



ISSN: 2158-7051

INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL OF  
RUSSIAN STUDIES

ISSUE NO. 2 ( 2013/1 )

## THE END OF IVAN'S CHILDHOOD IN ANDREI ZVYAGINTSEV'S *THE RETURN* (2003)

TERENCE MCSWEENEY\*

### Summary

Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return* (2003) is one of the defining films to emerge from Russia in the first decade of the new millennium. There can be little doubt that it is heavily influenced by the work of Andrei Tarkovsky, yet it manages to become something much more than an imitation. Like Tarkovsky's finest work, the film is imbued with an articulate sense of nostalgia and is constructed as a richly multivalent text. Its palimpsestic nature, distinctly personal to each and every viewer, makes attempts to decode its symbolism interesting yet ultimately redundant. What remains is a deeply threnodic exploration of the problems of gender identity in contemporary Russia.

**Key words:** Russian cinema, Zvyagintsev, Tarkovsky, nature, spirituality.

*I wouldn't like to be a mediator between the screen and the viewer. I wouldn't like to whisper into the viewer's ear what the viewer is seeing on the screen.*

(Zvyagintsev quoted in Murphy 2004:13)

[...] film then becomes something beyond its ostensible existence as exposed and edited roll of film, a story, a plot. Once in contact with the individual who sees it, it separates from its author, starts to live its own life, undergoes changes of form and meaning.

(Tarkovsky 1986: 118)

Andrei Zvyagintsev's cinematic debut, *The Return* (*Vozvrashcheniye*, 2003), is arguably

one of the most significant and critically acclaimed Russian films of the last decade. On winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2003, many were quick to compare Zvyagintsev to Andrei Tarkovsky, who had won the same prize for his own debut, *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962), forty-one years before. In the twenty years since Tarkovsky's death many directors have had the weighty mantle 'the heir to Tarkovsky' foisted upon them, or even taken it upon themselves, yet it seems such a title is demonstrably apt for Zvyagintsev as evidenced by *The Return* and his subsequent film *The Banishment* (*Izgnanie*, 2007). This article proposes to examine what it is that makes *The Return* such an engaging text; it will explore its themes, style, imagery, and its relationship to the work of Andrei Tarkovsky. The similarity between the two quotations which begin this article underline the connections between the two artists and their shared belief that the meanings which reside in art belong exclusively to the spectator, who make of artistic texts what they will. In many ways we will see that this is the defining aspect of Zvyagintsev's cinematic style, the deliberate and sustained use of images and situations with ambiguous and multivalent properties.

The period since the collapse of Communism has been an extremely difficult one for the Russian film industry; as the transition from the Soviet system of state-controlled, state-funded film production to an ostensibly free market enterprise proved to be a tremendous shift economically and culturally. The number of films produced dropped to record lows as producers and directors struggled to come to terms with finding their own sources of funding from private or international sources. However, the first decade of the new millennium showed substantial evidence of its recovery. In fact 2003, the year of the release of *The Return*, proved to be a watershed year in the return of Russian cinema to national and international prominence, both financially and artistically. Nikita Mikhalkov, the self-proclaimed patriarch of Russian cinema in his closing speech to the 2003 Moscow film festival remarked, "Russian Cinema has been reborn" (Mikhalkov, quoted in Monahan 2004). After more than ten years of relative apathy towards the cinema, where Russians were more content to stay at home and watch the latest American blockbusters on video or DVD, it seems the Russian public are returning to the cinema in considerable numbers.

Russian cinema's production figures make much more promising viewing than they did at any time in the last twenty years. In 1997 only twelve feature films were produced, this rose dramatically to seventy-five in 2003, two hundred in 2006 and two hundred and twenty in 2008.<sup>[1]</sup> In 2008 Russia joined the top four cinema going nations of Europe for the first time, behind only France, United Kingdom and Germany, with over 120 million admissions per year. Russia's share of its own film market has also steadily gone up in 2004 it was 12.1% but by 2008 it had reached 25.5%.<sup>[2]</sup> It is now possible for the biggest Russian releases to generate more than twenty million dollars at the box office with notable examples like Timur Bekmambetov's *Daywatch* (*Dnevnoy dozor*, 2006) making thirty-four million dollars and Fyodor Bondarchuk's *9th Company* (*9 Rota*, 2005) twenty-four million dollars.

