

# Time and the Film Aesthetics of Andrei Tarkovsky

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Andrei Tarkovsky was born in 1932, in Laovrazhe, the Ivanova district of the Soviet Union. He died fifty-four years later in 1986, only months after the release of his last film, *The Sacrifice*. His prior films are *Ivan's Childhood* 1962, *Andrei Rublev* 1966, *Solaris* 1971, *The Mirror* 1975, *Stalker* 1979, and *Nostalgia* 1983. Tarkovsky's films form an intensely personal and consistent oeuvre that have accumulated a loyal following in the West and (slowly) in the East. Tarkovsky's written thoughts on film and art still remain little discussed. This essay will look into Tarkovsky's aesthetics through both his films and his scattered theoretical conjectures collected in *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema* (from which all subsequent quotes by Tarkovsky are taken)<sup>1</sup>.

As the title of the book indicates, time is the most important working principle for Tarkovsky:

Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations:  
such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art... On that I  
build my working hypothesis, both practical and  
theoretical (63)

He describes time in terms of human memory and life-processes. This sets up a duality where time is connected to memory and consciousness and intimately expressed through nature. This notion of time as memory will lead to a brief discussion of Henri Bergson's concept of duration as a comparative term to help understand Tarkovsky's aesthetics. The connection to a now neglected early 20th century philosopher is not obscurantism if one remembers the impact Bergson's thoughts had on modern art. With Bergsonism in the air modern art became haunted by the quest for an aesthetic to represent the flux of time and memory.

And as Erwin Panovsky, Arnold Hauser and others have noted, film is the quintessential time-space art because time and space acquire qualities of the other. Through montage time loses its irreversibility, it is

spatialized. Through the moving camera space loses its static, homogeneous quality, it is temporalized (as in Cubist painting). Bergson was a major figure of this time-based zeitgeist and influenced countless artists who were searching for ways to articulate time and memory aesthetically. Briefly then, Tarkovsky's aesthetics will be explained in terms of time, duration and nature. My conclusion will hold that Tarkovsky's film aesthetic challenges viewer perception and cognition by shifting between or simultaneously representing inner and outer states of reality.

In charting the course of Soviet film history one will find a series of important connections between filmmaker and theorist. The names Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Vertov stand out as prominent figures in the evolution of film language, theory, film/politics. Although these four filmmaker/theorists are not singular in their visions they held the common belief that montage is cinema's main formative principle. Tarkovsky can be seen as continuing in this rich tradition of Soviet filmmaker/theorist, but changing its course.

This opposition is best defined against the early Eisenstein. In the essay "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," written in 1929, Eisenstein states: "Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage"<sup>2</sup>. Many decades later Tarkovsky states:

Nor can I accept the notion that editing is the main formative element of film, as the protagonists of 'montage cinema', following Kuleshov and Eisenstein, maintained in the twenties, as if film was made on the editing table (114).

Leaving aside other important cultural and political variables, with this quote Tarkovsky is clearly severing himself from the Soviet tradition of montage hierarchy.

Tarkovsky goes back to Lumiere's *Arrivée d'un Train* as the moment when a new aesthetic principle in art was born: "the ability to take an impression of time" (62). Out of this ability to imprint time grows the cornerstone of Tarkovsky's aesthetics: what he calls rhythm. This rhythm is not achieved by calculated editing but by the sense of time, which Tarkovsky calls time-thrust or time-pressure, flowing through a shot:

The distinctive time running through the shots makes the rhythm...rhythm is not determined by the length of the edited pieces, but by the pressure of the time that runs through them (117).

Rhythm, expressed by the time-pressure within a shot, and not editing is the main formative element of Tarkovsky's cinema.

