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Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Winter, 1989-1990), pp. 28-34

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1212806>

Accessed: 22-04-2018 20:48 UTC

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The Mirror

Vlada Petric

Tarkovsky's Dream Imagery

It is widely acknowledged that Tarkovsky's films are suffused with what he refers to as an *oneiric air*—a dreamlike impact—which resists the audience's need to verify the logic, as well as the credibility, of the events presented on the screen. Especially in *The Mirror* (1975–78) and *Stalker* (1980), Tarkovsky succeeds in conveying daydreams about the past and the future through pure cinematic means: complementing verbal expression by audiovisual means, he achieves a kinesthetic orchestration that is experienced on a sensory-motor level,

mostly because of insistent, continuous camera movement through space. Instead of controlling the viewer's attention by cutting from one image to the other, Tarkovsky emphasizes the temporal nature of reality, by means of which he transcends the commonplace signification of objects in order to reach something that the naked eye neglects or is unaccustomed to perceiving.

With all its socio-biographical implications, *The Mirror* is a dream film *par excellence*, reflecting the author's reminiscences of his own youth, while *Stalker*—commonly read as a science-fiction fantasy—is a hallucinatory anticipation of a world that “represents the reality of the artist's inner life.”¹ In these films, it is the execution of the shots, particularly their kinesthetic intensity, that makes the objects or events presented on the screen look both imaginary and real. Tarkovsky's treatment of tracking and its interaction with the movement within the shot, together with the chromatic rendition of the image, are directly opposed to the Eisenteinian collision produced by the juxtaposition of stationary shots. In his book *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky explicitly states that “the film image comes into being during shooting and exists *within* the frame, while editing brings together shots which are *already* filled with time.”² For Tarkovsky, the notion of time is the most important aspect of the film medium, because “it is inherent to cinema. . . . It pulsates through the blood vessels of the film, making it alive through various rhythmic pressures,”³ which confirms the director's attempt to evoke emotional, often highly visceral responses in the viewer, instead of triggering ideas meant to support a particular attitude toward society and history. This is clearly exemplified by his use of documentary archival footage (e.g., the Red Army crossing Lake Sivash in *The Mirror*) which, with its “rhythmic pressure,” generates a nightmarish feeling: overexposed and accelerated, the authentic footage is perceived as “a superhuman effort of a tragic moment in history, thus becoming the center, the very essence, the heart and nerve of my film.”⁴ Consequently, the historic significance of the found document is transformed into a subjective vision of actual facts that occurred in the past, experienced both as a distressing and nostalgic vision of history.

An important feature of Tarkovsky's dream imagery is that his shots are never distorted from

their representational appearance, yet at the same time the projected image looks “estranged” (a common term used by Soviet Constructivists of the 1920s), rendered obliquely in order to suppress the “dramatic” meaning of the event, while getting the viewer involved with meanings hidden beneath the narrative level. Encouraged to search for something beyond the image as an *analog* of reality, allowed to ponder upon the presented events/objects, the viewers engage in their own reflection upon what they perceive on the screen. A close analysis of climactic sequences in the two Tarkovsky films shows that they contain many features characteristic of dream process, such as the bizarreness of the situation, strong physical motion, obfuscated peripheral vision (elimination of the image’s borders), the flickering effect (light pulsation), an unexpected change of chromatic tonality, spatial-temporal discontinuity, pictorial distortion of objects, decelerated motion, a fluctuating focus (blurring)—all of which contribute to the acceptance of unusual occurrences taking place on the screen. If, for example, the plaster on the ceiling begins to disintegrate, falling—in slow motion—on the protagonist (in *The Mirror*), or a liquid substance starts pouring over vertically positioned screens in the background (in *Stalker*), the viewer is compelled to look for the hidden meaning of such oddities. As emphasized earlier, Tarkovsky finds a balance between the ontological authenticity of the film’s image and its phenomenological obliqueness, which helps his dream imagery transcend the film “language” as a system of signs, reaching the level of audiovisual abstraction. Thus, the unique cinematic (kineshetic) experience suppresses a psychoanalytical interpretation of the filmed event: while doubtless intriguing, such interpretation not only lacks analytical substantiation but is less revealing than the actual experiencing of the oneiric mood generated by particular cinematic devices and their relation to the thematic aspect of the sequence.

