East European Film Bulletin

ESSAY

Tarkovsky Kills Horses

Violence, Art, and the Ethical Limits of Cinematic Realism

VOL. 153 (MARCH 2025) BY TRAVIS COOPER

The other day, rewatching Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966) in preparation for a lecture in my global cinema course, I had a terrible realization. During a battle scene in which Tartar hordes sack the city of Vladimir, amidst death, torture, burning, and pillaging, a horse stumbles and falls from an embankment. Enemy warriors stab the horse to death. The animal's death looks frighteningly authentic and entirely too realistic.

In the following paragraphs, I explore the implications of this realization, that is, how the potentially real, on-screen execution of the horse forces viewers to confront the ethical limits of cinematic realism. I argue that while the problematic scene adds emotional and historical weight to the film – christening the fictional violence of the battle scenes with an edge of real, unsimulated ferocity – it also implicates both the filmmaker and audience in moral complicity, revealing the complicated entanglements between cinematic truth and the horrors of history.

More on the specifics of the horse's execution below, but it's worth noting that there are many unsettling scenes of violence in *Rublev*. One of the hardest to endure is the gut-wrenching torture where mercenaries hold a soldier down and pour melted iron down into the facial openings of his enclosed steel helmet. Steam rises from the helmet, the hot liquid essentially boiling the poor soul to death through the orifices of his face. We do not see the soldier's face, concealed behind the mask, but we do witness his pain evidenced through his writhing body. Once dead, the Tartars tie the corpse behind a horse and parade it through the besieged city.

Challenging scenes, one might argue, are characteristic of *Rublev*. Part of the film's epic texture is that the viewer is called on to suffer through the protagonist's earthly ordeals alongside him. The pain and suffering and discomfort that Andrei and other characters endure are strategic, though, in that they amplify the culmination of the film in its famous visual appendix, the

compendium of icons. As Tarkovsky explained, “We wanted to show that Andrei Rublev’s art was a protest against the order that reigned at that time, against the blood, the betrayal, the oppression.” *Rublev* suggests that there is no beauty, religious or otherwise, sans pain. The melancholic drudgery of much of the film, blended with staccato moments of harsh violence, only serve to heighten the conclusion. Black and white gives way to technicolor. Physical and spiritual suffering begets wonder.

Difficult-to-watch scenes characterize the film, perhaps rightly so. But the seemingly literal killing of the battle horse, a mere micro-story buried deep within *Rublev*’s more encompassing metanarrative, hits differently.

It’s a short enough scene, a ballad of suffering contained in only a few seconds. A more detailed account goes something like this: A soldier is pulled from his horse and the now-riderless animal stumbles at the top of a wall. Pushed forward by the warfare behind him, the horse hesitates at the top of an embankment, questioning his current route, and then falls down the stairs, crashing clean through wooden railings to the ground below. The horse lands hard on its side after plummeting 10 or 15 feet. It immediately rights itself back onto its stomach, and wounded from the fall, struggles to get back to its feet. The camera pans left, observing the enemy soldiers who are gathered at the base of the wall, and then slowly pans back right. When we see the horse again, it’s back on its feet, facing the other direction, but with its damaged legs it stumbles about. Losing its balance a second time, it falls backward, rolling onto its back, legs in the air. As the wounded horse paws the air in confused desperation, a soldier approaches. Brandishing a long lance, the soldier sinks the iron head into the horse’s neck. The gaze of the camera lingers close as we observe the whiteness of the horse’s eye as it dies – we feel the terror of its final moments of pain and confusion.

Then the scene cuts away.

Stunned, I skipped backward and replayed. (I won’t say I recommend it, but the scene is available online for inquisitive readers.[1]) It was too realistic to be simulated. As clear as could be, a horse falls and is stabbed. Tarkovsky confirms the horse’s live execution in an interview with critic Aleksandr Lipkov that appeared in *Literaturnoe Obozrenie* in 1988.

