

# Liturgy on the Reel

## Ascesis through Film

### Abstract

This article investigates representations of ascesis in film. Ascesis (askesis, ἄσκησις) is an ancient Christian praxis that remains an integral part of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Its aim is the restoration of the human being into its wholeness, which in Orthodox theology is referred to as the growing of person from the image to the likeness of God. Ascesis is bound to the Divine Liturgy: it is a continuation and manifestation of the experience of liturgical life and its aim is the (kenotic) fulfilment of love. Ascesis is a constant metanoia, a precondition of reconciliation, a transformative process, and an artistic creation, and it is the divine inspiration that leads to salvation. This article examines the depictions of ascesis in two films: *OSTROV (THE ISLAND)*, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006) and *MAN OF GOD* (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). The overarching aims of this article are to show (1) the ways in which asceticism is conceptualised and expressed in Orthodox Christianity and (2) the ways in which film expresses the inexpressible, moving from descriptive language to the expression of inner liturgical life by the means of film language. It seeks to provide novel perspectives within the field of religion and film in researching asceticism through film. Building upon Andrei Tarkovsky's thought, this article finally suggests approaching ascesis in film through the lens of poetic cinema.

### Keywords

Ascesis, Orthodox Theology, Film, Andrei Tarkovsky, *OSTROV*, *MAN OF GOD*

### Biography

Milja Radovic is an international scholar in film and religion. Her primary focus has been on nationalism, religion, acts of citizenship, and Orthodox theology. She has published two monographs with Routledge, *Film, Religion and Activist Citizens: An Ontology of Transformative Acts* (2017) and *Transnational Cinema and Ideology: Representing Religion, Identity and Cultural Myths* (2014), and lectures internationally. She has also served as a jury member with Interfilm, the International Interchurch Film Organisation, at international film festivals (Berlin, Cottbus, Locarno, Karlovy Vary, Oberhausen, St Andrews).

## Introduction

This article examines representations of Christian asceticism through film. One of its overarching aims is to demonstrate the ways in which film can express the inexpressible, moving from descriptive language to the artistic expression of the experience of inner liturgical life by the means of film language. According to Andrei Tarkovsky, “The poet does not use ‘descriptions’ of the world; he himself has a hand in its creation.”<sup>1</sup> The artistic expression of asceticism in film requires this shift, from the descriptive to the creative and authentic act in which personal and objective, ontological and historical meet. In other words, it is the auteur who begets the subject from within, which manifests as artistic expression. The ways in which asceticism has been transferred into cinematic space are examined here through the films *OSTROV* (*THE ISLAND*, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006) and *MAN OF GOD* (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). The films have been selected on the basis of their explicit focus on the theme of Christian asceticism, concentrating on the life of ascetics while attempting to visually translate the ascetic praxis into artistic form. The internalisation and externalisation of the subject of asceticism makes these films an important source for studying the cinematic conceptualisations of asceticism and for understanding their unique capacity to convey ascetic experience as a personal one, that is, to communicate the inexpressible through an artistic form of film language and at the same time to communicate the life of an ascetic in its whole historicity through cinematic space. The selected films provide a unique perspective on the ways in which asceticism is perceived and portrayed by contemporary filmmakers. The examination of two films does not limit the subject of research; on the contrary, it facilitates better focus on the subject. This article inevitably poses the question of what a “religious film” is and how we understand “transcendental style in film”. It argues that films depicting asceticism do not have to be of any particular genre,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that scholars must find new and creative ways of examining the cinematic space and the ways in which film expresses transcendental experience and Christian praxis. The research on asceticism reveals the potentiality of cinema, as “the most truthful art form”, as a meta-language,<sup>3</sup> to express “the state

1 Tarkovsky 1989, 42.

2 The true cinema image is built upon the destruction of genre, upon conflict with it. For further reading, see Tarkovsky 1989, 150.

3 Tarkovsky 1989, 40.

of mind” both of those represented and of those who create, imparting themselves into their creation.<sup>4</sup>

The ways in which ascesis of the Orthodox Christian tradition has been expressed through film and via film language is a subject that has not yet been examined adequately in scholarly research on religion and film. The well-known and much written about film ANDREI RUBLEV (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1966) provides one of the most insightful cinematic expressions of ascesis, yet the ways ascesis is expressed in the film have not been studied. Although Tarkovsky’s film is not analysed in this article, his work serves as a point of reference for investigating this topic further. Paul Schrader made a major impact in film criticism by developing a specific approach to *film art*, which is important for scholars working in the field of religion and film, investigating how the transcendent, the holy, or the inexpressible is transferred into the cinematic space. Schrader finds it useful in film criticism to employ the term “transcendental style”, as opposed to “religious film”,<sup>5</sup> and applies this term for analysing films such as those of Yasujiro Ozu, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and Robert Bresson.<sup>6</sup> Schrader argues that “the function of transcendental art is [...] to express the Holy itself”<sup>7</sup> and precisely because “style” is “the way to approach the Transcendent”,<sup>8</sup> it can be analysed. Although Schrader did not engage with the Orthodox Christian tradition, his theory is important for furthering research in theology and film within this specific religious tradition. Schrader argues that the “more a work of art can successfully incorporate sparse means within an abundant society, the nearer it approaches its transcendental ‘end’.”<sup>9</sup>

What for Schrader is a “miracle”, when “cinema can create a style of confrontation”,<sup>10</sup> for Tarkovsky, one could argue, is the cinema of poetry, which he continuously expressed through his own opus. In that sense,

4 Tarkovsky 1989, 41.

5 Schrader 2018, 37.

6 Schrader 2018, 37.

7 Schrader 2018, 39.

8 Schrader 2018, 35.

9 Schrader 2018, 35.

10 The moment of confrontation can only occur if at the decisive moment the abundant means have lost their power. If the “miracle” can be seen in any humanistic tradition, psychological or sociological, the viewer will avoid a confrontation with the transcendent. Schrader 2018, 35.

their understanding of the ways in which cinema art connects life and the transcendent is perhaps one of the most striking similarities between Schrader and Tarkovsky, even a meeting point. Schrader's understanding of transcendental style and Tarkovsky's cinema of poetry are important for further theorisation and understanding of asceticism and film from the perspective of Orthodox Christian theology. The role of the artist in the creative process whereby inner life is expressed in external circumstances as the search for the truth is related to time (as cinema itself is), but it is also surrounded by the "timeless time" – that of the liturgy, which starts here but reflects eternity, the Holy itself.

For Schrader the transcendental style, although just a style, "can bring us nearer to that silence, that invisible image, in which the parallel lines of religion and art meet and interpenetrate".<sup>11</sup> For Tarkovsky, artistic creation is an authentic act which only humankind, created in the image of God, possesses. In Orthodox tradition, art was not a substitute but an expression of the inexpressible that arises from an authentic experience of humankind lifted to the divine sphere, a foretaste and transformative image of theosis, both historical and eschatological reality.

