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THE THING FROM INNER SPACE

on tarkovsky

Jacques Lacan defines art itself with regard to the Thing: in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, he claims that art as such is always organized around the central void of the impossible/real Thing – a statement which, perhaps, should be read as a variation on Rilke's old thesis that beauty is the last veil that covers the horrible.[1] Lacan gives some hints about how this surrounding of the void functions in the visual arts and in architecture; what we shall do here is not provide an account of how, in cinematic art also, the field of the visible, of representations, involves reference to some central and structural void, to the impossibility attached to it – ultimately, therein resides the point of the notion of *suture* in cinema theory. What I propose to do is something much more naive and abrupt: to analyse the way the motif of the Thing appears within the diegetic space of cinematic narrative – in short, to speak about films whose narrative deals with some impossible/traumatic Thing, like the alien Thing in science-fiction horror films. What better proof of the fact that this Thing comes from Inner Space than the very first scene of *Star Wars*? At first, all we see is the void – the infinite dark sky, the ominously silent abyss of the universe, with dispersed twinkling stars which are not so much material objects as abstract points, markers of space coordinates, virtual objects; then, all of a sudden, in Dolby stereo, we hear a thundering sound coming from behind our backs, from our innermost background, later rejoined by the visual object, the source of this sound – the gigantic spaceship, a kind of space version of the Titanic – which triumphantly enters the frame of screen-reality. The object-Thing is thus clearly rendered as a part of *ourselves* that we eject into reality... This intrusion of the massive Thing seems to bring a relief, cancelling the *horror vacui* of staring at the infinite void of the universe; however, what if its actual effect is the exact opposite? What if the true horror is that of Something – the intrusion of some excessive massive Real – where we expect Nothing? This experience of "something (the stain of the Real) instead of nothing" is perhaps at the root of the metaphysical question "Why is there something instead of nothing?"

Furthermore, I want to focus on the specific version of this Thing: the Thing as the space (the sacred/forbidden zone) in which the gap between the Symbolic and the Real is closed, i.e. in which, to put it somewhat bluntly, our desires are directly materialized (or, to put it in the precise terms of Kant's transcendental idealism, the zone in which our intuition becomes directly productive – a state of things which, according to Kant, characterizes only the infinite divine Reason).

This notion of Thing as the Id-Machine, a mechanism that directly materializes our unacknowledged fantasies, possesses a long, if not always respectable, pedigree. In cinema, it all began with Fred Wilcox's *The Forbidden Planet* (1956), which transposed onto a distant planet the story-skeleton of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: a father living alone with his daughter (who had never met another man) on an island, and then their peace disturbed by the intrusion of an expedition. On *The Forbidden Planet*, the mad/genius scientist (Walter Pidgeon) lives alone with his daughter (Anne Francis), when their peace is disturbed by the arrival of a group of space-travellers. Strange attacks of an invisible monster soon start to occur, and, at the film's end, it becomes clear that this monster is nothing but the materialization of the father's destructive impulses

against the intruders who disturbed his incestuous peace. (Retroactively, we can thus read the tempest itself in Shakespeare's play as the materialization of the raging of the paternal superego...) The Id-Machine that, unbeknownst to the father, generates the destructive monster is a gigantic mechanism beneath the surface of this distant planet, the mysterious remnant of some past civilization that succeeded in developing such a machine for the direct materialization of one's thoughts and thus self-destroyed... Here, the Id-Machine is firmly set in a Freudian libidinal context: the monsters it generates are the realizations of the primordial father's incestuous destructive impulses against other men threatening his symbiosis with the daughter.

The ultimate variation of this motif of the Id-Machine is arguably Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, based on Stanislaw Lem's novel, in which the Thing is also related to the deadlocks of sexual relationship. *Solaris* is the story of a space agency psychologist, Kelvin, sent to a half-abandoned spaceship above a newly discovered planet, Solaris, where, recently, strange things have been taking place (scientists going mad, hallucinating and killing themselves). Solaris is a planet with an oceanic fluid surface which moves incessantly and, from time to time, imitates recognizable forms – not only elaborate geometric structures, but also gigantic child-bodies or human buildings; although all attempts to communicate with the planet fail, scientists entertain the hypothesis that Solaris is a gigantic brain which somehow reads our minds. Soon after his arrival, Kelvin finds by his side in his bed his dead wife, Harey, who, years ago on Earth, killed herself after he had abandoned her. He is unable to shake Harey off, all attempts to get rid of her fail miserably (after he sends her into space with a rocket, she rematerializes the next day); analysis of her tissue demonstrates that she is not composed of atoms like normal human beings – beneath a certain micro-level, there is nothing, just void. Finally, Kelvin grasps that Harey is a materialization of his own innermost traumatic fantasies. This accounts for the enigma of strange gaps in Harey's memory – of course she doesn't know everything a real person is supposed to know, because she is not such a person, but a mere materialization of *his* fantasmatic image of her in all its inconsistency. The problem is that, precisely because Harey has no substantial identity of her own, she acquires the status of the Real that forever insists and returns to its place: like fire in Lynch's films, she forever "walks with the hero," sticks to him, never lets him go. Harey, this fragile spectre, pure semblance, *cannot ever be erased* – she is "undead," eternally recurring. Are we thus not back at the standard Weiningerian antifeminist notion of the woman as a symptom of man, a materialization of his guilt, his fall into sin, who can only deliver him (and herself) by her suicide? *Solaris* thus relies on science-fiction rules to enact in reality itself, to present as a material fact, the notion that woman merely materializes a male fantasy: Harey's tragic position is that she becomes aware that she is deprived of all substantial identity, that she is nothing in herself, since she only exists as the Other's dream, in so far as the Other's fantasies turn around her – it is this predicament that imposes suicide as her ultimate ethical act: becoming aware of how he suffers on account of her permanent presence, Harey finally destroys herself by swallowing a chemical stuff that will prevent her recomposition. (The ultimate horror scene of the movie takes place when the spectral Harey reawakens from her first, failed suicide attempt on Solaris: after ingesting liquid oxygen, she lies on the floor, deeply frozen; then, all of a sudden, she starts to move, her body twitching in a mixture of erotic beauty and abject horror, sustaining unbearable pain – is there anything more tragic than such a scene of the failed self-erasure, when we are reduced to the obscene slime which, against our will, persists in the picture?) At the novel's end, we see Kelvin alone on the spaceship, staring into the mysterious surface of the Solaris ocean...

