

The Edge of Perception: Sound in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*

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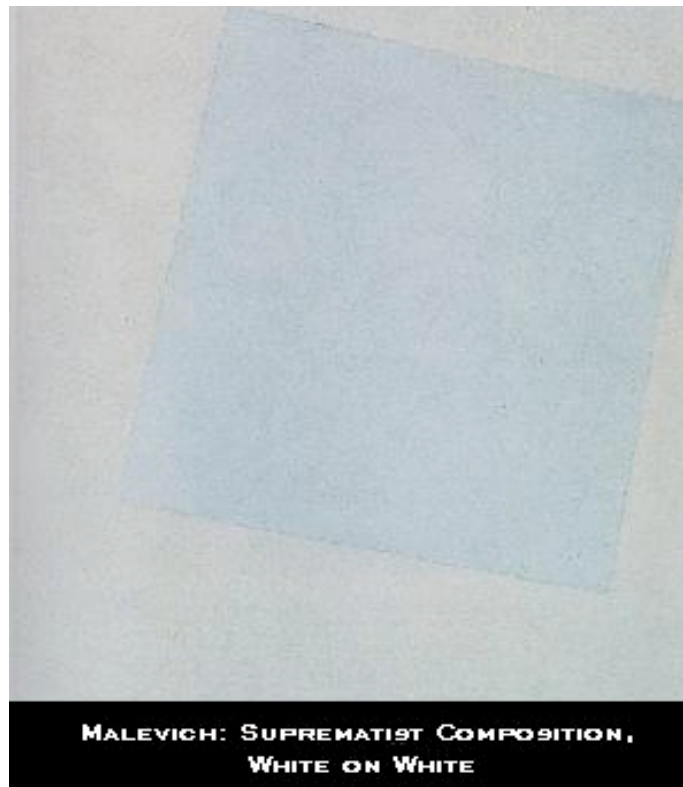
Abstract

The intricate deployment of all the elements of sound – music, dialogue, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, as well as the intervals of silence – in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky offers a complex multi-dimensional experience, creating in each viewer a unique response to sound. This paper analyses soundscape of Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker* in order to understand the techniques employed, and how the use of sound creates a unique perceptual awareness in the audience. Rather than attempting to reveal meanings and symbols in the film, this paper explores how, through a sensitivity to the possibilities of sound in film, it is possible to transcend the confines of its traditional uses and enable in its perceiver the freedom to engage that allows for the individual's own sensitivity and subconscious mind to take an active role in creating a personal connection and meaning.

Keywords

Tarkovsky, sound, *Stalker*, perception

In itself, accurately recorded sound adds nothing to the image system of cinema, for it still has no aesthetic content. As soon as the sounds of the visible world are removed from it, or that world is filled, for the sake of the image, with extraneous sounds that don't exist literally, or if the real sounds are distorted so that they no longer correspond with the image – then the film acquires a resonance. Andrey Tarkovsky (1987)



When the artist Kazimir Malevich exhibited his work “white on white” in 1913, he wrote about the reaction, saying,

...the critics and, along with them, the public sighed, ‘Everything we loved is lost. We are in a desert. Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!’ Even I was gripped by a kind of timidity bordering on fear when it came to leaving the world of will and idea in which I had lived and worked and the reality of which I believed. But a blissful sense of liberating nonobjectivity drew me forth into the ‘desert,’ where nothing is real except feeling. (Chipp 1968)

The artist Robert Irwin sees this work as a pivotal shift in the development of art

in the modern era, in that it made feelings the equal of intellect and impermanence the equal of permanence. He goes on to say that one of the roles of art since these shifts began to evolve (with artists like Malevich and Mondrian), 'is a continuous examination of our perceptual awareness of the world and a continuous extension of our ability to understand the nature of that world.' (Irwin 2000) This kind of examination of how we define our reality and the impermanence that surrounds us can be found in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and is central to the theme of this paper. His films feel as if they have led us into this 'desert' and left us where all that was familiar and known has vanished. Beneath this, however, is offered the opportunity to engage with the multi-dimensionality of reality - if we so wish. In particular I will be focusing on the use of sound in his film, *Stalker*, and how it uses challenge this perception of *normal* reality. His soundtracks offer a complex and multi-dimensional experience of his films and create a heightened experience of listening that is very unusual within cinema.

