublev is a world historical artist not for his skills as an artist but because he has been through "the circle of suffering"[3] and experienced faith, love, and brotherhood after emerging from it. When Rublev and his colleagues leave the monastery, Rublev realizes that he has limited knowledge of life outside the walls of the monastery and encounters the reality of the faithlessness of the medieval period, and then is appalled by such reality. Rublev confronts life with faith; despite going through faithlessness, he regains his faith eventually, which is the theme of the film. Thus, these two films are neither propaganda nor an agitation for an ideal nation. Tarkovsky's style is more concerned about an individual's psychic state and inner growth, stemming from his belief in a higher humanity within human beings.

Tarkovsky grows up in the Soviet Union. However, his concerns are related to an individual's inner aspects instead of the Communist collectivization. Tarkovsky was fortunate to have studied at the film school Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) between 1954 and 1961 after the death of Stalin in 1953. In contrast to Stalin's severe repressive regime, his successor Nikita Khrushchev initiated a political and cultural "Thaw," which allowed a limited foreign art films to the Soviet and provided a humanistic ground for Tarkovsky and his contemporary Soviet directors. Despite the openness of the Thaw, Tarkovsky's images are exceptionally unusual even from a present-day perspective. His films are unique owing to his not only humanistic way of storytelling but also outstanding film skills. Tarkovsky follows the early Soviet director Alexander Dovzhenko's idea, particularly on the use of offscreen space; however, Tarkovsky depicts more profound dialectics among the multi-spaces. This analysis is based on the use of screen space. On the one hand, Tarkovsky is aware of the power of offscreen space, which shows how he enhances the dramatic elements during the progression of narrative. On the other hand, since the two films are related to wars, the analysis represents how Tarkovsky rejects the traditional narrative of war films and touches on morality, spirituality, and humanity.

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[1] Turovskaya 1989: 32.
[2] Sartre 1963.
[3] Tarkovsky 2012: 90.

The Two Spaces, Onscreen and Offscreen[4]

The offscreen space indicates two kinds of meanings. First, the fundamental film skill that reminds the audience of the hidden physical space lying outside of the frame. Tarkovsky mentioned the scene of murder in Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), where the character is shot and killed by the Kulak, to show the dialectic between onscreen and offscreen spaces. Given its attribution of silent film and the required image of sounds of gunshot, Dovzhenko's camera captures the nearby horse raising its head and then goes back to the character who falls down on the ground. For the audience, the raised head of the horse represents the gunshot ringing out. [5] In this way, Dovzhenko creates the offscreen dramatic intensity through the horse's action. The audience can immediately imagine the offscreen space where the character is attacked. As Tarkovsky's noted, Dovzhenko invented a brilliant shots of intercutting in the silent cinema.

Second, for those considerate directors, the harnessing of onscreen and offscreen spaces is to disclose the hidden truth. As a continuation of the discussion on *Earth*, the film narrative is based on two deaths: the natural death of the grandfather and the political death of the grandson. For Dovzhenko, the significance of revolution is to not only glorify the political triumph but also represent its unavoidable suffering and deaths of individuals. Gilberto Perez noticed that Dovzhenko focuses on "the spatial fragmentation"[6] and integrates "plenty of close-ups"[7] into a symbolic relation. Instead of simply emphasizing the details, Dovzhenko's close-ups ask the audience "to keep something else in mind while we look at the detail."[8] These discontinuous close-ups are linked by their "inner arrangement"[9] and united in agreement toward the other new world. The ideal new world for Dovzhenko is never represented onscreen and similar to the last shot in *Earth*. When members of the crowd raise their heads and look up to the sky, their action suggests that an airplane is flying above their head at that moment. Although the airplane symbolizes the new world, Dovzhenko retains the airplane and its related new world in the offscreen space; they never appear onscreen, showing the early Soviet belief that the new world is nearly coming but has not yet arrived. Dovzhenko assembled the onscreen and offscreen spaces successfully through the heads of characters twisting from the visual perception to the symbolic level. Burch similarly pointed out: "any film…employs movements into and out of frame; any film…suggests an opposition between screen space and offscreen space through the use of such devices as offscreen glances, the shot and the reverse shot, partially out-of-frame actors, and so on. Yet…only very few directors (the greatest ones) have used this implicit dialectic as an explicit means of structuring a whole film."[10] Dovzhenko, considered one of the greatest directors and greatly admired by

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[4] Burch, in his *Theory of Film Practice*, discussed Renoir's *Nana* (1926) and proposed the disposition between onscreen and offscreen spaces as the Two Kinds of Space. This work borrows Burch's term to describe the possibilities of screen space.