Schrader further argues that many film directors "have forged a remarkably similar form" which "was not determined by their personalities, culture", but "is the result of two universal contingencies: the desire to express the Transcendent in art and the nature of the film medium".<sup>12</sup> This is what gives the transcendental style, according to Schrader, its universality. This article argues that the personality of the auteur, and frequently also the cultural framework,<sup>13</sup> shapes the artistic form and expression. Tarkovsky reminds us that "unless there is an organic link between the subjective impressions of the author and his objective representation of reality, he will not achieve even superficial credibility, let alone authenticity and inner truth".<sup>14</sup> This article claims that rather than "the *desire* to express the Transcendent", it is the experience of life – "being absorbed into God"<sup>15</sup> – that informs the degrees and ways in which

11 Schrader 2018, 35.

12 Schrader 2018, 35.

13 Andrei Tarkovsky represents both the rule and the exception: while ANDREI RUBLEV was made at a time of persecution of religion during the Soviet era (in this sense it is in principle not shaped by its immediate cultural framework), the film is informed by rich Russian Orthodox tradition and spirituality.

14 Tarkovsky 1989, 21.

15 On being absorbed into God, see Tarkovsky 1989, 240.

that experience will be expressed through art. This art, in the case of Orthodox ascetic art, has its own tradition, which shapes yet does not replicate itself.

Only in this existential sense can true artistic creation be a form of sacrifice<sup>16</sup> and not a desire for self-expression. It is through this sacrifice of self that the divine can be found. Tarkovsky compares artistic creation to “a confession [...] an unconscious act that none the less reflects the true meaning of life—love and sacrifice”. It is closest to the highest forms of poetry.<sup>17</sup> For Tarkovsky *poetic cinema* is “the observation of the phenomenon passing through time”,<sup>18</sup> as cinema has like no other art “force, precision and starkness with which it conveys awareness of facts and aesthetic structures existing and changing within time”.<sup>19</sup> Poetic cinema is not how you “shoot something”, it is not sacrificing “concrete, living, emotional content”<sup>20</sup> for the sake of convention, for the “purity of cinema” lies precisely in the “capacity of the images to express a specific, unique, actual fact”.<sup>21</sup> Infinity cannot be described or captured, but it can be apprehended “in faith and through the creative act”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, poetic cinema is important as it creates an authentic cinematic space by means of poetic linkage in which an honest disposition of the heart in moving towards God with all its subtlety is disclosed by film language. Poetic linkages through which “the poetic design of being” can be glimpsed “beyond the limitations of coherent logic, and conveying the deep complexity and truth of impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life”.<sup>23</sup> If the language of the soul is the language of love, it can only be expressed through poetry.

The representation of ascesis for what it is through film must involve both faith and the creative approach, where poetry serves in expressing the most inner experience of life in specific time. Depicting ascesis from the outside, that is, projecting the outsider’s gaze onto something that is in

16 Tarkovsky 1989, 40.

17 Tarkovsky 1989, 239.

18 Tarkovsky 1989, 66.

19 Tarkovsky criticised “pseudo-poetic cinema” and its “empty symbolism” which involves “breaking off contact with fact and with time realism, and makes for preciousness and affectation”, Tarkovsky 1989, 68–69.

20 Tarkovsky 1989, 69.

21 *Mise-en-scene*, that is, “the disposition and movement of selected objects in relation to the area of the frame”, in poetic cinema arises from the “psychological state of the characters”, Tarkovsky 1989, 73–74.

22 Tarkovsky 1989, 39.

23 Tarkovsky 1989, 21.

itself intangible, would not merely result in a cliché, but would also degrade both cinematic potential and human creativity. This does not mean that the filmmaker is an ascetic in a literal sense, but rather that the approach to the subject contains ascetic quality so to speak, such as self-sacrifice, sincerity in expression, or going beyond the worship of oneself in order to point to the truth, which art in its highest form can express. Only then, when cinematic space reflects the sincere relation of the auteur to the subject, will this shape the relationships within the filmic frame, which receive a poetic form. In other words, poetic expression is the result of an authentic human act of creation.

Tarkovsky showed how cinema works as a “sculpting in time”, and while scholars mistook Tarkovsky’s quest in time to be an end in itself,<sup>24</sup> they did not discern the theology which informs the content of Tarkovsky’s films and more importantly how the specific theological tradition informs the film language.

In analysing two films which are rooted in the same Orthodox Christian artistic tradition within which Tarkovsky begot his *ANDREI RUBLEV*, this article aims to show (1) the ways in which asceticism is conceptualised and expressed in Orthodox Christianity, and (2) the ways in which this is conveyed through film and by means of film language. In doing so, its author hopes to offer novel perspectives on ascesis and its transformative dimension, which can perhaps be best expressed through film if we understand film art as the poetic quest for the truth. “The meaning of religious truth is hope”<sup>25</sup> and when “an artist can discern the lines of the poetic design of being [...] he is capable of going beyond the limitations of coherent logic, and conveying truth of the impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life”.<sup>26</sup> Poetry<sup>27</sup> is closest to prayer. Thus, building upon Tarkovsky’s thought, this article suggests ascesis in film be considered through the lens of *poetic cinema*.

## On Ascesis

Before we turn to ascesis in the films, it is useful to clarify what ascesis is within Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. Ascesis is the heart of Christian life and the continuation of the liturgical event. *Ascesis* (askesis, ἄσκησις) in

24 Schrader 2018.

25 Tarkovsky 1989, 43.

26 Tarkovsky 1989, 21.

27 ποίησις – to bring something into being; ποιεῖν – to make, to create.

the literal sense means training (ἀσκέω, I train) and it is a living praxis of Orthodox Christianity. As such asceticism is both an internal and external event, a personal and historical occurrence. Ascetic praxis is a manifestation of continuous repentance – metanoia. Asceticism is praxis of the hesychastic monastic life, but it also extends beyond monasticism.<sup>28</sup> In that sense, asceticism is not a practice reserved for a few, as it is often misconceived, or one of the ways of acting in the world; it is a way of existence that integrates all aspects of human life and as such it spreads to all humanity. It is at the core of the Christian life and the life of the Church. Ascetic life is not a life of self-punishment or despair, as it is often wrongly understood, but the life of sorrowful joy which comes from kenotic humility. It is living to fulfil the commandment of love for the neighbour and love for the enemy, and this can be achieved only through humbleness and humility.<sup>29</sup> Thus, asceticism is not a rejection of humanity and the world, but the renunciation of the ways of this world, which is the beginning of repentance. Asceticism is the theology of experience rooted in hesychastic prayer and continuous metanoia.