There are two kinds of kinesthetic movement in *The Mirror* and *Stalker*: the camera’s lateral trajectory with a person dominating the close foreground, while a semi-abstract (blurred) motion occurs in the far background, and the camera gliding perpendicularly over objects in nature. Most of the shots in the first part of *Stalker* (after the Prologue) are executed with lateral tracking: accom-

panying (in close proximity) the three characters (Stalker, Writer, and Scientist) in their journey to the center of the Zone, the camera envisions the shape of things to come through an out-of-focus landscape which is seen behind the travelers’ heads positions in the foreground (often with the back of the head facing the camera), so much so that the indistinct part of the image becomes more expressive than the distinct one. As a result, the blurred background overpowers the human figure in the foreground, as if entrapping the characters, who become more and more lethargic, staring off into empty space, disappointed with what they have encountered in the place for which they have searched so long.

One should be aware of the distinction between Tarkovsky’s lateral camera movement and Godard’s parallel tracking as employed in *See You at Mao* (1969), where the camera dollies along the endless automobile assembly line, showing workers engaged in repetitive, mechanical movements, or in *Tout va bien* (1972) where it tracks in front of the innumerable cashiers at a supermarket, in parallel to the wild rush of striking workers demolishing the store. The function of Godard’s camera movement is to intensify the physical action taking place in front of the camera, for ideological purposes, while Tarkovsky’s is to penetrate the environmental facts, based on the director’s belief that the camera is capable of unearthing the hidden significance of the material world. On the other hand, Tarkovsky’s long takes also differ significantly from the notorious “sequence shots” executed by Miklós Jancsó in *Winter Wind* (1969) and *The Red Psalm* (1972), where the ceaseless camera movement *describes*—in rhythmic terms—ritualistic events choreographed in front of the camera with an overt political concern. Tarkovsky’s camera movement *reflects*—in cinematic terms—the rhythmic pulsation concealed beneath the outside appearance of reality, provoking a strong emotional response, as well as contemplation.

In *The Mirror*, almost all tracking shots are more or less self-referential, especially when the movement within the frame is decelerated, as in the tracking shot over the grass, bushes, and leaves, ending on the table with a piece of bread, and a candle holder gently overturned by the wind (as a poetic gesture, the same shot is repeated twice at

crucial points of the filmic diegesis). Even more enchanting is the frontal camera movement following the young Alexei as he enters (in slow motion) the old house and passes through floating, transparent curtains before reaching an antique mirror in which the boy is confronted by his own shadowy reflection. The kinesthetic energy of such a movement affects the spectator's point of view: because the camera assumes the boy's subjective point of view that brings the spectator *alone* to the surface of the looking glass—the audience experiences an alienating effect in relation to the reflected referent's image, and the entire event has been “made strange,” hence experienced with a strong associative inclination.