In the exchange, Lipkov brings up the question of depictions of cruelty in *Rublev*. Lipkov challenges Tarkovsky’s content, accusing that “the cruelty in the film is shown precisely to shock and stun the viewers.” Tarkovsky, clearly not amused, replies:[2]

> I know why you mention this. It’s all because of those rumors. . . . We didn’t burn the cow: she was covered in asbestos. And we took the horse from the slaughterhouse. If we didn’t kill her that day, she would have been killed the next day in the same way. We did not

think up any special torments, so to speak, for the horse.

Tarkovsky strategically defends *Rublev*'s violence by suggesting that cruelty is an inescapable part of human history. He draws comparisons to *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a controversial war film that he feels challenges the depictions of cruelty in *Rublev*, for example, with its infamous visual of the unattended stroller that bounces down the staircase. Above all, Tarkovsky wishes to preserve historical accuracy in its complexity and dualisms – the good *and* the evil, the wonder *and* the horror. As Lipkov notes of another scene, a marauder lights a cow on fire. Per Tarkovsky, the cow's demise was carefully staged. But he admits that the horse's death was very much real and that had the execution not been captured on film the animal would have died in the slaughterhouse the proceeding day. For full effect, and to optimize both the efficacy of the execution and the fullest visual impact, Tarkovsky shot the horse in the neck and had it pushed from the top of the embankment.

The Russian auteur isn't the only filmmaker to employ animal violence for cinematic effect. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) features the ritual slaughter of a water buffalo. Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003) contains an infamous scene where the protagonist eats a live octopus in a sushi restaurant. Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973) depicts at least three separate instances of live animal slaughter. In Juzo Itami's food-centric and decidedly metacinematic *Tampopo* (1985), to make a special dish, a chef kills a soft-shelled turtle with one fatal slice. Carlos Reygadas' *Japón* (2002) features a difficult scene of unsimulated violence against a bird. These are just a handful of many examples of authentic animal violence captured for the sake of crafting compelling visual narratives in fictional feature films.

Rublev's violence against the horse, however, feels uncharacteristically Tarkovskian. Tarkovsky's films, after all, often have a mythical relationship with animals such as dogs or birds. *Stalker* (1979) and *Nostalghia* (1983) both feature visuals in which dogs play a mysteriously symbolic and poetic role. Tarkovsky's intimate Polaroid photographs, taken on a camera gifted to him by Italian director Michaelangelo Antonioni, prominently feature dogs.[3] There's a famous photo that circulates online in cinephile social media groups of Tarkovsky reclining back with two delicate birds perched on his chest,[4] reminiscent of the bird imagery that appears in *The Mirror* (1975).[5]

Tarkovsky the horse executioner is hard to reconcile with the Tarkovsky who rescued and adopted wounded birds.[6] The filmmaker who sacrificed a horse on-screen for cinematic effect seems a far cry from the filmmaker who waxed poetically about filmmaking being a spiritual endeavor, something metaphysically akin to "sculpting in time." As one commentator on *The Mirror* expressed in a letter, one must watch Tarkovsky's films meditatively, "as one watches the stars, or the sea, as one admires a landscape."[7] One might try to

make the case that nature, too, is terrible, but such a justification aside, the introspective poetics of Tarkovskian cinema seem to grind up against the realism of historical depiction.

We've so far considered this dilemma from the perspective of the audience's reaction to this violent scene. But other film studies approaches, such as feminist analysis, provide further insight. In *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship*, Shohini Chaudhury argues that cinema disseminates images that aim to construct how viewers "think and feel about atrocities." In this vein, feminist film scholars have rightly categorized audiences of onscreen violence as paradoxically both "witnesses" and "voyeurs."[8] To witness an atrocious historical event on film – say, Vladimir's ruthless invasion by the Tartars, in the case of *Rublev* – is to participate in a mediated form of historical remembrance, beholding and witnessing the inevitable horrors of the human record. But a quasi-voyeuristic aspect to such viewing may also be in play.

