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“THE RETURN OF THE SACRED”:
IMPLICIT RELIGION AND INITIATION SYMBOLISM IN ZVYAGINTSEV’S
VOZVRASHCHENIE (2003)

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Abstract: Recent studies have been increasingly interested in the connections between popular culture – cinema in particular – and religion, and most particularly in how traditional mythologies and religious frameworks and practices are recycled and reinterpreted within modern media. These interactions can be ranged from opposition to dialogue and move towards appropriation and even replacement, in terms of functions and impact. Departing from a series of theories – mainly that of “implicit religion”, coined by Bailey but also developed by theorists like Lyden – the article examines the issue of recycled myth and religious pattern in contemporary cinema, focusing on the Russian “New Wave” and more specifically on discussing Zvyagintsev’s *Vozvrashchenie* [*The Return*] (2003). The article aims to decode the religious layers and symbolism of the film, which can find a coherent explanation in Eliade’s theories on the pattern of initiation, but also in those on the sacred camouflaged into the profane and most particularly on the hierophanies and initiation religious patterns. The paper also focuses on the function of religious archetypes and rituals as employed by contemporary storytellers like cinema (with all its audio-visual paraphernalia), especially when such religious scripts are as articulated, although implicit, as in Zvyagintsev’s narrative. The article concludes that this return to religion and the sacred as worldviews and manners of understanding of the world can be explained as employed for their persistent function of myth structures as meaning and coherence providers.

Key Words: implicit religion, ritual, sacred, initiation, fatherhood, Russian cinema, Andrey Zvyagintsev, *The Return*.

Introduction. Recycling Religion in Contemporary Cinema

As scholars have increasingly emphasised during the past decade and a half¹, multiple connections can be established between popular culture – cinema in particular – and religion. These interactions can be ranged from opposition to dialogue and move towards appropriation and even replacement, in terms of functions and impact. Thus, theorists have identified different models or typologies that would explain the avatars of religion within the environment of cinema. Such a three-fold model – referring, however, strictly to Christianity – is that of Clive Marsh, designed under the influence of Paul Tillich's perception on art and religion². Thus, "Marsh suggests a three part-model to understand how Christ and culture relate – Christ in opposition to culture, Christ in agreement with culture, and Christ in dialogue with culture"³, privileging the third formula. In Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt's *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in popular American Film* (1995), Martin suggests a three-fold typology "to describe the study of religion, which can then be applied to the study of religion and film as well. The three approaches he identifies are the theological, the ideological, and the mythological."⁴ Another five-fold typology belongs to Robert K. Johnston (2000), the stages he designs when examining the relation between cinema and religion involving a range of approaches that comprise *avoidance, caution, dialogue, appropriation*, and, finally, *the divine encounter*⁵, or the revelation that becomes a key for reading Zvyagintsev's *Return*.

John C. Lyden also "proposes a model of interreligious dialogue between religions and films"⁶. Thus it becomes apparent that the dialogue is, therefore, a formula that has gained ground, prevailing over previous approaches that favoured the idea of complete secularization within such media as well as over those that saw cinema as potentially influential in promoting ethical or political ideas. As previously discussed elsewhere,

"Popular culture became a favourite space of dialogue and melting pot of the cultural and religious diversity characterising the contemporary world and in the same time fulfilling, without religious institutions constraints, the 'modern man's need for the sacred in spite of tendencies to restrain its force in the cultural practices of modernity'^{7,8}.

Moreover, the link between cinema and religion outstretches towards the identification of common patterns in the structure and functions of cinema in comparison to the religious behaviour. Thus,

theorists started "looking not just at film texts but also noting the structural parallels between cinema-going and religious rituals"⁹, as Melanie J. Wright notices in her 2007 work dedicated to the topic. Among them, Conrad Ostwalt, who argues that "the movie theatre has acted like some secular religion, complete with its sacred space and rituals that mediate an experience of otherness."¹⁰ Similarly,

"Adam observed that going to the cinema involved a ritualic level – darkness, silence etc. – and a symbolic, both unified in the religious. Moreover, he stated that at the functional level, cinema is similar to the medieval church, both as a ritualic space and as a decoder of meaning. Secondly, and even more significantly, religiousness is conveyed within cinema through the virtual world it creates, possessing a real impact in shaping identities, values, realities. Margaret Miles is one of the observers of the phenomenon, arguing that 'the representation of values in contemporary culture may be seen to occur most persistently not in the church or the synagogue but in the movie theatre'."¹¹

Another significant researcher, John C. Lyden develops the approximation between the two cultural areas in speaking about a "communitas" (Victor Turner's concept¹²) shared by the moviegoers, a kind of experience that involves accessing a "liminal (in-between, uncertain, initiatory) space together, undergo a period of self-exploration and bonding while outside normal social structures, and then return to society."¹³ This ritualic, "participatory performance"¹⁴ associated with the movie-going behaviour contributes – together with the modern myths created by cinema and the recycled religious patterns in the cinematic narrative –, to this increasing focus of researchers on film in connection to the field of traditional religious thinking.

Modern Functions of Recycled Myth and Religious Patterns

The employment of concepts such as "myth", "ritual" or "implicit religion" may need some contextual clarification. All of them seem to claim an interdisciplinary approach as they can be identified in various fields from popular culture to political behaviours, a common element being their use within fictional and non-fictional narratives communicated to contemporary audiences.

"There has been some effort to develop such a method in the recognition that films have a 'mythology' all their own. ... Martin uses the term 'mythological' study to refer to comparative religious studies and the history of religions approach, which asserts that 'religion manifests itself through cross-cultural forms' including myth and ritual. This approach views religion "as a universal and ubiquitous human activity".¹⁵

Outside their traditional cultural contexts, the myth patterns are relevant for their structure and functions. Thus, myth "functions as a timeless model", which "deprives historical phenomena of their specificity and transforms them to omnipotent patterns"¹⁶.

What is highly significant for the employment of myth in cinema and contributes to a large extent to the applied analysis below is the fact that the myth is basically a meaning-providing narrative that offers a coherent understanding of everyday events:

"In anthropological terms, the essence of myth is that it provides a narrative structure and coherence to the history of the community; it is a shared narrative that gives meaning. What myth presents is a symbolic reconstruction of the community's formation. This reconstruction may be based on real events, or on phenomena which have no existence independent of the myth itself. Myth is therefore foundational for the community in the sense that it provides the basic rationale for the community, a sense of its meaning and purpose as well as how it came about. What is important is less the empirical basis of the myth than that the myth is accepted and believed in."¹⁷

Indeed, this approach of reading films as meaning-providing narratives¹⁸, recycling archetypes and religious symbols in order to find a coherent explanation of existential experiences, has recently supporters. It speaks of the significance of film religious-like nature both in content and in the environment (the community sharing the meaning providing experience being now that of the moviegoers).

"If the practice of film viewing can be understood as religion...then the dialogue between religion' and 'film' is really just another form of interreligious dialogue...Rather than assume that religion and culture are entirely different entities or that religion can assume a hegemonic position in

relation to culture, perhaps traditional religions might benefit from learning to listen to the religions of popular culture as they are learning to listen one another."¹⁹

This shared experience takes, thus, the form of a modern ritual, implicitly religious, as the latter perspective becomes highly significant in this approach, both in its structure and in its content. "Ritual" itself is a core concept here because, while a key structure for cinema narratives, it can also define the practices described above that concern the movie-going shared experience. It is, as the current analysis aims to reveal, also the case with *The Return*, in what concerns the hero's journey and initiation, a universal theme of cinema, no matter its source.