The vast majority of these financially successful films are American influenced hits inspired by the likes of Tarantino's pop culture referencing crime thrillers, the brooding machismo of early Scorsese and the special effects laden, high-concept, action packed narratives of a Bruckheimer production. Yet there is another type of film being made in Russia, one that is not influenced by American culture, one that is not filling the newly built multiplexes, but is still gaining prominence and winning awards not only inside Russia, but all over the world. Some critics have described these films as a 'new wave' of Russian cinema.<sup>[3]</sup>

This emerging movement is arguably more influenced by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Tarkovsky than Tarantino, Scorsese or Bruckheimer. They are quintessentially Russian in their construction; posing questions of national identity, masculinity and femininity, dealing with spiritual crises without the glibness and excess of mainstream films. Technically they are slower paced, feature iconic and unironic images of Russian landscapes and feature narratives that favour character development over action and spectacle. Among them are films like Khlebnikov and Popogrebsky's *Koktobel* (*Koktobel*, 2003), Mariya Saakyan's *The Lighthouse* (Mayak, 2006) and, perhaps more important than any other, *The Return* by Andrei Zvyagintsev.

Even a brief synopsis reveals how the influence of Tarkovsky permeates Zvyagintsev's meticulously crafted debut. Two brothers, Ivan and Andrei, are shocked by the return of their enigmatic father who has been absent for twelve years. Before Zvyagintsev got involved with the project, the original script had named the two boys Archil and David, revealing their Georgian roots. When the director came on board he changed the names to the more Tarkovskian Ivan and Andrei; 'Andrei' sharing the name with both directors and also 'Ivan' and 'Andrei' were the names of the child protagonists in Tarkovsky's first two feature films, *Ivan's Childhood* and *Andrei Rublev* (1971). The naming of the two child protagonists is just the beginning of a succession of references to Zvyagintsev's spiritual and artistic mentor which flood the frames of *The Return*.

### **The Prodigal Father Returns**

*[The Return marks] a new era in the history of national film-making. We have seen Soviet and post-Soviet film-making. Now it is time for real Russian film-making.*

(Anatoly Chubais quoted in Felperin 2004: 10-11)<sup>[4]</sup>

The film begins with an atmospheric and ambiguous prologue: an underwater camera slowly moves among the remains of a small submerged vessel, the significance of which will not be revealed until the closing moments of the film, almost two hours later. The diegetic and non-diegetic sound converges to create a powerfully threnodic soundscape as the title emerges from the deep, *The Return*.

The narrative formally begins with a group of teenagers daring each other to jump from an abandoned tower into the cold water below in an archetypal test of bravado and masculinity. Those who cannot make the leap will be labeled a coward by their peers. One by one they jump, some more reluctantly than others. Andrei (played by Vladimir Garin) leaps, but his younger brother, Ivan (played by Ivan Dobronravov) is unable to muster the courage to throw himself off the edge; he has failed their test of what it takes to be a man. For this he is ostracized from their group and called a chicken by his friends and even, albeit unenthusiastically, his brother. After a while the boys tire of teasing Ivan and leave him alone and shivering at the top of the tower. Hours pass before a woman comes to rescue him, it is his mother (played by Natalya Vdovina) who will remain un-named throughout the film. Ivan pleads with her, "I can't go home. I *have* to jump." His mother does not understand the strict rules of the teenage world in which he inhabits, "No one will know" she promises him before leading him home. Thus the stage is set for the cultural battleground on which the narrative of *The Return* is fought: gender identity in contemporary post-Soviet Russia and what it means to be 'a man'. The film can be persuasively read on three levels; as a naturalistic family drama,

as a socio-political allegory of family values in modern Russia and as a religious parable. It is the representation the father that is central to all three of these interpretations.<sup>[5]</sup>

The next day Ivan sheepishly returns to his friends hoping that all is forgotten, but he is soon once again the object of their mockery. While it is not his brother who turns on him, his elder brother becomes the target of Ivan's anger at being rejected by his peer group. After a brief but vicious fight Ivan yells "Mum will kill you!" and they both run home as fast as they can in order to be able to tell their mother of the others' crimes. They come upon her in a distinctly Tarkovskian pose, back to the camera smoking a cigarette while gazing off into the distance, replicated almost directly from *Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975), which also saw a young mother struggling to raise her children alone.