Sound is not merely a sonic representation of a visual occurrence. The aural produces a perspective and depth of field not possible through visual phenomena alone. Sound is all around us and is not bound by the same restrictions that limit our ability to see with our eyes. It is equal to, if not more important than, sight in creating the space in which we find ourselves.

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan writes in his essay 'Visual and Acoustic Space':

We who live in the world of reflected light, in visual space, may be said to be in a state of hypnosis. Ever since the collapse of the oral tradition, before the age of Parmendies, Western civilization has been mesmerized by a picture of the universe as a limited container in which all things are arranged according to a vanishing point, in linear geometric order...The term *sensus communis* in Cicero's time meant that all the senses were translated equally into each other. It was the Latin definition of man in a healthy state, when physical and psychic were constant and distributed in a balanced way to all sense areas. In such a condition it is difficult to hallucinate. In any cultural arrangement, trouble always occurs when only one sense is subjected to a barrage of energy and receives more stimulus than all the others. For modern Western man, that would be the visual state. By neglecting ear culture, which is too diffuse for the categorical hierarchies of the left side of the brain. Mankind has locked itself into a position where only linear conceptualization is possible...Acoustic space is both discontinuous and nonhomogenous. Its resonant and interpreting processes are simultaneously related with centers everywhere and boundaries nowhere. Acoustic and visual space structures may be seen as

incommensurable, like history and eternity, yet, at the same time, as complementary, like art and science or biculturalism. (Cox and Warner 2004: 68-69)

By dissecting and analyzing *Stalker*, it is possible to understand the techniques, processes and objectives that facilitate and inform a deeper insight into how the sound is functioning and the osmotic affect it has on its audience. This is not an attempt to reveal some kind of hidden meaning or expose a symbolic undercurrent running through the film, but more an exploration of how, through a sensitivity for the possibilities of sound in film, it is possible to transcend the confines of its traditional uses and enable in its perceiver the freedom to engage that allows for the individual's own sensitivity and un/sub/conscious mind to take an active role in creating a personal connection and meaning.

Tarkovsky uses sound in order to define place, whether that be literal, psychological, or existing as some kind of parallel reality. He allows sound the time to evolve, develop, and build the space, often before the viewer is aware of what is occurring visually. There are long stretches in *Stalker* when there is a notable absence of dialogue and music, allowing the possibility of experiencing the *feeling* of space that exists around the immediate story. His films are famous for their long takes, tracking shots, and very precise *mise en scene*. It is also his use of sound that creates a covert precision and intricate development within the progress of the film, allowing individual soundscapes time to unfold, defining what is apparently obvious and/or revealing what is hidden from the auditor. The experience is often one of moving, (sometimes noticeably, sometimes imperceptibly) between 'causal listening' and 'reduced listening.' These two modes of listening are terms expressed by composer and filmmaker Michel Chion, stemming from the ideas of Pierre Schaffer and *musique concrete* in which the qualities of a sound are appreciated and explored in isolation from its source cause: 'Causal listening...consists of listening to a sound in order to gain information about its cause (or source)' and reduced listening mode 'focuses on the traits of the sound itself independent of its cause and of its meaning.' (Chion 1994: 25, 29) These two terms offer a useful reference to return to throughout this study, as it is the blurring of the two modes that Tarkovsky manages to manipulate so effectively.

Of significant importance to these two films is the relationship Tarkovsky developed with composer Eduard Artemiev. Through their discussions and work, Tarkovsky and Artemiev developed an idiosyncratic sonic voice in cinema found only in the three films they worked on together: *Stalker*, *Solaris* and *Mirror*. All three of these films exhibit a remarkable sophistication and sensitivity, not only in the music and sound design individually, but also their complementary nature to each other and to the visuals, as both support and as a parallel expression. This is achieved by a complex blend of layers, where sound and music are rarely

descriptive in a literal sense, always retaining the feeling that they are operating as more than representation.

Kim Cascone, who worked as assistant sound designer with David Lynch on *Wild At Heart*, compares Lynch's work to *Stalker*. He observes that Lynch creates a sound world that is not contained within the screen, but one that forms a dimensional space around it. Although marrying beautifully with the image, there is an element to the sonic language that extends way beyond the film to an eternal space. Cascone ends his essay by writing,

...foggy off-screen evocations of a type of space always existing beyond our periphery, just out of reach or dismissed as background noise. This is how their work achieves viral contagion: it lodges itself into your psychic membrane and starts to blur your dreams with real life. This blurred boundary is where the most interesting cinematic experience takes place, and awaits those curious enough to explore them. This is how film sound does its most damage, how it permanently infects the host body and alters our perceptual experience of life.' (Cascone 2003)

