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Philippe Bornet

Book Review

Jean-Luc Maroy, **LE SACRIFICE d'Andrei Tarkovski: une parabole sur le temps de la fin**

Paris: L'Harmattan 2017, 472 pp., ISBN: 978-2-8061-0350-5

This detailed study of Andrei Tarkovsky's *THE SACRIFICE* (SE/GB/FR 1986) is a revised version of a doctoral thesis in Catholic practical theology defended at the University of Louvain. It is structured around three main parts: an introduction to Tarkovsky's cinematographic practices, an analysis of various scenes of *THE SACRIFICE*, and a theological comment on major themes.

In the first part (19–104), “l'esthétique tarkovskienne”, Jean-Luc Maroy situates *THE SACRIFICE* within the director's entire oeuvre. Referring to Tarkovsky's own assessment of his work, his autobiographical essay *Sculpting in Time*,¹ Maroy emphasizes that art, for Tarkovsky, is an evocative or symbolic way to suggest a sense of a “real truth” or of the absolute. According to Maroy, Tarkovsky considers art as an expedient to evoke deeper levels of reflection, to raise spiritual questions, and, more specifically given the context of the 20th century, to counter the western culture of materialism and consumption. Nature and landscape are revalorized as a “sacred mystery”, a mystery that has been forgotten by the majority of people in modern times. As Maroy convincingly shows, these intentions run through most of Tarkovsky's eclectic production, from *SOLARIS* (SU 1972) to *STALKER* (SU 1979) and *THE SACRIFICE*. Aiming at awakening a critical reflection among his putative watchers, Tarkovsky's filmmaking is then the exact opposite of Soviet cinema, in which the images and the ideological message they were supposed to convey were under strict control. The audience, however, was not always as open to being questioned, resulting in a mixed reception. Similarly, the “spiritual” element has often escaped the attention of both the general public and critics, so that, as the author legitimately claims, the present work can be considered as filling a research desideratum.

This first part provides an excellent summary of Tarkovsky's aesthetics and proves to be particularly valuable for the rest of the analysis. Two questions could be further developed. The first concerns Tarkovsky's own complicated re-

1 Tarkovsky 1986.

lation to religion. As noted in the third part (363–364), despite identifying as an Orthodox Christian, the director never entirely embraced this identity and, like many of his contemporaries, seems to have been skeptical about the institutional (or normative) aspect of religion. This raises the question of how this ambiguous relation did (or did not) impact the representation of religious themes in his work – a question which is tackled by the author but which could be drawn out further, although it might very well be that sources to reconstruct this are simply missing. A second point is whether Tarkovsky’s appreciation of his own work should always be taken at face value, especially since his autobiographical book is a late retrospective reconstruction of his career. But again, external sources might be scarce.

The study of religious or spiritual aspects in *THE SACRIFICE* is an important part of the second part (105–337), “analyse et interprétation”, which begins with the history of the film’s genesis. The film is convincingly presented as closely entangled with the director’s own life: as the main protagonist, Alexander, Tarkovsky himself can be seen as devoting his life to raising a certain awareness about materialism, the lack of spirituality among his contemporaries, or the ecological peril (133). As such, the director could appear as a kind of prophet in the apocalyptic zeitgeist of the cold war and its nuclear threats – incidentally, the film’s first projection in April 1986 coincided with the Tchernobyl disaster (128–129).

There follows a detailed and systematic analysis of the film with a focus on “spiritual” themes. Underlining the arbitrary character of a clear-cut division of shots and sequences – something particularly true for a film which precisely aims at breaking away from pre-established structures – the author suggests a well-thought subdivision into 121 shots and 15 sequences (138). This subdivision is centered around three temporal elements: (1) the time before the catastrophe (sequences 1 to 4), (2) the catastrophe itself, the consequences of a nuclear war, the promise made by Alexander to God to sacrifice himself if time is reversed, and the recourse to “faith” as the only way out (sequences 5 to 12), and (3) the revelation that time was actually reversed in exchange for Alexander’s fulfillment of his promise to burn his house and to remain silent for the rest of his life (sequences 13–15). The author proceeds then to analyze the soundtrack: music, noises from nature, and noises produced by humans. Maroy shows that sounds are particularly crucial here as they are often associated with the evocation of a “spiritual world” or with symbolical meanings – in particular, Bach’s aria from the St. Matthew Passion “*Erbarme dich*”, suggesting the mood of bitter regret that is central to the film. The next section is devoted to a close analysis of each of the 156 shots (188–272), a difficult task but successfully carried out. Here, particular attention is paid to the composition of scenes, to the movement of actors and the camera, and to the soundtrack, with interesting comparisons between scenes and many insightful interpretations. The last