Edward I. Bailey, the author who coined the concept of "implicit religion" to be applied below onto the case study, was interested precisely in this type of ritualised behaviour. Bailey was, however, most interested in the "performative aspects of behaviours – as associated with implicit religion and being 'secular manifestations of religious behaviour' and in the manner in which they are exhibited, repeated and therefore turned into ritualised practices."²⁰ The concept of "implicit religion" replaced that of "secular religion" which Bailey initially used, discussing the idea of practices (and beliefs) that can be seen as comparable with traditional religious frameworks, re-enacted into the secular environments and thus offering (supplementary) meaning when decoding reality. Naturally, "religious" defines here not a specific (Christian, Islamic or so on and so forth) practice or belief but rather a "coherent set of (magical) beliefs, teachings, (sacred) objects, (spiritual) experiences and practices that can function as sources of meaning"²¹. In what cinema is concerned, perhaps more than any other form of contemporary popular culture, we can safely say that it is a privileged environment for recycling and reinterpreting religious patterns, symbols and behaviours (based on this implicit religion formula), because as a modern storyteller it inherits the functions of previous major narrative-providers as mythologies, fairytales or literature and also benefits from multiple means to convey such narratives.

The visual prevails within cinema and a film-maker like Zvyagintsev – whose film *The Return* makes the subject of the case study analysis below –, admits such an open preference for the image to the expense of dialogue, image usually conveying ambiguous and plural meanings: "The most important thing for me is the image, not the thought."²² From this point of view, cinema greatly benefits from the increasingly sophisticated technologies of image creation and reproduction. And, again, as I noticed elsewhere, can be seen itself as

"a space for developing new popular culture rituals associated with contemporary 'sacred spaces' (such as the cinema multiplex within the

commercial centre, the new consumerist *axis mundi*), the cinema also seem to offer a sort of new access to transcendence. Thus, not only through the experience itself but especially through the messages and products delivered by cinema (containing a set of ready processed recycled patterns and clichés – religious or cinematic), the film has become a favourite supplier of a new type of life-integrated religiousness."²³

While in previous studies I have focused on Western cinema²⁴ and particularly on Sci-Fi, science-fantasy or fantasy as *sui generis* re-interpreters of traditional myth or religious patterns, I believe that in terms of implicit (and not only explicit) religion, the Russian cinema and the so-called "New Wave" films in particular are highly relevant and stimulating environments for deeper analysis. Most significantly, I believe that this must be performed based on the thesis that implicit religious imagery, patterns and behaviours (and I shall explain the preference for the "implicit") are relevant not only at the level of the visual image as references but also because they have the deeper significance anticipated above. That is the contribution to a meaning providing interpretation of the world and to the need for a coherent interpretation of events that escape, as it is the case of *The Return*, everyday understanding, either through their mystery or through their tragic or absurd nature.

Almighty Fathers and Fatherless Sons: Religion and the Russian Cinema

Ritual and religion are major recurrences of Russian culture, being intertwined even with areas that appear to be secular, such as politics or the media, cinema among them. Even the Soviet festivals and parades, despite the explicitly atheistic nature of the regime and their secular, popular culture appearance, were saturated with religious elements: "socialist festivals were thought to counterbalance the compelling beauty of the Russian Orthodox service. ... Rooted in the religious procession (*krestnyi khod*) the Communist parades were inspired from 'traditional popular culture, liturgical rites, and even tsarist ceremonies'."²⁵ The Soviets attempted to recycle and fill with the new political and culture content the formerly religious structures (also deeply connected with the tsarist ceremonial rituals and figures) and use their power and impact. Such an example was the new calendar of official holidays that intentionally overlapped traditional Orthodox holidays²⁶.

In what regards Russian cinema (and by this I refer to both Soviet and Post-Soviet cinema), it has developed a complex relation with religious

imagery, mainly under the influence of political developments. From the very first film made in Russia we can observe the ambivalent relation that unfolded between a secular medium and a deeply religious culture and political ceremonials: it "captured scenes connected to a civil religious ritual: the Coronation of Tsar Nicholas II in 1896. This short sequence contains shots of the imperial couple entering and leaving the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Kremlin."²⁷ I mentioned the word "ambivalence" because before the Soviets, even the tsar and the heads of the Orthodox Church oscillated between suspicion and fascination with this new environment, using it for recording events like the one mentioned above but in the same time censoring its content.²⁸ Thus, significantly for the later development of Russian cinema and for the topic of this paper, the initial representations of religious figures (naturally, by this meaning Christian and more particularly Russian Orthodox) being censured:

"Initially, cinematic depictions of Jesus were taboo. The Orthodox Church responded almost immediately to one portrayal of Jesus with a letter—Russia's first film censorship document—issued by the office of the Holy Synod in 1898, titled *On the inadmissibility of holy subjects being shown by means of the so-called 'Living photography'*."²⁹

This attitude was, however paradoxical it may seem, perpetuated within the Soviet cultural canon, which chose to both use and censure cinema, together with the rest of the media – as well as with literature and all forms of arts and communication – as an important propaganda instrument. Moreover, as early as this, cinema was perceived as an alternative to religious rituals and imagery³⁰, which matched the intentions of the atheistic Bolsheviks. Trotsky thus argued that "this rivalry may become fatal for the church' if the cinema is put to effective use"³¹. Thus, in the first decades of Soviet cinema, explicit religion was silenced or associated with the past³², but actually traditional religious patterns and mythological structures were recycled, being filled with a new civil religious content, with the Soviet values and figures. One of the main hero patterns that was subject to such a process of appropriation and recycling is that of the Father, extremely relevant for the current analysis. It is highly significant both for Christian imagery and for the tsarist ceremonies and cultivation of the figure of the "batiuska Tsar" ("Father Tsar"), placed in the centre of a mystic adoration cult. Faithful to its practice of silently appropriating the previous ceremonial (political, religious and military) rituals and refill them with specific content, the Soviet regime also recycled the Father figure and associated it with the new leader(s).

"Twentieth-century Russian totalitarianism embraced the supremacy of the paternal ruler, with only slight, primarily secularizing, modifications. The paternal image positioned the leader – Lenin and Stalin – as an omniscient divinity with absolute power, an image amply illustrated in Soviet visual culture, which drew on religious iconography for its representation of the two addressing multitudes 'from above,' dispensing 'blessings,' and withdrawing into sacred solitude to contemplate ways of improving the lot of the masses.²⁶ This mythology, which propagated Lenin's purported single-minded devotion to the masses and Stalin's tireless work on their behalf, necessarily operated on desire and selectivity. Stalin's canny exploitation of familial rhetoric proclaimed him not only Father of the People, but Father of virtually everyone and everything in sight. And the populace responded with the sort of fearful idolatry that children nurture for the domineering, arbitrary, but charismatic father they idealize."³³

During the Thaw, as this kind of politicized Father imagery tended to fade in the absence of an Almighty leader, explicitly or implicitly religious patterns penetrated the cinematic fictional world, re-enacting, such in the case of Andrei Tarkovsky (Zvyagintsev's acknowledged model), religious scripts and ambiguous figures. Concerning the father figures, researchers have identified the motif of fatherlessness, following the fathers' heroic deaths in the war, the directors associating thus the figure of the father with the suffering of war, crimes and prisons³⁴. Although the case study chosen for the current paper belongs to the post-Soviet "New Wave" cinema, these lineages in Soviet cinema were necessary to mention. From the religious point of view we witness a "Resurrection" of the Sacred in Russian post-Soviet cinema, while the figure of the Father remains major, even when the films continue to focus on the absence rather than the presence of fathers.

