

Dreams, mirrors and subjective filtration in *Ivan's Childhood*

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Abstract

Though Ivan's Childhood (1962) is often viewed in the context of Andrei Tarkovsky's later masterpieces it easily stands on its own considerable merits, offering a compelling synthesis of form and theme. This article examines the thematic implications of the film's complex narrative structure and its bold manipulation of perspective. Tarkovsky's first feature-length film uses prominent visual motifs, such as mirrors and mirrored images, across two distinct, yet occasionally interacting narrative planes. An analysis of the shifts in spatial attachments, objective and subjective camera angles sheds new light on the relationship between the title character Ivan and Lieutenant Gal'tsev, as well as the film's enigmatic closing scene. Far from being an extradiegetic coda tacked on by a young and inexperienced artist, the final dream sequence fits quite naturally into the narrative progression of the film despite the logical contradiction that the apparent dreamer, Ivan, is dead when it takes place.

Keywords

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Ivan's Childhood/Ivanovo detstvo (1962) occupies an unusual place in the remarkable career of Andrei Tarkovsky. It was his first feature-length film and immediately established the young film-maker as a major creative force in world cinema, winning the top prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1962 and drawing praise from such luminaries as Ingmar Bergman and Jean-Paul Sartre. Yet somehow, in the two decades since Tarkovsky's death this amazing film has met with relative neglect. There is no shortage of excellent critical literature dealing with *Ivan's Childhood* but the work has yet to receive the same intense scrutiny devoted to the later films.

In some respects, the blame for this may lie with the director himself. While *Ivan's Childhood* may not reach the visual beauty and artistic grace of its immediate successor, *Andrei Rublev* (1966), Tarkovsky did little to help the reputation of the film by dismissing it, in later years, as a 'qualifying examination', a test to determine his abilities as a film-maker (Tarkovsky 1986: 27). Though it is difficult to accept such a statement at face value there is some justification in a similar assessment reached by Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie: 'it is almost, in hindsight, as if the young prodigy were showing off what he *could* do – though the virtuoso, expressionistic camerawork, odd angles, moodily atmospheric lighting, and occasional heavy-handed symbolism are all discarded or modified later' (Johnson and Petrie 1994: 187; emphasis in the original).

1. For the most part, the use of the term 'narration' in this essay will conform to David Bordwell's definition in *Narration in the Fiction Film*: 'the process whereby the syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula' (Bordwell 1985: 53). Spatial attachment, a term borrowed by Kristin Thompson from Boris Uspensky, refers to the way a film narrative may 'guide itself via the presence of certain characters within the action' (Thompson 1988: 174).

It is certainly true, as they note, that much of what Tarkovsky does with camera movement, angles and lighting in this film is later abandoned, but this in no way diminishes its finely tuned narrative structure. Even if one disregards the strained circumstances in which this film was made, what the young director *could* do, and indeed did at this early stage of his career was nothing short of extraordinary. *Ivan's Childhood*, like the later masterpieces, offers a compelling synthesis of form and content and culminates in a final sequence that has yet to be fully appreciated or analysed. This essay seeks to provide a closer narrative analysis of the director's first film than has yet been given and a more thorough evaluation of its enigmatic conclusion. An examination of the dream sequences, spatial attachments and manipulation of perspective shows just how fully the young director integrates style and content at this early stage in his career – particularly in the use of mirrors as dominant structural and thematic factors.¹ Far from being an extradiegetic coda added by a novice film-maker, the film's oneiric epilogue, one of the most emotionally powerful scenes in the Tarkovsky oeuvre, is the natural resolution of everything that precedes it. Despite claims that he 'left the reins slack' in the conception and realization of the film, *Ivan's Childhood* is in fact a tightly controlled and deftly orchestrated work by an artist already in full command of his medium (Tarkovsky 1986: 27).

Like *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979), *Ivan's Childhood* is adapted from a literary work. Vladimir Bogomolov's 'Ivan' was written in 1958; it is the story of a 12-year-old Russian scout fighting the Nazi invasion, told by Lieutenant Gal'tsev, a Soviet officer himself barely out of his teens. Excepting some considerable additions from the young director, the film follows the fundamental plot of the story quite closely. Returning from a scouting mission, Ivan is brought before Gal'tsev, who vainly attempts to interrogate the child and eventually puts him into contact with Colonel Griaznov, the local chief of army intelligence, and Captain Kholin, the third of the story's main characters. The central action takes place over approximately one week, during which plans are made for an upcoming offensive and another reconnaissance mission for Ivan across the Dnieper and into occupied territory. As with the overwhelming majority of Soviet scouts serving in the war, Ivan does not return from the mission. His fate is only learned later when Gal'tsev, sifting through the ruins of Berlin, discovers a dossier recounting the boy's capture and execution.