Time-pressure is perhaps impossible to define in precise, analytical terms, but we can come to a closer understanding of it by examining how it is manifested. We know that the time that flows through a shot is Tarkovsky's guide to film form, but is there a source point for this time-pressure? Is there something that Tarkovsky consistently relies on as a temporal/rhythmic foundation? The rhythm Tarkovsky speaks of, the time-thrust that shapes each shot and consequently the editing, is predicated on the spontaneous rhythms of nature and its forces: water, rain, wind, fire, fog, snow, vegetation:

Rhythm in cinema is conveyed by the life of the object visibly recorded in the frame. Just as from the quivering of a reed you can tell what sort of current, what pressure there is in a river, in the same way we know the movement of time from the flow of the life-process reproduced in the shot (120)

Tarkovsky also likens the time-pressure in a shot metaphorically to the rhythms of a brook, spate, river, waterfall, or ocean. This flow of time can range from, quoting Tarkovsky, "lazy and soporific to stormy and swift." The extent to which these metaphors are reflected in his films varies, but in most cases, like *Andrei Rublev*, *The Mirror*, *Stalker* and *Nostalgia*, the mise-en-scène works with and against the rhythmic flow of natural phenomena. For example, the slow-motion tracking shot in *The Mirror* which follows the right to left direction of a fierce wind blowing across bushes and toppling over objects on a table (this shot appears twice in the film); the shot in *Andrei Rublev* where a left to right camera movement follows the incidental background action of a stranded canoe floating downstream while the central action occurs in the foreground; the scene following the raid in *Andrei Rublev* where the spiritual energy of an exchange between Rublev and the ghost of Theophanes is subtly underscored by hellish steam rising from the death-infested floor and descending dandelion seeds; *Nostalgia*'s stunning opening scene where all the elements of the time-pressure (camera and figure movement, mist, film speed) come to a halt in a freeze frame. In the same film the constant sound of rainfall on windows, ceilings and puddles creates an aural rhythm that reflects the solitude and overwhelming nostalgia that suffocates the transplanted Soviet.

Hence the appearance of life-processes in Tarkovsky's mise-en-scène form a powerful visual tapestry that goes beyond theme or imagery to form and aesthetics. Tarkovsky relies on nature and natural phenomena to

underscore and often dictate the time-pressure (rhythm) of a shot. The movement of time, its flux and quality, flows from the life-process that is recorded in the shot. Even though the fires, downpours and gusts of wind are staged, re-shot or recreated there still remains the spontaneous element of “nature’s time” within the filmic time. Each of the natural events and elements -water, wind, fire, snow- have their own sustained rhythm. Tarkovsky uses these natural rhythms to express his own, that of his characters and the temporal shape of the film.

Editing still plays an important part in Tarkovsky’s aesthetics but its creative element comes from matching the varying time-pressures already established in each shot and not from clever or conceptual juxtapositioning. For example, in *The Mirror*, his most complex film structurally, Tarkovsky combines historical and personal time by intercutting childhood memory and political and cultural history: the Spanish Civil War, Russia-Germany in WW2, the Cultural Revolution, the atomic bomb. The surface separation between the personal and the historical is shattered by editing that carefully joins the various rhythms of the stock shots to staged shots.

In one segment he uses stock footage of Soviet soldiers crossing Lake Sivash on foot. The integration of this documentary-time with Tarkovsky’s time was so convincing that many people believed that the found footage was staged by Tarkovsky. The reason for this is because Tarkovsky was conscious of the time-pressure in this shot and took care in linking it to contiguous shots of a similar rhythm.

Tarkovsky refers to film as if it were a living, breathing entity:

Works of art are...formed by organic process; whether good or bad they are living organisms with their own circulatory system which must not be disturbed (124)

The function of editing is to maintain this organic process:

Editing brings together shots which are already filled with time, and organises the unified, living structure inherent in the film; and the time that pulsates through the blood vessels of the film, making it alive, is of a varying rhythmic pressure (114).

Matching shots of differing rhythms can be done without destroying this organic process if it grows out of an inner necessity. An example is the car journey sequence in *Solaris*. Through camera movement, sound and consistent forward direction the shots in this sequence share the same rhythm. The montage heightens to a frenzied single-frame fusion of

overlapping highways, lights, skyscrapers and cars. This technological symphony is abruptly followed by a cut to astronaut Kelvin's childhood dacha. The image is quiet, peaceful and serene. The time-pressure in this shot is opposite from that in the previous shots.

