



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Ivan's Childhood

## (Ivanovo detstvo)

Tarkovsky's first feature – about a Soviet teenager engaged in espionage missions on the German front during World War Two – is also one of his finest: visually impressive, emotionally direct, eschewing the symbolism and portentousness of some of his later films. Tarkovsky admired Bresson's work for its uncompromising artistry, its 'ascetic' vision of the world and its simplicity – all to be found here.

[bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)

Trying to summarise what actually appears on screen in *Ivan's Childhood*, as so often, makes one even more aware of what does not appear. In this respect, the distributor's synopsis makes instructive reading, since it effectively 'normalises' what is the film's most radical strategy – the abandonment of a single narrative standpoint and the introduction of Ivan's dreams. While Vladimir Bogomolov's story is narrated consistently from the first-person viewpoint of Lieutenant Galtsev, it also provides a fairly full account of Ivan's devastated life from before their first encounter to the final retrospective revelation in Berlin of his fate. Tarkovsky, however, made a number of crucial changes. The film begins and ends with two of the dreams which recall Ivan's attachment to his mother and fear of separation from her. The first, coming before the credits (is this the earliest pre-credit sequence in Soviet cinema?), effectively evokes an idyllic pre-war childhood and also leads directly into a dream-like depiction of the wartime landscape. But the last can scarcely be, as the synopsis suggests, Galtsev preferring 'to think of Ivan as he was in times of peace' after his dreadful discovery. Instead it emphasises just how autonomous the four dreams are, despite three being 'cued' by Ivan sleeping.

They form a kind of counter-narrative, with the two central ones using special effects to create a magical suggestiveness around Ivan's relationship to his mother and the little girl seen in the latter two. So powerful and, in the context of post-war Soviet cinema, unexpected are the dreams that one inevitably speculates about influences. Had Tarkovsky seen *Los Olvidados*, in particular, with its provocative juxtaposition of the mother in dream and reality? This stemmed, as Raymond Durnat shrewdly notes, from Buñuel's reproach to 'neo-realist orthodoxy for its neglect of the inner life'. And we can easily trace in Tarkovsky's bold insistence on Ivan's 'inner life' a similar reproach to the petrified Socialist Realism of the Stalin era. In this sense, *Ivan's Childhood* now stands as perhaps the finest achievement of the still underestimated Soviet New Wave of the 1958-65 'thaw' period; and its Venice Festival award marked a second stage of international recognition – after the Cannes prize for *The Cranes Are Flying* in 1958 – that Soviet cinema was emerging from its long isolation.

Seen now, *Ivan's Childhood* may look more like a conventional Soviet Great Patriotic War movie than it did in 1962 – innumerable details seem in fact

highly subversive of the genre – but it can scarcely avoid being seen teleologically in the light of Tarkovsky's subsequent work. Here, indeed, almost all his familiar motifs appear already (as many did in his previous graduation film, *The Steamroller and the Violin*), and they were clearly introduced by Tarkovsky. For instance, the original story does not include anything like the episode of Ivan's running away from the military HQ and falling asleep in a ruined house, to awake and be questioned by a bewildered old man, which anticipates scenes from *Andrei Rublev* and *Stalker*. Nor, for that matter, is Ivan's mother even mentioned by Bogomolov: it is his father (characteristically not included in the dreams by Tarkovsky, the autobiographical poet of absent fathers) who we learn was killed serving as a border guard.

The remarkable scene in which Ivan 'plays' at war in the darkened dugout is in fact a realisation of an ellipsis in the story, which Tarkovsky develops to include an entirely enigmatic reference to Ivan's experience in a Nazi death camp. And the final scenes in Berlin bear an uncanny resemblance to the scenes of devastation in *Stalker* and *The Sacrifice*, not to mention the finale of Klimov's *Come and See*. Elsewhere, dripping water, apples, skeletal ruined buildings (a gutted church has become the base camp), a book of Renaissance pictures – all these introduce us to the iconography of the mature Tarkovsky. There is also another invention to remind us of what the later Tarkovsky eliminated from his films. Picking up on a brief episode in which Galtsev tries to upbraid his new female medical officer, 'a pretty trim-looking blonde of about 20 ... the close-fitting skirt hugging her strong hips ... a bit too good to look at' (Bogomolov's story is no literary masterpiece), and the worldly wise Kholin comments crudely on her attractions, Tarkovsky and Mikhail Papava created the remarkable forest interlude between Kholin and Masha.

