

Joan Kjaer: Hello and welcome the WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer, I'm coming to you from MERGE in downtown Iowa city and thank you for joining us. This program is called Art and the Face of War and we're focusing on two influential artists, Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco de Goya and Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. They are two very different people working in different artistic media, separated by time and space, but somehow connected by the expression they gave to the horrors of war. Our guests in this segment of WorldCanvass will help us see this traumatic period, the Napoleonic incursions into Spain and Russia, through both the original works by Goya and Tolstoy and through film and operatic interpretations.

Joan Kjaer: Here to give us their insights are Anna Barker visiting assistant professor in the UI department of Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures. Thanks, Annie. Next to her is Rebecca Fons, the programming director at Iowa city's FilmScene. Thanks for being here, Rebecca.

Rebecca Fons: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: And at the far end we have Associate Professor in the UI School of Music Nathan Platte. Very good to have you back with us, Nathan.

Nathan Platte: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: So people who were with us for the first segment already know a little bit about why these two artists are connected, in terms of our discussion tonight. Anna, you've been teaching War and Peace for many years, both to UI students, and I know this fall you're also teaching at the senior college. What is it about War and Peace that continues to inspire you and also captivate other readers 150 years after it was first published?

Anna Barker: It's the toughest question to answer. I'm actually teaching War and Peace in my undergrad class on Tuesday nights and senior college on Wednesday afternoons and this is my 15th and 16th time teaching War and Peace and it never ceases to amaze me. It is a novel. I teach other books, I teach all the novels of Dostoevsky every year. I teach Milton, I teach Goethe, I teach Bulgakov, I teach Herodotus to my Wonder Woman class. So there are other writers who are extremely appealing to me. But there's something about War and Peace that is absolutely unimaginably beautiful and Tolstoy's seeking in that novel is what brings me back to that novel over and over and over again. He doesn't give us answers, but he shows us characters who are walking through life and wondering what the meaning of it all is and these characters happen to attempt to come to terms with what it means to be a human being at the time of tremendous turmoil.

Anna Barker: Every time I go back to the novel and I'm listening to it in Russian, every time I am preparing for my next presentation, I am just absolutely astonished by one,

the beauty of Tolstoy's Russian. Two, the extent of his research and how incredibly meticulous he is. Three, by the power of his convictions. He really wants us to know how he feels about this period and he brings so much of his own philosophical and theological thinking to this novel. And four, just the incredible beauty of the relationship of these characters. And I confess to my students that I still weep when I come to contact with certain episodes in this novel because they are just so incredibly human and so incredibly unbearable. And then once the character departs us in the novel, I miss them because they become just such an integral part of our lives.

Anna Barker: And the novel is about young people. The novel is about older people who have perhaps come to terms with what it means to be a human being. My young student readers of this novel are absolutely blown away that they emote and they feel so close to these characters despite the fact that they are young people growing up in the United States in the 21st century and they feel empathy for characters who were created by a Russian aristocrat 150 years ago. It is truly astounding.

Joan Kjaer: Well, I think we have a rare opportunity too, to get a little extra insight from you regarding Tolstoy and his own life. I know that you have visited more than once, the ancestral home. And so tell us something about what that's like.

Anna Barker: What do you need to know about Tolstoy is, his collected works in Russian, on the shelves of the University of Iowa library, are 90 volumes, nine zero and he's a college dropout. So twice, he didn't finish his first year as a student of oriental languages at Kazan University. So he thought, well, jurisprudence should be easier and that didn't work out either. At the ripe old age of 19 he comes into his inheritance and he moves to the ancestral estate, Yasnaya Polyana and continues making mistake after mistake all through his 20s. I mean the kid had an absolutely disastrous life in his teens and 20s. Remarkable thing is he pulls it all together in his early 30s, gets married at 34 and starts writing this novel immediately as soon as his life stabilizes. So the astonishing thing about War and Peace is it was written by a young man in his 30s. Tolstoy is 41 when he finished the novel and he lived another 41 years in the shadow of this accomplishment.

