



The Sacrifice Offret

Director: Andrei Tarkovsky

Production Companies: Svenska Filminstitutet, Argos-Films, Film Four International, Josephson & Nykvist, Sveriges Television TV2, Sandrew Film & Teater

Participation: Ministère Français de la Culture

Executive Producer (Svenska Filminstitut):

Anna-Lena Wibom

Producer (Fragó Films): Katinka Faragó

Production Manager: Göran Lindberg

Technical Manager: Kaj Larsen

Assistant Director: Kerstin Eriksdotter

Post-production Assistant Director:

Michał Leszczyłowski

Casting: Priscilla John, Claire Denis,

Françoise Menidrey

Screenplay: Andrei Tarkovsky

Director of Photography: Sven Nykvist

Camera Operators: Lars Karlsson, Dan Myhrman

Special Effects: Svenska Stuntgruppen,

Lars Höglund, Lars Palmqvist

Editors: Andrei Tarkovsky, Michał Leszczyłowski

Editorial Consultant: Henri Colpi

Art Director: Anna Asp

Wardrobe: Inger Pehrsson

Make-up: Kjell Gustavsson, Florence Fouquier

Sound Recording/Re-recording: Owe Svensson,

Bosse Persson, Lars Ulander, Christin Loman,

Wille Peterson-Berger

Stunts: Richard Roberts, Johan Torén,

Lars Höglund, Lars Palmqvist

Interpreter: Layla Alexander

Cast:

Erland Josephson (Alexander)

Susan Fleetwood (Adelaide)

Valérie Mairesse (Julia)

Allan Edwall (Otto)

Gudrún Gisladóttir (Maria)

Sven Wolter (Victor)

Filippa Franzén (Marta)

Tommy Kjellqvist (little man)

Per Kallman, Tommy Nordahl (ambulance men)

Sweden-France-UK 1986©

148 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

A Curzon re-release

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Re-releases

The Sacrifice

He was a giant for work, and a highly disciplined man who hated disorder and would only come to the set after much preparation. Quite often I found it strenuous to keep up with his pace – which is not to say that Tarkovsky made inhuman demands on his collaborators, but to give an idea of his rhythm and that the whole team were happy to follow it. *The Sacrifice* contains a mere 120 cuts, but each one was subject to deep critical scrutiny. Editing the film did not mean blindly following a pre-arranged set of concepts. It meant creative work carried out between an axis of a fixed vision and the inner dynamics of the material, the number of cuts gave no indication of the range of difficulties faced in the process.

Michał Leszczyłowski, Editor, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1987

The issue I raise in this film is one that to my mind is the most crucial: the absence in our culture of room for a spiritual existence. We have extended the scope of our material assets and conducted materialistic experiments without taking into account the threat posed by depriving man of his spiritual dimension. Man is suffering but he doesn't know why. I wanted to show that a man can renew his ties to life by renewing his covenant with himself and with the source of his soul. And one way to recapture moral integrity is by having the capacity to offer oneself in sacrifice.

Andrei Tarkovsky, 1986

Within a few weeks of each other in the spring of 1986, Gunter Grass' *Die Rättin* was published in Germany and Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* was given its first showing at Cannes. In his novel Grass describes the time after an atomic holocaust, after the end of human time, the earth ravaged by fire storms and ashes, its landscapes pitted and filled with water and debris, encrusted with mud, cleft and torn asunder. The catastrophe at the centre of Tarkovsky's film is the outbreak of a Third World War, a final cataclysm in which 'there will be neither victors nor vanquished, neither cities nor villages, neither grass nor trees, neither water in the springs nor birds in the sky.' In the spring of 1986 the disaster of Chernobyl burst upon us, casting its warning shadow over the world. In the final days of the year Tarkovsky died.

