

Document Citation

Title	Think icon
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1992 Feb 25
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	53
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Andrei Rublev, Tarkovsky, Andrei, 1969



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Think Icon

By J. Hoberman

Andrei Rublev

Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky
Written by Tarkovsky
and Andrei Konchalovsky
Produced by Mosfilm
Distributed by Kino International
At Film Forum 2
Through March 5

When Andrei Tarkovsky's dark, startling *Andrei Rublev* first materialized on the international scene in the late '60s, it was an apparent anomaly—a pre-Soviet theater of cruelty charged with resurgent Slavic mysticism. Today, rereleased in the post-Soviet world in a new 35mm print for a limited run at Film Forum, Tarkovsky's second feature seems to prophesy the impending storm.

Its greatness as movie making immediately evident, *Andrei Rublev* was also the most historically audacious Soviet production since Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*. Tarkovsky's epic—and largely invented—biography of Russia's greatest icon painter, Andrei Rublev (circa 1360–1430), was a superproduction gone ideologically berserk. Violent, even gory, for a Soviet film, *Andrei Rublev* was set against the carnage of the Tatar invasions and took the form of a chronologically discontinuous pageant. Its pale-eyed, otherworldly hero wandered across a landscape of forlorn splendor—observing suffering peasants, hallucinating the scriptures, working for brutal nobles until, having killed a man in the sack of Vladimir, he takes a vow of silence and gives up painting.

The first (and perhaps the only) film produced under the Soviets to treat the artist as a world-historic figure and the rival religion of Christianity as an axiom of Russia's historical identity, *Andrei Rublev* is set in the chaotic period that saw the beginning of that national resurgence of which Rublev's paintings would become the cultural symbol. Indeed, it was precisely the veneration of icons that would distinguish Russian art from that of the West. As the Renaissance gathered momentum, sacred images were transmuted into secular works of art; Russian paintings, however, remained less representations of the world than the embodiment of spirit. For the early 20th century avant-garde, the icon was a symbol of an ideal national past and an inspiration to a transformed future life. Malevich's Supremacist canvases can be understood as modern icons; so too the images of Stalin, ubiquitous under the Cult of Personality.

Andrei Rublev is itself more an icon than a movie about an icon painter. (Perhaps it should be seen as a *moving icon*, in the sense that the Lumière brothers made *moving pictures*.) At once humble and cosmic, Tarkovsky called *Rublev* a "film of the earth." Shot in wide-screen and sharply defined black and white, the movie is supremely tactile—the four elements appearing as mist, mud, guttering candles, and snow. Although this is a portrait of an artist in which no one lifts a brush—the patterns are God's, a close-up of spilled paint swirling into pond water or the clods of dirt Rublev flings against

a whitewashed wall. It's difficult to think of another film that attaches greater significance to the artist's role. It's as though Rublev's presence justifies an entire world.

Tarkovsky works with the entire frame throughout, most impressively in long shot. Undirectable creatures animate his compositions—a cat bounds across a corpse-strewn church, wild geese flutter over a savaged city. The birchwoods are alive with water snakes and crawling ants, the forest floor yields a decomposing swan. The soundtrack is filled with bird calls and wordless singing; there's always a fire's crackle or a tolling bell in the background. The film provides an entire world—or rather the sense that, as predicted by Andre Bazin's "Myth of Total Cinema," the world itself is trying to force its way through the screen.

Like Bazin, Tarkovsky privileges *mise-en-scène* over montage but, although his complicated tracking shots suggest those of his Hungarian contemporary Miklós Jancsó, his interest is not in choreography. A 360-degree pan around a primitive stable conveys the wonder of creation. Such long, sinuous takes are like expressionist brush strokes; the result is a kind of narrative impasto. From a close-up recording the micro impact of a horse's hooves on the surface of a turbid river, Tarkovsky's camera swivels to reveal a Tatar regiment sweeping across a barren hill. Other times, the camera hovers like an angel over the suffering terrain. The film's brilliant, never-explained pro-

logue has some medieval Daedalus braving an angry crowd to storm the heavens. Having climbed a church tower, he takes flight in a primitive hot-air balloon—a sudden, exhilarating panorama before he crashes to earth.