This basic outline of the plot serves as a point of departure for Tarkovsky, whose film then leaves behind Bogomolov's text. As he observed in *Sculpting in Time*, 'I saw the content of the story as merely a possible basis, the vital essence of which would have to be reinterpreted in the light of my own vision of the finished film' (Tarkovsky 1986: 18). But unlike many film adaptations, the difference lies in addition rather than subtraction. Though he seldom deviates from the main points of the plot, the film-maker is clearly more concerned with the inner lives of his characters than military realism or displays of bravery and heroic sacrifice. Indeed, these are secondary concerns, incidental to what is at the heart of the film. This is not to say that Tarkovsky does not display a considerable amount of loyalty to his source. A survey of his narrative technique reveals that in many ways the film keeps surprisingly close to

the first-person narration of Bogomolov's story. During roughly the first half of the film, the narration remains tightly attached to the title character, often showing the world of his dreams and the dark reality of the war through the filter of his consciousness and only rarely leaving him for any length of time. Gradually, however, a shift is made favouring the perspective of Gal'tsev; as in Bogomolov's story, the world that the audience perceives and the information that it comes to know over the latter half of the film is relayed primarily through Gal'tsev's consciousness.

Spatial attachment and filtration: the first dream sequences

Opening with the first of four dream sequences, which together with the waking dreams of Ivan and Gal'tsev constitute Tarkovsky's most striking addition to Bogomolov's story, the initial attachment to Ivan is total; he is, with the exception of the woman immediately identified as his mother, the only character featured in the dream. Yet the nature of this attachment is variable. The audience is granted access to the mental world of the character but the fact that we see Ivan within the dream creates a degree of objectification in this and later sequences. Though the film begins with a shot of Ivan standing beside a tree and looking out through a spider's web, perspective in this sequence frequently moves from such objective angles to perceptual filtration, a term used by Seymour Chatman to describe instances where images and sounds are relayed to the viewer 'as if the narrator sat somewhere inside or just this side of the character's consciousness and strained all events through the character's sense of them' (Chatman 1990: 144; emphasis in the original). Such a shift occurs with the second shot of the film: an uncomfortably close view of a goat immediately followed by a shot of Ivan looking. Moments later a moth flits across the sunlit field succeeded by a shot of the boy not only looking but also tracing the motion of the insect with his eyes. A similar series follows as Ivan rises through the trees and a cut is made to a shot imitating his gaze as he descends a hill. As we will see, what the director does with editing reveals a great deal about the film's overarching thematic concerns. The alternation of objective shots with filtration is a crucial component of his narrative technique, one which evolves considerably over the course of the film.

The first dream concludes, as does the second, with the apparent death of Ivan's mother and he awakes in a wholly different environment. The grim world of wartime Ukraine in 1943 presents a stark contrast to the bright, summer world of the dream and this opposition is further underscored in a series of negative relationships, realized by the movement of the boy in relation to the viewer's perspective as well as the movement of the camera itself. Returning to the opening shot of the film, Ivan quickly moves away from the web and out of the frame to the left just before the camera rises to the top of the tree. As it stops, Ivan reappears, moving back into the frame from the left but now at a considerable distance from his initial position. After he awakes from the dream these positions and movements are reversed. As the boy steps out of the windmill in which he has been hiding the camera is set at a distance from the character. Ivan again exits the frame to the left and quickly reappears in the immediate foreground, having completed, in reverse, the same elliptical motion found

in the first shot of the dream. Within moments he is making his way through a dark swamp and there is another reversal of the opening shot. As Ivan approaches through the stagnant water the camera descends along the trunk of a dead tree, a counterpoint to the live birch of the first shot, and comes to rest as he negotiates a line of barbed wire; a negative and unnatural variation of the web framing his face earlier in the film. Thus, from the outset, the film establishes two inverse and, for the moment, divergent narrative planes.

The second dream sequence furthers this distinction but at the same time subtle clues suggest the barrier between the two may be more fluid than at first glance. Following the credits, which roll as Ivan crosses the Dnieper, we are first introduced to Lieutenant Gal'tsev. Detained by a Russian sentry, Ivan is brought before the young officer and immediately demands to be put in contact with Colonel Griaznov. Once the boy's identity is established and his scouting report completed, Gal'tsev provides him with a bath, dinner and a bed. Seconds after the boy pushes away the food, the camera again assumes his perspective as the kerosene lamp at which he stares begins to sway and fall. A more objective stance is taken a moment later as Gal'tsev carries the exhausted boy to bed but as the camera scans the room it quickly becomes apparent that reality is giving way to dream and for the next few seconds both the character and the narration straddle the two worlds. Visually this is realized by the shot of the Ivan's hand hanging over the side of the bed, which is realistically motivated, and the water dripping from it into a waiting basin, which belongs to the dream. A confusion of spatial relationships and distortions of reality are characteristic of all the pre-oneiric sequences, as is the use of filtration just before the slip into the alternate narrative plane. This scene in particular is a fitting illustration of Slavoj Žižek's observation that

[t]he typical stance of the Tarkovskian hero on the threshold of the dream is to be on the lookout for something, with his sense fully focused and alert; then, all of a sudden, as if through a magical transubstantiation, the most intense contact with material reality changes it into a dreamscape.

(Žižek 2000: 250)

Thus the sound of dripping water on the diegetic plane gives rise to the vision of water within the dream and from a shot of the child in bed the camera rises up the wall, revealing it to be at the bottom of a well with a second Ivan looking down from the top. At this point it would seem the character has split; the dream Ivan is different from the sleeping boy. However, consistent with the dream narrative, identity, as well as spatial relationships, is in a constant state of flux. In a moment the dream Ivan has invisibly moved to the bottom of the well, attempting to grasp the star floating just beneath the surface of the water. As in the first sequence, the boy is accompanied by his mother and it is again her death and the child's cries that drive away the oneiric tranquillity.