"All³⁵ declared paternity an acute, endlessly ramifying problem in post-Soviet society, rooted in the passivity, self-indulgence, and fecklessness of men raised by single or divorced mothers who dote on their sons. Russian fathers, the trio insisted, are essentially absent. ... Attributing the contemporary epidemic of "fatherlessness" to the catastrophic loss of ale lives in World War II, Chernov maintained that during the Soviet postwar era the

country’s leaders and screen personalities functioned as compensatory virtual fathers.”³⁶

Significantly for the applied analysis to follow, this focus on fatherhood and the absence of the father figure has been associated with the crisis of identity which post-Soviet Russia underwent following the demise of communism. It also “culminates decades of conflicts and troubled negotiations between generations of males—similarly reflected in post-Soviet theatre”³⁷.

Case Study. *The Return of the Father*

Andrei Zvyagintsev’s debut film *The Return* (2003) is one of the most significant examples among the so-called “New Wave of Russian cinema” and this not only due to the awards it has won (such as the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2003) or to being one of the most critically acclaimed productions of post-Soviet cinema. A more important argument, I believe, in favour of its study as a major recent Russian production is its profound structural and content affinity with the Russian culture, in a manner that transgresses the Soviet cultural distortions. As Terence McSweeney argues³⁸, there is a general tendency of this Russian “new wave” cinema for revisiting Russian classics and for developing a typical approach and rhythm that distinguishes this type of cinema from those employing Western techniques, not to mention the preference for certain themes (fatherhood or fatherlessness among them).

“This emerging movement is arguably more influenced by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Tarkovsky than Tarantino, Scorsese or Bruckheimer. They are quintessentially Russian in their construction; posing questions of national identity, masculinity and femininity, dealing with spiritual crises without the glibness and excess of mainstream films. Technically they are slower paced, feature iconic and unironic images of Russian landscapes and feature narratives that favour character development over action and spectacle. Among them are films like Khlebnikov and Popogrebsky's *Koktobel* (*Koktobel*, 2003), Mariya Saakyan's *The Lighthouse* (Mayak, 2006) and, perhaps more important than any other, *The Return* by Andrei Zvyagintsev.”³⁹

Among these legacies, critics have mostly emphasised Zvyagintsev’s

overt references to Tarkovsky's films, having been called Tarkovsky's heir or a new Tarkovsky⁴⁰ both because of such explicit connections and for his subtle technique and subject preferences. The film quotes full emblematic shots, such as the first shot of the unnamed Mother ("focusing on the back of her neck – a shot characteristic of Russian cinema of the Khrushchev Thaw period – echoes the well-known shot of the mother in Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*"⁴¹) but also shots of nature, such as the final shots of the landscape⁴². There are also more implicit suggestions, contained for instance in the names of the two boys in the film, Andrei and Ivan, which have made many think of the master's *Andrei Rublev* and *Ivan's Childhood*. Moreover, the latter had won, decades before, the same Golden Lion Award as *The Return*, which was, among other things, defined by McSweeney as "the end of Ivan's childhood"⁴³. In what the names were concerned, their choice was not accidental, as the director preferred them to the initial ones (Archil and David⁴⁴): "the naming of the two child protagonists is just the beginning of a succession of references to Zvyagintsev's spiritual and artistic mentor which flood the frames of *The Return*."⁴⁵

The plot of the film says relatively little in itself about the essence and the message of the film. It is, therefore, a delicate task to try to summarize it, as the director himself was reluctant to explain or describe the film, suggesting, most rightfully, that there is far more to it than the explicit facts. "Zvyagintsev himself has stated that 'the film is a mythological look at human life,' and that 'if you watch this movie from the standpoint of everyday life, it's a mistake, because it's much broader, and the mystery of the film won't reveal itself to you'"⁴⁶.

However, one must start by mentioning the key elements of the plot, adding from the very start that the environment and most particularly the water, itself a meaningful presence in the film (and which needs further detailing in the analysis) contributes, through long shots, to the narrative, perhaps equalling in significance the action and the dialogue. Thus, the first shot, an underwater one which captures a submerged boat will be attached meaning only at the end of the film, becoming recognizable as the very boat used by the characters and which contained at the end the dead body of the father. However, the boat is empty in this first shot, failing to announce the tragic denouement and allowing further interpretation. The explicit plot begins with another meaningful scene (shot, as most of the film, in dark or sepia tones) which announces the theme of the initiation and its trials: several boys jump from a tower into freezing water. It is "an archetypal test of bravado and masculinity"⁴⁷ not only in the eyes of the viewer but also through the importance attached to it by the boys, both those who actually jump and Ivan, the younger boy, who fails the test:

"he has failed their test of what it takes to be a man. For this he is ostracized from their group ... Hours pass before a woman comes to rescue him, it is his mother ... who will remain un-named throughout the film. Ivan pleads with her, 'I can't go home. I *have* to jump.' His mother does not understand the strict rules of the teenage world in which he inhabits, 'No one will know' she promises him before leading him home. Thus the stage is set for the cultural battleground on which the narrative of *The Return* is fought: gender identity in contemporary post-Soviet Russia and what it means to be 'a man'. The film can be persuasively read on three levels; as a naturalistic family drama, as a socio-political allegory of family values in modern Russia and as a religious parable. It is the representation the father that is central to all three of these interpretations."⁴⁸

The scene announces, therefore, as a form of "mise en abyme", the major theme of initiation as well as Ivan's role as a protagonist in this and the absence of the father, which is implicitly suggested by the mother's arrival to the rescue of the child from a dangerous situation he cannot (yet) overcome alone. After a later confrontation with the group, that recorded Ivan's failure, the two brothers fight and they both run, in a childish manner, to tell their mother. These details tackling the issue of maturity/immaturity will contribute, as jigsaw pieces, to the later construction of meaning. Arriving at home, they are met by the mother – shot in the Tarkovskyan manner described above –, who seems preoccupied by a more significant issue and asks them to be silent, as their father is asleep. The boys are amazed, as he had been absent for the last twelve years from the family⁴⁹. The father "sleeps peacefully in a deliberate reconstruction of Mantegna's *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*' (c1480)"⁵⁰. His being asleep announces his later death, not only through the religious reference but also as being characteristic to Zvyagintsev's cinematic *topoi*, if we are only to remember *The Banishment*, where the mother appears several times as sleeping before her "sacrificial" death. This image, referencing both to Mantegna and to Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, does not suffice for the children to recognise him as their father (lack of recognition which is in itself a biblical reference) but they run to the attic and retrace an old family picture, kept in an illustrated Bible, next to the image of Abraham *sacrificing* his son (another clue for the further development of events). A rather silent dinner follows, reiterating the Last Supper and also placing the father in the centre of the family, both visually and in the relation with the rest of the family, the

mother, grandmother and the children. There appears from the very moment that the children find themselves in between the authoritarian masculinity of the father and the feminine universe that had so far been theirs, both physically, through their placement at the table and metaphorically, as wine is given to them at the suggestion of the father but softened with water by the women. This ambivalence is put a stop when the father takes the boys, despite the mother's reluctance, to a fishing trip that will turn into a dramatic – and eventually tragic – initiation.

