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**TWO POETS IN THE FILM. THE ENCOUNTER
OF TONINO GUERRA AND ANDREI TARKOVSKY,
WHICH WAS NO COINCIDENCE**

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Tonino Guerra and Andrei Tarkovsky met for the first time in Moscow in late 1975, thanks to Guerra's future wife, Lora Jabločkina. Drawing upon the diaries of Andrei Tarkovsky, reminiscences of Tonino Guerra, and previously unknown interviews with Lora Guerra and the film producer Lorenzo Ostuni, I explore the start of the relationship between the poet and the film director. I also examine the origins and the profound reasons for their artistic and personal connection, and how their collaboration led to the making of the documentary film *Voyage in Time*, and then of the movie *Nostalghia*. Finally, I attempt to understand the nature of their meeting, which is both accidental and 'inevitable', focusing on the dialogue Tonino Guerra and Andrei Tarkovsky had about the tension between poetry and film direction, which is particularly evident in *Voyage in Time*. The documentary was in fact the occasion for the poet and the director to express themselves with the linguistic codes that most influenced each of them during their individual artistic paths. That then led to *Nostalghia*, the film in which the results of the cultural exchange between the two artists converge around the symbolic intensity of poetry and cinematographic image.

Key words: Tonino Guerra; Andrei Tarkovsky; *Voyage in Time*; *Nostalghia*; poetry; cinema.

With this paper, I will try to weave a tale with many voices, a story written by the two protagonists, Tonino Guerra and Andrei Tarkovsky, and recounted orally by a few characters who were witnesses to their artistic bond, or more generally, their friendship. The main voice, the intradiegetic narrator of this story, is Lora Kreindlina Guerra: Tonino Guerra's wife and architect of the meeting between the two artists. She was the interpreter of their dual-language dialogue, in Italian and Russian, as well as the guide to the East for her husband, who recalled on multiple occasions how Russia was her gift to him¹. The words of Lora Guerra, who I interviewed in Janu-

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¹ For more on the relationship between his wife and Russia, cfr. a piece taken from *Polvere di sole*: "Friday, 20 March. It's my wife's birthday. Seventy years. We're so close. She has given me this continent of friends and stupendous shows. I've learned a lot from Russia. The world around me exists because of my wife". (Venerdì 20 Marzo. È il compleanno di

ary 2020 at her house in Pennabilli (in the Italian province of Rimini), will make an appearance in a few fundamental sections of this story. Her voice will be joined by that of Lorenzo Ostuni (1933–2013) — a philosopher, symbolist, friend of Federico Fellini and, most importantly, the producer of *Nostalgia* — taken from an unpublished interview I conducted with him in early 2013, just a few months before he passed away. The English translations of both interviews, originally made in Italian, as well as of all Italian quotations are mine.

A quick historical recap will help us contextualise the relationship between Guerra and Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky first noted Tonino Guerra's name in his diary entry from 20 January 1976 [Tarkovsky, 2014: 155]. It was, in fact, one of the early encounters between the two in Moscow, though not the first, as Lora Guerra explained:

Tonino and Andrei met shortly before New Year of 1975, as the eve of the last day of the year was spent celebrating at the house of writer friends. When they first met, Tonino asked Andrei if he could see some of the materials from *Stalker*, which was in the works, and he told him how he admired his films. The next day, we went to see a projection of *Stalker* at Mosfilm. Tonino was shocked. He said it was a brilliant film, and he asked Andrei: "Since you haven't finished it yet, can you put one of my drawings in that muddy water? That way, I can forever remain in the film". And Andrei did just that, adding one of Tonino's pastels.