The integration of dream and reality

That Ivan is a child divided between the bitter reality of the war and the pastoral vision of his dreams is a point no student of the film has failed to

observe. The smiling Ivan at the top of the well is a striking contrast to the dirty boy that barks orders to the flustered Gal'tsev in the scenes preceding the dream. But while the oneiric sequence underlines this contrast, it also sets in motion a tendency, which gathers momentum as the film progresses, of establishing connections between the worlds of dream and reality.

A subjective shot just before Ivan appears at the bottom of the well shows that he and his mother are actually staring at their own reflections, one of many mirror images linking the disparate narrative planes. By breaking the surface of the water, reaching through his own reflection as it were, the dream Ivan, the inverse double of the hostile child soldier, is reaching out to the sleeping boy on the realistic plane. His invisible move to the bottom of the well also suggests that the boy of the dream descends from a higher level, attempting to grasp a light in the midst of darkness. The move is the first of a series in which the divergent worlds of the film are drawn closer. For the moment, however, the death of the mother seems to keep any such connection from becoming firmly established. The precocious, embittered soldier still reveals little in the waking world that would link him to the child of the dreams and, as in the pre-credit sequences, the transition from dream to reality is abrupt and disturbing.

The interpenetration of oneiric and waking planes takes a major step forward a short time later when Ivan, carrying out his threat to join a partisan detachment should Griaznov decide to send him away from the front, encounters an elderly man combing through the ruins of his *izba*. Though the sequence undoubtedly takes place on the realistic plane, it overtly references oneiric motifs and even assumes the same editing rhythm. Generally, shot length on the realistic plane is considerably longer than in the dreams. In the first three shots of the preceding scene, where Ivan confronts Griaznov in a field office and makes his threat, the initial shot is over a minute in length, the second nearly thirty seconds, and the third again roughly a minute. While these are brief according to Tarkovsky's later standards, the pace of editing is far slower than what we find on the oneiric plane. To take a conservative example, the first shot of the film, at 24 seconds, is uncharacteristically long for a dream sequence. The next three shots, however, last 2, 8 and 4 seconds respectively. Space does not allow for a more thorough consideration of shot length in *Ivan's Childhood* but the divergent patterns demonstrated here remain consistent throughout the film.

The disruption of this consistency makes the scene at the *izba* all the more unsettling. The first shot, of Ivan approaching the ruins, continues the relatively long takes characteristic of the realistic plane. As the boy lies down in a decrepit shack, however, there is an immediate POV shot of what he sees through the roof, recalling the filtered shot of the lamp just before the second dream. As in the dreams, shots begin to move in rapid succession but here are broken by a lengthy reminder that the boy remains in the real world of the war. In less than a second, a rooster flies to the top of a post and begins to crow. Immediately Ivan rises and there is another rapid cut to the figure of the old man quickly followed by a half-second shot of Ivan beginning to approach. The next shot, at nearly two minutes, is one of the longest of the film, breaking the dreamlike rhythm and deepening the tragic reality in which the characters find

themselves. As the old man speaks it is revealed for the first time what the dreams have only suggested: Ivan's mother has been killed in the war, as has the old man's wife. The latter has difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality; organizing the ashes of his home for his wife's return and equating a missing nail with the soldier that killed her. Once the oneiric rhythm is restored, the integration of dream and reality is underscored by images of a well standing just outside the ruins and a burned-out tree, foreshadowing the final image of the film. The arrival of Griaznov, Kholin and Katasonych, while prompting the old man to hide, does not entirely dispel the oneiric atmosphere. Though shots return to their normal rhythm, Tarkovsky explicitly references the previous dream when Ivan leaves food for the old man at the mouth of the well.

The tentative interpenetration of the alternate planes in this scene marks a new stage in the developing narrative strategy and a prelude to the waking dream early in the second half of the film. By this point, the tight spatial attachment to the title character throughout the first half of the film has begun to wane. Following the scene at the *izba* the boy is absent (and barely mentioned) for over ten minutes of screen time. Instead, Tarkovsky briefly digresses into a fledgling love affair between Kholin and the young medical officer Masha – the only significant character in the film to have absolutely no contact with Ivan. His absence continues as Kholin, Katasonych and Gal'tsev peer over to the German side from the trenches and initial plans are made for the coming mission. With Ivan's reappearance it soon becomes clear that while the spatial attachment to the character resumes, it has now assumed a significantly altered form. Already in the film, Gal'tsev has served as a primary conduit for *fabula* information but now facts about the boy's past and his ultimate fate are relayed only as this character becomes acquainted with them.

This move, part of a gradual process shifting the film's centre of gravity over to Gal'tsev, keeps Tarkovsky consistent with Bogomolov's text but it also allows him to inject an original thematic dimension. Beyond merely telling the story of the young scout and his exploits, Tarkovsky's Gal'tsev serves as the focal point for actively engaging the audience in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the child. As Denise Youngblood has observed, 'Gal'tsev serves as the picture's moral center' (Youngblood 2007: 126) and it is through this centre that the inner life of the child, first glimpsed in the early dreams, is conclusively revealed. Though his position is less explicit than Tarkovsky's later protagonists, Gal'tsev is at the centre of the film's search for harmony or some kind of spiritual value in the midst of the war's chaotic destruction. Indeed, it is with this quest and the revelation of a higher reality through the medium of the dreams that the film-maker really makes Bogomolov's story his own.