The convulsion that sets the machinery of sacrifice in motion in Tarkovsky's film is in fact a symbolic crisis. In a general sense it can be seen as a product of man's spiritual plight, of the triumph of materialism. 'I wanted to show that man can restore his links with life by renewing his covenant with the source of his soul,' Tarkovsky said in an interview. The cause of the catastrophe that lies at the heart of the film is to be found in the state of disharmony in which man lives with himself and with nature. The disaster that threatens the world is more a symptom of its malaise than the root of the problem. 'Sin,' Alexander philosophises, 'is that which is superfluous; and that being the case, our whole civilisation consists from beginning to end of sin.'

Alexander's sacrifice is the liberating act of a man seeking a way out of this situation, a man who sees an opportunity of becoming an instrument of human redemption. Although he himself has retired from the stage to contemplate, to write and teach, he has grown weary of words. Like Hamlet, he sees the world ruled by procrastination and idle talk. The time has come for deeds.

In *The Sacrifice*, as in other films by Tarkovsky, there are certain autobiographical references to be found. It is an aspect of his work for which he frequently incurred criticism, and most severely in his native country. The

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From Mon 3 Aug

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autobiographical element in his films ranges from the direct personal quotations of *Mirror* to relatively allusive parallels in other films. *Nostalgia* is dedicated to Tarkovsky's mother and contains echoes from his childhood and youth.

The Sacrifice is dedicated to his son, and the thematic material – the faith Alexander places in Little Man – is a reflection of the hopes Tarkovsky himself placed in the future.

In other realms of art the inclusion of personal motifs or experience is regarded as a valid process, through which a further plane of meaning and dialogue may be established. Tarkovsky's use of autobiographical reference could be compared in painting (to which one can trace numerous parallels in his work) with the incorporation by artists of their own portraits, often discreetly hidden among the secondary figures or in background scenes. In the 'Adoration of the Magi', for example, critics have long conjectured that the armoured figure in the bottom right-hand corner is a self-portrayal of Leonardo himself as a young man.

Tarkovsky's descriptions of the development of the screenplay for *The Sacrifice* throw an interesting light on the autobiographical elements in his films, and how they are either allowed to impinge directly on the content or are transmuted and assimilated to form a virtually indistinguishable part of the overall fabric.

The initial screenplay concept, written before the shooting of *Nostalgia* and bearing the title 'The Witch', revolved about the cure of a man suffering from cancer. In his desperation, confronted with the knowledge of an incurable disease, he encounters a strange figure (the forerunner of Otto, the postman), who tells Alexander that his only hope of recovery is to go to a woman, allegedly a witch possessed of magical powers, and to sleep with her. This he does and experiences a remarkable cure, much to the amazement of his doctor. But the witch turns up one day and stands outside his house in the rain to claim him. Alexander's sacrifice at this stage in the development of the screenplay consisted of relinquishing family and possessions and going off with this woman in the attire of a poor man.

During the shooting of *Nostalgia*, Tarkovsky was struck by a number of parallels between his preoccupations in film at that time and his own life. Andrei Gorchakov, the film's leading character, had come to Italy with the intention of remaining only a short time and had been consumed with yearning for his home; but he had been unable to return, and ultimately died in Italy. Tarkovsky himself had originally intended to return to Russia after completing the film, but had also been overtaken by illness in Italy and forced to stay. He was deeply affected further by the death of Anatoli Solonizyn, the leading actor in most of his earlier films, who was to have played the role of Gorchakov in *Nostalgia*, and who was long foreseen for the part of Alexander in 'The Witch'. Solonizyn died of the same disease that had brought the turning point in Alexander's life in the first version of the story, and 'today, years later, I too am suffering from it.'

Tarkovsky subsequently revised his treatment of this story, removing it from a realm that had become alarmingly personal, to give it a more universal validity. The autobiographical strand remains, however, inextricably woven into the texture, and the lines spoken by Alexander to his little son beneath the trees have a poignant significance: 'There is no such thing as death, only the fear of death.'

Peter Green, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1987