In the 40-minute final sequence that brings *Rublev* full circle, the teenage son of a master bell-maker successfully supervises the casting of a huge silver bell. The casting of the bell, everyone's will concentrated on a single aesthetic object, is a synecdoche for the film. Rublev wanders through the rainy panorama, ceding the foreground to the skinny kid, giggling with hysterical confidence (and played by the same actor who was the eponymous star of Tarkovsky's first film, *My Name Is Ivan*) as he directs a landscape of workers. It is the magnitude of the bluff that restores Rublev to the human community. After the job is done, the monk comforts the sobbing boy and hears his confession: "My father never told me—he took his secret to the grave."

Tarkovsky began shooting *Andrei Rublev* in September 1964, two years after *My Name Is Ivan*, won the Golden Lion at Venice and two months before Nikita Khrushchev was deposed. By the time he wrapped in November 1965, the cultural thaw had frozen over. When *Rublev* was finally completed in August 1966, the ministry demanded deep cuts. The film was too negative, too harsh, too experimental, too frightening, too filled with nudity, and too politically complicated to be released—especially on the eve of the Revolution's fiftieth anniversary. After a single screening in Moscow (the Dom Kino supposedly ringed with mounted police), *Rublev* was shelved.

Trimmed by a quarter of an hour, a cut Tarkovsky would later endorse, *Andrei Rublev* was sched-

uled for the 1968 Cannes Film Festival only to be yanked by the Soviets at the last minute. (As the '68 festival would be disrupted and shut down by French militants, this move was not altogether irrational.) The following year, thanks in part to the agitation of the French Communist Party, *Rublev* was shown at Cannes, albeit out of competition. Although screened at 4 a.m. on the festival's last day, it was nevertheless awarded the International Critics' Prize. Soviet authorities were infuriated: Leonid Brezhnev reportedly demanded a private screening and walked out midfilm.

With questionable legality and over strenuous objections by the Soviet Embassy, *Andrei Rublev* opened in Paris in late '69. Ultimately, the Soviet cultural bureaucracy relented, releasing the film domestically in October 1971. Two years later, *Rublev* surfaced at the New York Film Festival, cut another 20 minutes by its American distributor, Columbia Pictures. *Time* compared the movie unfavorably to *Dr. Zhivago*; those other New York reviewers who took note begged off explication, citing *Rublev's* apparent truncation.

What was there to say? The artist is introduced, along with two brother monks, taking refuge from a storm in a stable where the peasants are being entertained by a bawdy jester. Such buffoons, one monk observes, are made by the devil; the sequence ends with the clown being arrested. In the next sequence, two monks discuss aesthetics while, outside their church, a prisoner is tortured on the rack. (Later, in a fit of jealousy, one of them will leave his monastery, cursing the devotion to art that has corrupted his brothers.) At one point, Rublev refuses to terrorize the faithful by painting a Last Judgment. His principles harm his career; the irony, surely not lost on Tarkovsky, was that, a century after the painter's death, the Orthodox Church had accorded his icons absolute stylistic authority, a standard "to be fol-

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lowed in all perpetuity."

On one hand, *Rublev* is founded on the conflict between austere Christianity and sensual paganism—whether Slavic or Tatar. On the other, it puts the artist in the context of state patronage and repression. (Tarkovsky originally planned to call the movie *The Passion According to Andrei*—like his namesake and creator, Rublev is a nail biter.) When Rublev stumbles upon the midsummer mysteries of Saint John's Eve—an alien rite, delicate and strange with naked peasants carrying torches through the mist—the monk himself is captured and tied to a cross. One wonderful touch: Andrei inadvertently backs into a smoldering fire and has the hem of his robe set, momentarily, aflame.

For Tarkovsky, Rublev's story is "the story of a 'taught,' or imposed concept, which burns up in the atmosphere of living reality to arise again from the ashes as a fresh and newly-discovered truth." In a brief coda, the movie explodes into color with abstract close-ups of actual icons—cracked and charred by "living reality." ■