

For a cinema without concessions

Wanderer

by Guillermo Saccomanno

9 de octubre de 2022

As well as being one of the geniuses of cinema Tarkovsky was also a great Russian writer. Like Bergman, before his stories became scripts, they were accounts. Alexander, the protagonist of *The Sacrifice*, is an ex actor, a disenchanted veteran turned critic and essayist, who wants to plant some dry branches on the shores of the mirror-like still waters with the aid of a four-year-old child. The boy has recently had his vocal cords operated. He cannot speak. And the bandages around his neck bother him. While, they both try to plant the stems, Alexander tells him that these branches make an ikebana. The child approaches, and crouching down secures the branch with stones and fistfuls of earth. The silhouette, with a hazy ocean behind, illuminated by a gleam of light, it looked very beautiful", Tarkovsky writes.

"The time of the white nights was approaching", Andrei Tarkovsky writes, as he opens his account of *The Sacrifice*. "Total quiet reigned. The sun was hiding behind the rocks, the sky barely lit beyond the woody peaks reflected in the shallow waters that rippled through the pebbles of the bay, generating a sense of joy, as if time had come to a standstill."

Alexander, grimly, tells his son of a parable: Once upon a time, long ago, an old man from a monastery called Pamve also planted a dry branch on a hill and asked his disciple, the monk, Ioann Kolov, it was an orthodox monastery, to water that branch every day until it came to life. For years, Ioann would fill a pale of water every morning and head on his way. It took him a whole day to carry the bucket up the hill, from dawn to dusk. Every day Ioann covered his ground carrying the pale of water, and when it was getting dark, he'd return to the monastery. He did so for three years. One beautiful day, as he was climbing the hill he saw that the tree was completely covered in flowers".

"No matter what they say", says Alexander, "method is a great thing. Sometimes I think that if we repeated the same action every day, like a ritual, systematically and unchanging, exactly at the same time, the world would be different. Something would change. It would not be able to stop changing". In his essay *Sculpting in Time* Tarkovsky declared: "What interests me most about man is his disposition to serve something higher, his refusal to make do with the normal bourgeois "morale". While the father goes on with his monologue, the boy gets lost in the nearby woods. The father runs after him. The boy playfully surprises him from behind. Alexander hugs him. They fall. The boy bleeds. Alexander faints and has a vision: an imminent atomic war, a nuclear disaster. He reacts

and his anguish leads him to conjure with a sorcerer, to give everything up in exchange for his family's survival. In truth they are all immersed in their own selfishness. Alexander, as if possessed, in an attempt to rescue his family sets his house ablaze. Fantasy and reality are intertwined. An ambulance will carry him to psychiatric confinement. He will take up a vow of silence: "And I shall remain mute, never again will I speak to man, I withdraw from everything that ties me to this life. Help me lord and I shall do everything I have promised".

Like Pasolini, Tarkovsky is a man of faith. The pursuit of love confronts him with materialism. "I am aware that the idea of sacrifice is not very popular today. Hardly anybody wishes to sacrifice himself for another person or for something (...). You either live the life of a consumer depending on technical developments or material goods in general, blindly committed to what is supposed to be progress; or you find a responsibility of your own, within, directed not only towards yourself but towards others. It is precisely here, in this responsibility, in what happens in it and with it, that it is possible to "sacrifice", to perform the Christian idea of entirely surrendering". Tarkovsky did not shoot *The Sacrifice* in the best of conditions: in exile, banned in his country, suffering from terminal cancer. He believed that art was prophetic. Shortly after making *The Sacrifice*, after his death, came Chernobyl.

In mid-lockdown I watched it again. I called Adriana Lestido. We share our devotion for Tarkovsky. After her trip to the Antarctic, land where her images shift from realism to a metaphysical abstraction, after having traveled across Norway, this time when I called, I was not surprised she should answer the call from a van in the middle of a snow storm somewhere on a bleak road in Iceland. She showed me on WhatsApp. I swear it was intimidating. Adriana remained for several months in a cabin in the middle of nowhere. So, just as she returned from Antarctica with *Black Antarctica*, she returned from Iceland with a film shot at her own expense, after selling her house, and with all her resources at stake in order to make the film *Wanderer, The Quest for Home*, a unique work of art, an absolute cleansing of the narcissistic subjectivity of creation. *Wanderer* is undoubtedly also proof that the Tarkovskian sacrifice is more than a spiritualist notion. The evidence lies in the film's effect. I shall say what it's about: a succession of sequences of solitary landscapes in the proximity of the Arctic Circle. Sea, waves, rushes, meadows, snow, a few horses, a stable, wind, bursts of light. Uninhabited landscapes, not a single human being. Their solitude could might these scenes seem ghostly, yet it is precisely our absence that shelters the suicidal species ready to destruct the entire planet. Tarkovsky's description of time standing still quoted earlier represents the "wandering" spirit, this laconic experience: there are merely a few poetic references and songs, no more is required, the ambient sound is essential. *Wanderer, The Quest for Home* is a work of art; love it or leave it.

One afternoon in the winter of this year, Adriana screened it for me in her house, I was slow to react. I did so hours later and wrote to her: "I keep thinking about your film, a wild and delicate refinement that makes you consider the relationship between us and others, the place where we live. There's no new age reductionism, at a time when the planet is in flame, its resources are running out and humanity seems not to have grasped anything of its history of self-destruction. The fact that we do not see a human being in your film is what alarms us, a structure in the abyss that forces us to engage with our own nature. So, as an exercise of extreme meditation, your work does not admit in-betweens: love it or leave it. I want to see it again, to think it over. I was affected by it. It's is the logical consequence of your work unfolding from its crudest of documentary journalism to deep, subtle introspection. One has to be grateful to this wandering proposal of yours, this searching for a home in the cold. Gratitude is the least one can feel".