Anna Barker: As Tolstoy's view about life and aesthetics change in his 50s and 60s, he becomes a complete pacifist and a Christian anarchist who doesn't believe in the power of the state over a human being. He doesn't believe in the power of armies to wage war on people. He doesn't believe in the power of the state to wage war on an individual. He is completely against capital punishment. And what horrifies him the most is the complicity of the official church in atrocities against human beings. And he becomes so heretical in his Orthodox teachings that he's ex-communicated by the Russian Orthodox church at the ripe old age of 72. But inadvertently he starts an entire movement of young people who believed in his teachings to the point where they would start Tolstoyan communes. And remarkably, one of those Tolstoyan communes was started by the young Gandhi when he was a lawyer in South Africa.

Anna Barker: He read Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of Heaven is Within You* and he was so moved by Tolstoy's appeal for nonviolent protest that he wrote a letter to Tolstoy. Tolstoy corresponded with him during the last year of his life. And, well, the rest is history, the nonviolent movement begins with Gandhi. And then we have reverberations of that happening in the United States with Martin Luther King. So Tolstoy had an incredible impact on future generations of thinkers and philosophers. And it's fascinating that this human being who wrote the most warlike novel in Russian history, *War and Peace*, already in that novel starts speaking as a person who does not approve of violence, who cannot stand violence of one human being against another human being. And the best characters that Tolstoy creates in this novel do not want to condone violence, Natasha can not pray for the death of the French soldiers.

Anna Barker: She can pray for Russian victory, but she cannot pray for death. Nikolai, her brother, his hand falters when he's ready to strike a French soldier with his saber because he sees the young French soldiers eyes and he realizes that there's fear in those eyes. And he realizes though this is war, I am afraid, but he's afraid too. And Tolstoy's project lasts throughout his lifetime, he is a war veteran. He fought in the Crimean war, in the 1850s he begins his literary life as a war correspondent was his Sebastopol sketches. So he definitely can speak from personal experience about the horrors of war, but that takes him all the way into his old age and into this resistance to violence that has to be peaceful. And out of the New Testament, the only part of the New Testament that he can live with is the Sermon on the Mount.

Joan Kjaer: Well, one of the things we want to talk about is some film versions of *War and Peace*. And I guess some you might consider successful, some perhaps not so much so, but we really want to concentrate on this film that will be shown soon at FilmScene. You told me earlier, 2019 is the 50th anniversary of the first Russian film Oscar for *War and Peace* by Bondarchuk.

Anna Barker: Sergey Bondarchuk. You probably notice that there are several adaptations of *War and Peace*, they just keep churning them out. The latest one is with Lily James. There's one from I think the 80s and then the US actually made the first big successful adaptation of *War and Peace*. It was made in, I believe, 1956 with Audrey Hepburn as Natasha and she became such a successful Natasha that when Bondarchuk was casting actresses for Natasha in the Russian adaptation, he was looking for an actress who would remotely look like Audrey Hepburn and he succeeded, Saveleva was a very young ballerina. He actually wanted to have an actress who would have no acting experience because he wanted a woman who would portray the immediacy of Natasha on the screen.

Anna Barker: Bondarchuk was the director of the film, the producer of the film. He played the main character Pierre. He was a screenplay writer and the narrator. It was a monumental effort and the Russians restored this film for the 50th anniversary of its production. It was produced through the 1960s and in 1969 it got the Oscar for best foreign film. The new restoration is absolutely spectacular and I

can't wait to see it. It was actually screened at Lincoln Center and the New York Times gave it an absolutely glowing review, it called it peerless.

Anna Barker: And part of the success of this film is that there was no budget limit for this film. Anything that director wanted, he got, if he needed tens of thousands of soldiers in Napoleonic uniforms, he got them. If he needed war horses, he got them. If he needed porcelain, 18th century French porcelain from archives in Russian museums, he got absolutely everything that he asked for this film. And it's fascinating, the actor who played Andre became such an iconic Andre that this War and Peace recording that I'm listening to, the reader actually speaks the lines of Andre, was the voice of the actor who played Andre in War and Peace and he speaks the lines of Pierre with Bondarchuk's voice. So they became sort of the iconic Andre, Pierre and Natasha.

Joan Kjaer: So that leads us directly to you, Rebecca, because FilmScene will be showing this film.