The mother (Terekhova) waits on the fence in *Mirror*.



Zvyagintsev pays homage to the opening of *Mirror* in *The Return*.

She quiets them with the news that their father, whom they haven't seen for twelve years, has returned. Of the two, only Andrei can even remember the man, as Ivan was just a small baby when he left. The boys quietly tip toe into the house and peer into the room where the stranger is sleeping. The camera frames the father (played by Konstantin Lavronenko), who will also remain nameless throughout the film, lying on the bed, a solitary feather tracks his breathing as it rises and falls. He sleeps peacefully in a deliberate reconstruction of Mantegna's 'The Lamentation over the Dead Christ' (c1480), which Tarkovsky used to similar effect in *Solaris* (*Solyaris*, 1972).



Mantegna's "Lamentation over the Dead Christ" (1480)





Zvyagintsev's lamentation in *The Return*.



Tarkovsky's lamentation in *Solaris*.

Still they are not convinced; can it really be their father after so long? They rush up to the attic to find an old photograph between the pages of a dusty family bible. On close inspection the pages concern the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Like in a Tarkovsky film, no small detail is left to chance; the biblical parable and its theme of physical and spiritual sacrifice will become more significant later in the narrative as the oedipal nature of the story is revealed.<sup>[6]</sup> The photograph of the man in the centre of his two boys is unquestionably the same as the man sleeping downstairs, it *is* their father.<sup>[7]</sup>

Shortly after, the family eat their first meal together in twelve years. The scene positively encourages connections to Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper' (c1495-1498), as the centrally positioned father resumes his dominant role after being away for so long. Like the decor of one of Tarkovsky's many cinematic homes, the house is strangely timeless; it could be the new millennium, the 1970s or even just after the end of the Second World War. The father gives the boys their first glass of wine which the mother and grandmother tellingly dilute. He breaks the chicken roughly with

his hands before passing it out to his family, the boys first. The older brother Andrei seems eager to please his father and gazes up at him, wide-eyed, asking for more. Ivan is less impressed with his father's return and the disruption it has caused to the harmony of their home and he professes his dislike of the wine. This is the first of many times he will seek to challenge the authority of his newly returned father. The silence of the grandmother and mother is palpable throughout.

In the opening ten minutes Zvyagintsev has revealed the context of the film. To the father it seems immediately apparent that in his absence the boys have become soft, feminized and deficient in masculinity. I would argue that the film suggests, in no uncertain terms, that this is because they have been raised by their mother and grandmother, without the authoritative influence of their father. As soon as the father returns the mother immediately resorts to a passive role; it is he who occupies the position at the head of the table (despite the fact that it is almost certainly the labours of the mother and the grandmother that have put the food there), later the mother meekly waits for him in bed with a pensive expression on her face, wearing make up and a sexualised nightdress. When the father decides he wants to take the boys on a fishing trip she has no choice but to agree. Zvyagintsev in a rare example of suggesting what he believes the film is about stated, "I would say it's about the metaphysical incarnation of the soul's movement from the mother to the father" (Zvyagintsev quoted in Gritten 2004: 22). Indeed the film continues to marginalize women throughout the course of its narrative: aside from the mother and grandmother, we later only see a waitress and a highly objectified passing beautiful woman on the street, there are no other female characters.