Hesychastic prayer is neither an artistic creation nor scientific investigation; it is neither philosophic research and speculation nor abstract intellectual theology.<sup>30</sup> An ascetic strives to live Christ's commandments, centralising Christ in the centre of their heart. Prayer transforms the purpose of life, transferring one's heart and nous from temporal to eternal. The fruit of prayer is knowledge of oneself and through that of the whole of humankind, which produces weeping over the state of humankind, which is lifeless without God, but also gives freedom that is outside human boundaries. It is through metanoia and kenotic prayer that the gift of discernment between good and evil and the gift of contemplation of divine reality as the grace of God descend upon the ascetic. Asceticism is the manifestation of faith through praxis whose fruits are fruits of love, as God is Love. It is through the synergy of God's act of grace and humankind's freedom to respond to God's call that asceticism manifests as transformative power – in love for the enemy and in the love for God, which precedes all forms of love. This love that manifests in ascetic life is not love out of obligation, a moral act, and contains no "ethical must", it is "love because of ontological affinity".<sup>31</sup> The

28 1 Cor. 9:24–27 points out the importance of training, the roots of asceticism.

29 Sophrony 1991, 138.

30 Sophrony 1991, 156–157.

31 Zizioulas 2004, 8–11.

prayer of the heart, hesychastic prayer, is central to ascetic life, for the ascetic struggle is in the heart. Only once the heart is enlarged is it possible to experience the ontological love for the enemy and ontological freedom. Ascesis aims for the restoration of the human being as a whole, bringing the potentiality of a person, the image of God, into its fullness – the likeness of God. Acquiring a true hypostasis is, however, not possible merely by human effort; it is possible only by the grace of the True Person of Christ. Ascesis is inseparable from liturgical life and is its most profound expression. Liturgy is a unique and authentic event as an act of God in which humankind participates. It is the thanksgiving of people (λαός). Although the liturgy may appear to be something that repeats and is based on specific rules, it is not a repetitive performance. Every liturgy is a unique event, a union between God and humankind that permeates the whole human life. Hence, ascesis cannot be reduced to “the activity of thought” or to “intellectual conformity”.<sup>32</sup> Ascesis is a continuation of participation in the Divine Liturgy, and the Divine Liturgy surpasses space and time, the spatio-temporal dimension, remaining at the same time a historical occurrence for it takes place in concrete historical time and space.

The transformative dimension of ascetic-liturgical experience and ascetic *podvig* has been expressed through ascetic art, iconography, and poetry. The Orthodox iconographic tradition which adorns the spaces of liturgical worship is both the story of ascesis and the space of ascesis. The icon in Orthodox theology is sacred; it is a window onto eternity, mystically representing Christ – the Person par excellence – the transfigured saints and the world to come. The icon depicts God because God became man; it represents the Person and a personal relationship, and in that sense the icon is meta-historical. It is important to say that the icon refers to another, not to itself, to the relationship between persons (God and humankind), to the Church itself. “The Church becomes a real depiction of the Kingdom of God, leading us to the Divine Eucharist, which St Maximus the Confessor described as the image or Icon of the Kingdom.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, “when an image becomes an Icon, it no longer refers to itself anymore – to its ephemeral existence; rather, it refers beyond itself: to something beyond this corrupted world”.<sup>34</sup>

32 See Foucault in McWhorter 1992, 243; 252.

33 Bishop Maxim 2010.

34 Bishop Maxim 2010.



Poetry as the highest form of expression gives a foretaste of the eternal, of that which cannot be described, preparing, inspiring, and imparting to the soul the taste of communion in God's love, beginning here and stretching to the age to come. Hence, prayer is often expressed through hymnography and supplication, forming an integral part of liturgical life. Music equally forms a constitutive part of liturgical life: hymns and prayers, like the whole Divine Liturgy, are sung. All these expressions do not aim to satisfy humankind's emotional or psychological needs and desires or to make an impression, but seek rather to inspire and invite humankind onto the narrow path of sorrowful joy, the ascetic liturgical life in Christ. Ascesis reveals that being is being-in-communion and that "the purpose of life is Love".<sup>35</sup> This love is the divine imprint in the being that is the image of God.

Ascesis is thus a means and not the goal. The goal of ascesis is the salvation of humankind, the reconfiguration of the distorted human being unique in its occurrence, the restoration of the human being into person, that is, into the likeness of God. Ascesis is the way of life which harmonises the whole human being. Ascesis in Orthodox Christianity as expressed through art, its iconography, poetry, and music is the fruit of the inner experience of ascetic-liturgical life. In what ways and to what extent this can be transferred into film is the subject of the next part of this article. The films examined here approach ascesis as both an internal and external event. The internalisation and externalisation of liturgical-ascetic life by the means of film language and also depictions of the liturgical life of metanoia and kenotic prayer will be considered further.

## Ostrov

The film *OSTROV*, by Pavel Lungin, which received much international attention, is one of the first films made in post-Soviet Russia that focus explicitly on ascetic life in Orthodox Christianity. Through his film, Lungin explores ascesis as liturgical life, relying upon his own tradition and the experience of Orthodoxy, following a Dostoevskyan quest in discerning good from evil, truth from lie, virtue from crime.

The film concentrates on the life of Father Anatoly, a monk who lives in a small monastery on an island somewhere in the Arctic. Prior to becoming a

35 Sophrony 1991, 159.

monk, as the film narrates, he was a sailor who murdered his officer-in-command, Tikhon, forced to do so by German soldiers in 1942. After ship and harbour were destroyed by the Germans, the future monk, who had been blown out to sea by the explosion, was saved by monks. The film continues with the life of Father Anatoly, thirty-four years later, in the monastery on an island. Father Anatoly lives in constant repentance because of his sin, praying for the soul of Tikhon. His way of being, which is embedded in the monastic life of *opštežiće*,<sup>36</sup> is somewhat distinct from the rest of the brotherhood: the sick, the abandoned, the suffering all come by boat to Father Anatoly for help, advice, or healing. For this reason, Father Anatoly is challenged by Father Jov, who questions his lifestyle, his eccentric behaviour, and his relationship with the people, but nevertheless at the end is conquered by love for Father Anatoly. Father Anatoly heals the sick and prophesises – even his own death. Father Anatoly finally discovers that captain Tikhon, for whose soul he prayed for more than three decades, is alive. Father Anatoly heals Tikhon's possessed daughter, after which he dies peacefully.

The film focuses on the personality of Father Anatoly and is divided according to the major events on the island. His character, portrayed at times as eccentric and at other times as simple-minded, is perhaps the reason why he has been understood as the classic cinematic figure of a “holy fool”, “a fool for Christ” or *jurodivi*.<sup>37</sup> Exploring the concept of the holy fool in Orthodoxy and particularly in Russian tradition,<sup>38</sup> Alina Birzache builds upon G. P. Fedotov in considering *jurodstvo* as “the most radical form of Christian kenoticism”.<sup>39</sup> Birzache's research is important for understanding specific manifestations of asceticism in Russian Orthodoxy and their relational aspects both for society and for Christianity in the East.<sup>40</sup>

While in his film *Lungin* may draw upon the praxis of *jurodstvo*, he does so only to the extent required by the story. *Jurodstvo* is not employed merely for

36 Coenobitic life – κοινωμία (κοινός): joint participation, a life in the monastic community.

37 “The film depicts a traditional conduct of a fool in Christ [...] He provokes sinners to repent. He provokes the other monks, claiming that they ought to fully give themselves to Christ and have no other aspirations”, Bodin 2011, 3.

