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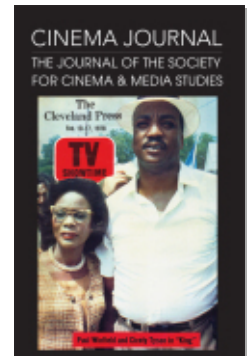
*Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* (review)

Mark Le Fanu

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# Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema

by Robert Bird. Reaktion Books  
2008. \$25.00 paper. 256 pages

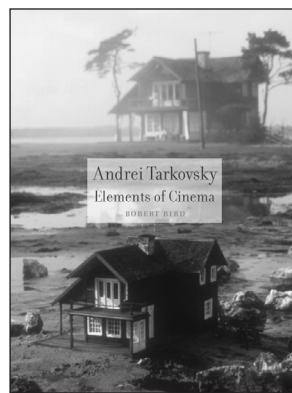
by MARK LE FANU

don't suppose there is doubt in many quarters that Tarkovsky was one of the great artistic figures of the twentieth century. At the most basic level of film style, his vocabulary, alive as it was to the beauty of the world embodied in the four elements of earth, fire, air, and water (yet somehow managing to “naturalize” these elements and to avoid making them too symbolic) has had a marked effect on the look of international cinema ever since. Numerous contemporary cineastes pay homage to Tarkovsky, either explicitly or in subtly hidden ways.

Notwithstanding his tremendous cinephilic appeal, Tarkovsky has not quite been welcomed into film studies. It is perhaps not hard to see why: his religious disposition, his moral fervor, his stated belief in truth (and in the complementary existence of error), his ideological dogmatism—all this is contrary to the coolness of our epoch, and to the technician bent of much academic discourse in the humanities.

Of course there is another side to Tarkovsky: his speaking out is shadowed by ambivalence, even by craftiness. For all Tarkovsky's public commitment to truth, the art itself veers toward the cryptic, especially perhaps in the later works, from *Stalker* (1979) onwards. *Stalker*, *Nostalghia* (1983), and his last film *Sacrifice* (1986) seem to offer themselves as parables, demanding, yet at the same time withholding, interpretation. It is not obvious what any of them “mean,” and in this respect—an important one—Tarkovsky must be allowed to belong to the broad stream of sophisticated modernism, which, among other attributes, prides itself on being impossible to pin down.

An earlier English-language book aiming to explicate Tarkovsky was subtitled “A Visual Fugue,” and Robert Bird's procedure in the new study under review could also be described as fugal. The films are examined chronologically, but the order, in practice, is loosely conceived, and each topic the author pauses on encourages him to make



observations not only about the particular film he is thinking about, but about all the other films as well. So we circulate, and go back on things, contrapuntally. Bird is intent not so much on demonstrating how the films “hang together” as a whole (their narrative coherence so to speak) as on analyzing certain specific aspects of their poetics: the “atmosphere” in which the human story is enveloped, the “texture” of the films in a materialist sense. The author (who has previously published a monograph on *Andrei Roublev* in the BFI Classics series) is a Russian-speaking British scholar based at the University of Chicago, and he has been able to penetrate original Russian sources, including the archives of Mosfilm and Goskino, in greater detail than any other previous English-language study of this director.

Yet the information provided by such burrowing, copious enough in certain ways, tends to be incidental to the present project. *Elements of Cinema* is a work of hermeneutics rather than biography or journalism. Facts, as such, are less important than interpretation, and here we encounter certain difficulties. Bird is not a very elegant writer—but maybe we can pass this by quietly. (The book itself is very elegant; it is beautifully illustrated.) His epigrams tend toward the vatic and vacuous. As great a problem, though related to it, is that Bird’s explication seems to me only ever to tell *half* the story: penetrating enough, often, on the microlevel, the author halts timidly just as the argument gets interesting. To take an example: “Imagery is more important than text in Tarkovsky’s cinema.” True or false? The inadequacy of human speech seems to be suggested by the importance Tarkovsky attaches to silence, both as a theme in its own right (the various vows of silence that are dramatized in *Andrei Roublev*, *Nostalghia*, or *Sacrifice*) and also as a preferred stylistic aptitude—witness the famous long, floating camera takes that want us to take in the mute beauty of the world, beyond language. By the same token, language in Tarkovsky’s cinema could be understood as nothing more than one of the miscellaneous “sounds” of the universe, like birdsong—its meaning less important than its melody. Indeed, this seems to be the position that Bird is taking when he writes: “Tarkovsky’s characters are unable to find shelter in language as a social body or as a historical text; to a significant degree they are left—like the mute Andrei Roublev before the alien marauders—with language as a form of alien music.”