The dialogue with Tarkovsky began almost immediately. In spring of 1976, Guerra sent the director a few short stories, taken from his work *Il polverone*, in order to get a response, almost in a "duel" between poets, or rather, between playfellows [Tarkovsky, 2014: 194]. According to Lora Guerra:

Tonino and Andrei didn't start out as two poets, but rather as two children. Andrei would ask: "Tonino, do you like collecting rocks?" "Of course! Whenever I go to the river, I collect them all", and then they'd talk about rocks. Andrei would continue: "Have you ever walked on ice to see how the fish sleep down below?" And Tonino would go: "Andrei, the rivers don't freeze where I'm from, but I like the fog over the water". "Me too", Andrei would respond, then began talking about a stream near his country cottage. Each of them would recount something, and a conversation began... That was the first time they met. Basically, it was a sort of game, a game of understanding up to what point their affinity went during the encounter. Then the more precise questions began.

mia moglie. Settant'anni. Vicini. Mi ha dato questo continente di amici e di spettacoli stupendi. Ho imparato molto dalla Russia. Il mondo attorno a me c'è perché c'è mia moglie") [Guerra, 2012: 90].

In one of their early meetings, Guerra suggested that Tarkovsky make a film in Italy. The film was shot in spring of 1982 and it was called *Nostalghia*. In this span of time, from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, their friendship solidified into an artistic bond founded on assiduous confrontations. Guerra himself confirmed it in an interview from 2010:

It was a time of incredible freedom and spirituality. Our friendship grew during that period <...> that's how that three-year interview came about, as did the idea of bringing him to see something of our Italy. So, we decided [Lora and I] to fight for him to come to our peninsula, which we did. That gave rise to the film *Voyage in Time*. Using it as an excuse, we managed to get him to come to our country².

From this statement, we can deduce that bringing Tarkovsky to Italy was both an artistic and political necessity. After all, Tarkovsky was under surveillance in the Soviet Union³, since he was obstructed from carrying out his work with any means possible by the government, as Tarkovsky often mentioned in his diary entries. Guerra thus offered him the tangible support he needed to get out of the rather miserable state that the director always seemed to find himself in due to his swelling debts, and due to the impossibility of self-expression. The collaboration between our two protagonists officially began in the summer of 1979, when filming began on a documentary that originally was to be called *Sputnik* — in Russian, with the dual meaning of “travel companion” and “satellite” — and which later took on the definitive name of *Voyage in Time*. The documentary was directed by Tarkovsky, since he shot it together with cameramen Luciano Tovoli and Giancarlo Pancaldi. Nevertheless, Tarkovsky couldn't officially list his name as the director, as the Soviet authorities had only granted him permission to make one film in Italy, and that film was to be *Nostalghia*⁴. In the opening credits, we therefore see the title, *Voyage in Time*, followed by the names Andrei Tarkovsky and Tonino Guerra. With this little trick, the roles of writer and director could be mistaken, and also merge.

The *special* on Tarkovsky and Guerra demonstrates how the initial research for *Nostalghia* was carried out and testifies to the exchange between these two artists, founded on dialogue that is not without similarities and

² “Erano giornate di grande libertà e spiritualità. In quel periodo è cresciuta questa amicizia <...> nasce così quel colloquio durato tre anni, nasce così l'idea di portarlo a guardare qualcosa della nostra Italia. Allora abbiamo pensato di batterci per un suo viaggio nella nostra penisola, cosa che abbiamo fatto, ed è nato così il film *Tempo di viaggio*. Con questa scusa siamo riusciti a farlo approdare nel nostro Paese” [Guerra, 2010: 437].

³ In the interview mentioned above, Guerra added: “We walked on snow-covered streets so as to stay far away from anyone who could hear our conversations”. (“Camminavamo nelle strade piene di neve per stare lontani da qualcuno che poteva sentire i nostri discorsi”) [Guerra, 2010: 437].