Rebecca Fons: Yes. Wear comfortable clothing. It's over seven hours long. I give Anna much credit because last year during the UNESCO book festival, they were celebrating Frankenstein and it was very easy for us to present Bride of Frankenstein and Frankenstein, they're 50 minutes. Then we did a double feature, it was very simple. And I don't think the credits had even rolled and Anna said, "Next year we've got to do War and Peace, it's seven plus hours long, but we have to do it." And FilmScene is expanding, actually as we speak, to a second location and so that really frees up a screen for us to be able to do that. So on October 6th we're presenting all four chapters of War and Peace, which is seven plus hours long. We have built in breaks for the bathroom and for more popcorn. And if you bring in a sandwich, we will not kick you out. I think we'll allow that.

Rebecca Fons: And then the subsequent days after that you can sort of pick and choose which chapters you want to see or see a chapter on Monday and Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. I mean, I think the New York times review that you commented, they called it peerless. I mean it is truly beautiful and Criterion Collection, who is the gold standard and restorations and new exhibition did this restoration and it is truly beautiful. The music, the imagery is so crisp and clean and it's really something to be seen on the big screen. I think we get used to watching things on Netflix or on our computers at home, but this is one of those that at home it is a challenging watch. I mean seven plus hours is a big commitment for anybody. But to see it on the big screen and to feel the bass rumble because there's just amazing sound mixing, there's sort of every film technique in the book. There's sort of chaotic editing. There's interesting cuts. There's whimsy. It's a lot. And so to see it on the big screen is really how it meant to be seen and I imagine how Sergey would hope.

Rebecca Fons: I mean, it took, like you said, I think it's something like in today's US dollars, they say that the budget was \$700 million. He had hundreds of thousands of extras, real soldiers, pieces of art and artifacts. And so I think we should do him justice

by seeing it on the big screen. If we can do that one thing, that's what we should do.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Well, and then maybe you can both talk a little bit about how this particular film maker has told the story, because I think that there has been some success with versions of War and Peace where maybe they concentrate on a romantic relationship, but is this different? Does he follow the novel essentially straight through.

Anna Barker: He follows the novel all through. And this will be the lead in to the opera. The opera doesn't begin till the beginning of volume two. Prokofiev really felt that if we're not going to sit through an eight hour opera, we have to cut somewhere. So the opera begins at the beginning of volume two. Bondarchuk just does the entire film in four parts and it's fascinating how he divides the parts and he gives titles to the parts. So the first part is called Andre Bolkonsky because volume one of War and Peace is where we see the development of Andre. Volume two is called Natasha Rostova because volume two is hugely important for Natasha's development. Volume three, or part three of the film is 1812 and that is where we are presented with the Napoleonic invasion and the Battle of Borodino. And then volume four or part four of the film is entitled Pierre Bezukhov because that is the most important novel for the development of this character.

Anna Barker: I have to say that last time I've seen this film in a movie theater, I was a teenager, we had to read all of War and Peace for our Russian literature class in ninth or 10th grade. And our teacher arranged for all of us to see the entire film in a movie theater and I remember sobbing through many of the parts. So after reading War and Peace out loud on the Ped Mall, I will be ready to just relax and enjoy the entire eight hour spectacular. I can't wait to see the restored version.

Rebecca Fons: Yeah, I think it'll look really beautiful. I have only ever seen it on a computer, so I'm really excited and I definitely paused it and sort of lost my way and forgot where I was. So I will be committing to the Sunday screening as well. I'm really excited and I think there's something to be said, this adaptation is really spectacular and different critics have commented about how Bondarchuk, he has control over the film. And I think a lot of times when filmmakers are adapting big tomes or even just a beloved novel, there's sort of this fight between the original text and adaptation or they sort of lose their way on that. It's topical, but it just came out last weekend, a film called The Goldfinch, based on the Donna Tartt book. And it sort of received bad reviews because it's sort of too faithful but not faithful enough. It just doesn't really quite work. And that's an 800 page book, Pulitzer Prize winner.

Rebecca Fons: And then of course there's Gone With The Wind, which is different in a lot of ways than the source novel. But I think this adaptation is really, it's his own story, but it is, I think for those who love the novel, really find that it is an appropriate adaptation and probably the best since King Vidor's in 1956 with Audrey Hepburn and Peter Fonda as Pierre.