To connect the feminine world so directly with weakness is a reproduction of the patriarchal fallacy that has been dominant for too long in Russian and western cinema. Ella Taylor of the *LA Weekly* was also concerned, "*The Return* adds up to an implacable discounting of maternal love, but also, perhaps, of Mother Russia (enfeebling) into Father Russia (character-building). I'd have thought this, of all nations, would have had it up to here with tough love from strong leaders" (Taylor 2004). The fact that so few other reviews mention this indicates how much of the norm this has become in Russian cinema. Tarkovsky was frequently, throughout his career, accused of being sexist and such criticisms unfortunately seem to be similarly applicable to Zvyagintsev. Tarkovsky's representations of women have been detailed extensively by writers before: for Rosenbaum they are 'Neanderthal' (Rosenbaum 1997: 282), for Gianvito 'disturbing' (Gianvito 2007: xvi), for Žižek Tarkovsky portrays the sexual woman as an "inauthentic hysterical creature" (Žižek 2000:232). While some commentators have tried to ignore these tendencies, comments like "What is a woman's driving force? Submission, humiliation in the name of love. And a man's? Creation" (Tarkovsky 2002: 89) are far from isolated; they occur time and time again. These early sequences from Zvyagintsev's film prove equally troubling, yet he proceeds to complicate matters in his characterisation of the father, an authoritarian figure with profoundly ambiguous motives. However, unlike the women in the film, the father is given ample screen time to develop the contrasting shades of his character. Thus in *The Return* parental relations are a site of extended ambiguity and the film will provide no easy answers.<sup>[8]</sup> Julian Graffy suggests, "So *The Return* can be seen as a meditation on the inadequacy of traditional models of paternal authority. Russian culture has always been concerned to examine the strained relations between fathers and sons" (Graffy 2004: 64). Graffy is correct when he asserts that fatherhood has been a perennial subject for in contemporary Russian films, almost a barometer for post-soviet anxiety; from the absent fathers of Alexsei Balabanov's *Brother* (*Brat*, 1997) and Pavel Chukrai's *The Thief* (*Vor*, 1997) or the idyllic father of Sokhurov's

*Father and Son* (*Otets i syn*, 2003). The father of *The Return* will emerge as far from a new man, but his brief appearance will have a significant impact on the lives of the two boys.

### **The Measure of a Man**

The significance of the father's twelve year absence lingers throughout the narrative. Why twelve? Could it be a coincidence that it was twelve years since the collapse of communism and when this film was made 2003? Or has Zvyagintsev factored this into his densely allegorical tapestry? Where the father has been in all this time is also kept deliberately ambiguous. There are small clues, but none prove definitive. He comments that he has eaten too much fish, he is good with his hands and he is proficient boats and machines. Could he have been a sailor or a soldier? Or could he have been a prisoner? When the boys ask their mother "Where did he come from?" She too is suitably vague, "He just came." Her answer lingers with its spiritual associations. The film is abound with unanswered questions like these, all a part of the Zvyagintsev's erotic narrative technique, something that Tarkovsky spent his entire career developing, which stands at a stark contrast to contemporary mainstream cinema with its overwhelming causality and narratives of action and reaction.

The father decides to take the boys on a fishing trip; away from their mother and the emasculating effects of modern civilization, a realm which has cosseted them since their infancy. Like in the work of Tarkovsky the journey the characters take is only physical on the surface, a more important and meaningful journey is the spiritual and psychological they undertake at the same time. As their road trip begins, a series of confrontations start: the father tests the boys, challenging their notions of how to behave. Unlike Andrei, Ivan refuses to call the man 'dad', he may be his biological parent but he is not his 'papa', it is a title that he has not earned. Their first lesson takes place in a restaurant which becomes a battle of wills between Ivan and the father. When the boy refuses to eat his bread the father insists he will go without. The use of bread is one of many allusions to religion and spirituality in the film which are too numerous to ignore. They begin with the photograph of the father being found in an old bible and continue with the reproductions of Mantegna and da Vinci, and the symbolic use of wine and then bread. Like Tarkovsky before him, Zvyagintsev is an intensely religious film-maker. Arguably one of the defining elements of Tarkovsky's films are the fact that they are imbued with his profound religious and spiritual beliefs. While the details of these beliefs become hard to isolate, every film resonates with Tarkovsky's humanist spirituality. Tarkovsky believed that one of the fundamental purposes of art, and specifically cinema, was a search for the profound, he suggested.

Art does not think logically, or formulate logic of behaviour; it expresses its own postulate of faith. In the case of someone who is spiritually receptive, it is therefore possible to talk of an analogy between the impact made by a work of art and that of a purely religious experience. Art acts above all on the soul, shaping its spiritual structure (Tarkovsky 1986 :41).