“The father decides to take the boys on a fishing trip; away from their mother and the emasculating effects of modern civilization, a realm which has cosseted them since their infancy. Like in the work of Tarkovsky the journey the characters take is only physical on the surface, a more important and meaningful journey is the spiritual and psychological they undertake at the same time. As their road trip begins, a series of confrontations start: the father tests the boys, challenging their notions of how to behave.”⁵¹

The stages of this process of initiation will start with details that in appearance are extremely common, such as a stop to a restaurant, but actually also filled with significance, such as Ivan's refusal to eat his bread, an authority challenge as well as a religious suggestion to bread as a Christian symbol⁵².

“The use of bread is one of many allusions to religion and spirituality in the film which are too numerous to ignore. They begin with the photograph of the father being found in an old bible and continue with the reproductions of Mantegna and da Vinci, and the symbolic use of wine and then bread. Like Tarkovsky before him, Zvyagintsev is an intensely religious film-maker. Arguably one of the defining elements of Tarkovsky's films are the fact that they are imbued with his profound religious and spiritual beliefs. While the details of these beliefs become hard to isolate, every film resonates with Tarkovsky's humanist spirituality. Tarkovsky believed that one of the fundamental purposes of art, and specifically cinema, was a search for the profound, he suggested.”⁵³

Through an increasing physical distance from the civilization, until reaching an absolutely isolated island, the process becomes complicated

and challenges the boys until their ultimate ordeal: following the father's accidental death, they must carry the body and reach home for themselves. This summary is, again, insufficient to capture the film's essence, as the following analysis will try to show. No detail is meaningless and the events can be read as an initiation script, filled with mythological and religious meaning.

A very important observation must be made here: indeed, as already anticipated, the film makes some references to religious (and more precisely Christian) imagery and narratives. However, there must be said that these references are implicit, however clear they might appear to some, as with the exception of the Bible (that actually serves for a family album in one of the first scenes and is abandoned in the attic), no explicit allusion to religion is made: no church appears in the timeless landscape, not other explicit religious imagery or behaviour. As similar as some shots may appear with religious imagery, such as Mantegna's lying Christ, they are merely implicit references and an argument, besides the already mention of the lack of explicit religious behaviours or images, is that the collection of myth and religious references in the films have been only partly decrypted by the critics, each of them making his or her own selection of recognized references, some being less ambiguous than others.

Hierophanies, Initiation and Aquatic Cosmogonies. Eliade Revisited.

*"We need myths if we are to transcend the banality of material life."*⁵⁴

As anticipated, Zvyagintsev admitted that in his film-making he is "concerned with the mythological dimension of human existence"⁵⁵ rather than with merely depicting a succession of events; so, *The Return*, "while a simple story on the surface, has suggestions of Greek mythology, political allegory, and religious parable."⁵⁶ Among all these interpretations or levels of analysis, the initiation scenario, complemented by a series of revelations of the sacred into the profane, in Eliade's terms, are the most significant, as the current analysis will try to argue.

The rich symbolism stems from more than one source, combining, as quoted above, mythological references (and their psychoanalytical rereading) with religious references of different sources. This mixed origin as well as the multilayered aspect of the narrative led to the current study's thesis that the initiation structure can be followed in Eliade's approach on comparative religion, in complementariness with his theory of the sacred camouflaged (and then revealed) into the secularized world and objects. Bailey, the theorist of "implicit religion" also contributes to this perspective that "anything in the world has the potential to be religious"⁵⁷, as long as it displays one of the following qualities: it provides

shared beliefs, inspires commitment and functions as a source of meaning and values."⁵⁸ This explains precisely what I believe to be the internal catalyst of the employment and reinterpreting of myth and religious patterns in order to add plural layers to the narrative and the absurd and tragic events it describes. But beyond adding depth to the plot, the use of this mythological-religious scenario has to do with a perspective on cinema, that favours a decoding of the sacred into the everyday events, agreeing with the statement that "every single moment of this film is a revelation"⁵⁹. The use of "myth" and "religion" or "ritual" must be here understood in Eliade's comparative religion perspective, therefore including the different forms of the sacred. The religious beliefs and rituals are seen as sharing an essential manner of understanding the world, the time and space, and also, in Bailey's terms, as meaning-providers, offering a coherent interpretation of the world. As I previously argued elsewhere,

"Thus, the 'sacred', Bailey argued, could be identified in secular areas - *sacrality in secularity* (recognisable legacy of Mircea Eliade's "sacred into the profane" paradigm [1956], discussing the *surviving religious patterns* under camouflage and rationality cohabiting with irrationality). These secular areas mentioned by Bailey (some of which completely "unholy" at a first look, if discussed from a traditionalist manicheistic perspective on the religious *versus* the secular) are 'literature, psychology, technology, medicine, law, acting, dreams, football, human rights, raves, venerated scholars and celebrities, childhood, justice, love, fun, and film'."⁶⁰

Moreover, Bailey's and Lyden's perspectives are themselves influenced by Eliade's legacy and all share this interest in religious behaviour and practices as universal paradigms. In Lyden's words, this heritage is significant as a basis for the development of further concepts and theoretical frameworks:

"It would not be an overstatement to suggest that Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) has had a greater effect on the academic study of comparative religions than any other twentieth-century figure. He based much of his own understanding of mythology on a stark contrast between the Western "historical" view of time and the cyclical view of time found in other (especially archaic) religions. Mythology, to Eliade, is primarily cosmogony in that it gives an

account of creation in a distant primordial time. This time of creation, however, can be accessed ritualistically through the retelling and reenacting of the myth of creation, in that such reenactment brings one outside of ordinary time and space to the sacred realm in which creation can once again occur."⁶¹

Also, the idea of "implicit religion" is, in my belief, congenial with Eliade's perspective that "the profane can be a vehicle for the sacred even as there is a continual alteration between the profane worldview and the sacred worldview"⁶² and that the sacred can manifest even in a deeply secularized context. There might be of some use to remember some of the arguments in Eliade's theory on manifestation and revelation of the sacred and discuss them in relation to *The Return*. Most significantly, Eliade himself, as early as 1956, emphasized the significance of cinema as an environment for what we could call a recycling of traditional myth patterns, their reconfiguration and interpretation so as to give birth to specific cinematic mythologies.