The waking dream

The new variant in spatial attachment commences when Ivan finally reappears in the abandoned church that serves as Gal'tsev's quarters. As Kholin and Katasonych repair a broken phonograph, Gal'tsev listens in on their plans for crossing the river. Sitting with Ivan over a captured album of Dürer engravings, his attention is divided between the boy with the book and the conversation between the two adults. Stopping at *The Four*

Horsemen of the Apocalypse, we learn bits and pieces of Ivan's life during the war as he singles out one of the skeletal riders for his resemblance to a German motorcyclist. Dürer's *Portrait of Ulrich Varnbühler* inspires a more detailed recollection. Arguing that the Germans cannot have writers, Ivan recounts how he himself had witnessed the burning of books in a village square, how the ashes hung in the air for a week afterwards.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this scene is that it is one of the few instances in which perceptual filtration is used in a wholly realistic setting. As Ivan speaks with Gal'tsev the camera tracks his gaze, following the signals given by his off-screen voice and pausing on the figures of the riders and their victims as they are mentioned. These images, however, are intercut with shots from Gal'tsev's perspective as he listens in on the other conversation. A critical movement occurs a second later during an unobtrusive cut in which Ivan turns to the *Portrait of Ulrich Varnbühler*. Following a shot of both Ivan and Gal'tsev looking at the portrait, their discussion continues over a close-up of the image, suggesting that we have moved from single to multiple filtration. The shot is primarily imitative of Ivan's gaze but Gal'tsev's voice, discussing the subject with the boy, indicates that it is also representative of his point of view. This fusion of perspectives, here at an initial stage of development, will play a crucial role in the latter half of the film.

Attention to the characters is now split as Gal'tsev accompanies Kholin and Katasonych to the river (uncovering the boats he has hidden), and Ivan remains in the abandoned church. Though we learn crucial details about the boy's life in the scene with the three men, this section of the film is dominated by the intensity of Ivan's waking dream. Alone in the church, his game of war is interrupted by frightening images and sounds that seem to dwell on the fringes of dream and reality. What results is one of the most disturbing and mystifying sequences of the film. Thus far dreams have been marked by shots of the character falling asleep or waking up. The scene in the church gives no such indicators; it is evident that the boy is awake, but the bizarre sounds and images are clearly not part of waking reality. Unlike the pastoral oneiric settings, the fusion of waking fantasy and reality creates a frightening glimpse into Ivan's psyche, as if the child's mind were opened and its horrific contents allowed to spill out onto the screen. This is what Ivan sees when he is awake and what pushes him through to the end of his brief life. Once again, Tarkovsky's manipulation of narrative perspective creates a deeper thematic dimension and continues the structural development initiated in previous sequences. In contrast to the second dream or the encounter at the *izba*, we do not enter the scene through the visual assumption of the child's gaze but rather through an aural representation of what occurs within his consciousness as reality collapses.²

The waking dream begins with an objective shot of Ivan raising the bell and then stalking an imaginary enemy but this narrative stance shifts almost immediately as a German voice unexpectedly fills the room. Though we remain with the same objective shot of the boy crawling on the floor this voice and the chaotic music that accompanies it signal the entry into his consciousness the shift into perceptual filtration upon which the entire presentation of the sequence hinges. The next shots

2. Interestingly, this is also the case in the first dream of the film, where the sounds of the cuckoo are heard before Ivan appears on the screen. It is reversed at the end when the drumbeat continues after the screen has gone dark.

move us more fully into the child's mind. Now imitating his gaze, the camera follows his flashlight as it scans the walls and corners of the room. Like the previous dreams, there appears to be an alternation between strict filtration and objective shots but close examination reveals this is not quite the case. Though Ivan will soon reappear on the screen, we remain locked within his gaze. Following the motion of the light, the camera eventually comes to rest on a message scrawled earlier in the war by young Soviet prisoners. As the camera and the light move over the words Ivan suddenly steps into the frame – into his own field of vision. Though he still holds the flashlight in his hand, the thin ray of light illuminating the wall continues to come from a different direction. Still tracking the boy's gaze, the camera again scans the room. In quick succession it moves from Ivan to a figure lying on the floor. Moving towards and then away from Ivan as he walks across the room, the camera (still following the flashlight) then finds the familiar figure of the mother huddled against the wall. When we again find Ivan he looks directly into the camera with his back to a mirror, underscoring the split in the character's psyche and marking a transitional space between the two levels of reality colliding within his consciousness. Again we move to the mother and back to Ivan just before the camera descends to a low-angle shot of the bell, which he raised in the first moments of the sequence. Concluding this portion of the waking dream, and marking a return to relative objectivity, there is a reverse-angle cut to Ivan rising from a position corresponding precisely to the perceptual angle of the previous shot. Thus everything that has just come across the screen, including the images of Ivan before the mirror and the message, has been relayed directly through the eyes of the child.