38 The first Russian holy fool – *iurodstvo* – is considered to be Saint Isaak Zatvornik in the 11th century, a hermit of the Monastery of the Caves at Kiev, but the phenomenon reached a climax in the sixteenth century. Birzache 2012, 61.

39 Birzache 2012, 21.

40 *Jurodstvo* has kenotic character but also a social role, reminding both monastics and laity that God cannot be constrained by human factors, by a set of rules. See Birzache 2012.

Fig. 1: Realisation after the murder: future monk, Father Anatoly, stares at the Nazi flag. Film still, OSTROV (THE ISLAND, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006), 00:08:58.



Fig. 2: The Island of repentance: the darkness is replaced by light. The whiteness of the Monastery on the deserted island where Father Anatoly starts his monastic life. Film still, OSTROV (THE ISLAND, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006), 00:11:17.



the sake of representation of Russian Orthodoxy or for a catechetical lesson for people returning to their roots via film in a religiously awakened Russia. On the contrary, it is a means of expressing deep repentance, or metanoia, through kenotic prayer. Just as *jurodstvo* in Russia was only a means, not an end, and directed to something bigger, Lungin points to what is beyond the form of the holy fool: he investigates the possibility of a constant state of repentance through kenotic prayer. In that sense he uses a well-known praxis of Russian Orthodoxy not as illustration but for contemplation.

Lungin opens his film with darkness and a sense of oppression, which the blinding interrogation-like lights behind the German soldiers suggest (fig. 1). In these several minutes of darkness the whole drama of human existence takes place. A sailor, an ordinary man who is loading coal onto a ship, will murder his captain in order to save his own life. The sailor will become Father Anatoly, metaphorically losing his own life through repentance. The site of the murder, close to the monastery, is a reminder of his sin. However, the dark mood does not prevail in the rest of the film, indicating that repentance has begun (fig. 2). The monastery and landscape are surrounded by water and covered in ice and snow, giving brightness to the film. Lungin creates a space that seems both isolated and approachable, cold and warm – an ascetic space similar to that of the deserts where ascetics of the past lived, a space where the inner battle between good and evil is unceasing. This space is not a space of austerity but rather a space of sincerity and freedom, as the open



Fig. 3: Father Anatoly lies on the ground praying, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner". Film still, OSTROV (THE ISLAND, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006), 00:02:12.

space and landscape visually communicate. The coldness of snow is soothed with constant prayer, while the camera on Father Anatoly's moving feet or on him lying on the ground personalises the space, bringing in warmth to a space which otherwise could be perceived as cold (fig. 3). He is entrenched in the natural world; his proximity to the earth shows both the mindfulness of death and the beauty of life in prayer. The shots of Father Anatoly in his cell are never completely dark; light always penetrates the space.

Father Anatoly's *podvig* is deeply personal for his relationship with God is personal. This personal relationship with God is central to the character and the film. The film unfolds the life of Father Anatoly through dynamic shifts between a steady slow pace and abrupt intrusions that show us the different ways in which visits touch his life. Through continuous shifts between still and abrupt, his personality and his life of repentance are revealed gradually, almost at the intimate level. He is portrayed as a hidden ascetic who continues to dig and load coal (this time for the monastery) and hides even from his superior (the abbot) that he sleeps on the coal. The burning coal, intertwined with the hesychastic prayer, symbolises the burning of his sin. The camera-eye is both an observer and a participant and is the only witness of what cannot be seen by others.

Further, Father Anatoly's relationship with the lay people, as well as with the monks, is both gentle and violent, indicating eccentricity or *jurdstvo*: for instance, he pretends that he is not the clairvoyant Father Anatoly of whom the people have heard; he shouts at a woman who asks him for his blessing for an abortion; he reproaches a widow and a mother for their hesitation to perform God's will to the end; and he has an outburst at the abbot for his attachment to earthly things, burning his boots and blanket.

While the actions of the main character may appear externally difficult, his humour, spontaneity, and constant prayer reveal that what appears difficult is light. Lungin's framing of Father Anatoly, the main character, is often decentralised from both specific frames and whole sequences; sometimes

he is with the people, sometimes with the monks, and sometimes alone doing work or praying on his island far off from the monastery. In this way Lungin avoids creating a spectacle of the character of Father Anatoly and enables us to see how the life of prayer flows in the small monastic community of which he is a part.

In between the major events, the film shows Father Anatoly's life of prayer, and it is prayer which links the events. In taking this approach Lungin shows that it is not a mere sense of guilt that drives his character into the monastic life, but that it is through his crime that the terrible knowledge of his own fall emerges, and through this knowledge he can see the fallen state of the whole world. Coming to see himself as nobody – a person capable of committing a murder – enables him to put God and the “deceased” Tikhon in the centre of his heart. This is achieved through his life of kenotic prayer and humbleness, despite his seemingly foolish outbursts. Lungin's perceptions and cinematic expressions of asceticism make the film an organic event of metanoia and kenotic prayer. The liturgy is depicted throughout the film, with the short sequences of services or the sound of monastic chanting in the background intertwined with continuous prayer, natural sounds, and action – such as Father Anatoly's jumping into the cold water to bring back a sick child – indicating the permeation of liturgical life and continuous metanoia. Prayer is a thread woven through the fabric of the whole film.

The camera work is dynamic and constantly changes. The space is not symmetrical; but asymmetry, as in the scene with the liturgy, conveys not a lack of order but rather the organic way in which order arises, without the need for formalist, that is, surface expressions of piety. External and internal are contrasted: what externally seems difficult, such as the life of Father Anatoly, the film shows as internally light, and what internally is difficult, such as the burden of sin, is externally expressed and transformed through prayer, such as in the scene in which a possessed woman is cured. The film questions and transforms our own view: the camera-eye communicates that what is seen by the eye is not always accurate and that which is not seen, what remains hidden, is the truth. Lungin thus thematises asceticism not solely through the story of the main character but also through film language: his framing, camera, and sound work in composition bring forward the inner perspective on metanoia and kenosis, the *podvig* of liturgical life. The island is both a symbolic and a real space, with the whiteness of the snow indicating both coldness and warmth, and the surrounding sea giving the sense of the Church as an island of salvation.