In her reading of the Hegelian dialectics of lord and bondsman, Judith Butler focuses on the hidden contract between the two: "the imperative to the bondsman consists in the following formulation: you be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body that you are is my body."[2] The disavowal on the part of the lord is thus double: first, the lord disavows his own body, he postures as a disembodied desire and compels the bondsman to act as his body; secondly, the bondsman has to disavow that he acts merely as the lord's body and act as an autonomous agent, as if the bondsman's bodily labouring for the lord is not imposed on him but is

his autonomous activity... This structure of double (and thereby self-effacing) disavowal also renders the patriarchal matrix of the relationship between man and woman: in a first move, woman is posited as a mere projection/reflection of man, his insubstantial shadow, hysterically imitating but never able really to acquire the moral stature of a fully constituted self-identical subjectivity; however, this status of a mere reflection itself has to be disavowed and the woman provided with a false autonomy, as if she acts the way she does within the logic of patriarchy on account of her own autonomous logic (women are "by nature" submissive, compassionate, self-sacrificing...). The paradox not to be missed here is that the bondsman (servant) is all the more the servant, the more he (mis)perceives his position as that of an autonomous agent; and the same goes for woman – the ultimate form of her servitude is to (mis)perceive herself, when she acts in a "feminine" submissive/compassionate way, as an autonomous agent. For that reason, the Weiningerian ontological denigration of woman as a mere symptom of man – as the embodiment of male fantasy, as the hysterical imitation of the true male subjectivity – is, when openly admitted and fully assumed, far more subversive that the false direct assertion of feminine autonomy – perhaps, the ultimate feminist statement is to proclaim openly: "I do not exist in myself, I am merely the Other's fantasy embodied."

What we have in *Solaris* is thus Harey's *two* suicides: the first one (in her earlier earthly "real" existence as Kelvin's wife), and then her second suicide, the heroic act of the self-erasure of her very spectral undead existence: while the first suicidal act was a simple escape from the burden of life, the second is a proper ethical act. In other words, if the first Harey, before her suicide on Earth, was a "normal human being," the second one is a subject in the most radical sense of the term, precisely in so far as she is deprived of the last vestiges of her substantial identity (as she says in the film: "No, it's not me... It's not me... I'm not Harey... Tell me ... tell me... Do you find me disgusting because of what I am?"). The difference between the second Harey who appears to Kelvin and the "monstrous Aphrodite" who appears to Gibarian, one of Kelvin's colleagues on the spaceship (in the novel, not in the film: in the film, Tarkovsky replaced the "monstrous Aphrodite" with a small innocent blonde girl), is that Gibarian's apparition does not come from "real life" memory, but from pure fantasy:

> A giant Negress was coming silently towards me with a smooth, rolling gait. I caught a gleam from the whites of her eyes and heard the soft slapping of her bare feet. She was wearing nothing but a yellow skirt of plaited straw; her enormous breasts swung freely and her black arms were as thick as thighs.[3]

Unable to sustain confrontation with his primordial maternal fantasmatic apparition, Gibarian dies of shame.

Is the planet around which the story turns – composed of the mysterious matter which seems to think, i.e. which in a way is the direct materialization of thought itself – not again an exemplary case of the Lacanian Thing as the point at which symbolic distance collapses, the point at which there is no need for speech, for signs, since, here, thought directly intervenes in the Real? This gigantic brain, this Other-Thing, involves a kind of psychotic short circuit: in short-circuiting the dialectic of question and answer, of demand and its satisfaction, it provides – or, rather, imposes on us – the answer before we even raise the question, directly materializing our innermost fantasies which support our desire. Solaris is a machine that generates/materializes in reality itself my ultimate fantasmatic objectal supplement/partner that I would never be ready to accept in reality, although my entire psychic life turns around it.