"The two researchers meet at is particular point, as Eliade [1956] also argued, when analysing the traces of the sacred within these secularized areas, that "the 'dream factory' of cinema, for example, 'takes over and employs countless mythical motifs--the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisaal landscape, hell, and so on).' Moreover, this ubiquitous persistence of the sacred into the secular world (refusing the sharp dissociation secular/religious) interpreted by researchers not solely as a dynamic self-reproduction of religious patterns (somehow naturally based on some "prototypical human gestures", but also as a source of meaning and coherence ('the camouflage of the sacred in the structures of daily life and in those of the professional life is an indicator of the need for meaning, mythologization and ritualization felt by man in modern society'). Similarly, Luckmann (1966) had defined "invisible religion" (which Bailey considered to be almost identical with 'implicit religion') - precisely as some 'thread-like theme that is woven through the various parts of one's life', religion continuing thus to play its integrative

function even if through non-canonical behaviours or symbolism."⁶³

Within the profane or the secularized world, as that described in the film objects or events reveal their hidden, camouflaged sacred nature. The film depicts such a world that lacks explicit presence of religiousness and, in the style Zvyagintsev also repeats elsewhere (such as the *Banishment*) there is a notion of timelessness and undefined space in the film that breaks with direct references to Russian religious practices –. Nonetheless, as already mentioned, this is no reason for considering the sacred as absent from such a world and less in this case, in which, as quoted above, "everything is a revelation".

"From the most elementary hierophany – e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree – to the supreme hierophany (which, for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act-the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world."⁶⁴

This emphasis on the Christ as an ultimate revelation would explain the number of implicit references to Christ, although distorted or in Eliade's words, "degenerated or camouflaged"⁶⁵, preserving some characteristics while losing some others. As already mentioned, the first image of the father is that of him sleeping, in a posture and setting that minutely recreates Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ*, also referencing Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. It also reminds us, within Russian literature, of a similar painting, Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb, painted by* (1520–1522), mentioned in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. Similarly with the scene in the film, this *ekphrasis* also deals with the idea of revelation, return (or resurrection), with that of belief and disbelief, recognition and failure to recognise (the boys' uncertainty whether it was their father) and, last but not least, announces the father's later death. The following moment, the confrontation with the old family picture, placed in a Bible is also significant. As already mentioned, the only religious explicitly object in the film but not used as such but kept in the attic together with old family objects and serving as an ad-hoc photo album, therefore suggesting its desacralisation. "No churches appear in *The Return*, a fact that sets the film apart from the traditional iconography of Eastern European cinema. However, the representation of the father makes him a Christ-like figure"⁶⁶. The image or the representation is very relevant for the Orthodox paradigm:

"According to Orthodox tradition, rather than simply representing divinities, *icons contain the divine*: Christ is believed to reside within the icon that represents him. Interestingly, the father ... is depicted as a Christ-like figure. In spite of his physical absence, he remains present in the photographs, which thus come to resemble icons. The father's soul, like that of Christ, endures in the material world through the representation of his corporeal form. It is also continued, of course, through his offspring, in the form of his two sons."⁶⁷

Similarly to Christ, the father will die on a Friday and his body will be lost in the water and will disappear completely (as the empty submerged boat in the initial shot of the film reveals it). This will take place on a Sunday, as the film is structured into seven days, announced in a form of the boys' travel journal. Beyond this first-level interpretation, the structure anticipates the idea of a ritualic new Creation of the world or reconfiguration of the two boys' world, after being initiated into adulthood. The trials involved in this process reveal, therefore, a progress of the challenges faced by the boys, until they remain alone and must be prepared to face this tragic absence of the father. Both the father's presence – he remains unnamed, so can be referred to as an archetypal Father, as the woman, caring and frail, submissive, fits into a traditional Mother archetype – and his later absence, in spirit and later in body, are felt as extremely powerful. They are the presence and absence of an "omnipotent father"⁶⁸ having the ability to change the order of the universe, of one "who, symbolically or empirically, represents an omnipotent authority culturally codified since time immemorial and essential to his [son's] 'transformation ... into a man'."⁶⁹

After a car trip filled with increasingly tense moments and trials of endurance, the three leave the car on land and venture to an isolated island in what seems to be a frail boat: "To make it there they must journey over water and through a fierce storm on a small boat"⁷⁰. The symbolism of water will be later discussed in relation to film, as it has a complex significance. Concerning the storm, it also has religious symbolism, as in many mythologies such strong natural phenomena are associated with the god's manifestations. "This means that certain privileged structures of the cosmos – the sky, the atmosphere – constitute favourite epiphanies of the supreme being; he reveals his presence by what is specifically and peculiarly his-the majesty (*majestas*) of the celestial immensity, the terror (*tremendum*) of the storm."⁷¹

Once they arrive, the space is set for the initiation that has been prepared by the ordeals faced on land and in the boat, the isolated island being no accidental choice for such a setting.

"One of the paradigmatic images of creation is the island that suddenly manifests itself in the midst of the waves. On the other hand, immersion in water signifies regression to the preformal, reincorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence. Emersion repeats the cosmogonic act of formal manifestation; immersion is equivalent to a dissolution of forms. This is why the symbolism of the waters implies both death and rebirth. Contact with water always brings a regeneration".⁷²

The island is, as Eliade argues in the quotation above, related to cosmogonies, therefore to the Creation of primordial world and, thus, embodies a privileged space for the manifestations of the sacred and for the practice of rituals (in this case, all of them implicit).

"But the uninhabited island is first and foremost a heterotopia, a term used by Foucault to signify a physical place that represents or parallels a utopia. Literally 'other place,' the term is defined by the author as a setting for initiation. It is a place that is open to the rest of the world and can be located geographically yet is difficult to access. The island is, like the house in *The Sacrifice* and that in *Nostalghia*, 'the true cosmos, the ultimate primordial setting.' It is a sanctuary in which both death and rebirth through initiation will take place."⁷³

Despite this implicitness and appearance of a banal place for fishing and everyday behaviour, the succession of events as well as the details of the space configuration – none of them left to chance – perfectly fit Eliade's description of sacred spatiality, including the existence of a tower and its ladder, an essential detail in the economy of the narrative:

"(a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space; (b) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld); (c) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the axis mundi: pillar (cf. the universalis columna), ladder (cf. Jacob's ladder), mountain, tree, vine, etc.; (d) around this cosmic

axis lies the world (= our world), hence the axis is located "in the middle," at the 'navel of the earth'; it is the Center of the World"⁷⁴

The abandoned island therefore hosts a tower, a sort of *axis mundi* as well as phallic symbol (similar with the one in the first shots of the film and with the same masculinity initiation connotations), where Ivan is still afraid to climb. However, after increasing tension between the authoritarian (and occasionally violent) father and the boys, Ivan runs through the forrest and isolates himself on the top of the tower. Climbing the symbolic ascensional ladder, the father collapses in a symbolic crucifixion pose.

"Ivan even steals the symbol of his father's masculine authority, his knife. One recalls now the significance of where the photograph of the father was placed at the beginning of the film, next to the story of Abraham and Isaac, however, it is not one of the boys who will be sacrificed, but the father himself. ... After their confrontation Ivan abruptly flees running through the woods in an effort to get away from his ... Yet it seems that Ivan has now conquered his fear of heights and is able to both climb and stand almost without fear on top of the tower. Is it his father's harsh treatment of him that has turned him into a man? He threatens to jump if the father comes any closer, in a tragic echo of the game he played with his friends at the start of the film, but a rung of the primitive ladder the father clings to comes loose, sending him plummeting to his death, arms outstretched in a classic crucifixion pose."⁷⁵

Besides Ivan's stealing of the knife as a symbol of power and manhood, another symbol is the watch that the father gives to Andrei when the boys take the boat for a short trip. It is a transfer of authority and responsibility and eventually, as the watch remains with Andrei after his father's death, it symbolises the father's exit from the historical time and passage into the timeless dimension of death.

