

# Tolstoy as the subject of art: painting, film, theate

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## **Tolstoy as the Subject of Art: Painting, Film, Theatre**

When Lev Tolstoy died in 1910, he was a literary celebrity, famous well beyond the borders of his native Russia. Towards the end of his life, photographers – today we would call them paparazzi – would camp out on the lawn outside of the Yasnaya Polyana estate, following Tolstoy's every move. His first posthumous photograph, taken on his deathbed in Astapovo, appeared in leading global media from New York to Bombay, and the newsreel documenting his funeral drew such crowds that its screenings had to be banned. Tolstoy's death became one of the first truly international media events of the twentieth century. But the public hunger for images of the great man was already prominent much earlier in his life, when both commissioned and unsolicited portraits and photographs proliferated, creating an international Tolstoy iconography. Throughout the twentieth century, artists, filmmakers and writers attempted to create their own vision of Tolstoy, either embracing or opposing, but always engaging with, this visual canon. This chapter will discuss Tolstoy as a subject of art in painting, cinema and the theatre, exploring the impact of celebrity-generated images on his representation in these media.

### **Portraits**

From framed prints to pictures in textbooks, portraits of Tolstoy remained ubiquitous in Soviet classrooms throughout the twentieth century. Today, portraits by Ivan Kramskoy (1873-1887), Nikolay Ge (1831-1894) and Ilya Repin (1844-1930) are printed on covers of the government-issue school notebooks and iPhone cases, passing the baton between generations. Most widely reproduced are the two portraits by Repin: the 1887 *Tolstoy with a book* shows Tolstoy in a chair, looking up at the viewer from a book he is holding in his lap, whereas the even more immediately recognisable 1888 *Ploughman* depicts Tolstoy driving the plough out in the fields. In the course of his career, Repin created twelve portraits, twenty-five sketches and three sculptural representations of Tolstoy, but none of them achieved the same iconic status. It was these two 1880s paintings that both originated *and* perpetuated what would become Tolstoy's enduring public image: that of a writer, philosopher and prophet, either resting, deep in thought; or working outside, in direct contact with nature.

Both portraits started their life as a series of sketches Repin worked on in 1882 in Moscow, and then developed five years later during the his short stay in Yasnaya Polyana in August 1887. That year, Tolstoy's literary career was at its zenith, and he was working on what would become his probably most controversial literary piece, *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889). Although

Repin set out to Yasnaya Polyana under his own steam, a need for an appropriate portrait of the modern genius was in the air. Pavel Tretyakov (1832-1898), patron of the arts and the owner of the largest private gallery in Russia at the time, snapped up Repin's *Ploughman* immediately after it was exhibited in 1888. Unlike the earlier 1873 portrait of Tolstoy by Kramskoy, Repin's work had not been directly commissioned by Tretyakov, and yet it pleased him immensely. Repin had created, Tretyakov noted in a personal letter, exactly the kind of portrait that 'future generations' would want to have as a reminder of Tolstoy's genius, down to specific compositional details: '[he is] such a major personality, that this figure's full stature should be captured for posterity, and definitely outside, in the summer, in full length'.<sup>1</sup> Later, Vladimir Chertkov's photographs of Tolstoy – we would now call these promotional images – would reference Repin's paintings, both by documenting Tolstoy at work in his study and capturing him outside, in the fields. The composition of these photographs followed the general fashion of contemporary portraiture, but the recurrence of certain settings, angles and colours testified to the intermedial endurance of Repin's work. *Ploughman* in particular enjoyed a fascinating afterlife of commercial reproduction, used to decorate a range of objects: plates and tear-off calendar stands, perfume bottles and pen-knives. It was this prominence across different media, from post-cards to chocolate-wrappers, that would propel Repin's images into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and keep the visual image of Tolstoy anchored in the public consciousness. Recently, Repin's 1887 portrait was wielded as a weapon of visual soft power at the closing ceremony of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. There, it featured in the gallery of Russian writers, alongside Mikhail Lermontov, Nikolay Gogol and Ivan Turgenev, used in exactly the kind of way Tretyakov would have been pleased with.