Anna Barker: He was too small.

Rebecca Fons: Too small. Yeah. There's a reason that it is not as revered as the Bondarchuk version. And I think it's because his version just really feels like sort of Tolstoy speaking through him, but he's also bringing his own voice. And I did write down a quote from the late great Roger Ebert who said Bondarchuk is able to balance the spectacular, the human and the intellectual, which I think is a praise that any filmmaker would want to receive.

Joan Kjaer: Terrific, terrific. Well, so now we go to the opera by Prokofiev and Nathan Platte from the school of music is going to tell us something about this work and the various versions of it that were produced over the years.

Nathan Platte: Sure. If it's all right, I'd actually like to just put in another plug for the film because I've been watching it and I study film music, so I've been listening to it and the music by Vyacheslav Ovchinnikov is just incredible. And let me be a little bit more specific, oftentimes when we watch epic films, we expect that no matter where the characters go, no matter how many years elapse, that there will be certain musical themes that sort of follow them. Think of *Gone With The Wind* or *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Lord of the Rings* and these themes that we sort of come to know and become these sort of threads of continuity. Ovchinnikov is like completely tossed that aside. And again it might be a reflection of the budget and a sort of like do whatever you want, do whatever you can.

Nathan Platte: But there are so many musical styles represented in that film that makes it musically interesting, but then also the way in which the music is mic'd is really fascinating. And so you have certain scenes where the musicians sound as though they are sitting right next to you in the theater, you can hear the flutist breathing. And then there are other ones where the orchestra is just wailing away, but the distance of the mic'ing and then also the handling of the mix, it sounds like they're playing in the next room over or something. It's very disorienting and fascinating. And so if you do sign up for that film, please bend an ear to the soundtrack, it's really interesting.

Nathan Platte: With Prokofiev and the opera, there's a lot of things that are, I think of note with this project. I mean we could just sort of start with the fact of making an opera based on a literary source novel. You have of course the process of setting something for the stage, but then setting it to music and as Anna already acknowledged, setting all of *War and Peace* to music would take weeks to perform. And so there's something that happens in most operatic adaptations of literary works of condensation, of extreme condensation or selection. We can't do all of this, so we're only going to do very specific parts of it. So the opera very much becomes a dialogue with the text of not just what is there but what isn't there. And then the sort of balancing force for that is that opera expands what is there because just logistically speaking, it takes longer to sing something, if you're singing in a comprehensible fashion then to say, and so scenes that pass in a couple of paragraphs or pages in Tolstoy's novel, unfold at a much more leisurely pace in Prokofiev's opera.

Nathan Platte: So you are invited to have sort of a different relationship with the characters in these limited select scenes that Prokofiev is sort of treating you to. And then of course you have the orchestral scores sort of narrating around what the characters are singing to each other. And so that in some ways is obvious, that's what opera does, but it sort of forces a very, very different relationship with Tolstoy's novel that is interesting. There's a lot that is unusual about the biographical and historical circumstances of this opera. So Prokofiev started working on it just as World War II was essentially beginning and made it his number one priority after Hitler violated the Nazi Soviet nonaggression pact by invading Russia in June of 1941. And one of the things that the Russian government did, the Soviet government did for artists of Prokofiev's stature is they got them out of large cities where they might be at risk.

Nathan Platte: And so while Prokofiev was working on the libretto with Mira Mendelson and beginning to compose this music, he is in this sort of series of internal evacuations. He's first evacuated out of Moscow and then from his second location to a third, he ends up in Georgia eventually. But I often wonder what that would feel like to be on the one hand, such a national treasure that your government is swooping in and taking you out of sort of harm's way and yet also knowing that there's millions of other people that they're not doing that for. And he would arrive by train, usually with other artists and there would often be people there, sometimes brass bands welcoming them because here come these celebrities that don't normally grace us with their presence. And so I think about that, I think, wow, what a sort of emotionally tumultuous time.

Nathan Platte: On the one hand, the world is falling apart, your country is under attack and you are being singled out for this special treatment and sort of praise. And then there's a sort of like, well what are you going to do with that? And so he starts working on this opera that is also just by coincidence, a great Russian novel about another invasion of Russia by a Western power. And so he's working on it and one of the problems with opera in the Soviet Union is it was the most tightly censored and controlled musical format that you could work in. Because as a story, characters and lines have sung dialogue and it's very easy for a censor to sort of swoop in and say, "I don't like how this character sort of says this, or this casts the Russian people or the Soviet people in an unflattering light, we think you should change this."