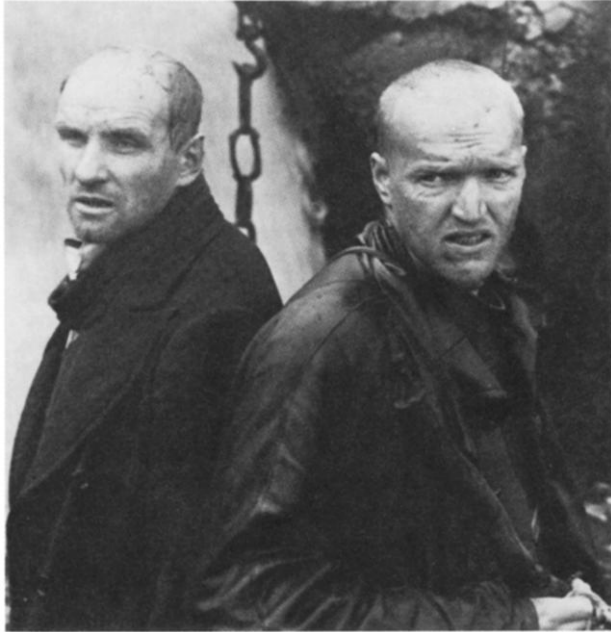
At the same time, the impact of this and similar movements is at once sensorial and emotional, as the pace of the tracking is either synchronized or desynchronized with the rhythm of spoken text, the musical accompaniment, and the thematic aspect of the action. *The Mirror* opens with a long shot of a vast field, seen from the point of view of the female protagonist sitting on a wooden fence, while at the very end of the film, the camera slowly tracks through a dark forest whose trees increasingly preclude the view of the distant field seen at the beginning of the film. *Stalker* exhibits a different relationship between the opening and closing rhythm: it begins (after the credits) with a frontal camera tracking through the narrow doorway of the protagonist's bedroom (with sculpturally designed murky walls), while ending with a stationary shot of the protagonist's daughter wistfully leaning on the table. In the first case, the opening stasis anticipates the pensive mood of the entire film, while the motion of the finale reinforces the nostalgic nature of reminiscences; in the second case, the initial movement forebodes a mysterious journey, while the stationary ending (above all, the camera's focus on the closed window) is almost a literal visualization of a dead end.

Slow motion, commonly exploited in the narrative cinema to make superfluous action look visually attractive (and grossly trivialized in popular video songs), in Tarkovsky's films assumes the function defined by Vsevolod Pudovkin more than a half century ago: “Close-up of time.” Whenever the motion on Tarkovsky's screen is decelerated, the action acquires a strong emotional impact, es-

pecially in nostalgic recollections, nightmares, and fantasies (e.g., the flying birds in *The Mirror*). Decelerated motion is the emotional *core* of Tarkovsky's dream imagery, which in climactic moments accomplishes what Maya Deren terms the “vertical penetration/examination” of the filmed subject, making the viewers aware of the *passage of time* and its *rhythmic pressures*. To experience all this, one should search *beyond* the shot's narrative meaning, since it is beneath the image's representational aspect where numerous layers of ineffable transcendental signification can be found. Consequently, *The Mirror* and *Stalker* transcend the Freudian signification of dream images, in that they do not so much function as latent symbols as they contribute to a subliminal experience of the dream world.

Lengthy tracking shots are not the only source of Tarkovsky's cinematic oneirism; an equivalent dreamlike mood is generated by the stationary (staring) shots depicting a dedramatized action, as in the penultimate long take in *Stalker*, when three men sit mesmerized in one of the Zone's chambers, disappointed with the realization that the place they searched for so long is not “the room where everybody's most heartfelt desire will be granted.”⁵ As they despondently contemplate their adventure, a series of unusual occurrences takes place around them, yet they remain “untouched” by the external world: time stands still, while the interior “rhythmic pressures” manifest themselves through the extremely subtle retraction of the camera positioned at a slightly low angle that draws the viewer's attention to the space outside the frame: whether the area above the sitting men is roofed, to what extent the change of the shot's composition—synchronized with continuous chromatic alterations—is based on plausible motivation (the shot opens as a chromatic image which gradually changes into a sepia tone, and concludes as a virtually black and white photograph)? When the rain unexpectedly begins to pour in the foreground (accompanied by the amplified sound of drops hitting the water), forming a shimmering circle on the pond's surface, as if reflecting the invisible sun's rays, the viewers are already captured both visually and auditorially: unconcerned about the improbability of the occurrence, together with the protagonists, they feel paralyzed by the “mysterious energy” of the Zone. One cannot resist here the idea that, perhaps, Tarkovsky had in

mind the real devastated region near Cheliabinsk where, in 1957, a chemical explosion of nuclear material occurred, and was never officially reported. (Coincidentally, the restricted area inside the 30-kilometer radius of Chernobyl is now referred to as the “zone,” with its own central room called “the sarcophagus,” which encloses the damaged No. 4 reactor with concrete.)