Jacques-Alain Miller draws a distinction between the woman who assumes her nonexistence, her constitutive lack ("castration"), i.e. the void of subjectivity in her very heart, and what he calls *la femme à postiche*, the fake, phony woman.[4] This *femme à postiche* is not what common-sense conservative wisdom would tell us (a woman who distrusts her natural charm, abandons her vocation of rearing children, serving her husband, taking care of the household, etc., and indulges in the extravaganzas of fashionable dressing and make-up, in decadent promiscuity, career, etc.), but almost its exact opposite: the woman who takes refuge from the void in the very heart of her subjectivity, from the "not having it" which marks her being, in the phony certitude of "having it" (of serving as the stable

support of family life, of rearing children, her true possession, etc.) – this woman gives the impression (and has the false satisfaction) of a firmly anchored being, a self-enclosed life, a satisfied circuit of everyday life (her man has to run around wildly, while she leads a calm life and serves as the safe protective rock or safe haven to which her man can always return...). (The most elementary form of "having it" for a woman is, of course, having a child, which is why, for Lacan, there is an ultimate antagonism between woman and mother: in contrast to woman who "does not exist," mother definitely *does* exist.) The interesting feature to be noted here is that, contrary to the common-sensical expectation, it is the woman who "has it," the self-satisfied *femme à postiche* disavowing her lack, who not only does not pose any threat to the patriarchal male identity, but even serves as its protective shield and support, while, in contrast to her, it is the woman who flaunts her lack ("castration"), who poses as a hysterical composite of semblances covering a void, who poses the serious threat to male identity. In other words, the paradox is that the more the woman is denigrated, reduced to an inconsistent and insubstantial composite of semblances around a void, the more she threatens the firm and substantial male self-identity (Otto Weininger's entire work centres on this paradox); and, on the other hand, the more the woman is a firm, self-enclosed substance, the more she supports male identity.

This opposition, a key constituent of Tarkovsky's universe, finds its clearest expression in his *Nostalgia*, whose hero, the Russian writer wandering around northern Italy in search of manuscripts of a nineteenth-century Russian composer who lived there, is split between Eugenia – the hysterical woman, a being-of-lack trying desperately to seduce him in order to get sexual satisfaction – and his memory of the maternal figure of the Russian wife he has left behind. Tarkovsky's universe is intensely male-centred, oriented on the opposition woman/mother: the sexually active, provocative woman (whose attraction is indicated by a series of coded signals, like the dispersed long hair of Eugenia in *Nostalgia*) is rejected as an inauthentic hysterical creature, and contrasted to the maternal figure with closely knit and kept hair. For Tarkovsky, the moment a woman accepts the role of being sexually desirable, she sacrifices what is most precious in her, the spiritual essence of her being, and thus devalues herself, turns into a sterile mode of existence: Tarkovsky's universe is permeated by a barely concealed disgust for the provocative woman; to this figure, prone to hysterical incertitudes, he prefers the mother's assuring and stable presence. This disgust is clearly discernible in the hero's (and director's) attitude towards Eugenia's long, hysterical outburst of accusations against him, which precedes her act of abandoning him.

It is against this background that one should account for Tarkovsky's recourse to static long shots (or shots which allow only a slow panning or tracking movement). These shots can work in two opposed ways, both of them exemplarily at work in *Nostalgia*: they either rely on a harmonious relationship with their content, signalling the longed-for spiritual reconciliation found not in elevation from the gravitational force of the Earth but in a full surrender to its inertia (like the longest shot in his entire *oeuvre*, the extremely slow passage of the Russian hero through the empty cracked pool with a lit candle, the meaningless test the dead Domenico ordains him to accomplish as the path to his salvation – significantly, at the end, when, after a failed attempt, the hero does reach the other border of the pool, he collapses in death fully satisfied and reconciled); or, even more interestingly, they rely on a contrast between form and content, like the long shot of Eugenia's hysterical outburst against the hero, a mixture of sexually provocative seductive gestures with contemptuous dismissing remarks. (In this shot, it is as if Eugenia protests not only against the hero's tired indifference, but, in a way, also against the calm indifference of the long static shot itself which does not let itself be disturbed by her outburst – Tarkovsky is here at the very opposite extreme to Cassavetes, in whose masterpieces the (feminine) hysterical outbursts are shot by a hand-held camera from an over-proximity, as if the camera itself was drawn into the dynamic hysterical outburst, strangely deforming the enraged faces and thereby losing the stability of its own point of view.)

Solaris nonetheless supplements this standard, although disavowed, male scenario with a key feature: this structure of woman as a symptom of man can be operative only in so far as the man is confronted with his Other-Thing, a decentred