[5] Tarkovsky 2012: 70. In this murder scene, there is only one startled horse nearby, but Tarkovsky mentioned the plurality of horses, which may be a false impression on his part. However, what Tarkovsky depicts in the series of action in this murder scene is truthful to Dovzhenko's images.

[6] Perez 1998: 167, 172.

[7] Perez 1998: 168.

[8] Perez 1998: 168.

[9] Perez 1998: 176.

[10] Burch 1981: 23–24.

Tarkovsky, is aware particularly of the function of offscreen space.

In Tarkovsky's images, numerous cases indicate the use of offscreen space. For him, the treatment of offscreen space is a film skill to intensify drama. In Ivan's flying sequence of *Ivan's Childhood*, the camera captures a close-up shot of Ivan's face and his shoulders in which most of Ivan's body is out of the screen. When the camera captures only the character's face, the audience can easily imagine the rest of his body and the possible flying vehicle (or no vehicle) that complements the offscreen space. The audience believes that either the rest of the body or the flying vehicle is only unseen at that moment. Ivan's flying is a fragment of one of his dreams. When Ivan wakes up in the battlefront, the joyful flying he has experienced in his dreams and the cruel scene of the war in front of him highlight a vivid contrast. In the offscreen space of the flying scene, the invisible force contains not only the flying vehicle but also the motive of flying, which could be Ivan's internality or the reality of Ivan's surrounding world. The hidden reality is that Ivan is a twelve-year-old boy who confronts the brutality of war; only in his dreams can he recall his lost childhood.

This method used by Tarkovsky to conceal partially the film imagery to reveal the hidden truth is similar to one of the final scenes in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). In the scene where the Stalker and his family are walking alongside a river and his disabled daughter is placed on his shoulders, the daughter is first shot at a close distance, leaving the Stalker in the offscreen space. At first glance, the audience cannot understand how the daughter is able to move forward as if she moves independently. When the camera slowly draws back and frames the entire landscape including how the Stalker carries his daughter on his shoulders, the truth is revealed finally. Tarkovsky could have established a full-scale shot directly at the beginning of the scene, but he did not so that the audience has to think through the limited film imagery for nearly a minute before knowing the answer.

On cinematic images, even when the camera offers a bird's eye view of the landscape, the shot is still only one aspect of the world. In other words, as Merleau-Ponty observed, "a painter…knows from experience that no technique of perspective provides an exact solution, and that there is no projection of the existing world which respects it in all aspects."[11] According to Merleau-Ponty, when significance is implied by the limits of perspective or the offscreen space, meanings flow between the seen and unseen spaces. The film's hidden message is in favor of the invisible force over all.

In Tarkovsky's images, the truth is concealed by the false perception, and unconcealed by re-framing or re-establishing a larger landscape to bring the offscreen space to screen. The audience's awareness has been rendered through the series of dialectic shots, although it does not mean that the false perception is unnecessary. As a result of the earlier false perception, the subsequent camera movement can modify the perception in a certain way where the truth is revealed and the significance is accumulating in the scenes.

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[11] Merleau-Ponty 1964: 174.