sequence of the film – the little boy carrying buckets, walking on the seaside and watering a tree – receives special attention (263–271) because it involves a rich set of questions about aspects that are central to the study: the relation between Alexander and his son, which can metaphorically relate to the relation between God and his son, Jesus; the expectation that the boy will continue caring about the tree even without immediate results, evoking the centrality of belief; or the boy’s enigmatic question, “Why is that, Papa?”, resounding as an existential interrogation about the world and the position of mankind itself.

The ensuing analysis (272–337) focuses on several major recurring themes studied transversally and comparatively: for example, the protagonists’ sleep and dreams, time’s reversibility, silence and mystery, love and sacrifice expressed and manifested by the protagonists, and insanity (in relation to the figure of Alexander). The last part of this long chapter is a discussion of several episodes that can convey divergent meanings. Among many thought-provoking points (such as whether there was a “real” nuclear disaster or not, or whether time was actually reversed by Alexander’s “sacrifice”), the interesting question is raised of whether the world has actually been “saved” because of Alexander’s prayer and sacrifice (through God’s grace) or because of Maria’s – presented as a “witch” – supernatural intervention (323–324). Judiciously, while exploring thoroughly the different hermeneutic options and their implications, the author does not offer any definitive interpretation.

The third part (339–426), “enjeux théologiques”, takes the film as inspiration to explore various theological issues specific to the second half of the 20th century, relating to themes such as images, eschatology, apocalypse, and sacrifice. Here, the goal is not to analyze or explain the film but to reflect on broader questions arising from the film at the intersection of cinema and theology. The author offers elaborate theological discussions, for example on love and reason (409–415), that can certainly be of interest for someone specializing in (practical) theology.

The whole study is extremely detailed and provides a solid guide to the interpretation of religious or spiritual themes in *THE SACRIFICE* and in Tarkovksy’s work more generally. One aspect might deserve further research (maybe in a follow-up study): while a Christian hermeneutic framework is largely justified by numerous explicit references to Christian symbols, one might wonder if, at times, this is not too narrow. There are indeed a number of possible non-Christian sources of inspiration for elements that can be characterized as “spiritual” – a crucial notion that deserves a more precise contextualization, and sooner (in the introduction) rather than later (362–366). As the author notes, there are Japanese themes running throughout the movie (the tree, the Japanese flute in the soundtrack etc.). They can be an invitation to analyze them not only as foreign cultural traits but also as allusions to Zen Buddhist (the idea of

renunciation, the monastic ideal) and Taoist notions (explicitly suggested by the yin-yang print on Alexander's robe in the last scenes, and a possible echo to the ecological concern that pervades the film), at least as imagined by a Russian director working in the second part of the 20th century. In addition, there would be ample space to develop a discussion about how the film might (or might not) reflect non-institutional and alternative forms of religion, such as Theosophy or Anthroposophy (the criticism of western materialism, the notion of a soteriological quest). In any case, *THE SACRIFICE* is both marked by an impressive number of discrete influences and lends itself to various interpretations. It can and probably should be considered a “myth” for modern times, questioning existential matters in a time of crisis.

On a more formal note, I would like to underline the quality of expression and the careful editing. However, even if it is evident that the reader is meant to watch the film while reading the book, the reproduction of a few film stills related to major scenes would have been particularly welcome. Similarly, since this is a dense work, dealing with a great variety of topics, a thematic index would have been a useful addition.

These minor reservations notwithstanding, the present volume offers a rich and detailed analysis of *THE SACRIFICE* as well as a solid theoretical framework to explore the interface of film and religion – a framework that will, one hopes, inspire further studies of the same genre on other filmic corpuses.

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