Stalker

Probably the most fascinating dream image in *Stalker* takes place in the Zone’s “Dune Room,” covered with numerous small sand craters. Everything that occurs in this room is perceived as a “close-up of time,” i.e., movement in slow motion. At one point, two black birds enter the screen from the left and right foreground, flying toward the other end of the room; just before they reach the back (brightly lit) wall, the first bird disappears (through an optical trick), as the other lands naturally on a sand dune, producing a cloud of slowly billowing dust. Visually fascinated, most viewers are uncertain what actually happened on the screen—or whether it happened at all—and feel a spontaneous desire to see the shot again. Such a self-referential directorial gesture intensifies a hallucinatory ambiguity through a merger of the representational appearance of the event and the surrealist execution

of the shot. The composition of the image, its chromatic fluctuation which lasts for a considerable period of time, together with the “strangeness” of the environment (the disappearing bird; the slow-moving dust that floats above the ground; the eccentric design of the room) not only mirrors the mood of the protagonists, but also provokes a hallucinogenic-like experience in the viewer. (Some effects achieved by Tarkovsky are reminiscent of U.S. “underground” or experimental films of the sixties in this respect.)

In *The Mirror*, a dreamlike impact is achieved by tracking shots that follow Masha’s friend Lisa running through the long corridor (happily relieved from the fear of misspelling Stalin’s name in the newspaper galleys Masha was correcting); as she contentedly jumps while running, the motion is slightly decelerated, which creates an illusion of her body floating in the air. The surreal effect occurs at the right place (in the thematic/narrative sense)—rhythmically synchronized with the heroine’s feeling of elation—thereby paralleling the mood of recollection that prevails in the sequence. Other times, mostly in the interior sequences, Tarkovsky arranges the objects and actors within the frame in such a way that the *mise-en-scène* defies physical laws as well as ordinary credibility. In the shot of Ignat’s mother’s levitation, the portions of the shot that would otherwise provide visible clues to the optical trick are erased by means of lighting, framing, and camera movement: perceptually disarmed, viewers are immersed in the composition of the image, instinctively accepting it as a visualization of the young protagonist’s inner world, above all, love for his mother.

Tarkovsky pays particular attention to two subjects that have always been of prime interest to great cineasts—the natural landscape and the human face. For him the camera is an exploratory device capable of capturing *l’esprit de paysage* “graphically and instantly, with photographic precision, so that the audience’s emotions become akin to those of a witness, if not of the author.”⁶ To achieve this, Tarkovsky often alters the natural appearance of the referent both in front of the camera as well as in the post-production process, yet without disturbing the ontological authenticity of the motion picture image. Thus in the opening shots of *The Mirror*, a vast field of buckwheat is “miracu-

lously caressed” by a gust of wind—a view that, as Tarkovsky admits, “has stayed in my memory as one of the distinctive and essential details of my childhood.”⁷⁷ The film-maker’s obvious intervention (the sudden gust of wind and its equally abrupt cessation) reveals “optically and immediately” the associational vibration of the author’s emotional memory. In *Stalker*, as the group advances through the deserted countryside, the composition of the shots depicting the landscape becomes increasingly crowded with details in the foreground, anticipating the anxiety the three men will experience in the center of the Zone, which complies with Tarkovsky’s inference that art must *transcend* and not merely *record* the outside world. For him, the camera is an explorer rather than an observer.

Pointing to Leonardo Da Vinci’s portrait of a woman (shown in *The Mirror*), Tarkovsky claims that the famous painting “is powerful precisely because in it one cannot find anything that one might particularly prefer, one cannot single out any detail from the whole . . . and so there opens up before us the possibility of interaction with infinity.”⁷⁸ He adheres to the same principle while showing a human face on the screen: rejecting facial expression as a way of conveying ideas, Tarkovsky attempts to “reach into our innermost feelings, to remind us of some obscure memories and experiences of our own, overwhelming us, stirring our souls like a revelation that is *impossible to interpret* [italics mine] in any particular way.”⁷⁹ This attitude relates to the concept of *la photogénie* defined by Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein in the 1920s as the most unique feature of the film medium. It was based on the assumption that through kinesthetic movement and photographic resolution, the camera possesses a power that can extract from the human face a psycho-emotional intensity, which is considered the true “*esprit de cinéma*” (this is also the title of Epstein’s 1955 book). Several such close-ups of the actress Margarita Terekhova (in *The Mirror*) appear inexpressibly beautiful on the screen, particularly when she turns her eyes to the lens: her piercing yet mild gaze can be compared to the perspicacious gaze Silvana Mangano casts at the viewer in Pasolini’s *Oedipus Rex* (1967) when she nurses her newborn son in an empty field. Like Pasolini, Tarkovsky uses the actors’ gaze to establish a direct—and self-referential—contact between

