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# INTRODUCTION

## *Debating* Ivan's Childhood

When Andrei Tarkovsky's first feature, *Ivan's Childhood*, premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September 1962, it received the Golden Lion, the top award, immediately propelling its 30-year-old director into the limelight. The film faced stiff competition: Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*, Bertolucci's *The Grim Reaper* and Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* were all on the programme; Losey's *Eva*, Welles's *The Trial* and Godard's *Vivre sa vie* had also been scheduled. *Ivan's Childhood* would win broad praise on its theatrical release and has since entered the world-cinema canon. But at the time, a somewhat negative review in the PCI's newspaper, *l'Unità*, set off an intensive exchange of views, raising vital questions about the principles and practice of criticism. NLR publishes a selection of these below.

The debate about *Ivan's Childhood* was sparked by Ugo Casiraghi, *l'Unità*'s film critic, whose judgement appeared the day after the Festival screening, and clearly had echoes elsewhere on the Italian left.[1] Casiraghi saluted the mastery of image composition in Tarkovsky's work and registered its objective significance for Soviet cinema—its 'rejuvenating function' in breaking with socialist-realist nostrums, as an experimentalist work of the Khrushchev Thaw. But he questioned the film's use of idyllic-childhood dream sequences and the 'love story' scenes, set in a birch forest, charging that its formal flourishes were compensation for a somewhat simplistic theme, or *leitmotiv*, when one might have hoped for greater thematic innovation. A few weeks later, *l'Unità* printed a spirited defence of the film by Sartre, in the form of a letter to the editor, Mario Alicata. As other critics piled in,

a contribution from Vittorio Strada, Italy's leading Russianist, placed the controversy within a longer Soviet argument over cinematic 'prose' versus 'poetry', stretching back through Eisenstein and Shklovsky to the debates of the 1920s.[2]

Speaking about the film a decade after its release, Tarkovsky was withering, and seemed to agree more with the first criticisms in *l'Unità* than Sartre's defence—too existential, in his opinion. In an interview with the GDR film critic Hermann Herlinghaus in 1973, a year after his third feature *Solaris* came out, Tarkovsky called the point about thematic innovation 'extraordinary'—'such a brilliant observation that I couldn't help agreeing with him.' The sentimental Stalinist formula, as in the 1946 Soviet hit *The Son of the Regiment,* had simply been given updated treatment.[3] He thought, too, that his young actor Nikolay Burlyaev, who played 12-year-old Ivan in the film, had been excessive, showing 'all thirty-two teeth at once'. This was really self-criticism; Tarkovsky was wincing at the work of the first-time director with everything to prove, too keen to display his brilliance. Nonetheless, he remained fond of the film, the great adventure shot on the Dnieper River that allowed him to revisit, as he would do time and again in subsequent features, his own

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[1] Ugo Casiraghi (1921–2006): *l'Unità* film critic, 1947–77; author of books on Cuban, Chinese, Czechoslovakian and Hungarian cinema, and monographs on Stroheim, Buñuel and Truffaut. Born to a working-class family in Milan, a teenage cinephile in the Mussolini era, Casiraghi contributed student film reviews to the GUF press before being conscripted and sent into action on the Albanian front; taken prisoner by the Germans after September 1943, he was interned in Austria and returned on foot to Italy after the War, joining the PCI and writing for *l'Unità*.

[2] Vittorio Strada (1929–2018): scholar and translator of Russian and Soviet literature; consulting editor for Einaudi's Russia list, where he published *inter alia* Platonov, Bulgakov, Bakhtin and other Formalists; author of *Revolution and Literature* (1967), on the post-Stalin literary canon; a left critic of the Soviet Union, he was denied access to Moscow State University to complete his doctoral research; remained a member of the PCI until 1980, when he swivelled to Craxi's PSI.

[3] The transcript of the conversation between Tarkovsky and Hermann Herlinghaus (1931–89), recorded in East Berlin in March 1973, was published in *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* and is available on the tarkovskiy.su website. Tarkovsky here attributes the criticism of formulaic theme to both Casiraghi and Alberto Moravia; this seems to be the source of the myth that Moravia joined the debate on *Ivan's Childhood*, taking the same line as Casiraghi. But though Moravia wrote about later Tarkovsky films, including *Stalker*, *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice*, there is no trace of a review of *Ivan's Childhood* by him either in the *l'Unità* archives or in *l'Espresso*, where he wrote a weekly film column, or in his 1975 collection, *Al/cinema*. NLR's thanks to Edward Lee-Six for help with this archival work.

memories of childhood, of his mother in particular, and to use cinema to navigate between different moments in time.

## *Timeless war*

The project of *Ivan's Childhood* was not Tarkovsky's idea but one he inherited after Mosfilm fired its first director. Taking it on, he was only months out of VGIK, the Moscow film school, embarking on a vocation he had come to more by accident than design. Born in 1932, he was the son of a poet who abandoned the family, leaving Andrei's mother to scrape by as a proofreader for a Moscow press. In 1951 he began Arabic studies at the Oriental Institute but soon abandoned his course to join a geological team prospecting in Siberia; he told Herlinghaus that he had applied to VGIK at the urging of a friend, without knowing much about it. Making a war film for his first feature, he followed a classic trajectory for an emerging director in 1950s Russia, but also immediately contradicted it. His film did not conform to genre, notably in its lack of violence, which was instead suggested off-screen—as was history.[4]

Mostly what we see and hear is the debris of war, material and psychological, as we follow the story of Ivan, an orphan of the conflict who shows up at a Red Army dugout by the Dnieper after doing reconnaissance on the other side of the river, behind enemy lines. When the officers want to send him to safety at a military training academy, he refuses, determined to stay by their side, all the way to a night-time river patrol under the mist and rain. In place of explicit violence, the film evokes this through its deliberately unusual angles and perspectives, which generate a sense of disorientation as we watch—objects and settings often appear askew, the world as though knocked off its axis. The devastated landscape is strewn with the remains of homes after bombings and fires. One man Ivan meets is living on land where his house once stood, the wooden door jutting out of the earth, behind it collapsed bricks and objects that had previously furnished rooms and hung on walls. The dominant sound here is the creaking hinge of the old door.