⁴ It was Lora Guerra to provide this meaningful detail.

differences. It was the first report that the RAI produced on the genesis of a film, and it is a precious source of information [Tarkovsky, 2014: 631]. In it, more so than in any other statement or interview, Guerra reveals the forms taken on by his work when writing the screenplay: we get the chance to see a poet in action and understand how poetry is used maieutically to create a cinematographic work. It is no coincidence that the central scene of *Voyage in Time* corresponds to that in which Guerra, before reading his famous poem *I bu*⁵, states that he has to translate it into Italian as it may be difficult to understand for those who don't speak his dialect of Italian. But then he only translates the first two verses, confirming that "art is very possessive, you have to meet her at her own home"⁶ and that, in other words, it takes effort to try to understand it in its authentic form. As such, the poet leaves an aura of secrecy around words which are not understood, left untranslated. At the same time, he allows us to enjoy its musical and rhythmic elements, going beyond the full meaning, thus, in the words of poet Andrea Zanzotto (1921–2011), giving it "the biological value of contact, of breathing, of walking arm in arm, to the point of not perceiving dialect as a peculiar language <...> but rather as a language that is *universal by defect*"⁷. It is in none other than the image of the ploughed earth — "the same everywhere"⁸, be it Italy or Russia, the backdrop of the recited text of *I bu* — that the two artists most converge: in this *universality by defect*. We are faced with a profound key, where Tarkovsky opens the abyss of his nostalgia for Russia and Guerra begins a new poetic phase, that of maturity. And those few verses, spoken out loud on the image of the ploughed field really do sound like a foreboding of the isolation amid the mountains of Pennabilli, which the poet would choose for himself exactly a decade later, in search of "the childhood of the world"⁹. We also mustn't forget that, before returning to the Apennines, Guerra discovered Russia, the place he chose when crossing over into fantasy and, at the same time, tying himself to the land through a form of magical realism, shared by Tarkovsky also¹⁰.

⁵ "Andè a di acsè mi bu ch' i vaga véa,/ che quèl chi à fat i à fat,/ che adèss u s'èra préima se tratòur./ E' pianz e' còr ma tòtt, ènca mu mè,/ avdàl ch'i à lavurè dal mièri d'an/ e adès i à d'andè véa a tèsta basa/ dri ma la còrda lònca de mazèl" [Guerra, 1993: 140].

⁶ "L'arte è molto gelosa, bisogna andarla a trovare a casa" [Guerra, *Voyage in Time*].

⁷ "Il valore biologico di un contatto, di una respirazione, di un camminare a braccetto, fino al punto da non percepire il dialetto come lingua peculiare <...>, ma come una lingua *universale per difetto*" [Spagnoletti, Vivaldi, 1991: 15].

⁸ This is a famous phrase by Tarkovsky that Guerra later makes his own in *Voyage in Time*, to then cite it on numerous other occasions [i.e.: Guerra, 2010: 437].

⁹ "L'infanzia del mondo", an evocative line taken from *Una foglia contro i fulmini* [Guerra, 2006: 36].

¹⁰ Franco Brevini proposed the definition of "magical realism against a rural backdrop" ("realismo magico a sfondo rurale") in relation to Guerra's second poetry phase [Brevini, 1990: 262]. On magical realism and Andrei Tarkovsky's films: cfr. Jameson, 2011.

We were saying that in *Voyage in Time* Guerra guides Tarkovsky on a quest, inspiring his director friend as he got to know a country that was new to him. Here is what Guerra's wife had to say regarding their trip around Italy:

Tonino wanted to fill Andrei's imagination and heart with everything he loved in Italy, so that he could choose what he needed for his future film. Neither of them knew what film they would make together. But Andrei had a more precise idea: he had read the story of a feudal serf composer who was freed by his master to travel to Italy to seek out melodies to put into music, but on the condition that he would come back to Russia after three years, returning to his destiny as a slave. It was a story that made a real impression on Andrei because it reflected his state of mind. Our journey began at a convent near Naples where seven monks had once lived. Each of them had a cell with his own not-so-small courtyard, in addition to a giant square where they met and walked together. No one lived there anymore, except for one single monk. Tonino was fascinated by him, and asked why he had remained, alone. The monk answered that he couldn't leave the yeast starter because it was 1,000 years old, so he stayed there to make bread. After Naples, we visited the Amalfi Coast, then Apulia. Bagno Vignoni, on the other hand, was Fellini's suggestion. There Andrei slept in a dark room in which they were building a lift, and that had a sort of precipice inside. In that room he was so sad, filled with heartache, and then he told us it was the place where the protagonist of the future film might have felt bad.