The behaviour of the two boys utterly changes after the father's death: they face the tragedy in shock but silence, without cries, and are able to carry the body and then row to the shore with far more determination and strength than during the first challenges they had to face in their initiation. It is the completion of their preparation for maturity, as they must return home alone, the father's body being lost after the boys' return to shore. Andrei takes the lead and drives the car, giving instructions to Ivan as his father previously gave him; Ivan also moves from the back of the car to the front and reveals a different

behaviour, for the first time admitting his father's simultaneous presence and absence, when he shouts "Father!" as the boat containing the body is sinking.

The initiation represents therefore the major theme and can be retraced as the main religious structure of the narrative. The so-called "rites de passage" or rites of passage, initiation among them, are some of the most significant ritual patterns, transgressing the border of individual religions, mythologies or beliefs, as they are common to most of them. The passage to maturity lies in the centre of such rituals and therefore has been inherited or in other cases borrowed by all major narrative structures, from ancient mythologies and folklore to contemporary cinema. As also detailed elsewhere, the hero's initiation, manifesting in the form of a quest, of a journey is one of the central myths of cinema narratives, most obviously recycling the traditional mythological pattern, which is universal ("occurring in every culture, in every time. It is as infinitely varied as the human race itself and yet its basic form remains constant."⁷⁶). Like in *The Return*, the scenario of the initiation involves a journey, as it means taking a symbolic distance from the comfortable, familiar and protective space, making a trip into the unknown, entering symbolic spaces such as a cave, an island, a labyrinth⁷⁷, scattered with increasingly challenging ordeals, at the border of (symbolic) death. As Campbell – in his classical *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) – emphasised, the classical hero's journey pattern is that of an adventure, outside of the familiar space, filled with obstacles, ordeals and descent into a sort of dark world (or underworld), implying initiation and ended usually with a successful return not only in terms of fulfilling the explicit purpose of the journey but also with a gain in terms of knowledge and maturity.

"The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. ... The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, *crucifixion*). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage),

his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinisation (apotheosis), or again - if the powers have remained unfriendly to him--his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of *the return*. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At *the return threshold* the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (*return, resurrection*). [emphasis added]"⁷⁸

The hero's initiation through a journey or a quest involves, therefore, an exploration of the world and of the self, symbolised in the quest and classical prototype of Odysseus, but proving itself enduring in taking the form of multiple avatars. Although the "call to adventure" can take the shape of different challenges and problems to solve, the common pattern mentioned above ("separation, liminality, and reintegration into society"⁷⁹, resulting in transformation through a fundamental experience) remains remarkably stable and enduring. *The Return* is implicitly structured as an initiation process, although mysterious for the protagonists, who are taken, guided into the adventure, rather than hearing its "call".

Cabart also identified the initiation pattern in the film, mentioning that it is "staged several times within the film's cyclical chronology, occurring for the final time on an island, a sanctuary cut off from the world"⁸⁰. I disagree, however, with the idea that there are separate moments that suggest the initiation, like a sort of traces, or residual religious references. My belief is that the whole narrative is structured following this pattern and has a final meaning, in Campbell's words, the *father atonement*, which also coincides with a return and transformation of the self. However, I agree with her comparison with a crossing of the Styx⁸¹ (and Charon's ferry, especially as the boat indeed carries the dead father during the *return* trip), while the trip to the island is, indeed, a *descensus ad inferos*. I also consider that instead of focusing on the three stages Cabart enunciates (the observation phase, the confrontation phase and the passage into adulthood), we should look instead at the traditional initiation framework that can be identified in the "separation, liminality, and reintegration into society"⁸². The film contains all the elements that make an initiation, including tests of endurance and bravery, and even the physical sufferings implied by the traditional initiation pattern: besides the tiresome and challenging journey and the physical efforts involved,

the father is also violent with the boys in several occasions, not to mention the constant psychological pressure and bullying. The traditional initiation also enacts a symbolical death of the novice (in this case Ivan's threat that he will throw himself from the tower, but instead the father is sacrificed/sacrifices himself, again in a Christ-like pattern of behaviour). This "fall" of the father is, in the same time, a victory over the "dragon" but it is more of a metaphor, because Ivan actually conquers fear and gains maturity. Nonetheless, Ivan's behaviour preceding the father's death can suggest a symbolic parricide: the boy not only has the knife but also utters in words the threat of killing the violent father: in the sacred spaces words have incantation power and, as *logos*, materialise. However, both the father's and the son's attitudes suggest that the death of the father is more likely a ritualic, Christ-like sacrifice (a sort of *Imitatio Christi*), especially as he falls in a crucifixion pose and then, his later posture in the boat re-enacts the initial Mantegna *Lamentation*. For the novices (and especially Ivan, as he seems to be the protagonist of the main transformation process) the event equates with a double revelation: that of the sacred and of death⁸³. However, despite the successful initiation – a positive outcome being apparent in the mature behaviour of the boys following the father's death – the symbolic treasure, the mysterious object recovered by the father from the island, is lost, together with the body of the father, which disappears under the water. The symbolic resurrection of the father – after his death on a Friday and his disappearance under the water precisely on a Sunday, like in the biblical narrative – is ambiguous. While such miracles seem impossible at the explicit level in the film's secularized world, lacking elements of fantasy or of the supernatural and appearing as banal and desacralised, the absence of the father's body from the sunken boat, as shot in the opening of the film, is also suggestive in this respect. There is no "Dead Christ in the Tomb", like in Holbein, via Dostoyevsky, but the absence might rather remember the empty biblical tomb.

This symbolic tomb *within the water* is also extremely important. As anticipated, the significance of water must be mentioned in relation to the film narrative.

"Zvyagintsev shares the late Russian master's [Tarkovsky's] *hydrophilia*; their films are waterlogged; rain is almost a member of the cast' (Menash 2004: 27). *Water* is used in a similarly figurative way in *The Return*; where the rain mirrors the changing relationship between the father and his boys, appearing from nowhere almost as a physical manifestation of Ivan's sense of rage directed towards his father after one of their arguments. This, the use of the lighthouse (connected to the mother and then later the father), and the image of the boys rowing across the

lake in a torrential down pour, prompted Julian Graffy to assert 'The placing of the story so firmly in the natural world is also evocative of Tarkovsky - the wind and the earth, and especially the rain and water of Tarkovsky's films are prominent here' (Graffy 2004: 64). [emphasis added]"⁸⁴