STALKER

Stalker in its form of expression approaches tragedy. It is true that in tragedy the hero has to die but I said "approaches" because this is not a tragedy caused by death but by the complete destruction of a "certain inner world." This is, after all, a different thing than tragedy. There exists, however, the concept of catharsis, cleansing through suffering, cleansing which is possible only in art... yes, perhaps also in life but always in the spiritual sphere. Thus if we are talking of *Stalker* as a tragedy of a certain individual, we are referring here to the destruction of the inner world of the title character. (Capo 1980)

Stalker (and this is true of all Tarkovsky's films) is very much focused on the characters' internal processes and how it is the individual who creates reality. Reality is not a predefined set of values and rules that can be applied collectively, but is constantly shifting and blurring, as represented by the nature of the Zone itself (discussed later). Tarkovsky writes in *Sculpting In Time*, "Artists are divided into those who create their own inner world, and those who create reality. I undoubtedly belong to the first." (Tarkovsky 1987: 118)

From the opening shot there is something strange and unsettling about *Stalker*'s visual and sonic aesthetic. We move slowly through a doorway gradually revealing a bed with three sleeping figures. The room is almost silent and therefore

tells us nothing aurally tangible about the environment we are in. Periodically we hear the sound of what could be a train, already experiencing the unique sound world created by Artemiev and Tarkovsky in which electronic and natural sound have been merged to give the sense of something both familiar and strange at the same time. The sound is initially experienced as *reduced* listening as it is so abstracted, but slowly transfers to *causal* listening as the sound becomes familiar enough to derive information about its cause source. Although there is no visual evidence of a train, the assumption is that this is a diegetic sound and as this progresses to the relatively loud sound of a train passing by (which in doing so vibrates the room and objects on a table), we are given the first strong aural sense of the space we are in. However, this sense is quickly subverted by the barely audible sound of Beethoven's 9th that infiltrates through the metallic clamor of the passing train. It is not clear whether this music is diegetic or non-diegetic and so its appearance sets the tone for the blurring of reality that is to follow. In an interview, Tarkovsky explained that for this part of the film he wanted to use music "that is rather popular, that expresses the sense of the movement of the masses, the theme of the destiny of human society." (Guerra 1979) This is fairly clear, but it is the other questions that this blending of sound throws up that are less easy to grasp and create the enigmatic and hypnotic quality that draws the viewer deeper into the film. Is this sound a dream of one of the figures in the bed? Does it hold symbolic meaning that will be revealed later? Or can it just be understood literally as a diegetic sound connected to the train? The nature of *Stalker* is oblique. It does not aim clear up these anomalies, but rather to pose metaphysical questions for the viewer to engage with. Long after the train has passed, objects continue to rattle upon a table setting up the orchestration of the natural environment that plays out through this scene. The distant sounds of trains echo through the space merging with the sounds of creaking floor boards as Stalker rises from the bed and makes his way through to a kitchen, the sound of which is so idiosyncratic it's as if the house is a living entity itself: pipes whine painfully as water flows through them, a heater gives off a low, unsettling hum in the corner, creaking doors build a sonic environment expressively heightened and rich.

Stalker leaves his house and makes his way across an industrial landscape accompanied by a haunting sonic orchestration of wheels sliding over tracks, train horns, ship fog horns and a disembodied voice placed unnaturally loud in the mix. This is the voice of Writer. Stalker, Professor and Writer are the three characters we follow for the majority of the film, each adopting an archetypal role through which the film expresses its essence. The three heroes set out on their journey to the Zone, an enigmatic place where there is a room which will grant you your deepest wish if you enter it. Beginning the journey in a beaten up old Land Rover we see them driving off into the distance through a desolate landscape. As the camera holds the frame and the Land Rover reaches the horizon, a delicate

electronic tone emerges through the natural sounds of the space. The natural sounds fall away leaving the tone hanging having the effect of freezing time, allowing a pause for a moment of reflection, an instant that allows us to enter that “desert of feeling.” Having the camera hold the frame creates a sense of the isolation of the three characters, the sound creating a consciousness of space, a precursor to the Zone. This characterization of space is central to *Stalker*. The soundtrack for the whole of this passage through the film is so resonant and expressive that the absence of any music is not missed in the building of the dramatic tension. The richness of dynamics and textures effectively acts as score which allows the diegetic sounds space to invoke their own innate musical qualities.