Fig. 4: Close-up of Saint Nektarios saying the ascetic prayer of the heart. *MAN OF GOD* (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

## MAN OF GOD

The film *MAN OF GOD*, directed by Yelena Popovic, focuses on the life of ascetic and bishop Saint Nektarios of Aegina (1846–1920). It is – in terms of production and targeted audience – one of the major contemporary films to centralise asceticism and show its significance for human life. Popovic decided to make this film after reading a life of Saint Nektarios; seized by the life of the saint and able to relate to the problems he experienced, she started the journey of constructing the story, which would receive a whole new form on the reel. Popovic understood that “the truth cannot be dramatised”.<sup>41</sup> She describes her approach as follows: “I made this film from the inside out. That was the main focus.”<sup>42</sup> With an intimate relation to the theme and an intuitive approach in creating the film, Popovic did not merely reconstruct the life of an exceptional person<sup>43</sup> but instead created an experience of his life, enabling the audience to find and follow the poetic thread in discovering “the way of the ascetic”.<sup>44</sup>

Popovic opens her film with a prayer, peacefully, from within, introducing us to the inner state of its main character (fig. 4). The film follows the life of Saint Nektarios, but Popovic, although faithful to biographical facts, does not take a descriptive or catechistic approach. Instead, she unfolds the life

41 Popovic 2021.

42 Popovic 2021.

43 See, for example, the biographical drama *GANDHI* (Richard Attenborough, GB/IN/USA/ZA 1982).

44 For further reading, see Colliander 1985.

of Saint Nektarios intimately, as something that is happening here and now, starting with the major disruptive event that will have greatest impact on the saint's life. The film starts in 1890 in Egypt, where Saint Nektarios was consecrated the metropolitan bishop of Pentapolis by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, later the Greek Patriarch of Alexandria, Sophronius IV. The beginning of the film relates the beginning of the trials of Saint Nektarios, as he is about to be expelled from his position as the result of false accusations, which were never presented to him openly. In his words, he is "sentenced without a crime". Even the Patriarch, his spiritual father, does not want to see him. Although popular among the people, he leaves Egypt for Greece, only to find that the jealousy and accusations in Egypt follow him. In Greece his persecution continues: unable to continue his episcopal office, he struggles to find any job or service. As the Archbishop of Athens refuses to see him, he seeks a placement from the Ministry of Religion, where he is not rejected outright but receives a bureaucratic response – is not a Greek citizen. He therefore becomes the man who will be known as the travelling hierarch. The ministry appoints him as an ordinary preacher in the diocese of Vitinea and Euboea, but met by hostility from locals inspired by the gossip from Alexandria, he resigns and returns to Athens. People who know him find no justification for the slandering of this humble man and draw closer to him. The reputation he earns on his own merits is confronted by the animosity of others, which follows him to the end. He is appointed dean at the Rizarios Seminary in Athens, where rumours and jealousy continue, but he also gains the love and respect of many. During this whole time, he lives a life of asceticism and ceaseless prayer, ministering to the poor and sick. Because of his spiritual daughters and his age, he seeks to establish a female monastery in Aegina, to which he retires from the seminary in 1908. However, the monastery, in spite the promises of some bishops, is not recognised by the Synod, and his trials continue – his monastery is maliciously accused and the nuns interrogated. Despite all these trials, Saint Nektarios continues to live the ascetic life of *podvig*, enduring all the slander that befalls him. The monastery's spiritual life blossoms, as does the love of people for him. In his final years, he is hospitalised by illness, tended by nuns and medical staff who witness his compassion and miracles for the poor and suffering in the hospital. Saint Nektarios died on 8 November 1920. At the time of his death, a man paralysed for many years was healed. At this point, the hand we have seen throughout the film finishes writing and the camera moves out to reveal the bigger picture, the apology of the Patriarchate to the saint.





Fig. 5: The 'unjust council' plotting against Saint Nektarios, the high camera angle indicating that God is watching MAN OF GOD (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

The image of the writing hand is woven into the visual fabric of the film and anticipates what we already understand at the end: “Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Matt. 5:10, NIV).

Yelena Popovic decided to focus on the crucial events in the life of Saint Nektarios, breathing into the film his life of prayer. Popovic achieves a contrast between the way of the world and the way of the ascetic. She offers the authentic experience of the ascetic life of a man in impossible circumstances. The way in which the film is shot and its imagery serve the purpose of the story and are never exaggerated. The opening sequence shows a line of icons before which the saint bows, doing metanoia, moves to the handwriting, and then to an Arab man who addresses Saint Nektarios saying that he was healed because of the saint’s prayers. We see the saint’s face for the first time in the daylight as he humbly replies, “He heard your prayers.” The film almost abruptly moves on to the gathering of the hierarchs who discuss Saint Nektarios. They sit in the dark, shot from a high angle, and we hear the plotting of his opponents, who find him “a fanatic” and “a man close to streets and harlots” (fig. 5).

The scene with the Patriarch Sophronios, before whom the accusations against Saint Nektarios are brought, is also shot from a high angle in the



dark. The chanting *Kirie Eleison* is heard in the scene where Saint Nektarios is serving in the church, with people approaching him, offering their support in disbelief. The scene signals his peacefulness and the storm that is about to start. The film takes us then on the journey to Greece, where Saint Nektarios, denied access to church officials, sits in the street with a beggar. We see him and the beggar exchanging warm words. When the hierarchs pass by, their coats cover the sight of the two men sitting on the ground. Before he leaves, Saint Nektarios gives his shoes to the beggar. The scene establishes a quiet understanding between the saint and the poor man, while the framing of the mantels reinforces the beggar's words that the hierarchs do not seem to care about him (just as they do not seem to care about the saint). The character of Saint Nektarios is expressed through his acts, paying for the poor boy's treatment in the hospital (for which he pays), secretly taking the place of the seminary's janitor when he falls ill, planting and working with his hands, putting his hands gently on people to console them, and giving his small salary for the sick and the poor, for the renewal of the seminary's church and finally for the monastery in Aegina.

While the actor Aris Servetalis as Saint Nektarios has a major role in transmitting and transcending the prayerful disposition and peace of the character, it is the filmmaker who reveals the significance of the ascetic prayer of Saint Nektarios, weaving it in between the crucial events that will determine his whole life. "Have mercy O Lord on the sick, and poor, have mercy on those who hate me and let them not perish because of me the sinner." In response to new persecutions, Saint Nektarios replies, "God bless them." His every prayer in the film is different and each time is shot in a different way, revealing ascetic prayer as dynamic, as an always new, authentic conversation with God. The prayer "Please give me the strength to do what is right, what is your will" followed by *metanoias* is contrasted with the shouts of men in his small parish on Euboea. The men surround him, their hands and bodies jeering at him with anger, and as they shout their voices are muffled and appear like a collective howling. The camera entrenched among the men circles around them, distorting the focus and the geometrical sense of space. By contrast Saint Nektarios stands calmly and speaks to them with an imploring voice in which we can clearly make out his preaching. The short scene ends with a shot from inside the altar in which the top of the wall makes up the upper half of the frame while in the lower half we see Saint Nektarios in the centre, with the men surrounding him (fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Saint Nektarios preaching while the villagers protest, as the slander continues in Greece. *MAN OF GOD* (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

The scene conveys the bitter experience of slander. Through the camerawork and the sound Popovic confronts different realities: the reality of this world as temporary and passing, just like the generic noise worldliness produces, and the reality which has eternal meaning, eternal value, the reality of God, in which the main character remains unshaken. The scene is framed as a response to his inner prayer, his desire to do what is right. The ascetic is portrayed with his inner tribulations, well summarised in one sentence of prayer: “What have I done? What did they tell him [the Patriarch of Alexandria]? Please Lord give me a chance to speak to him.” In the seminary, in between the events that take place there, Saint Nektarios is shown pronouncing the major ascetic prayer “Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me the sinner.”