First of all, the obsessive presence of water – from the underwater shot at the beginning of the film to the rain that constantly falls and even accompanies the boys to their boat trip to return to the land – contributes to the revelation of the sacred. Its constant presence marks its significance, communicating the viewer that the narrative camouflages a message that has to do with sacrality and fundamental events, such as the ritualic Creation, death or rebirth, all significant to the initiation rituals. The world is here sunken, as at the genesis of the world, in a "chaos of waters, the preformal modality of cosmic matter, and, at the same time, the world of death, of all that precedes and life"⁸⁵. This primordial chaos of waters (related to the *Genesis* but also many other cosmogonies) is linked in the Bible precisely to the seven days of the Creation, a script followed by the film's plot, sequenced into seven days, that end on a Sunday. The rituals perform precisely the function of symbolically repeating the sacred events, such as in this case, the Creation. In relation to the initiation, the water symbolizes a baptism but also a "victory over the waters"⁸⁶ during the hero's journey. It also regenerates, in an ambiguous symbolism of both death and rebirth⁸⁷, and "washes away the sins"⁸⁸, if we read the father's death as a symbolical parricide. Other symbols appear, associated with that of water, that dominates the film's symbolism: the fish, as a symbol of Christ (based on the Greek word for fish, that repeated the initial of the sacred name), the "walking on water" and others, such as the already mentioned storm. Other essential elements are present to complete this primordial landscape: besides water (in all the hypostases mentioned), fire (the three make a fire when they stop for camping), earth (the land, the island or even the mud in which the car remains stuck) and wind⁸⁹:

"Finally, wind, or *pneuma* in ancient Greek, represents the breath of the divine. An element enabling the transfer of knowledge, it can also symbolize the anger of the gods and the displacement of souls: the wind blows when the father shows Andrei the panoramic view from the top of the tower, but also when he falls to his death from the same tower."⁹⁰

The cosmogony, as well as the initiation, is complete, the world is reorganised, reconfigured and the boys are ready to return to the society:

however, we have no more details about their arrival and later events, all that was important had already happened, the boys are prepared to face adulthood and the father, "stripped of any social or chronological origins, the father ... comes from nowhere, and he's bound for nowhere"⁹¹. And, if we look at the final set of black and white pictures that suggest a voyage journal (and which lack any suggestion of the tragedy or trauma), the father might have never been there, an ambivalence that speaks about the revelation as well as about the absence of the sacred (a *Deus Absconditus*). Is what the director also replies, in a rhetorical question to an interview: "Do you think he somehow disappears from the picture? Or that *he's never been there?* [emphasis added]"⁹²

Conclusions. Initiation, Sacrifice, Parricide?

As detailed in the current paper, the figure of the father, both when present or when absent, has been an essential *topos* for Russian cinema, during the Soviet and the Post-Soviet period. Among other contextual explanations, the Father is a significant archetype in all types of cinema, precisely in the context of a deep connection between cinema and religion. This is also due to the persistence of such a figure not only within Christianity or Greek mythology but in most cosmogonies, no matter the religious systems. Together with its main domination, authority significance, this figure of the Father has been in many of these systems associated with violence and "power struggles between generations of males, whereby authoritarian fathers who fear usurpation slaughter sons, and ambitious and rebellious sons butcher or emasculate fathers."⁹³ It is a constant in "biblical, Greek and Freudian narratives"⁹⁴, describing an archetype that, like other significant ones (for instance, the hero's journey discussed above) also passed into cinema narratives and became powerful cinematic *topoi*, together with its ambivalence of love and hostility.

Most significantly, in all its hypostases (and systems of interpretation, from ancient mythology and biblical narratives to psychoanalysis and modern psychology) the father figure has a high significance in the son's passage to adulthood. Either followed as a model or rejected in a process of rebellion, he remains a major coordinate in this initiation process. Concerning the overlapping in *The Return* of the father figure with a Christ figure, through the detailed symbolism, this cannot be explained through the father's positive nature, but only through his sacrifice and, perhaps, through a Jungian interpretation that brings together the reaching of the Self (through initiation) and the Christ.

"Although myths may seem to be about external realities, they are in fact 'symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche . . .

mirrored in the events of nature.' Jesus represents the fully integrated "Self," the ideal of the mature and 'whole' person we all seek to be; the details of his external historical life are unimportant to Jung, for Jesus is only of real importance as he exists in the inner religious experiences of believers who encounter him as an archetypal ideal. He serves as a means to our own realization of complete selfhood, so his existence independent of us is irrelevant."⁹⁵

However, I incline to believe that the myth structures, heroes or behaviours are not employed here only as psychoanalytic references, although the film also allows such interpretations, but mainly as myth and religious structures (far more extensive, although implicit). This option can be justified by their extensive use, their content and structures but also by their function: as providers of meaning in front of the absurd and the tragedy of everyday events. The film implicitly allows this interpretation, supported by Zvyagintsev's own suggestions, that such a religious framework is followed in search of coherence and meaning. Such a cinematic approach favours a look beyond, at the sacred camouflaged in the events of life and death, but also in nature (as the director also focuses on it, insisting on his shots of water or the forest).

"Zvyagintsev carries out several lateral and vertical tracking shots, as well as bird's-eye and counter bird's-eye shots. These horizontal and vertical elements echo the metaphysical elements of the Orthodox tradition, according to which the divine lives as much on Earth and in humanity as it surpasses the material world. In Tarkovsky's work as well as in Zvyagintsev's film, these horizontal and vertical shots represent this coexistence of the immanence and transcendence."⁹⁶

The initiation script is doubled, therefore, at another level of interpretation, by this search of meaning and coherence in a world that seems void, desacralised or abandoned (itself a fatherless world). This search and revelation of the sacred is associated with a magical perspective and therefore there is no wonder that the filmmaker is reluctant to explain such a worldview that subtly or implicitly detaches from the film:

"I'm afraid there is no clue. *You either perceive it or not.* There are things which are without answers, and there is nobody who can explain them. *Either we feel them and sense them, or not.* Sometimes we just give up and carry on. That's normal. I can't do

much to help the members of the audience who don't understand certain things in the film. It would be like telling another person what that person is already seeing by himself. Art is not some sort of guideline for understanding. It's a thing unto itself. The most important thing for me is the image, not the thought. [emphasis added]"⁹⁷

This perspective explicitly favours *the image* to the expense of words, which can be seen as unimportant when it comes to the hierophany but in the same time as magical, because the *logos*, the film reveals, makes events that are anticipated in words, such as the death of the father, materialize. Also, most significantly, the perspective communicated by Zvyagintsev's film favours the idea of magic thinking and revelation, adding that a factual interpretation would be mistaken. The meaning of the film – irreducible to words as it would lose its power – is broader⁹⁸.

Notes

¹ Melanie, Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction*, (London: IB Tauris, 2006); John, Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, (New York: NYU Press, 2003).

² Hoff Kraemer, 187.

³ Hoff Kraemer, 187.

⁴ Lyden, 33.

⁵ See Hoff Kraemer, 188.

⁶ Hoff Kraemer, 191.

⁷ Sandu Frunză, *Comunicare simbolică și seducție*, (București: Titonic, 2014), 72.

⁸ Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu and Corneliu Pintilescu. "Religious 'avatars' and implicit religion: recycling myths and religious patterns within contemporary US popular culture", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 11 issue 33 (Winter 2012): 183-184.

⁹ Wright, 14.

¹⁰ Conrad Ostwalt qtd. in Lyden, 12.

¹¹ Fătu-Tutoveanu and Pintilescu, 191.

¹² Victor Turner, "Liminality and communitas." *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure* (1969): 94-130.