Of the many awards *The Return* won, perhaps the most significant was the SIGNIS prize, The World Catholic Association for Communication. Konstantin Lavronenko, emphasised how central this aspect was to the production, "I am also a believer, and so is Andrei. The Catholic jury prize is very precious to all of us, as are Christian values" (Lavronenko quoted in Paton-Walsh 2003: 10). This spiritual emphasis in the narrative was one of the primary reasons critics drew a connection



between Tarkovsky and Zvyagintsev on the film's release. Kenneth Turan described the film as "a biblical parable" (Turan 2004), Dave Kehr wrote that the film embodied the "grand tradition of Russian cinematic mysticism epitomized by Andrei Tarkovsky" (Keher 2004).

The messianic aura of the father had been established early in the film, with his mysterious arrival, the use of the Mantegna image and the fact that where he has been will never be revealed. Even the title of the film betrays its spiritual interests: *The Return* in Russian *Vozvrashchenie* means both the verb 'to return', the day 'Sunday' and 'resurrection'. The film takes place over seven days; the father will die on a Friday and is symbolically risen on the Sunday, like Christ.<sup>[9]</sup> Of course, this is compounded by his repeated association with fish and the overall theme of sacrifice. Yet if he is a religious figure the values he represents are ambiguous. He certainly is not a New Testament pantocratic Christ, rather a more severe Old Testament figure demanding, respect and obedience.

The numerous uses of water in a highly allegorical fashion further connect Zvyagintsev to Tarkovsky's oeuvre. Water has a particularly dense, lexically ambiguous system of connotations throughout Tarkovsky's work, representative of a diverse set of themes and concepts. It corresponds with Tarkovsky's erotetic fascination with nature as representative of the spiritual side of human existence which his work explores. Water is frequently used as a symbol of spirituality, purity, rebirth (baptism), motherhood, harmony, creativity and atonement (among others). It is often associated with happiness or acts as a link to childhood through femininity or to motherhood. Louis Menash wrote "*The Return* in its formal contours will immediately bring to mind the work and the film aesthetics of Andrei Tarkovsky. Zvyagintsev shares the late Russian master's hydrophilia; their films are waterlogged; rain is almost a member of the cast" (Menash 2004: 27). Water is used in a similarly figurative way in *The Return*; where the rain mirrors the changing relationship between the father and his boys, appearing from nowhere almost as a physical manifestation of Ivan's sense of rage directed towards his father after one of their arguments. This, the use of the lighthouse (connected to the mother and then later the father), and the image of the boys rowing across the lake in a torrential down pour, prompted Julian Graffy to assert "The placing of the story so firmly in the natural world is also evocative of Tarkovsky - the wind and the earth, and especially the rain and water of Tarkovsky's films are prominent here" (Graffy 2004: 64).<sup>[10]</sup>

After paying for the meal, the two boys wait outside the restaurant for their father to complete a mysterious phone call. They are accosted by a teenage criminal who demands their money, hits them and then runs off. When the father returns and sees what has happened he is disappointed in them both, it is yet another example of their inability to look after themselves. The father drives off slowly in pursuit, leaving the boys waiting yet again. In after-the-fact machismo Andrei comments "I hope he kills him, I would." To their surprise the father returns with the criminal himself, and challenges his son to exact their revenge, an eye for an eye, as Andrei himself had wished. Of course Andrei is unable to do it, as his brother had been too afraid to jump from the watchtower at the start of the film; such violence is not a part of their feminised world. Their weakness disgusts the father and he puts them on the bus to send them back home.

### **Beginnings and Endings**

I'm afraid there is no clue. You either perceive it or not. There are things which are without answers, and there is nobody who can explain them. Either we feel them and sense them, or not.

Sometimes we just give up and carry on. That's normal. I can't do much to help the members of the audience who don't understand certain things in the film. It would be like telling another person what that person is already seeing by himself. Art is not some sort of guideline for understanding. It's a thing unto itself. The most important thing for me is the image, not the thought.