The film conveys asceticism aesthetically through poetic expression: the scenes flow, connecting time and space, the shots are non-symmetrical, and rather iconic; the camera focalises through and often intimately follows the main character; the camera changes as the prayer changes and is often positioned in unusual high angles, giving the impression that God is observing all the events and people. The eyes of the camera thus frequently resemble the eyes of Christ as represented iconographically in the cupola of Orthodox churches.



Fig. 7: The Athonites pray for the world: Saint Nektarios in one of the ascetic caves in Athos. MAN OF GOD (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

The scene of the saint traveling, first from the city through the forests and then to the cave of Mount Athos, where with a fellow monk he prostrates himself in noetic prayer, connects spaces in a poetic way, indicating that the saint enters from the wider world (the landscape) into what is essential (the cave), from the mind to the heart (fig. 7). The physical flow and continuity of the composition and camera movement reflect the spiritual flow and continuity which characterise the inner life of prayer – the depth of the cave that frames the monks shows the depth of the inner heart of Saint Nektarios. The scene of prayer for a sick student, underlined by the Byzantine chanting of *Kirie Eleison*, shows Saint Nektarios with his students on their knees in prayer, shot from above within the doors of the altar, with Saint Nektarios's hands raised and eyes looking up, then it moves to a close-up of his face and the flower he is cultivating when news is received that the boy has been cured. The scene reveals the connection between ascetic prayer and human life, the prayer of supplication and the fruit brought forth by love well captured in the image of the flower. The film also shows people of different age, sex, and background reading his writing on the Mother of God, thus revealing the impact of prayer and truth on the lives of many, regardless of their social background.

The director uses mirroring shots to connect spaces, but she also contrasts this with more abrupt montage, giving a sense of both the continuity of ascetic life and the tension that surrounds the ascetic. The light in the dark spaces, which often comes from behind and shines onto Saint Nektarios, is the same light that one of the protagonists, the blind girl Xenia, who will become a nun, spiritually anticipates. The camera conveys this light, which is measured, non-intrusive, inducing beauty into the characters' simplicity. Shots depicting Saint Nektarios carrying stones on his back past the native villagers on the island of Aegina and a wide shot of him walking across an open field, where the sky reflects the earth in composition with the sun shining through the dark clouds, give a sense of moving forward, in a small reflection of the inner rays which shine upon the person who although surrounded by darkness perseveres in living in God.

Scenes of poetic beauty and prayer are followed by scenes of interrogation: his persecution culminates in a scene of open violence, as the police prosecutor enters with a soldier, first verbally and then physically attacking the now elderly Bishop Nektarios, hitting him in the face, which throws him off his chair onto the ground. They then ransack the monastery, breaking furniture, stripping rooms clean, and even mercilessly throwing an elderly debilitated nun off her bed onto the floor. The camera primarily tracks characters but to different effects: first the policemen, with whom instability and asymmetry are associated, and then the saint, who stoically follows the violence around him. The tracking shot visualises his painful gaze and thus affects us. The director creates a circular motion in space, moving among and around the nuns and Saint Nektarios during the police invasion of the monastery. The movement of the camera and the stability of the standing nuns and their bishop in the yard indicate an inner peace that contrasts with the violence.

The drunkard cries out that he knows his sin “represents the tragic and fallen state of the humanity who our Lord loves and calls to repentance”.<sup>45</sup> The drunkard is aware of his sin, unlike the “pharisees, those who believe they are righteous”.<sup>46</sup> “The main ingredient for repentance is honesty”, and Saint Nektarios “has the sensitivity and humility not to judge this person but to take in what he is saying”.<sup>47</sup> The sound, the movement of the camera, and the low angle with the close-up of Saint Nektarios, through whom we gaze

45 Popovic 2021.

46 Popovic 2021.

47 Popovic 2021.

Fig. 8: The paralysed man in the hospital lying in the room with Saint Nektarios. *MAN OF GOD* (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.



at the drunkard, visually communicate the fall and the stillness, the humble state of an ascetic struggle between two worlds, two states of being.

Saint Nektarios's final prayer is taken in one continuous hand-held shot, following him as he goes to the Mother of God and leans onto her icon, confessing to her his pain and praying to her to keep his children and all those on the island safe. The light penetrates through the windows and covers a part of the frame and Saint Nektarios like a cloud. The scene is a culmination of the saint's life of prayer and veneration of the Mother of God. Different icons of the Mother of God often appear subtly in shots behind the saint and at times he is shown lighting the oil lamp before her. Before his death, he entrusts himself and his flock to her. Moreover, this is the last time we see the saint pray. While the previous scenes always showed dynamic movement and changes in representation, both in his words and in the ways the scenes were shot, here the camera is still and a continuous over-the-shoulder shot captures the spiritual sincerity of his prayer. The scene gives a sense of deep intimacy, brought out authentically by Aris Servetalis, and for this reason the director decided to keep this shot.

Finally, it is in the closing scene that we hear the eponymous words "man of God". Saint Nektarios and the paralysed man are shot from above as they talk; they are both seen intimately from God's perspective, under God's eye (fig. 8). Lens flare seeps in as Saint Nektarios raises himself up, saying, "Are you speaking to me, my Lord?" and then lies back down to die in peace. This is followed by the healing of the paralysed man, shot in slow motion as he stands up and weeps profoundly, and accompanied by the soul-piercing opera of Zbigniew Preisner we are led to the shot of the completed writing.

The music of Preisner expresses and enhances the spiritual content implied by the visual composition, as in this last scene. Music does not deter-

mine the rhythm of the film but instead encompasses the image. Preisner, the editor Lambis Haralambis, and the director of photography participated fully in the process of creation (on set), in order to feel more tangibly what was to be achieved. Popovic notes that the film was “shot in an aspect ratio of 1.66 so that we can focus on the character instead of the surroundings, to make the audience identify with the character as much as possible and feel what the character feels”.<sup>48</sup> In the auteur’s words, “This aspect-ratio leaves more space above the head of a character which also aids in another thing: the main character is constantly searching for God and this gives the viewer a subconscious feeling of it.”<sup>49</sup> A desaturated look characterises the film, which does not have overly bright colours, because, in the director’s words, “Saint Nektarios’s life was very difficult and it also gave a timeless and at the same time modern feeling to the picture.”<sup>50</sup> The auteur chose this approach as “this made it feel like the story is happening right now”; it was “another way of bringing the viewer *inside* the story”.<sup>51</sup>

Popovic’s construction of cinematic space conveys the inner life of asceticism – for instance as Patriarch Sophronios tells the priests to leave, we see him in asymmetrical frontal wide-shot as he sits in the background of the much larger patriarchate room. As they leave, the film cuts to Saint Nektarios walking towards the altar in the foreground, and the altar and the larger church can be seen in the background. The layout of both rooms and the movement convey a sense of connected space, with the church appearing as a mirror reflection and continuation of the room in which the Patriarch sits. Connecting the space in this way gives the impression that they are together in the church, and although they are divided, the Patriarch and his disciple are connected in Christ. By connecting the spaces, the film auteur conveys the love they had for one another but which they have no opportunity to express again face to face. This is the experience and expression of ascetic and self-emptying love, where even if the one rejects the other, the rejected keeps the one who abandoned him as a part of his being and through love restores the space which would otherwise remain irrevocably divided. This space in asceticism is the liturgical space, the timeless mystery that unifies all humankind.

