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Tarkovsky - the 8th film

Reflexions on an 'electronic music opera' about Andrei Tarkovsky

“As an artist” explains Thomas Cornelius Desi, composer and director of the play, “one is concerned with recurrent ideas. If they come to assume the form of fixed thoughts or even obsessions, they might upsurge to life-issues. For me one such recurrent encounter is the Russian filmmaker Andrej Tarkovsky”¹.

The idea for this piece has a rather long history. After getting acquainted, in 2001, with the director's son, Andrei A. Tarkovsky junior, Desi deeply engaged not only with his films, but also with his theoretical writings, in the form of diaries as well as unrealized material. This research led the Austrian composer to score “Hoffmanniana” as an opera, a project which never came into production due to cuts to the budget of the “Bregenzer Festspiele”. This circumstance brought Desi to search for a novel adaptation of the libretto in the form of electronic music. The piece came finally to the stage in 2020, together with the trio »NIHE« (drift), which features Ekke Västriik in charge of analogical electronics, Tarmo Johannes as flutist and sound programmer, and Taavi Kerikmae taking up digital electronics. The fact that this libretto was brought into production with the aforementioned team, Johannes and Kerikmae are members of the Estonian Ensemble for new Music, is of particular significance. The main locations for the shooting of Tarkovsky's “Stalker”, were a former power plant in Talinn that has now become a cultural center, and a river at the periphery of the city. By the time of the filming, 1976, the water was poisoned with toxic waste from a paper mill. This was the likely cause of the multiple cancer related diseases that occurred amongst the production team, including the filmmaker and his wife.

Over 57 minutes, the spectator is confronted with an intense exchange between music and theatre, played out upon a very minimalist, but nevertheless highly technological scenario: two “real” actors, Tarkovsky (Gilbert Handler) and the Robot (KUKA), are accompanied by three “virtual” *personae* : Mischa, Tarkovsky's wife, (Gotho Griesmeier), Boris, the commissioner of the 8th Film (Martin

¹Thomas Cornelius Desi, Juni 2020.

Achrainer) and a synchronized chatbot². The stage setting, orchestrated visually by Peter Kogler, is in strong resonance with the content of the play.

In the middle of the piece, Boris expresses a peculiar request concerning the commission, “I want a document of the human soul!”

One scene later Tarkovsky counteracts, by presenting his point of view, “A film about nothing. A film about what happens when consciousness has come to an end. We reach emptiness”.

Between this discourse, Boris meditates upon time: “Finally, time is not a thing, but an idea [...]. If everyone is happy, there will be no time, because it is not anymore needed”.

It is this form of crystallization of void time, placed at the very center of the play, which constitutes the pivotal moment of tension between music and theatre, virtuality and actuality, and finally, art and life. This is the point where Desi’s play meets Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Tarkovsky, expressed in the second book of his work on Cinema³.

According to Deleuze, the crystal corresponds to the “formation of an image with two sides, the actual and the virtual”, whereby the virtual corresponds to the actual like a “double” or a “reflection”:

“the real object is reflected in a mirror-image as the virtual object which, from its side and simultaneously, envelops and reflects the real”.

The crystal is therefore the “smallest circle”, the “most restricted circuit of the actual image and *its* virtual image which carries everything and serves as an internal limit. [...] There is no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual, the latter becoming virtual through the same relation: it is a place and its obverse, which are totally reversible”⁴.

The mutual resonance between actual and virtual is the operation by which the crystal image acquires its own degree of reality. Instead of depicting a psychological state of consciousness, it comes to constitute an abstract dimension of “pure recollection”.

²Thomas Cornelius Desi, „Tarkovsky – Der achte Film“, electronic opera, libretto, 2019 - 2020.

³Deleuze Gilles, “Cinema 2, the Time Image”, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989. On the relation between Tarkovsky and cristal, see pag. 129.

⁴Ibid, 69.

Coming back to the play, the idea of the “double” gaining its own form of life is particularly accentuated in the splitting of Mischa. Four women are projected onto a gauze. Small diverging particulars can be observed intermittently; in other scenes the figures turn out to be identical. We see that the visual signs operate on two different levels: the expression of singular and unique traits parallels the concern of the *Gestalt* as a whole⁵. Despite their projection onto a two-dimensional frame, the vocal performances of the four Micha’s enable them to gain a progressively enhancing corporeal and organic reality. The spectator is brought back to their digital nature in the moment of their sudden and synchronous disappearance.

The human and non-human actors are enclosed in their own world, or monad, as Leibniz would say. Each is bound to a peculiar *milieu*, incompatible with that of the others. The ping pong game between Tarkovsky and the chatbot at the beginning: “Are you ok?” “I’m Not OK” “You’re OK, I’m Not OK”..., introduces a form of dissonance which will continue for the entirety of the play. The specific digital or analog realm ascribed to each performer, agrees with the production of her or his own form of interiority; it evolves according to its peculiar logic of enunciation. Despite the persistent presentation of multiple dimensions enclosed in themselves, a kind of multiplicity of separate universes, Desi ties the work together through his music. In this respect, music emerges in its own form of specificity: the development of subtle processes of transcoding between analogue and digital sources. This element leads towards the counteractualisation of the theatrical monologues. The logic of closure produced by speech, is countered by a subtle form of *melodic* inter-expression⁶: each singular monad acquires a specific form of resonance working in conjunction with all the others.

The final scene presents Tarkovsky dancing in his own virtual reality world, but being nevertheless mimicked by the robot, who imitates his movements and brings them to completion. We glimpse the possibility of a line of flight, an escape leading outside the logic of a solipsistic void: the sound of a flute coming from the back of the stage engenders a refrain between the human and the non-human thus opening the possibility for a fragile form of collective aesthetic affirmation.

⁵Cfr. in this regard the following remark by Deleuze: “Tarkovsky calls his text “On the cinematographic figure”, because he calls figure that which expresses the “typical”, but expresses it in a pure singularity, something unique”. *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶On the usage of this concept cfr. Jean Clet Martin “L’image virtuelle, essai sur la construction du monde”, Paris, Kimé, 1996, 58.