opaque machine which "reads" his deepest dreams and returns them to him as his symptom, as his own message in its true form that the subject is not ready to acknowledge. It is here that one should reject the Jungian reading of *Solaris*: the point of Solaris is not simply projection, materialization of the (male) subject's disavowed inner impetuses; what is much more crucial is that, if this "projection" is to take place, the impenetrable Other-Thing must already be here – the true enigma is the presence of this Thing. The problem with Tarkovsky is that he himself obviously opts for the Jungian reading, according to which the external journey is merely the externalization and/or projection of the inner initiatory journey into the depths of one's psyche. Apropos of *Solaris*, he stated in an interview: "Maybe, effectively, the mission of Kelvin on Solaris has only one goal: to show that love of the other is indispensable to all life. A man without love is no longer a man. The aim of the entire Solaris business is to show humanity must be love."[5] In clear contrast to this, Lem's novel focuses on the inert external presence of the planet Solaris, of this "thing which thinks" (to use Kant's expression, which fully fits here): the point of the novel is precisely that Solaris remains an impenetrable Other with no possible communication with us – true, it returns us our innermost disavowed fantasies, but the "Che vuoi?" beneath this act remains thoroughly impenetrable (Why does Solaris do it? As a purely mechanical response? To play demonic games with us? To help us – or compel us – to confront our disavowed truth?). It would thus be interesting to put Tarkovsky in the series of Hollywood commercial rewritings of novels which have served as the basis for a movie: Tarkovsky does exactly the same as the lowest Hollywood producer, reinscribing the enigmatic encounter with otherness into the framework of the production of the couple...

Nowhere is this gap between the novel and the film more perceptible than in their different endings: at the novel's end, we see Kelvin alone on the spaceship, staring into the mysterious surface of the Solaris ocean, while the film ends with the archetypal Tarkovskian fantasy of combining within the same shot the otherness into which the hero is thrown (the chaotic surface of Solaris) and the object of his nostalgic longing, the home *dacha* (Russian wooden house in the country) to which he longs to return, the house whose contours are encircled by the malleable slime of Solaris's surface – within the radical otherness, we discover the lost object of our innermost longing. More precisely, the sequence is shot in an ambiguous way: just prior to this vision, one of his surviving colleagues on the space station tells Kelvin that it is perhaps time for him to return home. After a couple of Tarkovskian shots of green weeds in water, we then see Kelvin at his *dacha* reconciled with his father; however, the camera then slowly pulls back and upwards, and gradually it becomes clear that what we have just witnessed was probably not the actual return home but still a vision manufactured by Solaris: the *dacha* and the grass surrounding it appear as a lone island in the midst of the chaotic Solaris surface, yet another materialized vision produced by it...

The same fantasmatic staging concludes Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*: in the midst of the Italian countryside, encircled by the fragments of a cathedral in ruins, i.e. of the place in which the hero is adrift, cut from his roots, there stands an element totally out of place, the Russian *dacha*, the stuff of the hero's dreams; here, also, the shot begins with a close-up of only the recumbent hero in front of his *dacha*, so that, for a moment, it may seem that he has effectively returned home; the camera then slowly pulls back to divulge the properly fantasmatic setting of the *dacha* in the midst of the Italian countryside. Since this scene follows the hero's successful accomplishment of the sacrificial/compulsive gesture of carrying the burning candle across the pool, after which he collapses and dies – or so we are led to believe – one is tempted to take the last shot of *Nostalgia* as a shot which is not simply the hero's dream, but the uncanny scene which follows his decease and thus stands for his death: the moment of the impossible combination of Italian countryside, in which the hero is adrift, and of the object of his longing is the moment of death. (This deadly impossible synthesis is announced in a previous dream sequence in which Eugenia appears in a solidary embrace with the hero's Russian maternal wife-figure.) What we have here is a phenomenon, a scene, a dream experience, which can no longer be subjectivized, i.e. a dream which is no longer anyone's dream, a dream which can emerge only after its subject ceases to be... This concluding

fantasy is thus an artificial condensation of opposed, incompatible perspectives, somehow like the standard optician's test in which we see through one eye a cage, through the other eye a parrot, and, if our two eyes are well coordinated in their axes, when we open both eyes we should see the parrot in the cage. (When I recently failed the test, I suggested to the nurse that, perhaps, I would be more successful if my motivation were stronger, if, say, instead of the parrot and the cage, the two images would be of an erect penis and a spread vagina, so that, when you open both eyes, the penis is in the vagina – the poor old lady threw me out... And, incidentally, my modest proposal was justified in so far as, according to Lacan, all fantasmatic harmonious coordinations – in which one element finally fully fits the other – are ultimately based on the model of the successful sexual relationship, where the male virile organ fits the feminine opening "like a key into the opening of a lock.")

Tarkovsky added not only this final scene, but also a new beginning: while the novel starts with Kelvin's space travel to Solaris, the movie's first half hour takes place in the standard Tarkovskian Russian countryside with a *dacha*, in which Kelvin takes a stroll, gets soaked by rain and immersed into humid earth... As we have already emphasized, in clear contrast to the film's fantasmatic resolution, the novel ends with the lone Kelvin contemplating the surface of Solaris, aware more than ever that he has encountered here an otherness with which no contact is possible. The planet Solaris has thus to be conceived in strict Kantian terms, as the impossible apparition of thought (the thinking substance) as a thing-in-itself, a noumenal object. Crucial for the Solaris-Thing is thus the coincidence of utter otherness with excessive, absolute proximity: the Solaris-Thing is even more "ourselves," our own inaccessible kernel, than the unconscious, since it is an otherness which directly "is" ourselves, staging the "objectively-subjective" fantasmatic core of our being. Communication with the Solaris-Thing thus fails not because Solaris is too alien – the harbinger of an intellect infinitely surpassing our limited abilities, playing some perverse games with us whose rationale remains forever outside our grasp – but because it brings us too close to what, in ourselves, must remain at a distance if we are to sustain the consistency of our symbolic universe; in its very otherness, Solaris generates spectral phenomena that obey our innermost idiosyncratic whims, i.e. if there is a stage-master who pulls the strings of what goes on on the surface of Solaris, it is ourselves, "the thing which thinks" in our heart. The fundamental lesson here is the opposition, antagonism even, between the big Other (the Symbolic Order) and the Other *qua* Thing. The big Other is "barred," it is the virtual order of symbolic rules that provides the frame for communication, while in the Solaris-Thing the big Other is no longer "barred," purely virtual; in it, the Symbolic collapses into the Real, language comes to exist as a real Thing.