48 Popovic 2021.

49 Popovic 2021.

50 Popovic 2021.

51 Popovic 2021.



## Conclusion

Cinema is capable of operating with any fact diffused in time; it can take absolutely anything from life.

– *Andrei Tarkovsky, Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*

This article has examined the ways in which ascesis of Eastern Orthodox tradition has been depicted and expressed through two films, *OSTROV* and *MAN OF GOD*. The films actualise ascesis as inseparable from human existence and they show its relevance for the life of every human being today. Ascesis is a matter not of lifestyle but of ontology, of life itself. The ascetics are not superficial figures; their greatness arises from their lowliness, for persevering in the struggle which happens in the heart of every man. The only, although major, difference is that they choose the narrow path and stay on it, depicted through the hesychastic self-emptying prayer which permeates the films. Ascesis is not limited to a description of a potentially higher state of being, of someone who stands above other people, but is expressed as a struggle and related to the human condition. The films engage with the problems of suffering, persecution, crime, punishment, envy, power, and citizenship, that is, the question of belonging. Ascetic praxis is explored explicitly and is the subject of the debate in the films (as ascetic art, iconography, is the matter of debate in *ANDREI RUBLEV*). In *OSTROV* asceticism is a stumbling point even for the monks living with the main character. In *MAN OF GOD* similarly, ascetic life is not only the theme but also the decisive element, the breaking point for the people involved. This tension between two paths is revealed in the films as the tension with which every person is confronted in this life, showing the relevance of ascesis in all periods of human history. This is revealed in the debate on ascetic life: the president of the seminary, induced by envy, accuses Saint Nektarios of cultivating asceticism in students, calling it “a radical approach to religion”. The saint replies, “A true ascetic does not worry about their out worldly appearance at all. His main focus is to correct himself inwardly so he can get closer to God. He is in fact a true Christian.”

Ascetic life appears as an obstacle, a matter of envy, a “rupture in this world”,<sup>52</sup> and at the same time as the only way to true life, as healing through Christ. The issue of statelessness, so to speak, that is, of not be-

52 See Engin F. Isin in Radovic 2017, 9–12; 24–27.

longing, is revealed in two ways. The bureaucratic obstacle based on Saint Nektarios's place of birth (today modern-day Turkey) is used against him (he is not technically a Greek citizen). However, this points to a whole new dimension of ascetic life – that of not belonging to the ways of this world<sup>53</sup> – which is developed throughout the film. This dimension is also present in Lungin's *OSTROV*. Father Anatoly's not belonging to this world is established from the opening of the film. In shooting Tikhon, he dies with him; physically lost to this world by falling into the ocean, he is found by God through the monks from the island. By experiencing the bitterness of sin, he turns to repentance, just as through the transition from ship to monastery, from the Second World War to the 1970s, layman is transformed into monk, man of the world into man of prayer, murderer into healer of human souls. Father Anatoly's not belonging to this world also permeates the whole film as he surpasses even the experience of the brothers of the monastery, only seemingly because of his *jurodstvo*.

Behind their lack of understanding (as evinced by Father Jov) is vanity and envy, that of Cain and Abel, and the will for power. In *MAN OF GOD*, the issue of power is central to all the trials. In the words of the main character: "Power is like a cancer, it eats you, slowly, and you don't even know it. Before you realise, you can turn into something you once despised. Many great men have fallen because of the power they were given." Popovic exposes the issue of power that permeates all human existence, including the Church. The way of the ascetic (in both *OSTROV* and *MAN OF GOD*) shows that the only antidote to power, that is, to pride, is humility. Humility as the fruit of prayer is what gives the characters the strength and peace that is not of this world. In *MAN OF GOD*, the peace of Saint Nektarios in face of such trials springs from his unceasing prayer. The unceasing prayer is linked with inner peace. As Saint Nektarios says to the president of the seminary, "Without having the peace you will never know the truth", elucidating the overwhelming truth that peace cannot be obtained by humankind on their own, nor can it be achieved in an intellectual way.

*MAN OF GOD* further tackles bigotry towards the Church and a number of clichés related to monasticism, such as the one that only broken people end up in monasteries. The scene of the ravaging of the monastery makes evident the truth of ascetic life as a spiritual phenomenon in the midst of

53 "But our citizenship is in heaven", Phil. 3:20–21, NIV.



material life,<sup>54</sup> which in *OSTROV* is shown through the portrayal of the re-birth of Father Anatoly.

Persecution, false accusations, modernity versus dark ages, intellectual enlightenment and asceticism, power and glory – all are intertwined within *MAN OF GOD*. Popovic actualises all these problems without losing sight of the whole picture, inviting the audience into the “truth of direct observation”.<sup>55</sup> The film reveals the auteur’s perceptiveness about the praxis of ascesis both for the characters represented and for the whole of society. It focuses upon the life of a real person, now venerated as a saint throughout the Orthodox world, through whose character the film auteur brings forward the life of ascesis, its meaning and application in contemporary life. Saint Nektarios and the fictional Father Anatoly are ascetics who experience brutality, which leads them to the rediscovery of the truth “of open hearted love”.<sup>56</sup>

Popovic internalises the subject, providing the inner perspective of a person of prayer on the human condition and suffering. In *OSTROV Lungin* similarly internalises the ascetic experience. The themes of crime and punishment, exclusion, and judgment permeate the film, placing the ascetic in the environment of this world, with which his inner dynamics often collide. It is through the examples of ascetic life that we see how perplexing situations can be overcome. In their exposure of asceticism, both Popovic and Lungin achieve the goal of “relating a person to the whole world”, which, as Tarkovsky reminds, is “the meaning of cinema.”<sup>57</sup>

## Poetic Cinema

When I speak of poetry I am not thinking of a genre. Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality.

— P. Adams Sitney, *Andrey Tarkovsky, Russian Experience, and the Poetry of Cinema*

54 While the police ransack the monastery and the distraught nun pleads, Saint Nektarios only points his finger upwards, towards heaven, indicating that God is in charge.

55 As the Holy Trinity in *ANDREI RUBLEV* is the living link between the people of the 15th and 20th centuries, so Saint Nektarios is the living link between the people of the 19th and 21st centuries, and is the person who shows the way of life which represents an answer to all the problems we mentioned. Tarkovsky 1989, 78.