The trolley train journey and entering the Zone

The Zone is reached by a motorised handcar, a journey experienced through the faces of the three main characters and accompanied only by the sound of hissing and clanging from the handcar as it travels over the tracks. Apart from when they first sit down, we do not see the physical train for the rest of the scene. Its presence is registered entirely through sound. The absence of the visual here plays a dual role. By focusing purely on the faces of the characters, we are not distracted by their surroundings and as a result the physical journey becomes transformed into an inner journey. Secondly, separating the sound from its source over the period of the journey takes the auditor through a process that starts in the mode of causal listening moving to reduced listening. Here, as in *Stalker*’s house, the sound of the environment is practically non-existent. The effect is to draw the viewer further and further into the inner worlds of the characters coaxed by the hypnotic sound of the handcar. As the scene progresses, the sound of the train (with the aid of electronic treatment) begins to change subtly as the clanking operates in a less naturalistic way, echoing and morphing and leading us simultaneously inside the characters and into the Zone. This is a very clever use of sonic invention that clearly shows Tarkovsky’s understanding of the importance and possibilities of sound. The handcar is electronically treated just enough for the viewer to be able to empathise with the characters and the shifting of their psychological states but not so much as to cause the viewer to pull back and become merely an observer dictated to by an overtly manipulative sound or prescriptive music. The delicate and precise balance between natural environment and the musique concrete sound design leads to an ambiguity of time and space that makes the scene so profoundly effective. As with the trains and music heard in *Stalker*’s house, the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic are being sensitively explored. A very careful blending of diverse tonal and distorted organic elements clouds the distinction between natural sound, sound design and music, encouraging the audience to question the very nature of the reality presented to them on the screen and to viscerally join the characters on the beginning of their

“journey into the heart of darkness.” (Peachment 2001: 1004)

The Zone

“The Zone doesn’t symbolise anything, it’s life, and as he makes his way across it a man may break down or he may come through. Whether he comes through or not depends on his own self respect, and his capacity to distinguish what matters and what is merely passing.” (Tarkovsky 1987: 200)

The Zone is a place that is in a constant state of flux. Time does not move as in 'normal' reality. Memories cannot be relied upon. One cannot assume a known path will lead to its usual destination. The visitors to the Zone must distinguish between passing illusion and that which will help them to survive. We know we have entered the Zone by the simple but effective way of switching from black and white into colour. The sound remains minimal, hanging on the threshold of audibility. We can see we are in a familiar natural environment of meadows and trees, with a river in the distance, but the absence of sound creates an unsettling, otherworldly feel. At some point, as the three men are talking, the sound of the distant river becomes slightly audible, which seems to act as a call from the Zone that the Stalker must follow as he suddenly leaves Writer and Professor. The sounds of the environment around Stalker then grow much richer as if we are being pulled into his internal world. He appears to be consumed by his feelings and memories of his environment as he physically embraces his surroundings. As Stalker returns to Writer and Professor the sound of the river is gone and we are back to a near silence, broken periodically by the cry of an animal and the sound of wind.

It is largely through the absence of sound that the Zone evokes such a haunting and isolated sensation. Tarkovsky achieves this not through silence but by calling attention to certain sounds such as the cry of a cuckoo (a recurring aural theme in several of his films) or a ghostly breeze with no visual reference. Following the three heroes through the Zone as they are guided by Stalker’s bizarre navigational tool of throwing pieces of white material tied to nuts into seemingly random locations, the sound of the desolate emptiness closes this wide open space claustrophobically around the characters. This stripped down soundtrack encourages a much stronger emotional impact as richer surreptitious sound elements periodically infiltrate the barren landscape, acting more as a metaphorical representation of the psychological state of the three characters and/or the abstracted consciousness that is the Zone itself. For no apparent reason the sound of the wind becomes audible or a random alien creak or cry unexpectedly slices through, reflecting the growing unease of Writer and Professor as they venture into the Zone. As the camera slowly pans over a field through the

wreckage of a car, in the distance we see the shells of deteriorated tanks. Stalker, Professor and Writer walk off to the left, but the camera does not follow, stays fixed on its shot, setting up a juxtaposition of visual imagery with the threatening, decaying, partially visible tanks seen through the overgrown natural and tranquil landscape. The sound here plays out its role of the consciousness of space. Barely audible electronic pulses and drones blend with the natural environment that becomes heightened in its activity as the three characters leave frame. The sound of the wind becomes louder and the electronic sounds slowly morph into discordant choral vocals hovering on the edge of perception, as if representing memories of what once occurred here. The source of this sound is unseen and therefore belongs to the realm of reduced listening. This use of sonic representation acts as an illusive score, whilst still allowing the sound to feel very much an extension of space. Again there is a pause within the story where there can be reflection, the use of abstracted sound raising questions and enabling connections that do not need to be answered or revealed, but allowing for the visceral connection to something parallel to the immediate experience, something outside of human intellectual understanding.

