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## **Brush Strokes of Melancholy: the Function of Art in Russian and Danish Cinema**

*MIREES' open lecture*

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On 27th of May, MIREES students had the pleasure to attend the seminar on the “*Brush Strokes of Melancholy: the Function of Art in Russian and Danish Cinema*” held by professor **Angela Tumini**, Associate Professor of Humanities and Film at the ADA University in Baku and an expert on Lars von Trier.

She began the lecture affirming that, when talking about Von Trier and his controversial movies it is impossible not to mention Tarkovskij: the Soviet film maker remains the main source of inspiration for the works of Von Trier (and of many other directors). If we compare the attitudes of these two artists we can notice a clear difference between Tarkovskij and Von Trier. In fact, for Tarkovskij, art and creativity are able to save the human individual, to raise him/her above the injustices and the oppression of power. On the other hand, Von Trier does not show any trust in humanity: for him no one is worth saving. The two artists have in common the sense of melancholia, which entails every creature in the world and can be described as ‘mourning without an object’. In the opening scene of the film “*Andrej Rublev*”, we can notice Tarkovskij’s symbolic striving for human redemption. Here the monk who invented a flying machine rises above medieval Russia: he leaves behind the world full of injustices and hardships, and succeeds in free himself. Tarkovskij’s movies are imbued with un-compromised art, deep spirituality and individualism: these features would cost him the exile from Soviet Union. He used art to disobey the impositions of power and free the individual soul: for him, cinema is a didactical tool for stimulating thinking and promoting criticism. But thinking also means doubting: Andrej Rublev is a human who constantly doubts everything; he is the constituent enemy of any kind of absolutism. Rublev is an iconographer, an artist who is able to transform the world thanks to its own spirit and human strength. Human ability in shaping the world is represented in the bell scene, when a young boy manages to repair a bell even if he never did this before. In “*Andrej Rublev*”, the human sufferings

and passions are ways to elevate human soul. In fact, it is thanks to pain that the best art is created. Iconography moreover has a metaphorical role as a means to instruct illiterate people. The use of color expresses the intensity of the scenes: the movie is black and white to confer to it more intensity. However, in the ending scene color irrupts: from the desperation and destruction the scene shifts to the beauty of church paintings in all their colors and details. This scene insists again that art is the only way to salvation.

Professor Tumini explained how the recent Russian movie “Leviathan” directed by A. Zvyagintsev has many common features with Tarkovskij works. The beauty of the scenes, the use of symbolism and especially the themes of the oppression of man by state authority and melancholia closely resemble the movies of Tarkovskij. Still, in “Leviathan” an essential feature is missing: here there is no possibility of redemption; nothing is able to save the human being from his gloomy destiny. Art and spirituality are totally absent, and the man is condemned from the beginning. Moreover, it is interesting to notice how the themes of oppressive state power are common to the two authors’ movies. In fact, even if they lived in different epochs – one in Soviet Russia, another in Putin’s Russia, they both had a similar understanding of the state coercive power.

The last part of the workshop was devoted to Lars Von Trier’s cinema, which is the main interest of professor Tumini. His movies beautifully express an overwhelming sense of nihilism and the impossibility of human redemption. Von Trier is himself a controversial character. In fact, he is a psychologically problematic person: he suffers from bipolar disease, depression, substance abuse and phobias. His film “Melancholia” is all about the suffering implicit in human condition and the impossibility to escape from destiny. This movie was for him a way to deal with depression and to transpose his own sufferings in art. The sense of powerlessness and doom is represented by the protagonist Justine, who at the beginning is an apparently happy bride. But throughout the day she starts to change and begins to display her depressed and suffering nature. While everything around her decays, she behaves more and more inappropriately and absurdly at the point that the groom leaves, disgusted by his own wife. Meanwhile, the presence of an approaching planet that is destined to hit the earth charges both characters with a sense of incumbent death and the pain of knowing to be destined for complete destruction. As in “Andrej Rublev”, here art plays an important role. In fact, “Melancholia” is full of artistic citations, among them the paining “Hunters in the snow” by Brueghel, which was shown many times in Tarkovskij’s “Solaris”. In a highly symbolic scene, the child substitutes some books on Soviet suprematist art with books on classical paintings like Caravaggio’s *David and Goliath* and Millet’s *Ophelia*. This scene represents the substitution of state-guided conformist art with more individualists and anti-materialists

masterpieces, recalling Tarkovskij and his cinema. Those paintings are also highly metaphoric in meaning: Ophelia could represent well Justine's drowning in melancholia, and Caravaggio could perfectly be associated with Von Trier, both "enfants terrible" of their times.

Professor Tumini remarked how paintings, music and cinema are closely correlated and how art imitates art. As she explained, great movies that are displaying music and art masterpieces are able to enrich us both intellectually and emotionally. Furthermore, they stimulate our curiosity of history and meaning of the music or paintings shown in the movies. She concluded saying that there could not be Von Trier without Tarkovskij, and she added that film directors (as artists in general) imitate some features of the great masters. She concluded the workshop underlining how great movies can be really demanding to watch because they need a great deal of patience and attention. Unlike blockbuster movies, they open our minds and touch our hearts like only real masterpieces could.

This workshop has been extremely interesting and it has been a great encouragement to approach those film directors and their works. Moreover this lecture has been particularly interesting for us MIREES students, fostering our interdisciplinary understanding of politics and society. In fact, analyzing movies we can really experience how art, psychology and politics are closely interrelated.

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