Here the striking, slightly clumsy but expressive geometry of camera angle and body movement combine to suggest a simultaneous attraction and ambivalence – a chaste eroticism of wartime chance encounter – which Tarkovsky rarely attempted in later films (this is the sequence which yielded the famous still of Kholin astride a trench embracing Masha). It is an emotion better developed in Alexei Gherman's *Twenty Days without War* (a film admired by Tarkovsky) than in the generally self-effacing (or neurotic) roles assigned to women in his work. In this, as in other respects, the belated re-release of *Ivan's Childhood* should remind those who resist the solemnity and religiosity of his last films that Tarkovsky was, in 1962, already one of the most accomplished and exciting filmmakers in the world. Fittingly, his first feature begins with the same image with which his last ended: a child and a tree.

**Ian Christie, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, July 1988**

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## IVAN'S CHILDHOOD (IVANOVO DETSTVO)

*Director:* Andrei Tarkovsky  
*Production Company:* Mosfilm  
*Production Manager:* G. Kuznetsov  
*Assistant Director:* Georgi Natanson  
*Script Editor:* E. Smirnov  
*Screenplay:* Vladimir Bogomolov, Mikhail Papava  
*Original Story:* Vladimir Bogomolov  
*Director of Photography:* Vadim Iusov  
*Process Photography:* V. Sevostyanov  
*Process Photography Artist:* S. Mukhin  
*Editor:* Lyudmila Feiginova  
*Art Director:* Yevgeni Chernyaev  
*Make-up:* L. Baskakova  
*Music:* Vyacheslav Ovchinnikov  
*Music Director:* Emin Khachaturian  
*Sound:* E. Zelentsova  
*Military Consultant:* G. Goncharov

## Cast

Kolya Burlyayev (*Ivan*)  
Irina Tarkovskaya (*Ivan's mother*)  
Valentin Zubkov (*Captain Kholin*)  
Yevgeny Zharikov (*Lieutenant Galtsev*)  
Valentina Malyavina (*Masha*)  
Dmitri Milyutenko (*old man*)  
Sergei Krylov (*Sergeant Katasonov*)  
Nikolai Grinko (*Gryaznov*)  
Andrei Konchalovsky  
Ivan Savkin  
V. Maryenkov  
Vera Miturich

USSR 1962  
94 mins

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## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### The Merchant of Four Seasons (Händler der vier Jahreszeiten)

Wed 1 Jun 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 11 Jun 20:30

### Ivan's Childhood (Ivanovo Detsvo)

Thu 2 Jun 14:30; Mon 20 Jun 20:50

### The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty

### (Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter)

Fri 3 Jun 20:50; Mon 13 Jun 18:10; Fri 24 Jun 20:45

### Taxi Driver

Sat 4 Jun 20:45; Wed 15 Jun 20:40;

Sun 26 Jun 18:20

### The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena)

Sun 5 Jun 13:10; Tue 14 Jun 20:45;

Wed 29 Jun 20:40

### Escape from Alcatraz

Mon 6 Jun 20:45; Sat 25 Jun 17:50

### Thief

Tue 7 Jun 20:30; Thu 16 Jun 18:00; Sat 18 Jun 20:30; Thu 30 Jun 20:30

### 71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance

### (71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls)

Wed 8 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large);

Mon 27 Jun 21:00

### Rosetta

Fri 10 Jun 20:50; Wed 22 Jun 18:15 (+ intro)

### Stranger by the Lake (L'Inconnu du lac)

Sun 12 Jun 18:10; Wed 15 Jun 18:10;

Tue 28 Jun 20:40

### Down by Law

Fri 17 Jun 20:45; Tue 21 Jun 20:45

### Certain Women

Sun 19 Jun 13:10; Thu 23 Jun 20:50; Wed 29 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by

BFI Director of Public Programme and Audiences, Jason Wood)

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