As an example of how voyeurism works, consider German filmmaker and provocateur Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997/2007), a metacinematic experiment par excellence. *Funny Games* is infamous for its many extended and at times nauseating scenes of violence against a family. In addition to this first-level violent narrative, fourth wall transgressions punctuate the film. (Recall that mind-bending remote-control scene – is there anything like it in all of cinema?) As he discussed in interviews, Haneke intended the fictional film to disturb viewers and counterintuitively uses cinematic atrocity as the medium through which to develop a complicated critique of the violence of film viewing.[9] Per Haneke, via *Funny Games*, the viewer is always complicit. There are no morally pure audiences. Does the sheer act of watching violence, fictional or not, at least to some degree condone the awful acts? Haneke implies this is indeed the case.

Voyeur theory argues that audiences are always, to varying degrees, complicit. To watch a film is, inevitably, to participate – even if from a mediated distance. The sensations of desire and enjoyment are difficult to distinguish from, for example, disgust and revulsion. Such emotions lie on a scale and the line between one and the other is not clearly demarcated. If cinephiles are voyeurs that means that as mournful as we may feel for the horse's on-screen suffering, the very act of participating in the viewing of *Rublev* has at least partially legitimized the presence of the execution in the film. Watching films is complicated. As viewers, we can find gratuitous scenes of violence abhorrent and still acknowledge the overall historical and artistic value of a film.

This complicated ethic of cinematic violence should inform our understanding of Tarkovsky's killing of the horse. I see the death as a ritual sacrifice on Tarkovsky's part. As his writings and interviews attest, Tarkovsky saw filmmaking as both an artistic endeavor and spiritual practice. His defense of

the execution in the Lipkov interview demonstrates the seriousness and precision by which he designed and executed the scene, down to the act of acquiring a horse scheduled for slaughter at a local slaughterhouse and shooting the horse in the neck to ensure its death after the fall and stabbing. For Tarkovsky, the very real death of the horse adds to the visceral weight of *Rublev* as a visual-historical-artistic artifact, accurately capturing this "terrifying" and "blood-drenched" time in Russian history. The execution provides a gritty sort of gravitas and emotional heft. Watching the scene, one is simultaneously moved, sickened, excited, dismayed, and horrified.

It's also worth noting that Tarkovsky surely anticipated the unsettling nature the execution would have on his audience. We know this because there's a parallel equine-related scene in *Rublev* that shows a beautiful stallion frolicking on the shores of a river. The horse jumps around, enjoying itself. At one point in this playful sequence, the horse rolls on its back, legs splayed upward into the sun. "I think that by concealing the shadowy aspects of life it is impossible to reveal deeply and fully what is beautiful in life," Tarkovsky divulged in the Lipkov interview. The intended parallelism and heightened contrast between one horse's joy and the other's terror is unmistakable. The contrast heightens the effect.

At the very least, I think we can understand Tarkovsky's intent. Some viewers may even empathize, citing the visual (and emotional) flatness of animal-related action scenes produced by computer-generated imagery (CGI) effects in so much contemporary filmmaking. Critics of CGI find it hard to emotionally invest in films they know are not visually "true." Predating and anticipating the rise of CGI, per Tarkovsky, "We wanted to make a picture that would be comprehensible to the modern viewer without departing from the truth, without resorting to some special *plastic expressivity*" (emphasis added). Elsewhere, the filmmaker criticizes directors that employ "clumsy, conventional gimmickry" and "filmic tricks" instead of a purer form of "poetic logic"[10] that more truthfully embodies the duplicity of history.

In this understanding of the film, the sacrifice of the horse *means* something. We now care about animals' lives as sentient beings, but has this care weakened the power of the cinema? The horse's death takes on more significance recorded for the annals of cinematic history than it would have had it not been acquired for *Rublev* and slaughtered the next day. Recall Tarkovsky's comment from the Lipkov interview. He intended *Rublev* to protest "the blood, the betrayal, the oppression" of the prevailing order of the day. With the execution, Tarkovsky complicatedly leverages violence against violence.