Commissioned portraits and authorised photographs represent the image of Tolstoy that was, to a degree, controlled by its subject, allowing us to debate the measure of his involvement in the process of their production. But some of the most interesting representations of Tolstoy come from a large pool of unsolicited artistic depictions, including not one but several church murals showing Tolstoy's descent into Hell. After the Russian Orthodox church excommunicated Tolstoy by special decree in 1901, a fresco titled *Last Judgement* was painted in a small church in Tazovo, a village near Kursk, some 500 km south of Moscow. On this

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<sup>1</sup> Ilya Repin, *Pis'ma I. E. Repina. Perepiska s P. M. Tret'yakovym. 1873-1898* (M.,L.: Iskusstvo, 1946), p.120.

mural, violently red fire separates the devil, holding Tolstoy in his clutches, from salvation and the church, represented by the figures in gilded robes. The background of the mural shows a group of laymen onlookers, all of whom have evidently given up any hope of saving Tolstoy's immortal soul. Another mural on the same subject has been restored in a small church in Perm region as recently as 2015.

A less sinister subset of unauthorised images included various caricatures, in magazines and special editions, a few of which specifically referenced Tolstoy's celebrity status and the crisis of authenticity it engendered. The nature of fame, creating a mediated image of the public figure seemingly separate from the person behind it, was at odds with Tolstoy's lifelong struggle for truth and sincerity. In his personal life, it became the catalyst for bitter conflicts with his family, but it was also reflected in the treatment he received from the press. The *Razvlechenie* [Entertainment] magazine put a satirized version of Repin's *Ploughman* on one of its 1901 covers, and included further pictures inside. Tolstoy was shown standing in the middle of the field, trying to continue ploughing, despite a horde of photographers armed with bulky early camera-contraptions attacking from the right, and a painter, clearly resembling Repin, busy working at three portraits at the same time on the left. A whole compendium of 'portraits, paintings, etchings and caricatures' was published in 1903.<sup>2</sup>

More benevolent, but equally highly stylized, images of Tolstoy arrived at Yasnaya Polyana by post from abroad, produced by the Polish artist Jan Styka (1858-1925). Styka never met Tolstoy and was creatively interpreting publicly available photographs in his devotional paintings, exhibited in Paris in 1910. One painting, *To Infinity*, depicted Tolstoy's flight from home; another portrayed him in conversation with Christ. A sketch for a panorama titled *Humankind* showed, according to the newspaper *Russkoe slovo* [Russian word], the following: "Humankind is restrained by chains. Nearby, one can see a group of thinkers [...]. A powerful figure of Tolstoy stands out, showing him at the plough, ploughing up the furrow of the future fair life, without chains".<sup>3</sup> In time, depicting Tolstoy in a group with other thinkers and religious figures would become a visual cliché as ubiquitous as his peasant shirt or grey beard. In this vein, Philip Glass' 1979 minimalist opera *Satyagraha* examined the role Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore, and Martin Luther King Jr. played in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. An art work of high late-Soviet kitsch, *Russia Eternal: A Hundred Centuries* (1988) by Ilya

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<sup>2</sup> *Graf Lev Tolstoi. Velikii pisatel' zemli Russkoi v portretakh, graviurakh, zhivopisi, skulpture, karikaturakh i t. d.* (Sankt-Peterburg, 1903).

<sup>3</sup> 'Za granitsej', *Russkoe slovo*, 267, 19 November 1910, p.10.

Glazunov (1930-2017) showed Tolstoy in a peasant robe, walking in the first row of an eternal church procession, a step behind Russia's canonised martyred rulers, holding a sign that reads 'non-violent resistance'.<sup>4</sup> But just ten years later, an installation by the performance artist Oleg Kulik (b. 1961) would question just this kind of indiscriminate appropriation of Tolstoy as a subject of art. An ironic take on iconography of Tolstoy, *Tolstoy and the Chickens* (1997-2004), consisted of a life-size wax figure of Tolstoy, complete with the beard and peasant attire, sat at his writing desk. The desk was positioned under a raised platform on which live chickens walked around, and, notably, defecated on the writer's head. The entire installation was enclosed into a wood and glass cage, resembling an old-fashioned museum display. According to Kulik, it depicted the relationship between Tolstoy and modern Russian thinkers, who, here represented by chickens, proclaimed themselves to be Tolstoy's intellectual heirs.