Another episode worth remembering, which is portrayed in the opening scenes of *Nostalghia*, concerns the *Madonna del Parto*, a fresco depicting a pregnant Mary, by Piero della Francesca:

Andrei really loved that fresco and he wanted to see it. At the time, it was kept in a chapel at the cemetery of Monterchi, and Tonino made sure it was opened for us. Once they got there, a hundred meters from that little church, Andrei told Tonino: "I'm not going. I can't do it. I can't go in alone. If my wife and none of my friends can see it, why should I?" So, the first time, he didn't go in. Then, a while later, he shot the wonderful opening scene of *Nostalghia*, in which Mary appears in the dark. And that's the theme of the film: the feeling of wistfulness when you can't share something.

The need to share things with others is clear even in the scene from *Voyage in Time* in which Tarkovsky confesses he isn't satisfied with merely visiting the artistic marvels of southern Italy, but that he wants to interact with the people, with the emotions and daily life of Italians. Which is why he would sit down at a table full of regulars on the side of the road. This

image contradicts the idea of an ascetic director, instead portraying him as “a spiritual child that loved people”¹¹.

Voyage in Time can also be used to ponder Guerra’s fascination with the art of cinematography, especially the way in which film can build and reveal imagery. In *L’Ulisse di Campagna* (2011), a documentary directed by Nevio Casadio, Guerra stated: “I’ve always known that the screenwriter is someone who helps out. Coming to Pennabilli, I became a poet again”¹². But what was his role in film? Did he feel he was just a collaborator? Once again, his wife had the answer:

Tonino began his career in film as a poet. He had published two collections of poetry in dialect — *I scarabócc* (“Scribbles”) in 1946 and *La s-ciupètta* (“The Gunshot”) in 1950 — when Aglaucio Casadio, the first director he ever worked with, asked him to be the screenwriter for a film called *Un ettaro di cielo*, which was shot in Romagna. As for the role of screenwriter, Tonino thought there were various types. He would give the example of the screenwriter that made paintings of bottles and the screenwriter who, like painter Giorgio Morandi, painted bottles in such a way that you were sure to see abandoned skyscrapers or impoverished people covered in dirt. He felt that he belonged to the second category. At a certain point, however, he went back to Pennabilli, not because his job was done or because he couldn’t do it anymore, but because cinema had collapsed. Fellini was right when he once told Tonino, driving from Santarcangelo to Pennabilli: “We keep making airplanes in a world where there are no more airports”. After all, words create images. Just think of the imaginal poets; Tonino was one of them, every poem he wrote was ready to be filmed. His poems are images, and the director’s job is to bring them to light, interpret them. What is film?, asked Fellini. Film is light, film recreates the world based on words, while maintaining its autonomy from them.

In the documentary trilogy that Donatella Baglivo dedicated to him [Baglivo, 1984], Tarkovsky stated that at first he didn’t think that it was possible to express oneself through film as one can in literature, music, or painting; to him, film was “a study, a tentative search for moments of contact with poetry”¹³. In that sense, Guerra and Tarkovsky came together as two poets. Even Lora Guerra thought so:

Andrei certainly was a poet. He expressed himself like a poet in everything he did — when shooting a film, or drawing or even when speaking —

¹¹ Once again, it is Lora Guerra to offer us this charming description of Tarkovsky.

¹² “Ho sempre saputo che lo sceneggiatore è uno che dà una mano. Io venendo a Pennabilli sono ridiventato poeta”.

¹³ “È stata una ricerca, un cercare a tentoni dei momenti di contatto con la poesia”.

because he was the son of a poet. I believe that his meeting with Tonino was fated. Andrei's father left the family when he was very young. But when he was an adult, at almost fifty, in some way Andrei found the father he adored and worshipped. The other poet was by his side this time... and so they worked together.