But surely this is only half of the story; we cannot *stop* at this point, after all! If dialectic is going to be invoked honestly, one has to see the other side as well. And this is, that Tarkovsky’s films, almost uniquely in the context of modern cinema, *really do speak out to their audience*. How can the sympathetic viewer miss this? What other significance can be imputed to such sequences as the opening passage in *Mirror* (1975) in which the adolescent youth triumphantly shakes off his stutter? The whole approach to language and communication in the film is glorious and positive. To “think” is to “thank,” said Heidegger: *Mirror*, surely, celebrates our common humanity, through speech, beyond and against ideology. Bird makes much play with the ambiguity of Arseny Tarkovsky’s poems that at different points in the film are spoken (intoned? sung?) over the sound track; but, if one has ears to hear, their affirmatory afflatus—their solicitation of (and belief in) truth and enlightenment—is inescapable.

Tarkovsky’s “speaking out”—his astonishing explicitness, and the bravery of his idiosyncratic individualism—only becomes worthy of notice, of course, in the context

of a society where you *couldn't* speak out, or if you did, you ran the gravest risks to your freedom. One doesn't get any sense of this profound social context from reading *Bird*. There is a *voulu* element to the author's procedure here; apparently it's still not the "done thing," in certain circles, to mention the wickedness of the system. Yet one is talking about Soviet communism, after all, not the watered down Western European version; and in these matters the responsible critic, in my opinion, shouldn't beat about the bush. Why be more backward on the issue than Tarkovsky was? It is only one of several large issues that *Bird* isn't willing to face candidly, including the twin topics of spirituality and religion. Whenever we come near these matters, warning lights go on and alarm bells start ringing. Yet they are central to an understanding of Tarkovsky, and not impossible to talk about sympathetically, even if, as a critic, you don't necessarily subscribe to the filmmaker's precise system of beliefs. *Bird* doesn't write about religion in a sophisticated way, as something which, being part of culture—and a huge part of culture—it's reasonable to have an allegiance to.

The author of *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* is an explicator, and an erudite one. But that is not quite the same thing as being a critic. The films of Tarkovsky are admired by *Bird*, but not appreciated artistically: he doesn't convey how wondrous they are. It is a paradox. Evidently, few people know more about the movies than he does; but the greatness of their utterance, in the last resort, eludes him. \*

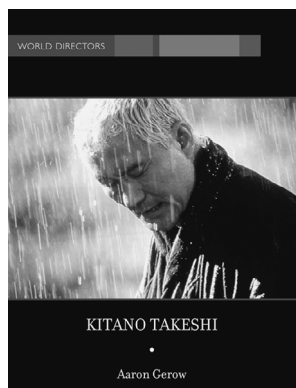
## Kitano Takeshi

by Aaron Gerow. British Film Institute

2007. \$85.95 hardcover; \$25.95 paper. 264 pages

by DAISUKE MIYAO

The assumption of auteur theory is that the films an auteur has directed can be analyzed to uncover recurrent themes and aesthetic patterns that express the unique cohesion of his or her personal vision of the world, transcending historical contexts.<sup>1</sup> Kitano Takeshi's films, for example, include recurrent themes and aesthetic patterns such as the motif of dualities, the obsession with the color blue, and self-annihilating violence. In light of these



1 Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (1985): 12.