[4] The Vladimir Bogomolov story 'Ivan' (1957), on which the film was based, is a first-person narrative told by the young battalion commander, Galtsev, which is very precise about the lines of battle. It is late 1943; the Germans have been driven back across the Dnieper but have dug in there; the Soviet forces are preparing for a difficult offensive to establish bridgeheads on the western bank. Tarkovsky subsumed all this into a timeless depiction.

In the outposts by the river, it is the drip-drip of a faucet that fills the makeshift living quarters.

Sound adds to the eeriness and isolation of the film's atmosphere but it also acts as a thread connecting us back to another time, the one before the war—the time of Ivan's childhood. We are taken back here in the series of dream-like sequences that punctuate the film and caused such disagreement among its early critics. Tarkovsky told Herlinghaus that it was only once he had come up with these, and how to shoot them, that he felt *Ivan's Childhood* would hold together. These dreams start in an idyllic way, accompanied by an orchestral score that adds a disturbingly excessive layer of gaiety. But this quickly sours, the music turns more abstract and ominous while signs of corruption become visible. In the last of the dream sequences, the whole scene takes on the appearance of a nightmare. Ivan rides on the back of an applecart, sitting among the fruit with a young playmate, perhaps his sister. But behind them the sky is black, the background appears in negative. This, it seems, is what remains of Ivan's childhood.

Svetlana Alexievich's *Last Witnesses: Unchildlike Stories* collected testimonies from Soviet citizens who, like Tarkovsky and his fictional Ivan, had been children at the time of the Nazi invasion. It was published in 1985, a year before Tarkovsky's death from lung cancer at the age of 54; many entries echo with what Ivan might have seen—so many children who became adults overnight. In one account a ten-year-old boy recalls his shock seeing a child's bicycle lying abandoned on the street. 'I had forgotten things like that existed.' But Ivan would not survive as a last witness. Tarkovsky's film is the trajectory of his disappearance. In the 77th minute of the 94-minute film, we lose him as he enters the darkness, determined to go back across the Dnieper to reconnoitre behind the German lines. We learn of his death in a subsequent sequence set in Berlin after the Soviet victory. A Red Army officer is looking through the remaining documents at Gestapo Headquarters; Ivan's photograph is among the files of those executed.

Before this, however, Tarkovsky breaks briefly from fiction to fact, inserting the only flash of explicit horror in the film: news footage shows the destroyed Reich buildings and then the charred body of Goebbels, lying next to the six little white-clad corpses of his children, killed by their parents who then committed suicide themselves. We learn this from

the commentary of Red Army officers standing around the bodies as the camera, in a dreadful pan from right to left, taking in the scene on the ground, concludes with a close-up of the fire-blackened head of Goebbels. The message here is stark: children were victims of this war twice over, killed by the enemy, and by their own. In the closing sequence, Tarkovsky brings Ivan back to life, or rather retrieves him in the only place he now exists—that time of lost childhood, of games and laughter. Returning to where the film began, we see Ivan's face by a tree, counting down, playing hide and seek on the beach. When he finds one of his young friends, the girl from the applecart, they run together, the camera tracking their movement in a sweeping shot that takes in the vast sun-drenched shore. Ivan runs on alone, while the camera rises above to adopt the all-seeing perspective that Tarkovsky would use so often in his films. A final close-up shows the boy's face and his raised arm, transitioning into the gnarly silhouette of a dead tree, before the screen goes black.

## *Freedom and rigour*

The texts published below by Casiraghi, Sartre and Strada are offered not as models for film criticism, but as prompts to ask what it is and what it could be. Should we discuss the symbolic function of every work of art, as Sartre says—even, or perhaps especially, the most realist? What about the question of thematics—the subject matter and the outlooks it embodies; the root of the problem, in Sartre's terms; in this instance, formulaic, as Casiraghi and Tarkovsky agreed, or properly expressive of the mad reality of war, as lived not just by the combatants of WWII but, as Sartre thought, by Algerians—and by Palestinians, Lebanese, Ukrainians, Iranians, too? The critics can be criticized. Sartre abuses his polemical licence in alleging that Casiraghi treats Tarkovsky as a 'suspect petit bourgeois'; he does not. For his part, Casiraghi supplies no evidence for the film's 'icy' (*gelido*) quality, and its emotional power has left few viewers unmoved. In their enthusiasm for *Ivan's Childhood*, neither Sartre nor Strada deal with its long and arguably mismatched birch-forest love scene.

But their insights can also be pushed farther. If Strada sees Tarkovsky's 'realistic experimentalism' as subordinate to a deeply human artistic ideal, then what pressures does the latter exercise? How to weight the imbalance, as Casiraghi might see it, between thematic and formal

innovation? Compared to the large-scale theme of war, is the smallness of much of today's work—few characters, shrunken social orbit—a sign of defeat? What tools and methods are needed 'to grasp a work in its singularity and concreteness'? What further questions does comparison throw up—*Ivan's Childhood* as a Soviet *400 Blows*? What does it mean, to quote Sartre again, for critical rigour to co-exist with critical freedom—knowing that, for him, freedom is also another word for a broader set of responsibilities?