Tarkovsky's other science-fiction masterpiece, *Stalker*, provides the counterpoint to this all-too-present Thing: the void of a forbidden zone. In an anonymous bleak country, an area known as the Zone was visited twenty years ago by some mysterious foreign entity (meteorite, aliens...) who left behind debris. People are supposed to disappear in this deadly area called the Zone, isolated and guarded by army personnel. Stalkers are adventurous individuals who, for a proper payment, lead people to the Zone and to the mysterious Room at the heart of the Zone where your deepest wishes are allegedly granted. The film tells the story of a Stalker, an ordinary man with a wife and a crippled daughter with the magic capacity of moving objects, who takes to the Zone two intellectuals, a writer and a scientist. When they finally reach the Room, the writer and the scientist fail to pronounce their wishes because of their lack of faith, while the Stalker himself seems to get an answer to his wish that his daughter get better.

As in the case of *Solaris*, Tarkovsky turned around the point of the novel: in the Strugatsky brothers' novel *The Roadside Picnic*, on which the film is based, the Zones – there are six of them – are the debris of a "roadside picnic," i.e. of a short stay on our planet by some alien visitors who quickly left it, finding us uninteresting; Stalkers themselves are also presented in a more adventurous way, not as dedicated individuals on a tormenting spiritual search, but as deft scavengers organizing robbing expeditions, somewhat like the proverbial Arabs organizing raiding expeditions into the Pyramids – another Zone – for wealthy

Westerners (and, effectively, are the Pyramids not, according to popular-science literature, traces of an alien wisdom?). The Zone is thus not a purely mental fantasmatic space in which one encounters (or onto which one projects) the truth about oneself, but (like Solaris in Lem's novel) the *material presence*, the Real, of an absolute otherness incompatible with the rules and laws of our universe. (Because of this, at the novel's end, the hero himself, when confronted with the Golden Sphere – as the film's Room in which desires are realized is called in the novel – does undergo a kind of spiritual conversion, but this experience is much closer to what Lacan called "subjective destitution": a sudden awareness of the utter meaningless of our social links, the dissolution of our attachment to reality itself – all of a sudden, other people are derealized, reality itself is experienced as a confused whirlpool of shapes and sounds, so that we are no longer able to formulate our desire...) In *Stalker* as well as in *Solaris*, Tarkovsky's "idealist mystification" is that he shrinks from confronting this radical otherness of the meaningless Thing, reducing/retranslating the encounter with the Thing to the "inner journey" towards one's truth.

It is to this incompatibility between our own and the alien universe that the novel's title refers: the strange objects found in the Zone which fascinate humans are in all probability simply the debris, the garbage, left behind by aliens who stayed briefly on our planet, comparable to the rubbish a group of humans leaves behind after a picnic in a forest near a main road... So the typical Tarkovskian landscape (of decaying human debris half-reclaimed by nature) is in the novel precisely *what characterizes the Zone itself from the (impossible) standpoint of the visiting aliens*: what is to us a miracle, an encounter with a wondrous universe beyond our grasp, is just everyday debris to the aliens... Is it then, perhaps, possible to draw the Brechtian conclusion that the typical Tarkovskian landscape (the human environment in decay reclaimed by nature) involves the view of our universe from an imagined alien standpoint? The picnic is thus here at the opposite extreme to that at the Hanging Rock: it is not us who encroach upon the Zone while on a Sunday picnic, it is the Zone itself which results from the aliens' picnic...

For an ex-citizen of the defunct Soviet Union, the notion of a forbidden zone gives rise to (at least) five associations: the Zone is (1) Gulag, i.e. a separated prison territory; (2) a territory poisoned or otherwise rendered uninhabitable by some technological (biochemical, nuclear...) catastrophe, like Chernobyl; (3) the secluded domain in which the *nomenklatura* lives; (4) foreign territory to which access is prohibited (like the enclosed West Berlin in the midst of the GDR); (5) a territory where a meteorite struck (like Tunguska in Siberia). The point, of course, is that the question "So which is the true meaning of the Zone?" is false and misleading: the very indeterminacy of what lies beyond the limit is primary, and different positive contents fill in this preceding gap.