56 Tarkovsky 1989, 207.

57 Tarkovsky 1989, 66.

Lungin and Popovic move beyond descriptive narrativisation and into an aesthetic logic of poetry, which emanates from the artistic image that can be created in the spirit of complete self-surrender.<sup>58</sup> Once stripped of self-love, the artist rises above themselves,<sup>59</sup> in order to show life itself, its struggle and its beauty. Film has ability to impart to the viewer a taste of the grace in which the ascetics of the Church lived: the inward approach to the subject enables us to see through the eyes of the ascetic and the experience of the ascetic is contrasted with the ways of this world. The films discussed in this article attempt to transfer this experience through their personal relationship to the subject, approaching ascesis on an intimate rather than descriptive level. In investigating asceticism in film, this article has argued that it is an authentic and creative act<sup>60</sup> of the film-artists that transforms the cinematic space into a form of liturgical space. In building artistically the cinematic space, the film becomes a symbol where “the spiritual truth”<sup>61</sup> is revealed and within which ascesis is experienced. Characters, historical time and events, and ascetic praxis are not a matter of the past nor are they “a museum object”.<sup>62</sup> The auteurs allow the characters’ lives to unfold in front of the camera-eye. The characters of the two ascetics (one fictional but based on a number of *jurodivi* ascetics well known to Russian tradition, and the other a historical figure), enacted by two brilliant artists, Aris Servetalis and Peter Mamonov,<sup>63</sup> become relatable and relevant: their search for the truth, their inner wrestling with the world and themselves (similarly to ANDREI RUBLEV), determines the pace of the films, taking a viewer on the journey of confrontation, of passing down the narrow path which leads to the source of the meaning of life itself. Through the depiction of their lives as the life of metanoia, a life-long process, the auteurs reveal the goal of ascesis, which is the salvation of humankind.

In representing asceticism both Yelena Popovic and Pavel Lungin build cinematic spaces in which the objective is shown through the subjective inner experience, where artistic expression overcomes the outsider’s gaze – ascesis is an inner event and at the same time a historical event. It is

58 This is the sacrifice of which Tarkovsky spoke. See Tarkovsky, 1989, 241–242.

59 Radovic 2017, 43.

60 Radovic 2017.

61 Tarkovsky 1989, 37.

62 Tarkovsky 1989, 79.

63 They do not play personae but live their own inner lives in front of our eyes. Tarkovsky 1989, 151.

impossible to arrive at an authentic representation of asceticism without the authentic personal relationship of the auteur with the subject. Without this relationship the film would be a mere shadow – a shallow look at praxis without deeper meaning or relevance. This inwardly approach is precisely what Popovic chose: in her artistic approach the “worldly approach” perception of asceticism is of less importance. The inwardly approach in creating the cinematic space in Popovic’s case is a result of her personal relationship to the theme and her dynamic and frequently spontaneous negotiation of cinematic space on the set: with the intuition of an artist, Popovic frequently decided on the spot how to narrate the story, which elements to focus upon, and how to approach specific scenes.

Lungin’s cinema reminds us yet again that art is the quest for truth, for the eternal. In painting the eternal through film language, Lungin is informed by Orthodox tradition, composing a film that draws the viewer in; Popovic by contrast invites the viewer to take in what is created within the cinematic space. Popovic’s personal relation to the subject shows that poetic style is not premeditated but springs from the personal: the sense for sacrifice, the quest for truth and real life, “not ideas or arguments about life”.<sup>64</sup> Being concerned with the reality of spiritual truth, both film auteurs approach film as a window upon life itself, pointing beyond themselves towards the source of meaning. In that sense their films resemble *Aesthetica Patrum*, where “aesthetics sees human being as the work of art, and this view connects aesthetics with the spiritual enhancement of man”.<sup>65</sup> Their cinematic-liturgical space is closest to *poetic cinema*, as only through a poetic approach is it possible to transfer liturgical experience into cinematic space. The film becomes a symbol in which “the absolute spiritual truth”<sup>66</sup> is revealed. If directing in the cinema is being able to “separate light from darkness and dry land from waters”,<sup>67</sup> then poetic creation in film is an act of sacrifice and service: like childbirth it gives humankind a chance to experience the truth that the artist begets in herself. Poetic cinema need not describe the world because the world “manifests itself” to the camera<sup>68</sup> as the most real space of human experience. Both Lungin and Popovic allow

64 Tarkovsky draws upon Gogol in that the function of the image is to express life itself. Tarkovsky 1989, 111.

65 Radovic 2017, 43.

66 Tarkovsky 1989, 37.

67 Tarkovsky 1989, 177.

68 Tarkovsky 1989, 60.

the reality of ascetic life to unfold before the camera eye. The liturgical event of ascetic life surpasses space and time, which is precisely what Popovic and Lungin attempt to achieve with their films.

Additionally, the films point beyond the frame, imparting to the viewer a taste of the spiritual reality that needs to be discovered beyond the screen. This is perhaps the most iconographic element of *OSTROV* and *MAN OF GOD*. In their expression they represent poetic cinema rather than “religious film”, for they attempt to engage with the reality of the spiritual life through film language, that is, they create an innovative space, stripped of illusion, that invites and communicates the off-screen reality.

This article has argued that the films *OSTROV* and *MAN OF GOD* follow the aesthetic logic of poetry, thus bringing asceticism in a novel and original way to the big screen. Inspired strongly by Orthodox praxis and aesthetics, together with a personal and intimate approach to their subject, they represent a certain phenomenon in itself, as they surpass the category of “religious film”. Their engagement with the transcendent is not abstract, nor is it an attempt to intellectually understand it; rather it is in service of the reality of life itself. The films manifest the reality of the lives of ascetics, avoiding artificial means of identification, while their aesthetics and *mise-en-scène* are neither austere nor abundant but emerge “from the personality of the characters and their state”.<sup>69</sup> The films attempt to avoid the illusion of the transcendental experience, seeking rather to invite the viewers to lift their hearts and minds to the level of Christ. The lifting of the heart is a liturgical call which cannot be described other than by means of poetic expression. In attempting to do so in novel and authentic ways, the films move the boundaries of our understanding of film’s capacity to communicate the experience of ascesis in the ways it has been depicted in iconography and, more importantly, in the ways in which it has been lived in the lives of the saints. As such they serve as a good platform for further investigation of the capacity of film to express the truth of faith and the human condition and to reframe research in religion and film through the lens of poetic cinema. If the aim of cinema is to break the illusion of “vulgar realism” or ideological abundance and to reach the point of “silence” where art conveys the timeless time and the liturgical, the ascetic experience of the joy of being

69 Tarkovsky 1989, 25.

alive, then only poetic cinema can do so, by capturing “man’s potential [...] his spiritual striving to go beyond the ordinary bounds of his life on earth”.<sup>70</sup>

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## Filmography

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