Instances of filtration continue as the scene nears its conclusion, now interspersed with more traditional objective shots. Ivan approaches and then rings the bell but stops as the voices on the soundtrack give way to the sounds of cheering. It is worth noting here that these are exactly the same cheers that pour from the soundtrack as Kholin grasps (but does not ring) the bell just before the film transitions into the epilogue. As with this later scene, the bell continues to sound though no one is actually ringing it. And it is here that the hidden child in Ivan finally seems to break into the realistic plane. Confronting a captured German he has conjured up through the image of an empty coat (another motif repeated in the epilogue) the boy collapses into tears as German shells begin to rain down on the Soviet camp.

Mirror images: Ivan, Gal'tsev and the narrative structure of *Ivan's Childhood*

In the two sequences that follow, though seemingly minor in comparison with the waking dream, the mirror returns as a prominent visual motif. As the barrage continues around him, Gal'tsev hurries back to the church to check on Ivan. Bursting into the room, he comes to a stop in the foreground of the frame just before the boy's reflection steps into the mirror (*Figure 1*). Ivan assures him that he is not afraid and the film returns to the bombardment, concluding with a shot of a cross slowly coming into the sunlight. Back in the church, the positions of the two characters have

been reversed; it is Gal'tsev's reflection in the mirror with the child now in the foreground (*Figure 2*).

Johnson and Petrie have noted that in Tarkovsky's films mirrors are commonly associated with questions of identity, its discovery or distortion (Johnson and Petrie 1994: 224). Undoubtedly, this is the case in the above



Figures 1 and 2: Ivan's Childhood. Courtesy of The Criterion Collection and Films by Jove.

3. Associations between characters involving reflections continues in the director's later films, particularly *Mirror*, in which Aleksei's estranged wife looks into a mirror and sees his mother, and *Nostalgia*, when in a dream Gorchakov sees the face of Domenico in place of his own.

scenes but far from exhausting the possibilities. The waking dream, in which the mirror is the central image, is essentially the boy looking within himself and finding his waking consciousness dominated by loss, hatred and the desire for revenge. In this sense, the mirror quite clearly serves as a device amplifying the boy's inward gaze. What then of these later scenes, in which the mirror remains a dominant motif? The reversed positions of Ivan and Gal'tsev in the two sequences following the waking dream do not allude to a questioning of the boy's identity but rather seem to open it up for a connection, even a shared identity with Gal'tsev.³ While it is the case, as Johnson and Petrie have noted, that this scene illustrates the inability of the two characters to communicate (Johnson and Petrie 1994: 224), it should be stressed that this non-communication exists only on the surface. The two may often be at odds outwardly, but Tarkovsky's sophisticated narrative approach goes to great lengths in encouraging the viewer to form a solid association between the characters.

The link between Ivan and Gal'tsev, to be sure, does not begin with the reversal of their positions next to the mirror. As already discussed, spatial attachment undergoes a gradual shift over the course of the film in favour of the lieutenant and concludes with an exclusive attachment to him in the film's epilogue – a complete reversal of the attachment to Ivan in the credit sequences before the titles. On a larger scale, the mirror is not only a physical device within the diegesis but an overriding structural principle of Tarkovsky's narrative. If we consider the link between Ivan and Gal'tsev forged by the mirror in the scene following the waking dream, its possible antecedents, and the direction this association takes later, we see just how fully reflections and mirror images permeate nearly every aspect of the film.

Fortunately, Tarkovsky does not overuse the mirror as a symbol but rather sets it in a continuous chain of homologous images, which develop and expand throughout the film on both sides of the story/discourse partition. For instance, the well in which Ivan sees his reflection during the second dream coalesces into the church's mirror of the waking dream and in the two scenes with Gal'tsev. But long before this, Tarkovsky has been using mirror images as a narrative device, both to draw a distinction between the alternative worlds of the film and create associations between Ivan and the lieutenant. Robert Bird's observation of glass surfaces in Tarkovsky's films serving as 'a space of mediation' between realms is particularly relevant in this regard (Bird 2008: 212). As we have seen, it is through the mirror of his reflection that the dream Ivan reaches into the waking world, it is through the mirror that he looks into himself during the waking dream, and it is within this space that the characters of Gal'tsev and Ivan are united. The mirror functions as a transitional point between the two worlds but also unifies the two characters at a higher level. From the opening frames of *Ivan's Childhood*, Tarkovsky uses a series of graphic matches to actively encourage the viewer to link the two characters, despite their obvious differences on the surface of the text. These matches, shots consisting of similar compositional patterns and elements spread out over the course of the film, repeatedly reinforce a largely unseen connection between the two and, perhaps most importantly, set the stage for the fusion of

the characters in the film's epilogue. Interestingly, the development of this technique seems to be coordinated with the shift in spatial attachment discussed above. Shots early in the film are usually matched after considerable portions of screen time have elapsed. But as narrative gravity slides over to Gal'tsev, matches increasingly appear in almost immediate succession.