(Zvyagintsev quoted in Gritten 2004: 22)

The father reconsiders and he takes them to a strange deserted island even further away from civilisation. To make it there they must journey over water and through a fierce storm on a small boat. The boys continue to challenge the father's alpha male status and Ivan even steals the symbol of his father's masculine authority, his knife. One recalls now the significance of where the photograph of the father was placed at the beginning of the film, next to the story of Abraham and Isaac, however, it is not one of the boys who will be sacrificed, but the father himself. After the boys return much later than they had promised from a fishing trip, the father strikes Andrei, the one most eager for his father's approval and attention, around the face. Ivan watches his father beat his brother before he pulls the knife and threatens to kill him if he does not stop.

After their confrontation Ivan abruptly flees running through the woods in an effort to get away from his father and the camera pauses to witness the father have some sort of revelation, the nature of which is highly ambiguous. Has he realised that his demanding and violent approach to authority is too strict? Both they and we the audience will never know.<sup>[11]</sup> He chases Ivan up an old wooden lighthouse which evokes the beginning of the film, apparently wishing to placate the boy but Ivan only sees it as more threats. Yet it seems that Ivan has now conquered his fear of heights and is able to both climb and stand almost without fear on top of the tower. Is it his father's harsh treatment of him that has turned him into a man? He threatens to jump if the father comes any closer, in a tragic echo of the game he played with his friends at the start of the film, but a rung of the primitive ladder the father clings to comes loose, sending him plummeting to his death, arms outstretched in a classic crucifixion pose.

Earlier we had been witness to the father retrieving a mysterious box from a hidden spot on the island. The contents of the box remain as unknown as the father's motives; is he just cruel and manipulative or is he guiding Ivan and Andrei through a necessary rites of passage so they can become men? Neither the audience, nor the boys will ever discover what is in the box, which joins a long list of cinematic Macguffins from *The 39 Steps* (Hitchcock, 1935), *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock, 1955) to *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994). A variety of theories have developed about what could be in the box and how it is connected to the past, but Zvyagintsev provides no clues, once again leaving it all to the imagination of the viewer. From a naturalistic perspective, the box may have been full of stolen money placed there before he was sent to prison, or it may contain a family heirloom that will prove to the boys that the father has loved them all along. If we approach the text as an allegory the hidden secret might be connected to the enduring legacy of communism, perhaps the repressed secrets of the gulag about which the country finds it difficult, even now, to come to terms with. Russia's perceptions of how the Communist era and in particular how Stalin should be remembered has been frequently debated on television and even in Russian courts in the last decade. When Joseph Stalin came third in a national poll to name Russia's greatest historical figure in 2008, there were accusations that he had actually won the poll but the organisers were too afraid to reveal the truth.<sup>[12]</sup> This interpretation casts the father as the strong leader it is often

claimed that Russians have historically desired above their liberty. This writer's interpretation is less prosaic but perhaps more emotionally resonant; the audience are denied knowledge of what is in the box, just as the boys are denied the opportunity of getting to know their father now that he is deceased.

After the father's death there is a marked change in the behaviour of the two boys. They cast aside their adolescent and immature bickering and work together in a way they had not been able to do before. There is a distinct sense that the father's death has proved a catalyst to propel them into manhood. They pull the father's dead body through the woods repeating his phrase 'with your hands, with your hands' among themselves. This, in some senses, legitimizes the father's authoritarian behaviour and implicitly reinforces what seems to be Zvyagintsev's troubling assertion that the women be blamed for the immaturity of the boys. Ivan and Andrei make it to the other side of the lake, but before they reach the shore the boat sinks and with it their father and the mysterious box inside. Instinctively Ivan calls out 'papa' for the first time, proving that it is only when something is lost that its true value is revealed. The images from the prologue of the film, two hours before, now make sense, the mysterious underwater vessel was the father's.

The ending of the film reveals the most self-conscious tribute to Tarkovsky of all, with a deliberate reconstruction of the final shot from *Mirror* down to the smallest of details. The boys drive away in their father's car leaving their father in the lake, perhaps as he would have wished. The camera lingers on the beach before moving slowly back into the woods as the world around darkens and darkens until it fades out.