As the journey progresses, the sound evolves in complexity and richness, wrapping a layered aural “dialogue” around the story. Suddenly, through the low rippling sounds of the distant river and the exaggerated dripping, there is the sound of something falling into water. The camera holds its frame on Writer for a few seconds before its cause is revealed. Cutting to the black and white shot of the bottom of a well with the disturbed water from the impact of the unknown object, sound impressions drift in, barely audible, blended within the water, like ghosts. Starting the sound on the previous image acts as a bridge, creating a connection with the immediate story to this beautiful obscure shot running as a parallel dialogue, without which the cut may be too incongruous. A bridge is built back to the immediate story by the voice of Stalker placed over the well shot, but it is soon clear that the voice is not diegetic. Acoustically it is different and the content of his words is philosophical and abstracted in nature, extended towards an invisible audience, not Writer and Professor. The cut to the next scene shows Stalker making his way in isolation through the Zone landscape, accompanied by the abstracted sound of the previous scene and although he is not talking, his voice is still present - a voiceover enhancing the increasingly strange rhythm of the film as it drifts between external and internal reality. The sound mirrors the fractured nature of time and space, being the nature of the Zone, through displacement in increasingly intricate patterns.

The Dry Tunnel

The camera pans a short distance, moving from the delicate yet very loud musical dripping of water to the shot of a huge waterfall seen through the ruins of a vast brick structure. As the waterfall appears, the sound alters drastically almost

creating a time jump within a continuous panning shot. The pan continues: the thundering sound of the waterfall, layered with abstracted sonic movement accompanied by the sound of large rusty lamps (suspended on metal rods) swinging rhythmically, slowing the tempo of the scene with their protracted, grinding, ancient groan, enhancing the disconcerting, oppressive landscape.

Having lost Professor, Stalker and Writer make their way towards the Dry Tunnel. Instead of following their passage through the tunnel, the next cut is of the burning embers of a fire, however the sound remains with Stalker and Writer and their conversation heard from inside the Dry Tunnel. The displacement of sound means there is nothing that can be obtained aurally about this new environment. However, it offers the opportunity to experience two separate places simultaneously within the Zone and perceive the consciousness of space as an omnipresent entity. Stalker and Writer emerge to find Professor and, following their surprise at seeing him, realize that the Zone has tricked them and they have ended up at an earlier point in their journey. This helps to make sense of the previous juxtaposition in sound and image as the Zone's shifting of time and space is revealed in an overt way. Using sound in this way also encourages reduced listening. Although we know the cause of the sound, separating the sound and placing it on an alternative image produces a heightened perception of both visual and aural space. The innate qualities of each sound are allowed to inhabit their own dimension and be experienced more viscerally. The image is therefore imprinted with a poetic quality.

In the following scene, the use of discontinuous and impressionistic sound plays out in very subtle and beautiful ways, where the "orchestration of the sounds of nature" is very evident. There is the relatively dense naturalistic environment of the distant hum of a river, wind, the ever-present dripping water and a fire lit by Professor. As Professor throws his coffee on the fire it extinguishes all sound but the dripping water, the picture cutting to Writer lying on the ground. On the next cut to Professor, the water all but disappears and the sound of wind appears suddenly. Cut to Stalker, who is in close proximity to the other two, and behind him we see a river with small cascading waterfalls. Immediately we hear the sound of the fast running river, loud and very present in the mix. Cut back to Professor and the sound of the river hangs for a few seconds and then, as if the river has magically disappeared, it fades to nothing and is replaced by the wind. This impressionistic sound develops through the scene as it builds to a long dream sequence in which the sound becomes obviously non-diegetic for the first time in the film. There is score that has been used earlier in the opening credits, a strange hybrid electronic score that incorporates eastern instruments, over which a child's voice recites poetry. Emerging from the dream sequence, although in the same the space with similar sonic characteristics, there are echoes of previous spaces within the Zone. The sound is much softer and the ubiquitous dripping is still present, but it is embedded amid the delicate breeze, gentle bird song and the haunting cuckoo

cry. This shifting of environmental sounds is almost imperceptible as it scores the verbal exchange of the three characters, adding a surreal and emotionally complex layer to the existential and philosophical dialogue, as if the subconscious space of each character is being physically manifested in their surrounding environment.