The first shot of the film, as we have already seen, is negatively matched twice in the sequences that follow: Ivan is framed by the web and, a short time later, barbed wire. Jumping ahead to the epilogue, there is a similar shot of Gal'tsev, now in the ruins of Berlin, framed by a strand of barbed wire as he experiences his own variation of the waking dream. A more precise and thematically crucial match is made in this early scene when Gal'tsev rises from the bed to interrogate Ivan. As he sits on the bed, the message from the murdered prisoners is plainly visible on the wall behind him (*Figure 3*). When Gal'tsev rises the camera lingers for a moment on the message. Just before the final mission across the river there is a reversal of the shot as the characters sit in silence before starting out. Now it is Ivan sitting before the writing in an exact reversal of Gal'tsev's position earlier in the film (*Figure 4*). Once again, as he rises and moves out of the frame, the camera stays behind and the writing comes into clearer focus.

While these matches take place more or less at the fringes of the film, many of the more significant ones occur at the centre, near the point of narrative transition. In addition to the match with the mirrors, we have another key moment when the characters are looking over the Dürer album. It has already been noted that this is perhaps a case of the narration alternating single and multiple filtration within the space of a single shot, but further unifying the gazes of the two characters is a match of their faces between the filtered shots. In both (*Figures 5 and 6*) the bottom half of the face is covered and their eyes isolated within the frame.

The most important of these visual rhymes have less to do with composition than with movement. Ivan's third dream, in which he rides in the back of an apple truck with a young girl, takes place not long before he sets out with Kholin and Gal'tsev on the final mission. By far the most peaceful and reassuring of the four dreams, the sequence exhibits several key differences separating it from its predecessors. Notably, the absence of Ivan's mother (this is the only dream without her) and the fact that this is the first dream sequence in which there is no perceptual filtration of what the child sees from within the oneiric plane. In fact, for much of the sequence the camera maintains an uncharacteristic distance from the child, suggesting perhaps that the dream does not even belong wholly to Ivan. General spatial attachment has already begun to shift away from him and it is no coincidence that his sister, if she is indeed the girl in the dream, appears only after Gal'tsev has been made aware of her on the realistic plane. It is impossible not to notice the strong resemblance of the little girl in the dream to Masha and worth recalling that Ivan has absolutely no contact with this character (his presence in the camp is a secret even from the other soldiers) while Gal'tsev, though he tries to disguise it, is obviously quite taken with her. Of course, it can be assumed that this is just how the sister looked but the possibility that Gal'tsev plays a role in the composition of this dream, that this sequence may be a projection of his consciousness

4. Unlike the mother of the dreams, there is some doubt as to the identity of this girl. She appears to match Ivan in terms of age, though certainly not in appearance. If indeed the child in the dream is his sister, this marks a rather strong deviation from Bogomolov's story, in which her age is given as approximately 18 months.



Figures 3 and 4: Ivan's Childhood. Courtesy of The Criterion Collection and Films by Jove.

as well as Ivan's, is too great to be fully discounted, particularly in view of what occurs just before Ivan falls asleep.⁴

At dinner, Kholin has just announced that Katasonych will not be going on the mission (Gal'tsev learns a short time later that he has in fact been killed) and Gal'tsev is going in his place. As Ivan leaves the table to



Figures 5 and 6: Ivan's Childhood. Courtesy of The Criterion Collection and Films by Jove.

lie down on the cot, Kholin launches into a characteristic admonishment of the young officer. The camera here executes a whip pan, catching Gal'tsev just as he folds his hands behind his head and answers the rebukes with the rhetorical question, 'And what am I, a child?' (Figure 7) followed by a cut to Ivan making the exact same motion with his hands as he lies



Figures 7 and 8: Ivan's Childhood. Courtesy of The Criterion Collection and Films by Jove.

on the bed (*Figure 8*). In a move characteristic of all pre-oneiric sequences, the narration shifts into perceptual filtration as Ivan's eyes scan the ceiling above him and come to rest on the message scrawled into the wall. The shot is at an impossible angle from his position on the bed but it would fall easily within Gal'tsev's field of vision from his seat at the table. As in

the scene over the Dürer album, the camera here mingles Ivan's gaze with that of the lieutenant in the space of a single shot.

Taken in isolation, these observations do not definitively establish that Gal'tsev is, even partially, a perceptual source of the third dream. However, when we consider the final dream of the film and the events leading up to it, this tentative fusion of perspective and consciousness emerges as yet another stage in Tarkovsky's unfolding narrative approach, a precursor to what is perhaps the most perplexing scene in an already complicated work.

Synthesis: the epilogue

The final dream of *Ivan's Childhood* could easily be misinterpreted as a loose end tacked on by an overly enthusiastic young film-maker. Critical literature on the film has suggested several possible ways of understanding the dream and most find it ambiguous enough to allow for several possible interpretations. Succinctly summing up the problem, Johnson and Petrie (1994: 75) observe: 'The earlier dreams are slotted naturalistically into the sequence of events, but this one takes place after the dreamer is dead'. But perhaps this is only partially true. That the dream recalls images from Ivan's life before the war and from the earlier dreams (which clearly do belong to him) is not in doubt but we must remember that by this point in the film the narration has shifted its attachment to Gal'tsev. Nearly everything we see and hear is dependant on his mediation within the text and it is reasonable to assume that this final dream also passes through the consciousness of the character. In fact, this idea has been suggested before but never really pursued. In one of the first comprehensive studies of Tarkovsky's films Peter Green suggests, but does not demonstrate, that the dream may have its source in the character of Gal'tsev, who is visualizing a scene from the boy's life before the war. He goes on to hypothesize that the dream may be 'a product of that merging of identities that was later to become a central feature of Tarkovsky's work' (Green 1993: 35). More recently, Gerard Loughlin (2008: 86) has also suggested that this final sequence may be a shared vision. Considering what we have already observed, this explanation is more than plausible. From almost the very beginning of the film, Tarkovsky's narrative has progressively drawn Gal'tsev and Ivan closer. In the final sequences of the film, though Ivan no longer exists on the realistic plane, this association continues as Gal'tsev experiences the boy's final moments and, ultimately, reaches into what must be considered a level of existence independent of any single diegetic consciousness.