¹³ See Hoff Kraemer, 189-190.

¹⁴ Hoff Kraemer, 191.

¹⁵ Lyden, 32-33.

¹⁶ Barbara, Törnquist-Plewa, *The Wheel of Polish Fortune: Myths in Polish Collective Consciousness during the First Years of Solidarity*, (PhD Diss., Lund University, 1992), 14.

¹⁷ Graeme J. Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3-4.

¹⁸ Hoff Kraemer, 189.

¹⁹ Lyden, 126.

²⁰ Fătu-Tutoveanu and Pintilescu, 185.

²¹ Karen Pärna, *Believing in the Net. Implicit religion and the internet hype, 1994-2001*, (PhD diss., Leiden University Institute for Religious Studies, Leiden University, 2010), 33.

²² Erica Abeel, "Return of the Prodigal Father; Andrey Zvyagintsev Talks About "The Return""

http://www.indiewire.com/article/return_of_the_prodigal_father_andrey, (accessed August 21, 2015). n.pag.

²³ Fătu-Tutoveanu and Pintilescu, 195-196.

²⁴ Fătu-Tutoveanu and Pintilescu, 182-205.

²⁵ James Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 5, 8.

²⁶ See also Peter Kenez: "it is noteworthy that already in 1920, middle-level Party leaders ...gave precise and detailed instructions on organizing holiday celebrations. For example, it pointed out the advantages of organizing celebrations on the dates of traditional festivals." (Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 92; "After the Revolution, the regime created a new holiday calendar of its own, which for several years coexisted and competed with the extensive calendar of Orthodox religious holidays."; Von Geldern, 7; "One suspects that those who thought up the celebrations were consciously trying to create alternatives to church holidays. The Bolsheviks were creating a civic religion." (Kenez, 139)

²⁷ Jolyon P. Mitchell, "Russia", in *Encyclopedia of religion and film*, ed. Eric Michael Mazur (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 374.

²⁸ See also Mitchell: "in 1913 the tsar famously wrote in the margin of a police report on cinema the suggestion that films could be divisive: "I consider cinematography to be an empty, useless and even pernicious diversion. Only an abnormal person could put this fairground business on the same level as art. It is all nonsense and no importance should be attributed to it. Nonetheless, he did make use of a court filmmaker to record significant events", Mitchell, 374.

²⁹ Mitchell, 374.

³⁰ "Leon Trotsky berates his comrades for not making better use of film to persuade the masses. "Here is an instrument which we must secure at all costs!" He portrays the cinema in competition "not only with the tavern but also with the church." ... For Trotsky, the cinema provides "spectacular images of greater grip than are provided by the richest church" or "mosque or synagogue." Trotsky asserts that "the cinema amuses, educates, strikes the imagination by images, and liberates you from the need of crossing the church door." For some, like Trotsky, cinema had the potential to replace the need for visiting traditional places for worship; for others it was perceived as a powerful tool of persuasion to be used to promote the new regime.", Mitchell, 375.

³¹ Mitchell, 375.

³² Mitchell, 376.

³³ Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova, *Cinepaternity: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 9.

³⁴ Alexander Prokhorov, "The Myth of the "Great Family"" in *Marlen Khutsiev's Lenin's Guard and Mark Osep'ian's Three Days of Viktor Chernyshev*, eds. Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 30.

- ³⁵ "The significance of such a metaphysics was eloquently conveyed in Moscow on 15 September 2007, when author and host Viktor Erofeev devoted the entire hour of his radio show", *Encyclopedia of the Russian. ... Erofeev and his guests, the poet Tatiana Shcherbina and the journalist Vladimir Chernov*", Goscilo, Hashamova, "Cinepaternity: fathers and sons in Soviet and post-Soviet film", 2.
- ³⁶ Goscilo, Hashamova, "Cinepaternity", 2.
- ³⁷ Goscilo, Hashamova, "Cinepaternity", 3.
- ³⁸ Terence McSweeney, , "The End of Ivan's Childhood in Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return* (2003)", *International Journal of Russian Studies*, 2 (2013), available online at ijors.net, n.pag.
- ³⁹ McSweeney, n.pag
- ⁴⁰ Beumers, n.pag.
- ⁴¹ Anais Cabart, "Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return*: A Tarkovskian Initiation", *Close Up: Film and Media Studies* 1, 2 (2013): 52.
- ⁴² "Certain long shots and close ups of a grove of birch trees – a Pan-Slavic symbol of eternal renewal found throughout Eastern European cinema – suggest the cyclical nature of the work, while the image of a dead white bird, a device also used as an omen", Cabart, 52.
- ⁴³ McSweeney, n.pag.
- ⁴⁴ McSweeney, n.pag.
- ⁴⁵ McSweeney, n.pag.
- ⁴⁶ Meghan Vicks, "Andrei Zviagintsev's *The Return* (Vozvrashchenie, 2003)," in *KinoKultura. New Russian Cinema* 32 (2011).
- ⁴⁷ McSweeney, n.pag.
- ⁴⁸ McSweeney, n.pag.
- ⁴⁹ The twelve year absence has been associated among other things, with the period since the collapse of communism (1991-2003), see McSweeney, n. pag.
- ⁵⁰ McSweeney, n. pag.
- ⁵¹ McSweeney, n. pag.
- ⁵² McSweeney, n. pag.
- ⁵³ McSweeney, n. pag.
- ⁵⁴ Jeffrey Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life. A Cultural Sociology*, (Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.
- ⁵⁵ Cabart, 51.
- ⁵⁶ P. G. R. Nair, *The Return* (2003), (Review), <http://www.boloji.com/>
- ⁵⁷ Bailey, E. (2002). Introduction. The Notion of Implicit Religion: What it Means, and Does Not Mean. In E. Bailey (Ed.), *The Secular Quest for Meaning in Life. Denton Papers in Implicit Religions* (pp. 1-11). Lewiston,etc.: Edwin Mellen Press, 9.
- ⁵⁸ Pärna, 6.
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- ⁶⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. by Willard Trask, (New York: Harcourt Press, 1959), 11.
- ⁶⁵ Eliade, 204.
- ⁶⁶ Cabart, 55.

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- ⁷¹ Eliade, 121.
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- ⁷⁶ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, (Studio City, CA:Michael Wiese Productions, 2007 [1998]), 4.
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- ⁷⁹ Jon R. Stone, "Ritual" in *Encyclopedia of religion and film*, ed. Eric Michael Mazur (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 369.
- ⁸⁰ Cabart, 57.
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- ⁸⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The myth of the eternal return: Cosmos and history*. Vol. 46. Princeton University Press, 2005, 60.
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- ⁹¹ Abeel, n. pag.
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- ⁹³ Goscilo, Hashamova, "Cinepaternity", 4.
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- ⁹⁵ Lyden, 59-60.
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- ⁹⁸ "Zvyagintsev: It's like if you watch this movie from the standpoint of everyday life, it's a mistake, because it's much broader, and the mystery of the film won't reveal itself to you. [At my frustrated expression] One shouldn't speak out loud about sacral and important meanings because as soon as we start blabbering about them, all that is magic and sacral immediately evaporates. One should suggest what is of real importance. That's what I tried.", Zvyagintsev, in Abeel, n. pag.

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