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Tarkovsky's *Stalker* – a symbolic exploration of hope and the human mind

Module code: ANTH0080_UG

Word count: 2865

Andrei Tarkovsky was a Russian director who has been widely considered one of the most prominent filmmakers of all time. His movies have a profound and slow-paced nature, which some specialists have labelled as ‘slow cinema’, along with the works of other directors like Pedro Costa, Bela Tarr and Jia Zhanke (Robé, 2017). Through his films, Tarkovsky constantly addresses transcendental topics related to the human condition. His style is characterized by a poetic use of metaphors combined with complex symbolism.

Stalker, considered by many critics one of his most notable works, was released in 1979 and is still seen as a cinematic masterpiece nowadays. As it is well known in the world of cinema, shooting this film was an arduous process and was also quite dangerous for several of the crew and cast members. Apparently, some of the locations where *Stalker* was filmed contained poisonous radiations, which may have caused the illness and death of some of the actors. A few years later, Tarkovsky himself died at a young age and it is plausible that the process of filming this iconic movie was considerably unfavourable for his health. Moreover, the first shootings of the film were destroyed, and many scenes had to be re-filmed several times. Still, Tarkovsky managed to create a brilliant piece of art.

Being said this, a film like *Stalker* inevitably leads to a wide variety of interpretations by the audience, especially from a political perspective. However, leaving its transcendental political aspects aside, there is one essential characteristic of this movie: it is a symbolic exploration of hope and the human mind. With a unique style and in a contrasting manner with most science fiction films, the plot of *Stalker* advances at a very slow pace. Moreover, as the movie must be watched in Russian, which is its original language, most viewers need to watch it with subtitles and may find it hard to follow the story while understanding Tarkovsky’s complex and emblematic dialogues. From the perspective of a twenty first century audience, these factors, combined with the connotative nature of the events and dialogues of the film, could make it complicated to maintain a high level of attention and to keep entertained while watching it.

In my opinion, this is a film that does not particularly intend to entertain its audience in any way. The purpose of a film of this kind is to absorb the spectator into what is happening to the main characters, to immerse us in its mysterious world, to make us forget that it is fictional and interpret it in first person as a plausible reality. Therefore, in *Stalker* there are very few actions, dialogues and events that should be interpreted by the viewer in a literal manner. This can be evidenced, for example, in the fact that Tarkovsky includes quite extensive scenes where apparently nothing interesting is happening, perhaps with the intention of creating a cathartic and empathetic state in the audience. In comparison to many contemporary sci-fi movies, rather than making use of explosions, intense violence or exaggerated plot twists, Tarkovsky gains the attention of the audience by aiming for gradually triggering our emotions and critical thinking through the film.

The main plot of this movie is simple and apparently unambiguous: two men, a writer and a scientist (only referred to as Writer and Professor), are guided by an enigmatic individual (the stalker) to a place known as The Zone, where it is said that magical things happen to those who visit it. Apparently, a meteorite had fallen in this place a long time ago, granting it with these powers. Consequently, the repressive government of the fictional country where the movie takes place made it illegal to enter The Zone, which could represent Tarkovsky's criticism against the Soviet Union. However, as it was mentioned previously, I consider it more interesting to view *Stalker* as an analysis of the human mind and a study of what hope means rather than as a political critique.

Since the fall of the meteorite, people who knew enough about this magical place started to visit The Zone illegally and then guided others towards it. These guides were known as stalkers. The ultimate purpose of entering The Zone was to reach The Room, a place where you are supposed to find true happiness, as it grants you with your most sincere wishes. Nevertheless, as the plot advances, the shadowy background story of each of the main characters along with their personalities start to unveil. In my opinion, while this occurs the sci-fi nature of the film begins to

fade away slowly, as it is less relevant when compared to its philosophical and psychological profundity.