The Collapse of Diegetic Space

In considering the spatial structures, Tarkovsky further collapses the spaces, showing one's exterior surroundings and inner psyche are both destroyed by the war. In *Ivan's Childhood,* the scene of Ivan and the old man is an example of the use of offscreen to express an individual's internal situation. When Ivan walks alone to a destroyed village, he comes to an old man's house. At the beginning of the scene, the camera captures skillfully the wooden door along with the screen frame. Not until the old man's invitation, the camera follows Ivan's steps into the house. Suddenly, the audience realizes that the door is nothing but simply a piece of segment for the old man to distinguish the house's exterior and interior. The protected walls and the covered roof are demolished as a result of the war. What the old man considers as his "home" has only one roaster, the abovementioned wood door, one stove, and a tomb-like chimney. Skakov[12] discussed this scene and proposed that the old man's broken house is "any-space-whatever" according to Deleuze's term. In the postwar period, there were many abandoned warehouses, desolate fields, and dismal spaces and cities that were either left dilapidated or under reconstruction. The severity of the war caused people to be incapable of responding to and describing the situation.[13] People become passive "seers,"[14] who were depressed upon learning of the situation. As Skakov noted, "Ivan and the old man both try to escape the present spatial desolation through leaps to another time."[15] The improbable time leaping only happens in a "dream or hallucination",[16] where characters can leave the miserable world temporally.

The intention in the scene above is similar to that in the sequence of the conversation between Rublev and his master, the Greek Theophanes in *Andrei Rublev.* In the sequence, Rublev and the surviving villagers are gathered in the church after Tartar's invasion, and Theophanes appears as a ghost talking with Rublev. In the film, Theophanes and Rublev have two significant talks. The first occurs as the two debate on the purpose of icon paintings. Theophanes mentions passively that today's people praise the icon paintings, but then destroy them tomorrow. Theophanes thinks his paintings are serving God and not the people. However, Rublev has an opposite point of view. Rublev believes that the icon painters should not be disappointed with people and regards Jesus's sacrifice on the Cross for people as a significant event. The second occurs after Tartar's invasion of the village when Rublev changes his opinion and recognizes Theophanes's viewpoint as correct. Rublev becomes unwilling to paint since he has come to believe that his paintings can not bring any peace to people. Theophanes regrets his earlier words and reminds Rublev of an artist's mission, that is, he/she should not lose his/her passion only as a result of destroyed works. Theophanes mentions that although many of his paintings are burned, destroyed, or disappeared, it does not disrupt his belief. At the end of that scene, both Theophanes and Rublev raise their heads as the beginning of this scene shows that the church is broken and its inside starts snowing. The exterior and interior spaces are linked as one space.

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[12] Skakov 2012: 27.
[13] Deleuze 1989: xi, 5.
[14] Deleuze 1989: xi.
[15] Skakov 2012: 27.
[16] Skakov 2012: 27.

In this scene, Tarkovsky copes with the complicated concepts of spaces, including onscreen and offscreen, dream and reality, and virtuality and actuality, among others. When the dead Theophanes appears as a ghost onscreen, the church turns to the co-existence space of virtuality and actuality; this scene is close to Deleuze's concept of a "crystal image." That is to say, the ghost of Theophanes represents Rublev's dream or hallucination. However, Tarkovsky does not provide any clue immediately before or after the scene to indicate that the ghost is Rublev's hallucination. The audience can only assume that the scene is improbably real as it is Theophanes's ghost onscreen; the scene is also not absolutely virtual. Nevertheless, Rublev, the holy fool, the surviving villagers and their temporal inhabitations are depicted accurately to exhibit unfortunate situations. The church becomes a crystal space, and the dream and the reality constitute "the smallest internal circuit."[17] The two aspects, the virtual and the actual, shift continuously one after the other. Between the two distinct sides, the boundary is vague and always in the "indiscernibility."[18] The gentle snowfall inside the church suggests that the church's roof is broken and loses its function as a protection and shelter of people and their souls. The diegetic state of church is similar to the old man's house in *Ivan's Childhood*. The severely damaged spaces manifest the cruelty of war and the inability of people to respond to the violence. People's worldviews are replaced literally by the discontinuous consciousness through the fragments of the ruins and wreck or the pieces of trivialities. The actual aspect of the present and the virtual aspect of the past and the future meet at the point of indiscernibility. The result is between the actual and the virtual, the dream and the reality; such result produces a new mode of image. The two sides are neither hierarchy nor suppression, but in a relation "as reciprocal presupposition, or reversibility."[19]