The audience may recall that in the prologue there was no body in the boat and in the epilogue the father proves absent again from all the pictures of their journey which appear on the screen. The images are of the good times the boys have spent on their vacation and show nothing of the transformative hardships they have endured. The fact that the father does not appear in any of the photographs has prompted some to ask, was he even there? These absences, both literal and symbolic, emphasise what the whole family has lost and the trauma many families throughout Russia endure every day. One might ask, if the film is a return, what is it a return to? Of course, it is the literal return of the father, but it may just as well be a symbolic return to spirituality both inside and outside of the diegesis after the enforced secularity of the Communist years. It may also be a return to authoritarian rule, a return to nature or, most persuasively, a reconciliation with the past as a way of coming to terms with an uncertain future. It is this ambiguous, yet decidedly powerful resonance which makes *The Return* one of the defining post-soviet texts of the new millennium.

---

<sup>[1]</sup>See David Hancock, "Russian Cinema Develops strongly", *Screen Digest*, June 17 2008, [http://www.screendigest.com/reports/08\\_6\\_f5/Russian\\_cinema\\_develops\\_strongly/view.html](http://www.screendigest.com/reports/08_6_f5/Russian_cinema_develops_strongly/view.html).

<sup>[2]</sup>Press Release, "The Russian Federation joins Europe's big five cinema markets in 2008", *European Audiovisual Observatory*, Strasbourg, 9 February 2009, <http://www.obs.coe.int/about/oea/pr/berlinale2009.html>.

<sup>[3]</sup>See Sylvie Braibant, "Russia's New Wave Movies" *Le Monde Diplomatic* October 2006. Trans. Donalds Hounam. <http://mondediplo.com/2006/10/15cinema>. See also "Something has begun to swirl, some kind of "new wave" has surfaced. Everyone was waiting for it. The wait is over."Aleksandr Shapagin" Newly Sprouting Seedlings in the Rustling Field of Domestic Cinema" trans. Vladimir Padunov. *Kino Kultura* 10. October 2005. <http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/oct05-kinotavr.html>.

<sup>[4]</sup>Anatoly Chubais is an intriguing figure in contemporary Russian history, a member of Boris Yeltsin's administration he is regarded as one of the architects of privatization. Chrystia Freeland writes in *Sale of the Century: The Inside Story of the Second Russian Revolution* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), "It is hard to convey quite how hard most Russians hate Chubais who, even more than Gaidar, has come to personify the country's flawed capitalist revolution." p.48.

<sup>[5]</sup>A year after completing the film but prior to its release, Vladimir Garin the actor playing Andrei died in a scenario similar to the one which appeared in the film. He was dared by local girls to swim in the icy waters of Sinovetskoye Lake when he was caught in its dangerous currents and drowned.

<sup>[6]</sup>Tarkovsky said, "There is never anything left to chance in my films." "Faith Is the Only Thing That Can Save Man", *France Catholique*, 2060 (June 20, 1986), trans. John Gianvito, *Andrei Tarkovsky Interviews* p.181. He was specifically speaking about the balloon flying through the air at the beginning and end of *Solaris* (1972). Zvyagintsev himself said something very similar, "Everything has a meaning. Everything is predetermined." See Godfrey Cheshire, "The Prodigal father", (Review) *Indyweek.com*, May 12 2004, <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/the-prodigal-father/Content?oid=1192152>.

<sup>[7]</sup>In a 2008 interview Zvyagintsev revealed, "It could just be coincidence that the stories which moved me happened to be about families, but perhaps there is an element of substitution there too, because I feel that I myself never had a complete family. My father left me when I was six and ever since then I have moved from place to place. It felt like was living in a hotel." See Rebecca Davies, "Andrei Zvyagintsev Interview", *The Telegraph*, 12 August 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3558368/Andrei-Zvyagintsev-interview.html>

<sup>[8]</sup>While on the surface it seems there would be little to compare *The Return* to David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) they are both meditations on the crisis of modern masculinity, Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt) "We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need."

<sup>[9]</sup>Birgit Beumers stated, "In this cyclical structure lies also a viable interpretation of the film: history repeats itself, but people still fail to recognise the genuine father - Christ". *A History of Russian Cinema*, Berg: Oxford/New York, 2009.

<sup>[10]</sup>Zvyagintsev himself commented, "Nature is the fourth character of this drama" (Zvyagintsev quoted in Murphy 2004: 13).