their intimate emotions and the audience’s instinctive perception. The way these two film-makers photograph the human face in close-up transcends the common use of the gaze in the dominant cinema as a vehicle for conveying rational messages, making it instead a means of intensifying the viewer’s empathy with the character’s inner world.

The phenomenological signification of Tarkovsky’s oneiric vision rests on an interaction between the representational and the surreal: the viewer feels that something is “wrong” with the way things appear on the screen, but is incapable of detecting sufficient “proof” to discredit presented events on the basis of everyday logic. As a result, the shot is “estranged” poetically in the best tradition of the famous Russian Formalist poets and Constructivist artists, who insisted that viewers always be aware of experiencing a work of art as a subjective transposition of reality. This is where Tarkovsky’s dream imagery differs from that of Bergman: in *Wild Strawberries*, for example, the participation of Bergman’s protagonist as an old man in the events of his youth have an overtly thematic dream connotation in contrast to Tarkovsky’s hero in *The Mirror*, who becomes part of the oneiric mood generated by the way the events are presented on the screen, not so much by what they mean. In one sequence young Ignat is shown in the room with the two women (his aunts?) who inexplicably disappear in the next shot. However surprising, this unexpected phenomenological incongruity is less dreamlike than the subsequent close-up of the slowly evaporating wet spot on the table at which the two women were seated a moment ago. The photographic texture of the shining surface, the fluctuating design of the spot, the changing light and color make this close-up perplexing in a way similar to the flickering effect of the old gas lamp’s flame that Ignat watches as it passes through various chromatic phases on its way to extinction. The painful camera fixation on the slow changes of the light texture has a hallucinatory impact on the viewer, who begins to perceive an ordinary phenomenon in an entirely different manner: the unusual concentration on a visual aspect of a natural process (the silence is broken only by the periodic crackling of the dying flame) mystifies a common fact, creating an eerie atmosphere.

The cognitive ambiguity of Tarkovsky’s shots

In the devastated
“Zone” of *Stalker*



is meant to shift the viewer's attention from the representational to the transcendental meaning of the recorded event, even when the film does not deal explicitly with dream content. In *Stalker*, some of the most fascinating shots, saturated with a dreamlike mood, are generated by purely photographic means, all of which “mirror” the protagonist's frustrated mind—a psychic transposition of his desire to escape from something oppressive into something that offers freedom. From the start of the film, the visual-audio execution of the shots in the pub (whose walls look like huge abstract reliefs) inhibits the viewers' spontaneous inclination to read the image only as a representation of reality; instead, it invites viewers to immerse themselves in the languid pace of the action and its environment, identifying with the hallucinatory world in which the protagonist finds “spiritual peace.”

A seeker and a pursuer, Stalker acknowledges verbally his intention of moving, together with his wife and daughter, to the Zone in order “to live in peace where nobody can hurt us.” His expectations, however, fade once he and his two companions reach the central room of the Zone: the camera becomes stationary, as if trapped in an unfriendly space, while the characters move aimlessly (mostly along the axis perpendicular to the camera), creating different compositions within the shot. After dwelling on the group for a consider-

able period of time, the camera begins to pull back, leaving them isolated in the distance, with a (sunlit?) pond revealed through the expansion of the frame. The visual-auditory devices—which function less as graphic symbols than as powerful sensorial stimulants—convey a strong sense of alienation. This is why instead of reading *Stalker* from an ideological/biographical/psychoanalytic point of view, it seems more justified—and exciting—to examine the film's structure as the author's dream imagery rendered through cinematic devices that trigger the viewer's sensorial response.