Tarkovsky is well-known for his functionless houses. Aside from the old man's house and the church discussed above, his following works also include many damaged and aberrant houses, which constitute "the crystal space" in a certain way. For instance, the leaking house at the final scene of *Solaris* (1972); the collapsed house and the leaky roof while the young mother is washing her hair in *Mirror* (1975); and Domenico's leaking house in *Nostalghia* (1983). In the same respect, the functionless houses does not only create a difference between outside and inside but also reflect the diversity in the characters' internality. These characters no longer have the chance to return to their earlier lives, but they also realize that the diverse states within them are the new wholeness. They are fated to face life's challenges.

Thus, the ruins in *Ivan's Childhood, Andrei Rublev, Solaris, Mirror*, and *Nostalghia* not only reflect the unspoken diversity and distorted temporality within the characters but also represent the significances of "the crystal space." The two separated sides in Tarkovsky's images are united at the point of crystal, but the frontier between the two sides is indiscernible or undefined.

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[17] Deleuze 1989: 70.
[18] Deleuze 1989: 71.
[19] Deleuze 1989: 69.

Body, Face and the Essence of Space

Ivan's Childhood and *Andrei Rublev* both depict the characters as having been through great sufferings caused by the violence of war. Tarkovsky not only focuses on the ruins to reflect the characters' unspoken dilemma as discussed above but also uses the images of characters' bodies or faces to reveal their inner psych. Bazin regarded a character's face as a kind of spatial space onscreen. For him, the essence of space is not given by a full landscape but the partial human body being framed in close-up shots, such as the eyes, tears, sweat, wrinkles, hair, and mole or spots on the face. These details "hold…the reconversion into a window onto the world of a space oriented toward an interior dimension only."[20]

In *Ivan's Childhood*, Tarkovsky captures plenty of close-up shots of Ivan's face to express the different degree of emotions, such as Ivan's happiness in the nostalgic dream and Ivan's strong agitation toward the young Russian's revenge message while in the bunker. However, the most impressive image of a shot is Ivan's extremely thin figure. At the beginning of the film, as Ivan takes off his clothes and prepares for a bath, the extremely thin figure is framed in the shot, making the audience aware of the crudity of war.[21] In another scene of the buffoon and peasants gathering in the barn in *Andrei Rublev*, the camera not only follows the buffoon along a 360-degree track but also captures the peasants' faces while the camera moves. From the camera movement, the audience can read the peasants' facial expressions, which show their sufferings and hopelessness amid the immorality of the medieval period.

Tarkovsky uses the images of faces and figures to represent the reality as visible. Moreover, for Tarkovsky, the divine is visible within people's surrounding world. Put in another way, the divine in Tarkovsky's image is neither separated from offscreen nor given a gold ring above the character's head as the cliché symbol of blissful tidings. In *Andrei Rublev*, Tarkovsky first tells the audience of Rublev's interaction with others and his surroundings, and then depicts the beauty of Rublev's icon paintings. Thus, as seen in Rublev's paintings at the final scene of the film, the saint is neither the Oneness nor the Son of God but as "a man who knows and suffers deeply, who has experienced life in all its richness and vicissitudes."[22] Tarkovsky uses the images of figures and faces, such as Ivan's thin figure, the peasants' faces and the saints' faces with Rublev's vision, as "windows"[23] toward the characters' internality. In a certain degree, the facial and figure expressions are the parts of the camera's movement, but the details of figure and face reveal the essence of man's life and emerge the filmic substance toward the audience.

Tarkovsky condenses one's lifespan sufferings and experiences into the images of figures and faces. Since these images lack the shot and its reverse shot, they do not belong to any subject's perspective or objective, but they go beyond the two sides,

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[20] Bazin 2005: 111.

[21] According to Nikolai Burlyaev, the actor who portrayed the character of Ivan, he remembers during the days of shooting *Ivan's Childhood* that Tarkovsky once pleaded to Burlyaev's mother to not give the young Burlyaev too much food, as he has to be like "a boy from a concentration camp." See Burlyaev 1990: 74.