## Films

The first film reels featuring Tolstoy appeared as early as 1908, shot by the Russian documentary film pioneer Alexandr Drankov (1886-1949). Tolstoy, due to his celebrity status, was Drankov's second subject after the Russian royal family, and the *kinokhronika* from 1908-1910 showed Tolstoy in his natural habitat: at home with his family, at work in the fields and with 'the "chief" Tolstoyan Chertkov'. Tolstoy's flight from home and his death soon after in 1910 provoked further public interest, and two years later Yakov Protozanov and Elizaveta Thiman's *Departure of a Grand Old Man* (1912) answered that call. Following the phenomenal popularity of footage showing Tolstoy's funeral, this early biopic mixed documentary images with staged scenes featuring professional actors in such a way that it was difficult for the contemporary audiences to tell one from the other. The opening images – Tolstoy walking towards the camera – were carefully modelled to resemble Drankov's famous reels. Shot in authentic locations, they invited the viewers to notice and revel in the combination of these hitherto separate visual realities. Alarming for Tolstoy's family, who were rapidly losing control over how their famous relative was presented on screen and threatened to sue, *Departure...* heralded a new stage of Tolstoy's fame – posthumous celebrity. As *Russkoe slovo* reported, according to the rightful heirs of Tolstoy's image, the film 'depicted absolutely unbelievable scenes, and those that were believable, in many cases were presented in an unacceptable and false light. Countess S.A. Tolstaya, V.G. Chertkov and other people, close to

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<sup>4</sup> For other prominent examples, alongside the cases I discuss here, see A. Tulyakova, 'Lev Tolstoy kak geroi pop-kul'tury', *Arzamas*, <https://arzamas.academy/mag/444-tolstoy> [Accessed 30 April 2020].

Lev Nikolaevich, were represented on screen as caricatures, in scenes that were insulting to them'.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the film was never widely released in Russia.

In the USSR, it was mainly Tolstoy's fiction, rather than his biography, that inspired lavish costume dramas, such as Sergei Bondarchuk's 1969 *War and Peace*. The story of Tolstoy's life had to wait until 1984, when Sergei Gerasimov, a leading Soviet filmmaker, released his last film, *Lev Tolstoy*. Gerasimov both directed and played the part of Tolstoy in this deeply personal drama in two parts, *Insomnia* and *Escape*, that explored Tolstoy's alienation from his family towards the end of his life. The moral conundrum of mediated celebrity persona troubles Gerasimov's Tolstoy, too: one scene features Tolstoy playing a recording of his own voice to the village children, pronouncing 'I will be gone one day, but the record will be there to remind you to behave yourselves!'. Gerasimov's Tolstoy lives in the world of modern technology: audio and video recordings (Drankov features as a character), train travel, global telegraphic communication. At the centre of this connected world, Tolstoy presides over a Yasnaya Polyana microcosm, the heart of the fin-de-siècle Russian world, where visitors come for advice and blessings while his family suffers through one sage announcement after another (all made at a dinner table). Aerial shots zoom out, the estate fading into the landscape, aiding the creation of just such an illusion. The meetings in Gaspra with visitors like the writer Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) are also clearly modelled on existing photographs and the official Soviet iconography, like the 1953 painting by A.I. Kirillov *Tolstoy and Gorky in Gaspra in 1902*. Portraits and photographs of Tolstoy are a part of this film's visual DNA: the interior sets are often shot from an angle that resembles Ge's and Repin's paintings, and several close-ups of Tolstoy's face and body reproduce not just the poses he held in them but also the lighting. In Astapovo, the camera shows Tolstoy receiving visitors on his deathbed from exactly the same angle as in the famous first photograph of Tolstoy's corpse. Faithfully reproducing the existing Tolstoy iconography, Gerasimov problematises the crisis of authenticity such reproduction engenders. As a result, his film offers a nuanced take on the effect that countless representations of Tolstoy as a subject of art have had on our perception of his personality.

Michael Hoffman's 2009 film *The Last Station* similarly focused on Tolstoy's final years. This time, the story of Tolstoy's rift with his wife and his flight to Astapovo is told from the perspective of his young acolyte, Valentin Bulgakov. The film inherits this de-centred focalisation from Jay Parini's 1990 novel of the same name that it adapts for the screen.

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<sup>5</sup> 'V Yasnoy polyane', *Russkoe slovo*, 225, 4 October 1912, p.7.