When I first heard about Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, I thought about the English meaning of its title and depicted a different type of film in my mind. However, the meaning of this word in the context of Tarkovsky's movie comes from a Russian book that *Stalker* was slightly based on (*Roadside Picnic* by Arkady Strugatsky and Boris Strugatsky) and means a guide or an inhabitant of The Zone. While the two visitors, Writer and Professor, represent two common archetypes of the modern society (the idealistic and the pragmatic, respectively), the stalker is a depiction of a third archetype that has existed since ancient times: the wise guide. Hence, they do not have personal names and are only called Writer, Professor and Stalker.

Just like the figure of the stalker in this movie, in Greek mythology the guide or the *psychopomp* was a person who showed people's souls their way to heaven or hell and made them take consciousness about what was still left in their existence. Similarly, in *Stalker*, as The Zone is a complex and almost sacred place that represents the human mind, Writer and Professor are guided by the stalker towards their own minds or their individual consciousness. Thus, The Room, which is the powerful centre of The Zone, may represent the nucleus of human consciousness and reaching it implies an ultimate understanding of oneself. Therefore, the purpose of the stalker is to guide these two troubled, confused and unfortunate individuals towards a real understanding of their inner selves. The main purpose of the two visitors is to find true happiness by reaching The Room: a state of absolute consciousness, a place where they will unveil their true selves and discover what they really desire.

Before the three main characters reach The Zone, the movie has no colours and everything seems to be tinted with a tone of sepia. This represents 'the real world', the dim and monotonous aura that, from Tarkovsky's perspective, accompanies modern society. In contrast, however dangerous, The Zone is an interesting, lively, colourful and hopeful place that represents the power of the individual mind. In a way, the vitality of this place suggests that we hold

something quite precious inside us, even if we are part of a chaotic society. Therefore, from my perspective, this beautiful and sacred place should not be interpreted as a real physical location. The fact that Tarkovsky chose to create The Zone as a magical place that originated from an alien invasion is no coincidence, as it represents a mental location that is always changing. It is a place that cannot be predicted nor fully understood.

This peculiar way of depicting The Zone and its relationship with the human mind could be the reason why the main characters cannot walk in arbitrary directions and must follow their guide all the time. The stalker himself is guided by the nature of The Zone and by the piece of white cloth that he throws before walking, which is a reference to the unmanageable destiny that we must all surrender to. Later, the stalker is guided by an intriguing black dog that appears in the middle of the film. Likewise, in ancient Greece, a similar dog known as the Cerberus was the guardian of hell (also known as the hound of Hades). This is another reference to Greek mythology and may explain why the stalker felt connected to the black dog since they first met and felt the need of taking it back home at the end of the film.

During the long and arduous journey through The Zone, the only purpose of both the writer and the scientist was to reach The Room, the centre of this magical place, and satisfy their utmost wishes. Meanwhile, the careful stalker did not want to fail them and was afraid of making the same mistakes as a previous stalker that he used to know, who is always referred to as Porcupine. Consequently, he constantly encourages his two companions to maintain a positive state of mind and a respectful attitude towards The Zone. From his point of view, his illegal and dangerous duty as a stalker was of the highest importance, as he helped unfortunate individuals become conscious about their inner selves and, therefore, be able to make their true wishes come true.

As it was mentioned before, when they all begin to approach the centre of The Zone, the writer and the scientist start to unveil their flaws. The long and introspective dialogues between the three characters demonstrate that Writer and Professor are sceptic and materialistic men who

do not really enjoy their jobs or their personal lives. They are both ambitiously selfish and their primary goal in life is to be more notorious, earn the Nobel Prize and be admired by others. Meanwhile, they both share a pessimistic attitude towards the world and an extremist position when defending their personal ideals. These negative factors constantly worry the stalker, as in *The Zone* “even the most wretched will die if they don’t know how to behave” (Stalker, 1979). So, as the two visitors become more conscious, we start to realise how ignorant they are about how they really are inside. Even if they are visiting this place to find hope and free themselves from a dark world, they become more imprisoned by realising that there is also darkness within them.