From a quiet scene with Kholin, Masha and Gal'tsev following the mission across the river the epilogue jumps ahead nearly two years with documentary footage of Russian troops in Berlin and the gruesome discoveries of murdered German children. Eventually returning to Gal'tsev, the only one of the main characters to survive the war, we move into the final moments of the film as he and a group of soldiers sort through the remains of the Gestapo headquarters. By now, the shift in spatial attachment is complete: Gal'tsev is the sole focus of attention and it is only his presence in Berlin that enables the conclusion. This does not mean, however, that the film has altered its tactics, only refined them. The presentation of Gal'tsev's experience in Berlin is a close, yet slightly more intricate, repetition of Ivan's waking dream earlier in the film. Once again, the shift

into filtration is announced not by POV shots but by an aural representation of the character's thoughts. As Gal'tsev stands with his back to the camera facing a ruined courtyard his voice-over asks whether this is to be the last war in history. Instead of providing an answer, Kholin's voice is heard chastising the younger officer for his nervousness (a trait he shares with Ivan) and reminding him that he should see a doctor now that the war is over. It is soon apparent that this conversation is only imaginary; Gal'tsev has to remind himself that Kholin has been killed on the way to Berlin. As the soldier Vasil'ev organizes the files of captured Soviets, solemnly reading off their fates, Gal'tsev's eye catches sight of Ivan's photograph and he jumps through a hole in the floor to retrieve the dossier. It is here that narration shifts fully into filtration as we follow Gal'tsev's gaze through the remains of the building. The soundtrack, however, presents not what the character hears in the real world but rather the sounds of Ivan's last moments (or at least Gal'tsev's perception of them) as a grim executioner takes the boy from his cell. This is a new variant of multiple filtration split along the lines of the medium's dual informational tracks. We see what Gal'tsev sees as he moves through the building but hear what Ivan heard in his last moments. Arriving finally at the basement and the sinister gallows, there is a cut to Gal'tsev as he stares into the room and then a dissolve to a dirty guillotine. Though the atmosphere and abrupt camera movement recall Ivan's fantastic waking dream, this last shot is actually documentary footage, further blurring the line between dream and reality. Now imitating the final seconds of the child's life, the camera moves wildly about the room but it is still through the mediation of Gal'tsev that these images are presented. A cut to Ivan's head rolling across the floor would seem to signal a return to single filtration, with Gal'tsev looking down on the boy but the next cut moves fully into the oneiric plane as the boy's mother smiles down on him. Once again, the narration seems to be operating within Ivan's perceptual filter but, as with the third dream, there are no shots directly mimicking his gaze. Rather, it is as if an unseen outsider were witnessing events from within the oneiric space.

So the question of who experiences this vision remains problematic. On the one hand, we may apply Žižek's evaluation of the final sequence of *Nostalgia* to this dream:

What we have here is a phenomenon, a scene, a dream experience, which can no longer be subjectivized – that is, a kind of nonsubjectivizable phenomenon, a dream which is no longer the dream of anyone, a dream which can emerge only after its subject ceases to be.

(Žižek 2000: 235)

The situation in *Ivan's Childhood* is slightly different. Like Gorchakov in *Nostalgia*, Ivan has ceased to exist on the realistic narrative plane but still inhabits a liminal oneiric space between the physical and the spiritual. But whereas the final dream of the later film loses its perceptual source on the realistic plane (neither Gorchakov nor his alter ego Domenico survives), the conclusion of *Ivan's Childhood* is anchored in the diegetic consciousness of Gal'tsev. What emerges is the dream as a transcendental space in

which individual consciousnesses coalesce into a unified whole and correspondence is achieved between the physical and the spiritual.

His waking dream (the vision of the boy's execution) transitions directly into the final sequence without abandoning the filtration leading up to it. In fact, the earlier instances of multiple filtration are here repeated and expanded. Reliving the final moments of the boy's life, Gal'tsev takes on his perspective, moving within his gaze as the camera spins about the room and looking through his eyes the moment the dream sequence begins. Once again, reflections of earlier moments, mirror images from the previous dreams, indicate the unification of the two characters but they also provide clues as to the transcendental nature of the oneiric world. The first shot of this final dream repeats, almost exactly, the last shot of the first. Smiling at her son, the mother wipes her head with her hand (*Figure 9*). In the next shot, Ivan raises his head from the bucket and, as in the first dream, makes the same motion (*Figure 10*). This repetition explicitly connects the final dream with Ivan's consciousness but it is also inextricably links him with Gal'tsev. In the lieutenant's final appearance on the screen, immediately preceding the shot of the guillotine in the basement of the Gestapo headquarters, he makes precisely the same motion with his hand seconds before the final dream commences (*Figure 11*). As before, it is a reflection, a mirror image that serves to unify the two characters and mark the transitional point between the two worlds. Moreover, these reflections on either side of the boundary between dream and reality allude to the liminal or transitional nature of the dreams themselves.