This is one of the few examples of Tarkovsky using expressionistic editing and deliberately matching shots of differing time-pressures. But the cut is theoretically justified because the stark contrast between the chaotic time-pressure in the technological montage and the tranquil rhythm in the shot of the natural landscape reflects one of the film's thematic conflicts of technology/nature, space/earth. Editing must strive toward this ideal or illusion of a seamless, organic flux.

Tarkovsky says that this was his theoretical working principle for *Stalker*: to maintain the unity of time, space and action. He wanted no time lapse in between shots; in effect, he wanted the film to appear as if it were one shot, with each shot representing a piece of time, and the entire film aspiring to an indivisible time.

This notion of indivisible time leads to Bergson's concept of duration. Bergson distinguished between two types of time, spatialized time and real time. Spatialized time is time that is conceptualized, abstracted and divided (clock time). Real time, which he called duration, is lived time that flows, accumulates and is indivisible.

Bergson used two metaphors to help define duration: music and consciousness. The latter is relevant to Tarkovsky's aesthetics. Duration rests within the consciousness of a person and can not be "stopped" or analyzed like the mathematical conception of time as a line. Our true inner self, our emotions, thoughts, and memories do not lie next to each other like shirts on a clothesline but flow into one another. Our consciousness is not a succession of states but a simultaneous overlapping.

Tarkovsky also expresses time as lived experience. In the beginning of the third and possibly most important chapter of his book, "Imprinted Time," Tarkovsky emphasizes time as human and experiential. Tarkovsky sees time as a subjective torch within each person that is indelibly connected to memory:

Time and memory merge into each other; they are like the two sides of a medal...without Time, memory cannot exist either (57).

Time as memory is similar to how Bergson explains duration: the flux of states within consciousness. For Bergson this signifies above all else, indivisibility.

Indivisibility can be interpreted cinematically as a long take style that records real time or a simultaneous representation of different points in

time (as Bazin did), but a complete cinematic interpretation of Bergson's duration would also include editing that links past/present, memory/perception, fantasy/reality, and dream-time/real-time. In short, inner and outer reality. Indivisibility can also be represented by a cutting and narrative style that does not call attention to these shifts in time and realms of reality (as they are not codified in consciousness). With the exception of *Ivan's Childhood* Tarkovsky's films require several viewings before one can make easy separations between the inner (mind) and outer (social/physical reality) world. This is what characterizes Tarkovsky's narrative structure as durational.

Tarkovsky's nuanced *mise-en-scène* shifts freely from past to present, from physical reality to mental reality, from the outer world to the inner world. It appropriates the flux from one state to another whether in a continuous shot or contiguous shots. Hence duration can be expressed through both long take and editing. Duration is the operative aesthetic because the demarcation line between the realms of reality are, as in consciousness, in a state of flux.

Tarkovsky's camera style is an important element of his time-based duration aesthetic. Vlada Petric points to two types of camera movements in *Stalker* and *The Mirror*: lateral movements with telephoto lenses that obscure all but one plane of the image and perpendicular tracking movements over objects (usually nature)<sup>3</sup>. Many directors employ the former but the latter is unique to Tarkovsky's world. Tarkovsky uses this camera movement most emphatically in *Stalker* and *The Sacrifice*. As Petric notes, this as well as other aspects of Tarkovsky's *mise-en-scène* and camera style, estranges the objects recorded. This unusual camera vantage penetrates normal ways of looking by placing us in an impossible point of view. In other cases, as the dream flight in *Stalker*, it appropriates a metaphysical out-of-body-experience. Tarkovsky uses this camera movement as a unique signifier for dream-time and subjective states (*Stalker*, *Solaris*, *The Sacrifice*) and as a way of estranging natural and everyday objects.