On the bond between Guerra and Tarkovsky, even Lorenzo Ostuni, the producer of *Nostalghia*, has rather strong opinions. His comments on the period in which the film was being made, which follow, might seem controversial due to his sometimes daring tone. However, I think it is important to present it exactly as it was told to me, without edits or cuts that would alter the substance of his words. According to Ostuni, Guerra and his wife Lora were extremely protective and generous towards Tarkovsky. It was as if, in addition to the person, they wanted to protect and simultaneously nourish the director's visionary, mystical world:

In the daily discussions that Tonino Guerra had with his wife, the latter was quite incisive, rather expressive and pressing in pointing to Tarkovsky as a *super* meaningful and *super* delicate subject, someone that, to welcome and protect him, one had to dedicate oneself to actions that were both generous and worthy of him, as if one were about to welcome a deposed king, a persecuted, unseated yet distinguished person. There was a component — and I don't think it was secondary — and it was the idea that Andrei's head was full of lots of lucidity, but also lots of folly. And managing the talents of that lucidity and that folly was something that implied complex participation. If not, what dialogue was there? There wouldn't have been any dialogue. There would have been a monstrous, infernal silence, an impenetrable curtain. To converse with Tarkovsky, you had to be able to go beyond yourself, due to his needs, which seemed apodictic and inspired by the Ten Commandments, because he was, in fact, close to the gods, but to those gods that, at the time, had been abandoned by the people and powerful men of his country. Tonino Guerra tried very hard, and in that regard, he was an extremely flexible, elastic person. His entire life was a system of adaptations, because only such immense ductility, such plasticity could allow him to adapt to nourishing the ambitions of Fellini, Angelopoulos, Tarkovsky, the Taviani brothers, etc. Guerra had that type of flexibility: he was a smart, imaginative child and he didn't get intimidated; he had a kind of innocence that was both audacious and cunning. But when it came to Tarkovsky, the game was a bit more serious. It wasn't the fanfare-game of the Italian filmmaker who has to climb the peaks of success, go to Cannes and win, and so on. Instead, there was a political, moral matter, one of systems of thought and of the way of conceiving of life. Tarkovsky was a very complex animal.

In Ostuni's description, Tarkovsky is presented as a lone, exiled man abandoned by Soviet bigwigs, despite being celebrated around the world, a "deposed king" welcomed with devotion and respect by Guerra. But, according to Ostuni, it was a mutual, exceptional exchange:

The hypothesis that I've come up with is that Tonino Guerra borrowed *depth psychology* from Tarkovsky. Tonino Guerra was without psychology, he was a man who didn't have psychology and he didn't think that psychology existed. Nor did Tarkovsky possess knowledge about psychology. He hadn't read anything by Freud, but he was the bearer of his own personal mystic vision of psychology, which is found in all his films, and which was so big, so profound, so irresistible that even a poetic, intuitive and psychologically uneducated peasant like Tonino Guerra could soak it up, and I believe he did just that. On the other hand, I think that from Tonino Guerra, Tarkovsky borrowed the quintessence of his father. In Tonino Guerra, partly for fun and partly so as not to die in exile, he saw his father. A younger father, a more available, a more discursive father, in which poetry could merge with imagery. Tonino Guerra was like his father, except he made films, and it was also he who took him by the hand and led him to the West. Deep down, they were bonded by dual tenderness: the uneducated Tonino Guerra who gets educated, psychologically speaking, through Tarkovsky and the personal stories of his films.

Based on Ostuni's explanation, we can see how the friendship between Guerra and Tarkovsky had many facets — emotional, intellectual, even psychological — that, from childhood, led the two authors back to their present as adults. Adults remained somewhat children, unaware and also aware of themselves, their relationship and the world that they recounted through words and images.