In *Iconostasis*, Pavel Florensky describes dreams as an 'ontological mirror reflection of our world', a reverse of the real in which the immaterial is thinly wrapped in a familiar physical form (Florensky 1996: 42). Tarkovsky's film, from the first to the last sequence, emphasizes just such an inverse relationship between the worlds of dream and reality by reflecting and inverting images, movements and sounds. This does not mean, however, that the dreams necessarily represent a supramundane reality to be equated with an afterlife – though one may interpret the final shots of Ivan running across the river as the ultimate progress to this level. Rather, as in Florensky's description, the dreams are 'the boundary where the final determinations of earth meet the increasing densifications of heaven' (Florensky 1996: 43). They constitute a boundary, however, which at once separates and unites. The dreams, like the mirror, function in the film as a transitional space between the physical and the spiritual, in which conflicting images, personalities or worlds may converge. And nowhere in the film is the dual nature of the oneiric world more apparent than in the final shots of the film, a vision shared by the deceased Ivan and the living Gal'tsev.

In addition to the already familiar figure of the mother, the final dream once again features the young girl assumed to be Ivan's sister as well as a new group of children playing hide and seek on the beach. Given the location and the reappearance of the girl, this would seem to be a continuation of the previous dream, were it not for the inclusion of a dead tree hovering ominously in many of the shots. The presence of the tree in this sequence, an image recalling the encounter at the *izba*



Figures 9 and 10: Ivan's Childhood. Courtesy of The Criterion Collection and Films by Jove.

and the missions in the swamp, is clearly incompatible with a world unscathed by the destruction on the other side and suggests that the oneiric plane is never completely divorced from the realistic world. In the final shots of the dream the camera tracks the boy as he races out onto the sand chasing the girl. As he runs out into the water there is a

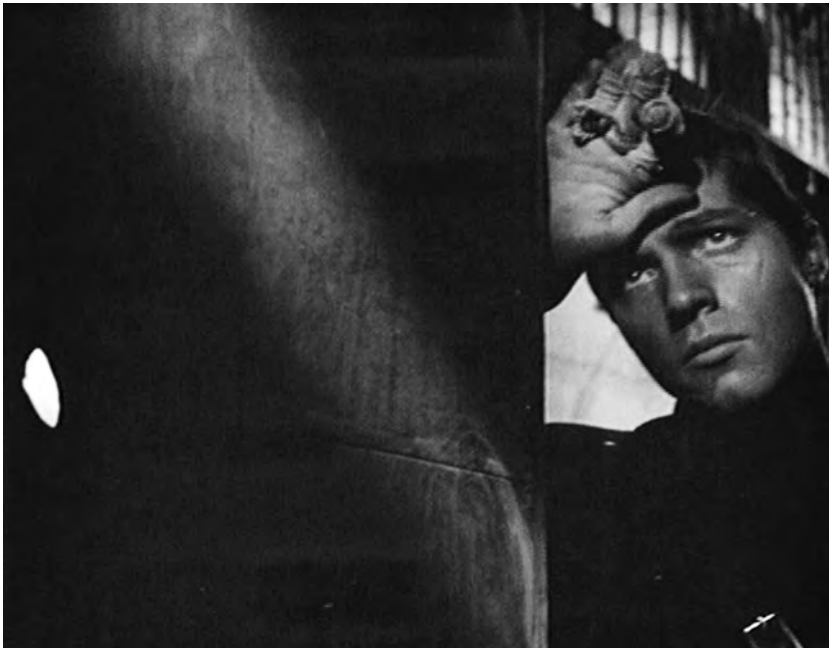


Figure 11: Ivan's Childhood. Courtesy of The Criterion Collection and Films by Jove.

quick flash of the tree approaching and then a return to the game. Once Ivan has overtaken the girl and rushed further out into the water the camera returns to the shore and charges into the tree, darkening the screen just before the end titles appear. This movement away from Ivan, who at this point is literally and figuratively crossing the river, and towards an image implanted from the realistic world again alludes to an outside presence. Rather than tracking the child all the way to the other side, the return to the tree signals a limit to narrative knowing – centred still within the consciousness of Gal'tsev, who at this point is unable to follow further. The pulsating drum, suggestive of a heartbeat, which gradually fades as the screen darkens, adds a stark touch of finality to the boy's brief life.

Gal'tsev's ability to access a world that initially seems to be wholly associated with and created by Ivan, a character now deceased, is the ultimate stage in the gradual fusion of the characters that has been building since the beginning of the film. But more importantly, this move establishes the oneiric plane as a transcendent level of existence independent of the consciousness of any individual character, adding a critical dimension of reality to each of the film's four dream sequences. Tarkovsky's intricate narrative dynamics, tightly interlaced with the thematic fabric of the film, encourage the viewer to grant this alternative reality an ontological value equal to, if not greater than, the empirical world of the war, a level of being existing concurrently with the physical but largely inaccessible and undamaged by the cataclysm on the other side of reality.

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