Briefly, here are other ways in which Tarkovsky's camera style reproduces duration: the moving camera as a visual expression of dreams and memories in flux; static long takes and agonizingly slow movements that foreground temporality; long takes that capture the same real-time tension that existed in the shooting of a shot (like the climax in *The Sacrifice* where a cottage burns to the ground in one take); camera movement that reflects psychological time; and the moving camera that merges real-time with memory-time.

This latter strategy, the merging of real-time and memory-time, is one of the most striking aspects of Tarkovsky's duration-based aesthetics. There are two wonderful examples of it in *Nostalghia*. In the first example

Andrei looks into a room and from his point of view we see a pile of dirt and water on the middle of the floor. The image zooms in closer to the rubble, flattening the space which now becomes clearer. It is a Russian landscape, with mountains, earth and pockets of water. A zoom-in abstracts the size perspective and places us into Andrei's psychological state. The camera tilts up a mountain. A cut brings us out of this memory image and back to physical reality.

The second example is the famous final shot of *Nostalghia*. As the shot begins we see Andrei lying down in front of what appears to be his Russian home. The camera slowly tracks back to reveal that the Russian landscape is nestled within an open Roman cathedral. To complete the power of this fantastic image, rain and snow begin to fall in different planes of the frame. The camera is now static but the illusion is not complete. Somehow, perhaps through nuances in lighting or post-production work, the cathedral seems to shift in tone to match the grey/whiteness of the falling snow. The image progresses to a tonal harmony that echoes Andrei's earlier flashbacks to his homeland. Rhythm, the time-pressure within the shot, reaches perfection through the tonal harmony and the merging of dream-time and real-time. The end result of this staggering shot is, aesthetically, the perfect marriage of form and content, and emotionally, a hauntingly beautiful and moving coda.

A consequence of duration is that shifts between realms of reality make it difficult to be certain of the ontological nature of certain events. Happenings occur in Tarkovsky's films that either defy or stretch natural explanation: levitations, telepathic acts, temporal/spatial discontinuities, inexplicable natural phenomena. Objects, people, and events are represented with mimetic accuracy yet something remains askew, pressing on the edge of natural and supernatural, dream-time and real-time. With Tarkovsky's duration there is a constant pull between inner and outer worlds and few conventional cues to clearly separate the ontological status of events. Petric in the quoted essay believes that these ontological ambiguities are "meant to shift the viewer's attention from the representational to the transcendental meaning of the recorded event..."<sup>4</sup> In the general sense this is true, since many of these ambiguous moments are Tarkovskian testimonies of faith in the spiritual and creative act. In as many cases these moments are also based in shifting states of consciousness.

The play that exists in Tarkovsky's films with interiors and exteriors reflects the inner/outer, mental/physical duality of his aesthetics. His films contain countless examples of locations that are in a state of limbo between interior and exterior. Rain and snow spontaneously fall inside churches, houses, hotel rooms and makeshift dwellings. In an outstanding scene in *The Mirror* a ceiling begins to crumble into a shower

of plaster, water and earth. In *Solaris* rain inexplicably drenches the inside of a house. Likewise in *Stalker*, rain begins to fall in the foreground as the three emotionally exhausted travellers lie outside the Zone's wish-bearing room. In *Nostalghia* the madman Domenico lives in a ruined home that is infested with water, vegetation and humidity. In the same film, there is the earlier described scene in which a miniature Russian landscape appears inside a room as a subjective hallucination of the homesick Andrei.

This teetering between levels of reality is a central aspect of Tarkovsky's aesthetics. The psychological grounding for it is the human mind: free-flowing conscious states, memories, visions, reflections, dreams. The physical grounding is nature. Together they form the inner/outer surface distinction of Tarkovsky's world.