Nathan Platte: And so writing opera and getting it approved and performed in the Soviet Union was not simple. Prokofiev believed that he had more or less a sure thing with War and Peace because it was War and Peace, what could possibly be objectionable about that? The problem had to do with General Kutuzov who in Tolstoy's novel is a very human, if you want to say flawed, but I mean, I suppose flawed would be an appropriate word, but just a very human, not a great general in the sense of capital G great. Just a person who's trying to do what he can with the limited facilities that he has and the sort of the strength of the Russian people, the strength of the country is really what wins the day, not him being a stupendous general.

Nathan Platte: But the censors were thinking, well Kutuzov needs to look like Stalin. And right now the image that we're pushing of Stalin is that he is a great man, capital G capital M and that Kutuzov in this stage presentation needs to look similarly and people need to sort of also sort of perceive that and give this character this particular level of respect. And so this is really where the opera sort of hits a major stumbling block because Prokofiev's, I think, interest in the work really had to do with a lot of the intimate scenes between Natasha and Andre and Pierre. And he was sort of constantly stymied by the fact that they were saying, "We don't like how you're handling the second part of the opera." Where he really focuses on Kutuzov's role within the military campaign. Joan mentioned that there are many versions of this because basically they would say, "No, this isn't good enough. You need to go back and try it again."

Nathan Platte: And Prokofiev, bless his heart, kept doing that because he really wanted this work to be on the stage as both an expression of patriotism. And also because he had spent years of his life at this point, invested in this. And although parts of it were performed either for committees or in reduced stage scenes, the complete work was never performed in his lifetime. It was actually performed in Florence several months after his death. And people who know about Prokofiev know that Prokofiev died on the exact same day as Stalin, which is a very, very bizarre historical coincidence. And so that sort of sounds like a sad story because here's this work that he spent all of this time in, born of a very personal moment within his own biography, but the opera has been sort of remarkably resilient over the 20th century.

Nathan Platte: And now, even in the 21st century, Valery Gergiev, who's a quite famous Russian conductor, essentially cut his teeth on this work. It was his premier performance with the Kirov, now Mariinsky Theater Orchestra, that was the first work that he conducted with them and has since gone on to make that opera house sort of an international phenomenon. And as recently as 2010 there was a new version of, well, a new old version of the opera unveiled that essentially tried to restore the opera to the way that Prokofiev had originally written it, before all of the Soviet committee sort of started jumping on it and saying, "Well what if you change this note and what if you pulled this out?" And so it's interesting that in 2019 it's actually much easier to experience this work in its various versions than it was at any point during Prokofiev's life and really for the past 70 years.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. And so the film that the School of Music will be showing is which version?

Nathan Platte: Well, our plan is to do the one with Valery Gergiev in the Kirov from the early 90s.

Anna Barker: And it's also fascinating that those of you who are opera fans, you probably know, Anna Netrebko, the great Russian opera soprano, she starts her career as Natasha in War and Peace. That is her first big role. Just to add to what Nathan was saying, it's fascinating, you need to know something about how Russians speak about the war of 1812 and World War II. They don't call them the war of

1812 and World War II. In Russia in the war of 1812 is called the patriotic war of 1812 and World War II is called the great patriotic war. So there's a connection between these two conflicts where as Nathan pointed out, it was a Western invasion by mostly French forces of Russia in 1812 and it was a Western invasion of mostly German, but allied European forces of Russia in 1941. It's fascinating that Napoleon marched into Russia with an army of 600,000 and he marched out of Russia with an army of 60,000.

Anna Barker: And it's fascinating, it wasn't the Russian cold that killed them. By the time he gets to the battle of Borodino a few months after his invasion, he has only 250,000 troops. It was disease, it was starvation and it was desertion that scattered Napoleonic troops even before they got to Moscow. And his supply lines were stretched too thin, it was 600 miles to his supply trains when he entered Moscow. At the time of the German invasion, Wehrmacht invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 when Prokofiev starts writing this opera, it was an army of 3 million people. It was the largest invasion in human history and Russians lost 28 million people in that conflict. So for Prokofiev to be writing this opera at this time is just this monumental personal challenge but also monumental national challenge. And it's fascinating how in the opera, the themes of the characters start merging at one point, when we get about two, three quarters through the novel, the theme of Kutuzov, the General merges with the theme of the people.