The Meat Mincer and beyond

Water is a primary element in *Stalker*; the soundtrack becomes progressively more liquid as the characters journey toward 'the Room.' Both visually and sonically this is a drenched world. If it holds any symbolic value, it certainly is not that of cleansing.

(When Tarkovsky was asked if rain held any symbolic meaning in his film, he responded, 'No. It is because there is so much rain in Russia.') There is a sense that as their quest progresses the heroes are drowning under the weight of their own individual spiritual struggle, metaphorically presented by the water. In an interview regarding water in his film *Nostalgia*, Tarkovsky said, 'Water is a mysterious element, a single molecule of which is very photogenic. It can convey movement and a sense of change and flux. Maybe it has subconscious echoes – perhaps my love for water arises from some atavistic memory of some ancestral transmigration.' (Mitchell 1983-84) Making their way along the long dark tunnel known as the Meat Mincer, they arrive on the other side at the entrance to the Room. Here again the environmental sound is a constant shift in discontinuous sound: a cold, wet atmosphere morphing into a delicate, warmer atmosphere with the sounds of birds filling the desolate building; glass-like water sounds cut through, shimmering. Suddenly the room falls silent, the atmosphere swallowed up; the three men sit in the center of the room. The camera pulls back, framing them in a long shot. They remain in silence for some time. The water returns, but this time it is different; gentle rain falling through the unseen ceiling, softly echoing through the room as it falls onto the flooded floor. This visceral connection with sound is so strikingly different that there is the feeling of catharsis - the sense of 'hope' that Tarkovsky regarded as so important in his filmmaking.

The camera cuts to the floor of the Zone and pans along a tiled surface littered with the remnants of a lost past. As a black liquid fills the water, the sound of a train comes in and gradually oblique orchestral music infiltrates. In polar opposite to the earlier example at the Dry Tunnel where we could hear the sound of *Stalker* and *Writer* and knew where they were even though we were seeing a new unknown environment, now the environment is known, but the sound is establishing place long before place is revealed.

The film sonically ends as it began. The sound of a train passing loudly overhead shaking some objects on a table, Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' entangled on the periphery of audibility. Everything still remains unanswered. What is real and what is an illusion? Tarkovsky has left us in Malevich's desert.

The use of discontinuous and incongruous sounds found in *Stalker* lead to what Slavoj Žižek called ‘ontological undecidability’: “It seems as if Nature itself miraculously starts to speak, the confused and chaotic symphony of its murmurs imperceptibly passing over into music proper.” (Žižek 1999)

Conclusion

“Only the words break the silence, all other sounds have ceased. If I were silent I’d hear nothing. But if I were silent the other sounds would start again, those to which the words have made me deaf.”
Samuel Beckett (Beckett 1996: 131)

Traversing the paths of Tarkovsky’s sound world leads the auditor into a matrix of contradictions and anomalies that, if sought to be understood through logic or rational thought, will lead only to frustration and confusion. However, if the auditor allows their conscious mind to relinquish control so as to make an intuitive connection to the film, then it makes for an incredibly rewarding journey. Although Tarkovsky is very meticulous with all elements of the sound in his films - music, dialogue, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds - it is in the spaces he leaves that allows these other elements to play out their idiosyncratic, hypnotic patterns. “Silence is where he hands over completely to the audience. We are invited to fill the space with our consciousness. This is the space of dreaming. Through his precision of structure in his filmmaking he invites us into a metaphysical world with no boundaries.” (Pangborn 2006)

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End notes

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http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Tarkovsky_Guerra-1979.html
11. Tarkovsky writing about the journey on the trolley train into the Zone – 'Sculpting in Time'
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17. pg 131 The complete short prose 1929 – 1989 Grove Press.
18. Annabelle Pangborn – from e-mail correspondence.

Digital Image (c)2007 The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence. Kazimir Malevich, 'Suprematist Composition: White on White'. 1918. Oil on canvas, 31 1/4 × 31 1/4" (79.4 × 79.4 cm). 1935 Acquisition confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich and made possible with funds from the Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest (by exchange).

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