Another protagonist is Sofya Tolstaya, which allows Hoffman to create an almost sacrilegiously intimate image of the writer (the film includes several scenes in the Tolstoy's marital bed). Celebrity, and the damage it incurs, becomes a dominant theme in the film. The opening title introduces Tolstoy as a 'celebrated writer', and the first scenes show Sofya picking up a newspaper from a carriage pulling in to Yasnaya Polyana – all under intense observation by a camp of photographers, representatives of Tolstoy's global fandom. The subject of the first discussion we witness between the couple is celebrity gossip. The film also incorporates Tolstoy's many mediated selves in photographs, film reels and gramophone records. Tolstoy's doctor, Makovitskii, jots down every word Tolstoy utters, and the sound of his scribbles accompanies many scenes in the film. Paul Giamatti's charismatic Chertkov is shown actively managing Tolstoy's public image: staging the photographs, editing Tolstoy's speeches, and, most importantly, granting or withdrawing access to the great man. Following the lead of the first Tolstoy biopic, *The Last Station* also mixes documentary and fictional narratives of Tolstoy's life, but makes a deliberate point in disrupting the visual iconography that Gerasimov used so emphatically. Many scenes are set in locations, familiar from photographs and paintings, but are deliberately shot from a different angle, or repurposed to focus on other members of the Tolstoy family. Attempting to show an intimate portrait of Tolstoy, Hoffman breaches the calcified façade of the writer's public image in an assured and revealing manner.

The only other Russian film to feature Tolstoy as a fully-developed character, Avdotia Smirnova's 2018 *The Tolstoy Defence, or A History of One Appointment*, pursued a different approach. The film tells a tragic but predictable story of a young nobleman's moral corruption and the role Tolstoy comes to play in his life. One of Tolstoy's recent biographers, Pavel Basinsky, consulted on the script, and the story itself was based on an actual court case Tolstoy once intervened in as a defence lawyer. Throughout the film, even in scenes shot on location, Smirnova follows Hoffman in deliberately contesting the Tolstoy iconography. Most startlingly, Smirnova's Tolstoy, played by Evgenii Kharitonov, is young, and resembles the much less commonly reproduced portrait by Kramskoy rather than Repin's bearded wise old man. Mostly shot on location, scenes in Yasnaya Polyana include not just the interior of the dining room and the bedrooms, but also pigsties and stables. Smirnova crafts a new Tolstoy for a modern audience in a way that is echoed in Andrei Zorin's 2020 biography: as a nineteenth-century writer, who struggled with very contemporary moral dilemmas.

### **Postmodern Afterlives**

In Viktor Pelevin's 2009 novel *t.* the reader is introduced to a Russian superhero: Count T, who left Yasnaya Polyana to travel the world and search for truth and wisdom. T. practices martial arts, challenges Dostoevsky to a duel with axes, and discusses the crisis of authorship with his own literary creator. This treatment of Tolstoy as a disembodied avatar of his ideas is echoed in one of the most popular recent Russian comedies, *What Else Are Men Talking About?* (2011, dir. D. Dyachenko). In this film, Repin's *Ploughman* comes to life and the ghost of Tolstoy follows the characters around, preaching on morality. This postmodernist Tolstoy of Russian popular culture is far removed from any historical context, and is not much different from the image his international celebrity had crafted world-wide. Unexpected parallels include Tolstoy's appearance as a character in a *Lucasfilm* TV series *Young Indiana Jones: Travels with Father* (1996 dir. M. Schultz, D. Mehta). The young Indiana meets an old man called Lev in a field in Russia – the boy has run away from home, and so, he discovers to his surprise, did Lev. Lev and Indiana bond over this shared experience, and Tolstoy gives Jones a crash-course in property distribution by eating all of the boy's apples. In these representations, the mediated celebrity self gradually takes over the actual historical person of Tolstoy, until he disappears altogether.

This absence, rather than presence, of Tolstoy, is a shared characteristic of modern representations of Tolstoy in various media, from popular novels to highest-grossing films and performances. *Tolstoy Is Not Here* (2014), an interactive play by Olga Pogodina-Kuzmina, examines the life of Tolstoy's family in the shadow of his departure, and has enjoyed a successful run in both Moscow and St Petersburg since 2017. Marius Ivashkyavichus' award-winning play *Russian novel* (2016), staged at the Mayakovsky theatre in Moscow, also explores the duality of Tolstoy's presence/absence in contemporary Russian culture. Tolstoy's legacy – his family, friends and writings – is literally centre stage in this production, whereas Tolstoy himself, like in Pogodina-Kuzmina's play, is simply not there anymore.