Going back to her interview, Lora Guerra showed me an unpublished diary page that her husband wrote as soon as he heard of Tarkovsky's passing. Guerra mentions *Nostalghia*, which he "wrote together"¹⁴ with his friend. He describes Tarkovsky as "a genius that will be *read* and *re-read*, because inside his films is the hope and the comfort of being able to improve before everything tumbles into a huge black hole"¹⁵. Another definition from Guerra himself that I would like to mention is: great cinema is "when the spectator sinks into his personal memories"¹⁶. These words perfectly interpret the role and the power not just of film, but also of literature, and it is interesting that, to honour the memory of his director

¹⁴ "Nostalghia, il film che abbiamo scritto insieme".

¹⁵ "Tarkovsky è un genio che *sarà letto e riletto*, perché dentro i suoi film c'è la speranza e il conforto di poter essere migliori prima che tutto precipiti nel vuoto di un immane buco nero".

¹⁶ "Questo è grande cinema: quando lo spettatore affonda nei suoi personali ricordi".

friend, Guerra expresses himself and observes the world through the eyes of a poet and writer, i.e. of one who is dedicated to the written word. It seems that, after all, the common thread of literature is what unites and solidifies the bond between these two big personalities. After all, words can be expressed in different ways: they can be sung like in the work of Homer, they can be recounted as images in films, or written in poems. Their essence doesn't change. And thus, being true to words, as Guerra was throughout his life, means being able to recognise the origin, the very principle of the world, the same world translated into images by Tarkovsky himself. In light of what has been said, I believe that the meeting of Tonino Guerra and Andrei Tarkovsky was not accidental. And it is not by chance that *Voyage in Time* begins and ends with a poem, *La casa*, written by Guerra with the Russian filmmaker in mind: "But the stuff that we've said / is so light that it won't stay locked in here"¹⁷. These verses indicate that their relationship is located elsewhere, in a world that is neither Russian nor Italian, but once again universal, and that the poetic actions of both tend towards infinity, to another time, far different from the season that is human life. This is the key to reading the silence, nature, and microcosms that often appear in the documentary and in the works of both artists: their works are poems made of images, even more than words. And if the ending of *Voyage in Time* is entrusted to the silence of the snow-covered countryside, all that's left for us to do is to embrace its truth and mystery.

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¹⁷ "Ma la roba che ci siamo detti / è così leggera che non resta chiusa qui".

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ДВА ПОЭТА НА ЭКРАНЕ. НЕСЛУЧАЙНАЯ ВСТРЕЧА ТОНИНО ГУЭРРЫ И АНДРЕЯ ТАРКОВСКОГО

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Тонино Гуэрра и Андрей Тарковский впервые встретились в Москве в конце 1975 г. благодаря будущей жене Гуэрры — Лоре Яблочкиной. В статье рассматривается становление и развитие взаимоотношений поэта Гуэрры с режиссером Тарковским; материалом исследования стали дневники Тарковского, высказывания Гуэрры, а также интервью с Лорой Гуэрра и продюсером Лоренцо Остунни (ранее неизвестные). Автор рассматривает глубинные причины творческого и личного взаимопонимания между Гуэррой и Тарковским, а также то, как в результате их сотрудничества появилась документальная лента «Время путешествий», а затем и «Ностальгия». Важнейшая задача исследования — понять сочетание случайного и «неизбежного» в их встрече и творческом взаимодействии. В фокусе внимания оказывается диалог Гуэрры и Тарковского во «Времени путешествий», где обсуждается смысловое напряжение между поэтическим и режиссерским, процессом поэтического письма и процессом создания фильма. Документальная лента стала для Гуэрры и Тарковского возможностью выразить «себя» с помощью лингвистических кодов, которые более всего повлияли

на них во время их индивидуального творческого формирования (Гуэрра в фильме читает стихи на романьоло, Тарковский говорит по-русски). Такое взаимодействие привело к созданию фильма «Ностальгия», в котором результаты культурного обмена между двумя артистами привели к некой общей точке — символической интенсивности поэтического и кинематографического образов.

Ключевые слова: Тонино Гуэрра; Андрей Тарковский; «Время путешествий»; «Ностальгия»; поэзия; кинематограф.

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