Anna Barker: And it's fascinating that there is a paragraph in War and Peace where Kutuzov is told about what's happening on the battlefield and he doesn't believe one of his generals, he says that what he sees in his soul is more important than what a general who saw the battlefield is reporting. And what Kutuzov sees in the novel is what is an every Russian soldier and this common soldiers aspiration towards victory is what drives people on the battlefield, not necessarily the orders given by commanders. And so in that sense, Prokofiev's rendition becomes incredibly moving. And every time I listen to the opera, I am just tremendously moved when this happens, when all of a sudden the character of Kutuzov starts associating with the characters of the soldiers.

Anna Barker: And there's one moment that is beautifully portrayed in the opera and it is in volume three of War and Peace. When a Holy icon that was rescued from a burning city is brought to the battlefield before the battle of Borodino and all of the soldiers come to kneel in front of the icon and pray and Kutuzov comes to the icon as well. And all of the generals come to the icon. So the spiritual aspect of the opera is very much the spiritual aspect of the novel and it's beautifully portrayed.

Joan Kjaer: Wow. Such an interesting discussion. Well before we wrap up, I want to turn to you Rebecca and give you a moment to just talk about FilmScene. Very big events happening here, starting in about a half an hour.

Rebecca Fons: Yes, I had dust on myself because I was cleaning before I came over. Yeah so FilmScene, which is located at the Ped Mall, we are expanding to a second

location in the Chauncey Building. We literally have a champagne toast this evening and then we open tomorrow with Downton Abbey and some other classic films like Cinema Paradiso, Field of Dreams. Obviously you can't open a movie theater in Iowa without showing Field of Dreams. And then one of my favorites, The Blob, which has a classic movie theater scene in it, no spoilers, but The Blob is involved obviously. So it's exciting for us for many reasons, sort of more awareness of who we are as a nonprofit art house cinema, but also it just means we will have five screens total, and that means we're able to do things like show seven hours of a 50 year old War and Peace adaptation and do other partnerships which are so important to us.

Rebecca Fons: So it's very exciting and the new building is beautiful and it sounds and looks amazing. It's probably going to be one of the best cinemas in any direction, five miles driving. I think. So that's something we're really proud of and Iowa city should be very proud of that as well because it is a momentous moment for us and for cinema in the Midwest.

Joan Kjaer: That's great. That's great. So that was October 6th is going to be the seminar run through-

Rebecca Fons: Sunday, October 6th at FilmScene is the entire marathon if you want to do it. And then that Monday through Thursday, they're individual chapters. And the Sunday screening Anna will be doing introduction, which I think will provide a lot of contexts for people. And then she'll also be returning for an introduction on one of those individual days, icfilmscene.org is our website. All of that is online and tickets are on sale now. And we may have a sellout on our hands, we kind of didn't know how many people would show up for seven hours, but it's looking pretty solid. And that if you haven't seen the book, you can sort of say you've or you haven't read the book, it's sort of a cheat. They always say the book is better than the movie, but some people think the movie's better than the book. So this gives you an excuse to learn a little bit more.

Anna Barker: And who knows, perhaps you will watch the film and then you will feel like a 55 hour novel is just just your thing to do.

Rebecca Fons: Yes. You may really be a long haul art consumer.

Joan Kjaer: There you go. There you go. And October 15th for the showing of the of War and Peace operatic film. So wonderful. So Anna Barker, Rebecca Fons, and Nathan Platte, thank you so much for being here, this wonderful conversation. And for all of you, I hope you can join us for part three of our program. We're going to be talking to a Joyce Tsai once again, the curator at the Museum of Art, and also to one of the conservators who worked on these precious Disasters of War. So all WorldCanvass programming is available on iTunes, the public radio exchange, and the International Programs website. I'm Joan Kjaer and for UI International Programs, thank you for joining us.