Both duration and nature are guiding principles to Tarkovsky's aesthetics (rhythm). Tarkovsky reconciles them by using nature as a fairground for Proustian memories. The haunting memories, visions, dreams and hallucinations that leave Tarkovsky's characters emotionally drained and sometimes spiritually rejuvenated are triggered or take place within a natural landscape. Examples include Ivan's escapist dreams in *Ivan's Childhood*; the opening and closing scenes of *Solaris* (Kelvin's real and reconstituted childhood home); Andrei's monochrome visions of his Russian homeland in *Nostalghia*; the Stalker's lake-side dream in *Stalker*; and the kaleidoscopic memory-time of *The Mirror*.

In these and other moments, nature and duration co-exist. Tarkovsky wrote that with each subsequent film the presence of nature became more prominent. Speaking of his next film (*The Sacrifice*) he says: "I shall aim at an even greater sincerity and conviction in each shot, using the immediate impressions made upon me by nature, in which time will have left its own trace (212)." Here we see the merging of nature, time and memory.

On a basic dialectical level these natural elements constitute an ideal counterpoint to the modern, industrial landscape (it isn't surprising that Tarkovsky once claimed that *Walden* was his favorite book). This dualism reaches its ironic pinnacle in *Stalker*. In *Stalker* Tarkovsky pictures the real world in black & white and monochrome and the magical Zone in color. In the dangerous Zone nature is alive. (It appears that the only way to preserve nature is to mine it with fatal booby traps). The water is clear and fresh; grass and vegetation is full and green. In the real world nature is reduced to a nuclear wasteland. The oil-drenched water is stagnant and the beaches are a chemical depository. Visible in the background are old-style factories. In the Zone, surrounded by a healthy nature, the stalker is able to dream. Again, Tarkovsky welds nature to memory and dream-time.

The way in which Tarkovsky slips between realms of reality, often



times unannounced, echoes Bergson's duration: a state of flux between present/past, memory/perception, reality/fantasy, dream-time/real-time. The flux that Bergson defines as an interpenetration of inner states finds its visual echo in Tarkovsky's aesthetics.

Few filmmakers communicate this sense of duration as well as Tarkovsky. It is an internally felt sensation of time, achieved by more than just the length of the take or pace of the camera movement, but by the entire *mise-en-scène*. All that is seen and heard within the frame is woven together to complement and augment the rhythm of the scene or shot: the film speed, the actions of the characters, the delivery of dialogue, the attention to objects and empty spaces, the soundtrack, the play in chromatic tonality; and, most importantly, the all-consuming presence of nature. These elements of the *mise-en-scène* work toward establishing the temporal flow, the rhythm of the shot/scene. The art of editing rests in gauging and appropriately matching these rhythms (stretches of time).

In conclusion, the act of recording time is the single most important aspect of Tarkovsky's work. Cinema's main formative element, rhythm, is determined by the time-pressure within the shot, which in turn is determined by the intensity of the life processes recorded in the shot. Nature is connected to duration through the confluence of time, memory and nature. In Chinese box-style, Tarkovsky's film aesthetic interpenetrates with rhythm, time, nature and duration. This aesthetic challenges audience perception in the way that inner and outer states merge. Memories burn through mental and physical barriers and alter spatial and temporal reality. They manifest themselves in natural environments, regardless of whether or not this environment is the memories point of origin. Personal time follows the kaleidoscopic patterns of memory and consciousness and is expressed through nature's spontaneous, indivisible rhythm. In Tarkovsky's duration/nature-based aesthetic reality achieves a heightened intensity through which Tarkovsky finds expression for his physical and moral ideals.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, Kitty Hunter-Blair, trans., (London: The Bodley Head, 1986). This is the first English edition. All page references are the same for the second and third English editions except for the odd exclusion from the third edition (1989) of one passage that I quote: "Works of art are...formed by organic process; whether good or bad they are living organisms with their own circulatory system which must not be disturbed."

<sup>2</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, Jay Leyda, ed., trans., (New York: Meridan Books, Inc., 1957), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Vlada Petric, "Tarkovsky's Dream Imagery," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 43, no.2, (Winter 89-90), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Petric, p.32 - 33