It is not only Stalker's expedition to the Zone's underground tunnels, giant water pipes, and deteriorating metal constructions that the viewer experiences as a visualization/sonorization of the author's own psychically induced fantasy, but also the Prologue and Epilogue which take place in an apartment and a pub (surrounded by expressionistically designed walls resembling organic matter)—both conceived as alien environments in which more than the story takes place. In capturing the verbally unutterable aspect of the material world, Tarkovsky above all uses light to achieve the “opacity” (Tarkovsky's term) of the shots (e.g., the unexplained vibration and motion of the objects, the inexplicable disappearance of things, and the unexpected materialization of smoke, fog, rain, fire, wind, and floating feathers), which complements

the philosophical density of the dialogue (often conveyed through Russian slang). But each of these thematic symbols of the dream world is represented on the screen by audio-visual means that make their “ineffability” impossible to convey verbally: Tarkovsky’s rain, fire, fog, wind, and earth are experienced on the screen as *cinematic* phenomena rather than perceived as a *natural* power.

Cinematic abstraction is most apparent near the end of the film, when the camera focuses on Stalker’s daughter (“Monkey”) whose frozen face reveals an autistic concentration: first we see only her profile occupying the foreground (as she is carried on Stalker’s shoulders), her hair covered by a colorful scarf, while the landscape in the background changes from blurred contours to a vivid chromatic design of land and water—a photographic equivalent of the shot composition prevalent during the group’s reconnaissance of the Zone at the beginning of the film. In the closing sequence, however, as Stalker’s wife tries to ease his last moments, Monkey’s facial expression parallels her father’s solemn expression: staring at the two glasses (one half-filled with liquid) and a jar on the table, she looks physically relaxed, yet her gaze gives off a psychic charge. As the camera gradually pulls back over the shining surface of the table, the three objects miraculously begin to move over the table’s surface toward the camera, until the tallest (empty) glass falls on the floor with an exaggerated crash. Simultaneously, the rhythmic staccato sound of the approaching train (associating, this time metaphorically, the film’s end with its beginning) is mixed with the howling of a dog and the noise of a trembling table. Changing its direction of movement, the camera slowly approaches Monkey, whose eyes are closed as she rests with her head on the table, face saintly and liberated from any strain, while Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” overpowers the rumbling of a departing train. The camera comes to a close-up of the young girl, her eyes open, while the musical crescendo reaches its peak as an apotheosis to the dialectical absurdity of life—a cinematic equivalent of the statement Stalker made after realizing that the mysterious Zone is an intrinsic—and necessary—aspect of human existence (“Even if it’s a miracle, it’s part of Nature, which offers at least some kind of hope . . .”).

Tarkovsky’s “spiritual revelation” (his term) of the reality in cinema defies the orthodox concept

of narrative cinema as a linear progression of representational events. Creating dream imagery whose kinesthetic energy surpasses the mere observation of reality, while providing a unique experience that is possible only in cinema, Tarkovsky proves that genuine experimentation in art does not mean merely using optical devices, but achieving a complex cinematic structure, “the form of which comes nearest to conveying the author’s inner world and embodying his longing for the ideal.”¹⁰ All creative film-makers have been preoccupied with the problem of expressing both *ideas* and *ideals* in visual (and audial) terms, thereby defying the belief that this medium is fit exclusively for physical action and dramatic performances.

In his best works, Tarkovsky has demonstrated in a creative manner that it is possible to achieve poetic dream imagery within the narrative genre, provided that the story is transcended by the kinesthetic impact capable of generating (here Tarkovsky cites Thomas Mann) “something spiritually broader and more universal than mere facts, an entire world of feelings, thoughts, and visions embodied within it.”¹¹ Evidently, the most intense feeling of spirituality which Tarkovsky experiences in his dreams, fantasies, and hallucinations cannot be conveyed through the spoken word alone, but most of all by cinematic images that represent the author’s “impressions created by the logic of dream, and formed in a way most appropriate to the thinking or dreaming process.”¹²

Notes

1. Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 188.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
12. The citation is taken from Tarkovsky’s celebrated 1982 lectures delivered at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome, as recorded in Donatella Baglivo’s video tape *Andrei Tarkovsky: A Poet in Cinema* (1983).