[22] Sen 1994: 108.

[23] Bazin 2005: 111.

which is a specific perspective, "a pure Form which sets itself up as an autonomous vision of the content,"[24] the same as what Deleuze suggested. Tarkovsky uses the images of figures and faces skillfully to discourse the essence, the actual aspect of man's life. Meanwhile, the divine, spiritualty, humanity, reality, and truth are mostly concealed by lie, forger or any other falsity as the real world does. Thus, for Tarkovsky, the action of revealing is important. Only with the unconcealment, the reality, humanity, and spiritualty are no longer hidden from the audience's sight, and represent themselves in an intimate relationship in a certain degree.

Conclusion

This work attempts to analyze onscreen and offscreen spaces in Tarkovsky's images, and focuses on the relation between space and its meanings. Tarkovsky has been inspired by the early Soviet director, such as Dovzhenko, who he admires. Dovzhenko uses the offscreen space to progress the narrative. Tarkovsky bases his skill on the use of the power of offscreen and further investigates the multi-spatial concepts. For Tarkovsky, the two films not only accuse the brutality of battle but, more importantly, represent the inherent willing within human, which could consistently search for the value of being. From here, one can also tell the difference between Dovzhenko and Tarkovsky. Dovzhenko's ideal new world is located offscreen, an unseen space; whereas the essence of life that Tarkovsky aims to reveal is nowhere but within the characters and is onscreen. For Tarkovsky, the truth is connected to offscreen space as its status is used to be concealed by the false perception. The truth in the film, similar to the real world, needs time to disclose it literally.

Although this work discusses the visual disposition of image, it does not attempt to watch Tarkovsky's images as silent film. After all, Tarkovsky deals with sound films, for example, the sounds is an important element in *Andrei Rublev*. Rublev uses the power of silent vow. During the Tartar invasion, Rublev kills a soldier who is attacking an innocent, mute girl. Since then, Rublev stops painting and vows to silence. It is not clear whether Rublev's silence is a meaningful redemption or a passive objection to the world. However, almost at the last scene in the film, Boris, the son of a bell-maker, tells the Prince's soldiers that he is the only person who knows the secret of bell casting, although in fact he does not know how to do it. Since Boris's father is dead in the plague and a rampage of death pervades the village, Boris is the only survivor in his family. He volunteers to do it himself at first only to escape from the plague. However, he casts the bell successfully, and he begins to sob on the ground in relief on completing his task. Rublev finds and comforts him. Rublev starts speaking again, and encourages Boris to work with him, saying that Boris will cast bells and Rublev will start painting icons again. Through the action of silence, Rublev is seeking self-redemption not only for his guilt but also for doubting the existence of God. From normal speech to vowing to silence and speaking again, Rublev's silence is related to "spoken" action. When Rublev re-speaks after the long silence and is ready to paint again, it indicates a meaningful action that re-links one to the world. Meanwhile, Rublev's silent vow is compared to the chaos in his medieval time.

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[24] Deleuze 1986: 74.

As the above discussion, these multi-spaces, such as onscreen and offscreen, virtuality and actuality, dream and reality, are no longer separated but are mutual to each other as a crystal space. Tarkovsky uses the collapse of diegetic space as a signifier to indicate the character's surrounding world and destroyed inner psyche. In *Ivan's Childhood*, the film tells the story of a young boy who loses his childhood as a result of the war. In *Andrei Rublev,* Tarkovsky depicts a message of how an individual confronts a dilemma and regains faith, which has been lost earlier. The offscreen space does not distract from the meaning of the narrative. Rather, the unseen, uncertainty of offscreen space makes the films more dynamic and reveals the characters' inner reality or unspoken dilemmas; this is typical of Tarkovsky's film skills. Thus, the two films not merely portray the crudity of war but also invite the audience to think the significances of life through the characters' sufferings, finding faith in passion, and recognizing that life is a journey to seek meanings.

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