In what, then, does the opposition between the Zone (in *Stalker*) and the planet Solaris consist? In Lacanian terms, of course, their opposition is easy to specify. It is the opposition between the two excesses: the excess of stuff over symbolic network (the Thing for which there is no place in this network, which eludes its grasp); and the excess of an (empty) place over stuff, over the elements which fill it in (the Zone is a pure structural void constituted/defined by a symbolic barrier: beyond this barrier, in the Zone, there is nothing and/or exactly the same things as outside the Zone). This opposition stands for the opposition between drive and desire: Solaris is the Thing, the blind libido embodied, while the Zone is the void which sustains desire. This opposition also accounts for the different ways the Zone and Solaris relate to the subject's libidinal economy: in the midst of the Zone, there is the Room, the place in which, if the subject penetrates it, his desire/wish is fulfilled, while what the Solaris-Thing returns to subjects who approach it is not their desire but the traumatic kernel of their fantasy, the *sinthome* which encapsulates their relation to *jouissance* and which they resist in their daily lives.

The blockage in *Stalker* is thus opposed to the blockage in *Solaris*: in *Stalker*, the blockage concerns the impossibility (for us corrupted, reflected, nonbelieving modern men) of achieving the state of pure belief, of desiring directly – the Room in the midst of the Zone has to remain empty; when you enter it, you are not able to formulate your wish. In contrast to it, the problem of

Solaris is over-satisfaction: your wishes are realized/materialized before you even think of them. In *Stalker* you never arrive at, reach, the level of pure, innocent wish/belief, while in *Solaris* your dreams/fantasies are realized in advance in the psychotic structure of the answer which precedes the question. For this reason, *Stalker* focuses on the problem of belief/faith: the Room does fulfil desires, but only for those who believe with direct immediacy – which is why, when the three adventurers finally reach the threshold of the Room, they are afraid to enter it, since they are not sure what their true desires/wishes are (as one of them says, the problem with the Room is that it does not fulfil what you think you wish, but a wish of which you may be unaware). As such, *Stalker* points towards the basic problem of Tarkovsky's two last films, *Nostalgia* and *Sacrifice*: how, through what ordeal or sacrifice, is it possible today to attain the innocence of pure belief?

The hero of *Sacrifice*, Alexander, lives with his large family in a remote cottage in the Swedish countryside (another version of the very Russian *dacha* which obsesses Tarkovsky's heroes). The celebrations of his birthday are marred by the terrifying news that low-flying jet planes signalled the start of a nuclear war between the superpowers. In his despair, Alexander turns in prayer to God, offering him everything that is most precious to him to have the war not happen at all. The war is undone and, at the film's end, Alexander, in a sacrificial gesture, burns his beloved cottage and is taken to a lunatic asylum...

This motif of a pure, senseless act that restores meaning to our terrestrial life is the focus of Tarkovsky's last two films, shot abroad; the act is in both films accomplished by the same actor (Erland Josephson) who, as the old fool Domenico, burns himself publicly in *Nostalgia*, and, as the hero of *Sacrifice*, burns his house, his most precious belonging, what is "in him more than himself." To this gesture of senseless sacrifice, one should give all the weight of an obsessional-neurotic compulsive act: if I accomplish *this* (sacrificial gesture), *the* catastrophe (in *Sacrifice*, literally the end of the world in an atomic war) will not occur or will be undone – the well-known compulsive gesture of "If I do not do this (jump twice over that stone, cross my hands in this way, etc., etc.) something bad will occur." (The childish nature of this compulsion to sacrifice is clear in *Nostalgia* where the hero, following the injunction of the dead Domenico, crosses the pool with the burning candle in order to save the world...) As we know from psychoanalysis, this catastrophic X whose outbreak we fear is none other than *jouissance* itself.

Tarkovsky is well aware that a sacrifice, in order to work and to be efficient, must be in a way meaningless – a gesture of "irrational," useless expenditure – or ritual (like traversing the empty pool with a lit candle or burning one's own house); the idea is that only such a gesture of just "doing it" spontaneously, a gesture not covered by any rational consideration, can restore the immediate faith that will deliver us and heal us from the modern spiritual malaise. The Tarkovskian subject here literally offers his own castration (renunciation of reason and domination, voluntary reduction to childish "idiocy," submission to a senseless ritual) as the instrument to deliver the big Other: it is as if only by accomplishing an act which is totally senseless and "irrational" that the subject can save the deeper global meaning of the universe as such.

The crucial point here is that the object sacrificed (burned) at the end of *Sacrifice* is the ultimate object of the Tarkovskian fantasmatic space, the wooden *dacha* standing for the safety and authentic rural roots of the home – for this reason alone, *Sacrifice* is appropriately Tarkovsky's last film. Does this mean that we encounter here nonetheless a kind of Tarkovskian "traversing of the fantasy," surrender to the central element whose magic appearance in the midst of the strange countryside (planet's surface, Italy) at the end of *Solaris* and *Nostalgia* provided the very formula of the final fantasmatic unity? No, because this surrender is functionalized in the service of the big Other, as the redemptive act destined to restore spiritual meaning to life.