If the film were being made now, Tarkovsky clearly breaches contemporary ethics. And let's be very clear: I believe we should side with the PETA activists against Tarkovsky's instrumentalizing of the horse's death, regardless of

whether the execution was inevitable.[11] Yet, we don't have to condone animal violence to understand the visceral weight the sacrifice accredits to the film. *Rublev* is a product of its own time. It simply couldn't be made today, and I don't necessarily see that as a bad thing.

Ultimately, the scene's unbearable authenticity – its indulgence in active, unsimulated violence against animals – forces viewers to confront the ethical boundaries of cinematic realism. Tarkovsky's *Rublev* remains a towering artistic achievement, winning major international film awards after its release and consistently topping arthouse, international film, and independent cinema lists for decades, but it is not an unblemished one. Its legacy knotted in beauty and brutality, what *Rublev* offers is transcendence through trauma. We may understand the logic behind the sacrifice, but even understanding does not absolve Tarkovsky. *Rublev* remains a complicated cinematic artifact, revealing both the wonders of art and beauty as well as the unsettling cost of truth on film.

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3. Fagard, Gawan (2012). "Visual Romanticism as a Subversive Affect: The Polaroids of Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979-1983". *Eastern European Film Bulletin*, vol. 17. https://eefb.org/retrospectives/the-polaroids-of-andrei-tarkovsky-1979-1983/ [Accessed on 10 April 2025]. ↩
4. r/criterion (2001). "Photo of Andrei Tarkovsky with his two birds". https://www.reddit.com/r/criterion/comments/m88mb8/photo_of_andrei_tarkovsky_with_his_two_birds/ [Accessed on 10 April 2025]. ↩
5. Knight, Ryland Walker (2007). "The Mirror". *Reverse Shot*. https://reverseshot.org/archive/entry/653/mirror [Accessed on 10 April 2025]. ↩
6. Bird, Robert (2020). "The Omens: Tarkovsky, Sacrifice, Cancer". *Apparatus: Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 10. https://www.apparatusjournal.net/index.php/apparatus/article/view/225/488 [Accessed on 10 April 2025]. ↩
7. Quoted at *Marathon Screenings*. https://marathonscreenings.com/Alison-O-Daniel [Accessed on 10 April 2025]. ↩

8. Chaudhury, Shohini (2014). *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship*. Edinburgh University Press, p. 2. ↩
9. Robert, Mark (2022). "'Funny Games' Press Conference in Cannes 1997" [Video]. *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHX-pPAb1qY&t=452s [Accessed 29 July 2025]. Rich, Katey (2008). "Interview: Funny Games director Michael Haneke". *CinemaBlend*. https://www.cinemablend.com/new/Interview-Funny-Games-Director-Michael-Haneke-8141.html [Accessed 29 July 2025]. ↩
10. Tarkovsky, Andrey (1988). *Sculpting In Time: The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art* (Kitty Hunter-Blair, Trans.). University of Texas Press, p. 30. ↩
11. There's still another irony, buried here, that an overly negative reaction to the scene too quickly glosses over. In 2023 alone, and from the United States only, over 20,000 horses were transported to slaughterhouses in Canada and Mexico. Had Tarkovsky the opportunity to defend himself further, he may point out the hypocrisy of protesting the death of one single horse while living within a society in which just for meat, hundreds of millions of animals are killed per day. See ASPCA (2024). "America's Dark Secret: Horses Are STILL Being Killed for Meat." https://www.aspca.org/news/americas-dark-secret-horses-are-still-being-killed-meat [Accessed on 26 May 2025] and Roser, Max (2023). "How many animals get slaughtered every day?" *Our World in Data.* https://ourworldindata.org/how-many-animals-get-slaughtered-every-day?utm_source=chatgpt.com [Accessed 28 May 2025]. ↩