<sup>[11]</sup>On the [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) message board many women seemed to suggest that this is the kind of father they would like for their children. User Y On stated, "By the way I'm a woman and a mother of boys, and after some time into the film, I started feeling, "Indeed, what more do you want of a father?" Yes, he is a bit too tough. Yes, he is a bit too insensitive and endangers his sons' lives. Yes, he is

likely to be reported to the authorities in any anglophone nation. But for the majority of the human societies, preparing the sons for the hard wild world and hardening the minds of the male children coming of age have been the main functions of a father. This father does it pretty well, and loses his own life in doing so; his ultimate sacrifice for his parternal (sic) love." See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0376968/board/thread/110384272>, 29 June 2008. Accessed 18 October 2010.

[12]See Luke Harding, "Stalin grandson in court fight to clear dictator's name", *The Guardian* Monday 14 September 2009. The battleground that is Stalin's reputation is being fought in a state sponsored drive in Russian schools and media. Even Putin was involved, "While promoting the market economy, Putin refused to join in the criticism of Soviet Communism. He urged that the achievements of Russia after the October 1917 Revolution should be given their due" Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia* (London: Penguin 1997), p.545.

## Bibliography

Beumers, Birgit. *A History of Russian Cinema*, Berg: Oxford/New York, 2009.

Braibant, Sylvie. "Russia's New Wave Movies" *Le Monde Diplomatic* October 2006. Trans. Donald Hounam.

Godfrey Cheshire, "The Prodigal father", (Review) *Indyweek.com*, May 12 2004, <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/the-prodigal-father/Content?oid=1192152>.

Davies, Rebecca. "Andrei Zvyagintsev Interview", *The Telegraph*, 12 August 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3558368/Andrei-Zvyagintsev-interview.html>

Felperin, Leslie. (Review) *Sight and Sound* n14 v7 (July 2004): 10-11.

Gianvito, John, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press Mississippi, 2007)

Graffy, Julian (Review) *Sight and Sound* v.14 n.7 (July 2004), p. 64.

Gritten, David "The director who came in from the cold," *The Daily Telegraph* (11/06/04), p.22.

David Hancock, "Russian Cinema Develops strongly", *Screen Digest*, June 17 2008, [http://www.screendigest.com/reports/08\\_6\\_f5/Russian\\_cinema\\_develops\\_strongly/view.html](http://www.screendigest.com/reports/08_6_f5/Russian_cinema_develops_strongly/view.html).

Harding, Luke. "Stalin grandson in court fight to clear dictator's name", *The Guardian* Monday 14 September 2009

Kehr, Dave (Review) *New York Times* (February 6<sup>th</sup> 2004)

Menash, Louis. (Review) *Cineaste* v.29 n.2 (Spring 2004): 25-27.

Monahan, Mark. "Boom time for Stollywood." *The Daily Telegraph* (3 July 2004)

Murphy, Carol. "Return to Nature", *Film Ireland*, 99 (July/August 2004):12-14.

Padunov, Vladimir. Kino Kultura 10. October 2005. <http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/oct/kinotavr.html>.

Paton-Walsh, Nick. "He is alive in my head." *The Guardian* (12<sup>th</sup> September 2003), p.10.

Press Release, "The Russian Federation joins Europe's big five cinema markets in 2008", *European Audiovisual Observatory*, Strasbourg, 9 February 2009, <http://www.obs.coe.int/about/oea/pr/berlinale2009.html>.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movies as Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)

Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia* (London: Penguin 1997)

Shapagin, Aleksandr "Newly Sprouting Seedlings in the Rustling Field of Domestic Cinema" trans.

Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).

Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Time Within Time The Diaries 1970-1986*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair, London: Faber and Faber 2002

Taylor, Ella. "Prodigal Dad: Filial Ecstasy and Agony in *The Return*" *L.A Weekly*. Feb 12 2004 <http://www.laweekly.com/2004-02-12/film-tv/prodigal-dad/>

Turan, Kenneth (Review) *Los Angeles Times* February 13<sup>th</sup> 2004

Žižek, Slavoj, "The Thing from Inner Space", *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl. (Durham, NC, and London 2000), pp. 232.

---

\* **Terence McSweeney** - Southampton Solent University, England

© 2010, IJORS - INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RUSSIAN STUDIES