What elevates Tarkovsky above cheap religious obscurantism is the fact that he deprives the sacrificial act of any pathetic and solemn "greatness," rendering it as a bungled, ridiculous act (in *Nostalgia*, Domenico has difficulties in lighting the fire which will kill him, and the passers-by ignore his body in flames; *Sacrifice* ends with a comic ballet of men from the infirmary running after the hero to take him to the asylum – the scene is shot

as a children's game). It would be all too simple to read this ridiculous and bungled aspect of the sacrifice as an indication of how it has to appear to everyday people immersed in their run of things and unable to appreciate the tragic greatness of the act. Rather, Tarkovsky follows here a long Russian tradition whose exemplary case is Dostoyevsky's "idiot" from the novel of the same name: it is typical that Tarkovsky, whose films are otherwise totally deprived of humour and jokes, reserves mockery and satire precisely for scenes depicting the most sacred gesture of supreme sacrifice (already the famous scene of crucifixion in *Andrei Roublev* is shot in such a way: transposed into the Russian winter countryside, with bad actors playing it with ridiculous pathos, with tears flowing).[6]

So, again, does this indicate that, to use Althusserian terms, there is a dimension in which Tarkovsky's cinematic texture undermines his own explicit ideological project, or at least introduces a distance towards it, renders visible its inherent impossibility and failure? Or is there, nonetheless, something inherently *false* in the Tarkovskian sacrifice? More fundamentally, what *is* sacrifice? The most elementary notion of sacrifice relies on the notion of exchange: I offer to the Other something precious to me in order to get back from the Other something even more vital to me (the "primitive" tribes sacrifice animals or even humans so that gods will repay them by rainfall, military victory, etc.). The next, already more intricate, level is to conceive of sacrifice as a gesture which does not directly aim at some profitable exchange with the Other to whom we sacrifice: its more basic aim is rather to ascertain that there *is* an Other out there who is able to reply (or not) to our sacrificial entreaties. Even if the Other does not grant my wish, I can at least be assured that there *is* an Other who, maybe, next time will respond differently: the world out there, inclusive of all catastrophes that may befall me, is not a meaningless blind machinery, but a partner in a possible dialogue, so that even a catastrophic outcome is to be read as a meaningful response, not as a kingdom of blind chance... Lacan goes here a step further: the notion of sacrifice usually associated with Lacanian psychoanalysis is that of a gesture that enacts the disavowal of the impotence of the big Other: at its most elementary, the subject does not offer his sacrifice to profit from it himself, but to fill in the lack *in the Other*, to sustain the appearance of the Other's omnipotence or, at least, consistency.

Let us recall *Beau Geste*, the classic Hollywood adventure melodrama from 1938, in which the elder of three brothers (Gary Cooper) who live with their benevolent aunt, in what seems to be a gesture of excessive ungrateful cruelty, steals the enormously expensive diamond necklace which is the pride of the aunt's family, and disappears with it, knowing that his reputation is ruined, that he will be forever known as the embezzler of his benefactress – so why did he do it? At the end of the film, we learn that he did it in order to prevent the embarrassing disclosure that the necklace was a fake: unbeknownst to all others, he knew that, some time ago, the aunt had to sell the necklace to a rich maharaja in order to save the family from bankruptcy, and had replaced it with a worthless imitation. Just prior to his "theft," he learned that a distant uncle who co-owned the necklace wanted it sold for financial gain; if the necklace were to be sold, the fact that it was a fake would undoubtedly be discovered, so the only way to retain the aunt's and thus the family's honour was to stage its theft... This is the proper deception of the crime of stealing: to obscure the fact that, ultimately, *there is nothing to steal* – this way, the constitutive lack of the Other is concealed, i.e. the illusion is maintained that the Other possessed what was stolen. If, in love, one gives what one doesn't possess, in a crime of love, one steals from the beloved Other what the Other doesn't possess – to this alludes the "beau geste" of the film's title. And therein resides also the meaning of sacrifice: one sacrifices oneself (one's honour and future in respectful society) to maintain the appearance of the Other's honour, to save the beloved Other from shame.

However, Lacan's rejection of sacrifice as inauthentic locates the falsity of the sacrificial gesture also in another, much more uncanny, dimension. Let us take the example of Jeannot Scwarz's *Enigma* (1981), one of the better variations on what is arguably the basic matrix of cold-war spy thrillers with artistic pretensions *à la* John le Carré (an agent is sent into the cold to accomplish a mission; when, in enemy territory, he is betrayed and captured, it dawns on him that he was sacrificed, i.e. that the failure of his mission was from the very beginning

planned by his superiors in order to achieve the true goal of the operation – say, to keep secret the identity of the true mole of the West in the KGB apparatus...). *Enigma* tells the story of a dissident journalist-turned-spy who emigrated to the West and was then recruited by the CIA and sent to East Germany to get hold of a scrambling/descrambling computer chip whose possession enables the owner to read all communications between KGB headquarters and its outposts. However, small signs tell the spy that there is something wrong with his mission, i.e. that East Germans and Russians were already informed about his arrival – so what is going on? Is it that the Communists have a mole in the CIA headquarters who informed them of this secret mission? As we learn towards the film's end, the solution is much more ingenious: the CIA *already possesses* the scrambling chip, but, unfortunately, the Russians suspect this fact, so they temporarily stop using this computer network for their secret communications. The true aim of the operation is the attempt by the CIA to convince the Russians that they do not possess the chip: they send an agent to get it and, at the same time, deliberately let the Russians know that there is an operation going on to get the chip; of course, the CIA counts on the fact that the Russians will arrest the agent. The ultimate result will thus be that, by successfully preventing the mission, the Russians will be convinced that the Americans do not possess the chip and that it is therefore safe to use this communication link... The tragic aspect of the story, of course, is that the mission's failure is taken into account: the CIA *wants* the mission to fail, i.e. the poor dissident agent is sacrificed in advance for the higher goal of convincing the opponent that one doesn't possess the opponent's secret. The strategy here is to stage a search operation in order to convince the Other (the enemy) that one does not already possess what one is looking for – in short, one feigns a lack, a want, in order to conceal from the Other that one already possesses the *agalma*, the Other's innermost secret.

Is this structure not somehow connected with the basic paradox of symbolic castration as constitutive of desire, where the object has to be lost in order to be regained on the inverse ladder of desire regulated by the Law? Symbolic castration is usually defined as the loss of something that one never possessed, i.e. the object/cause of desire is an object which emerges through the very gesture of its loss/withdrawal; however, what we encounter here, in the case of *Enigma*, is the obverse structure of feigning a loss. In so far as the Other of the symbolic Law prohibits *jouissance*, the only way for the subject to enjoy is to pretend that he lacks the object that provides *jouissance*, i.e. to conceal from the Other's gaze his possession of it by way of staging the spectacle of the desperate search for it. This also casts a new light on the problematic of sacrifice: one sacrifices not in order to get something from the Other, but in order to dupe the Other, in order to convince him that one is still missing something, i.e. *jouissance*. This is why obsessionals experience the compulsion repeatedly to accomplish their rituals of sacrifice – in order to disavow their *jouissance* in the eyes of the Other. And does, at a different level, the same not hold for the so-called "woman's sacrifice," for the woman adopting the role of remaining in the shadow and sacrificing herself for her husband or family? Is this sacrifice not also false in the sense of serving to dupe the Other, of convincing him that, through the sacrifice, the woman is effectively desperately craving to obtain something that she lacks? In this precise sense, sacrifice and castration are to be opposed: far from involving the voluntary acceptance of castration, sacrifice is the most refined way of disavowing it, i.e. of acting as if the Other effectively possesses the hidden treasure that makes him a worthy object of love...

In his unpublished seminar on anxiety (1962-63, lesson of December 5, 1962), Lacan emphasizes the way the hysteric's anxiety relates to the fundamental lack in the Other which makes the Other inconsistent/barred: a hysteric perceives the lack in the Other, the Other's impotence, inconsistency, fakery, but she is not ready to sacrifice the part of herself that would complete the Other, fill in the Other's lack – this refusal to sacrifice sustains the hysteric's eternal complaint that the Other will somehow manipulate and exploit her, use her, deprive her of her most precious possession...

More precisely, this does not mean that the hysteric disavows his castration: the hysteric (neurotic) does not hold back from his castration (he is not a psychotic or a pervert, i.e. he fully accepts his castration); he merely does not want to functionalize it, to put it in the service of the Other,

i.e. what he holds back from is "making his castration into what the Other is lacking, that is to say, into something positive that is the guarantee of this function of the Other." (In contrast to the hysteric, the pervert readily assumes this role of sacrificing himself, i.e. of serving as the object/instrument that fills in the Other's lack – as Lacan puts it, the pervert "offers himself loyally to the Other's *jouissance*.") The falsity of sacrifice resides in its underlying presupposition, which is that I effectively possess, hold in me, the precious ingredient coveted by the Other and promising to fill in the Other's lack. On a closer view, of course, the hysteric's refusal appears in all its ambiguity: I refuse to sacrifice the *agalma* in me *because there is nothing to sacrifice*, because I am unable to fill in your lack.

One should always bear in mind that, for Lacan, the ultimate aim of psychoanalysis is not to enable the subject to assume the necessary sacrifice (to accept symbolic castration, to renounce immature narcissistic attachments, etc.), but to *resist* the terrible attraction of sacrifice – attraction which, of course, is none other than that of the superego. Sacrifice is ultimately the gesture by means of which we aim at compensating the guilt imposed by the impossible superego injunction (the "obscure gods" evoked by Lacan are another name for the superego). Against this background, one can see in what precise sense the problematic of Tarkovsky's last two films, focused on sacrifice, is false and misleading: although, no doubt, Tarkovsky himself would passionately reject such designation, the compulsion felt by the late Tarkovskian heroes to accomplish a meaningless sacrificial gesture is that of the superego at its purest. The ultimate proof of it resides in the very "irrational," meaningless character of this gesture – the superego is an injunction to enjoy, and, as Lacan puts it in the first lecture of his *Encore*, *jouissance* is ultimately that which serves nothing.

notes

1 See chapter XVIII of Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge 1992).

2 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 47.

3 Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1978) 30.

4 See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Des semblants dans la relation entre les sexes," in *La Cause freudienne* 36 (1997): 7-15.

5 Quoted from Antoine de Vaecque, *Cahiers du Cinema*, special issue "Andrei Tarkovski" (1989): 108; my trans.

6 See de Vaecque 98.

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