When interpreting *The Zone* as a mental place rather than as a physical location, there are several aspects of its environment that can be regarded as metaphorical references to the human mind. Some are more evident than others, but we can find many of these references throughout the film. For example, there is a scene where we can observe piles of sand that have a brain-like texture while a few birds fly above it. One of the birds suddenly disappears in mid-air while the other one flies normally above the ground. These birds could be understood as a specific kind of thought or idea inside the brain, perhaps our most idealistic aspirations or our dreams. Hence, the bird that disappeared airborne may symbolise oblivion and shattered dreams. This is only one of many metaphors that Tarkovsky used with the purpose of attributing *The Zone* qualities of the human mind.

There is also the constant reiteration of the use of water. In some scenes, especially in the one that the stalker is apparently dreaming while verses from the Bible are recited, we can see a wide variety of objects under water. This is a representation of the unconscious; those thoughts that lay in the most profound places of our mind. As we cannot access them voluntarily, the water separates these ideas from the outside world, the conscious mind, and therefore serves as an intermediary substance that separates both parts of our minds. This can be interpreted as a clear psychological reference: for an unconscious thought to become conscious it must go through this

purifying water and we can only see this while we dream, while we are not in a state of mental awareness.

When they finally reach The Room, the stalker tells Writer and Professor to try to think about their whole life as soon as they enter this magical place and make their wishes. Considering The Room as a symbol for an utmost state of consciousness and inner understanding, the action of embracing the past is fundamental in the quest of realizing what each visitor genuinely desires for their future. From a psychological perspective, “remembering the past and thinking about the future are related processes” (Oettingen, Sevincer and Gollwitzer, 2018) and making a positive life-changing wish at The Room would require a high level of self-acceptance and mental stability. Therefore, considering the instability and pessimism of Writer and Professor, they are not capable of entering despite all the effort they made to reach this miraculous site. They are afraid of looking back at their past and embracing their genuine desires, afraid of becoming conscious of who they really are and of having the capability of changing their future.

In addition, Professor wanted to destroy this place with a bomb that he had carried in his backpack during the whole journey (perhaps destroying it was his only intention in the first place). The sceptic scientist argued that such a powerful place could become a dangerous weapon in the wrong hands. After a series of dialogues, discussions and fights with the stalker, they all sit down and surrender to the daunting and unbearable Room. The stalker had failed his duty to guide them towards consciousness and the visitors had chosen to remain hopeless and ignorant of who they really are. After this long and arduous journey to The Zone, they all go back home. Neither of them had accomplished their actual purpose. Almost at the end of the film, the frustrated stalker tells his wife that Writer and Professor, who are supposed to be a representation of the highest and most capable citizens of his country, are incapable of truly believing in anything. By saying this, he implies that the two visitors only pretend to be wise and confident individuals, while on the inside they have nothing but a troubled soul and a corrosive way of thinking.

In contrast to what the writer and the scientist represent, there is the figure of the stalker's disabled daughter, who demonstrates a thoughtful, sensible and emotional attitude in the few scenes that she appears. As the daughter of a stalker, this child may represent a new generation that is not yet ready to go to The Zone or perhaps does not yet have the necessity of reaching a state of consciousness. She represents someone with a pure and peaceful mind that observes the world with clarity, which is the reason why she is depicted as a character with superpowers. In the last scene of the film she demonstrates that she can use the power of her mind to move random objects in the kitchen. Perhaps, from her perspective the world is not a dark place as the adults believe. Hence, she embodies a future generation with a power of change. Although she cannot yet walk (and therefore visit The Zone), she may have been born with the hope and with the true understanding of the world that his father's generation has already forgotten.

Even if *Stalker* is a movie that can lead to a wide variety of interpretations, the key aspect when analysing its symbology is to consider The Zone as a mental place of hope, instead of as a mere physical location with magical characteristics. The movie takes place in a dystopic and repressive society where the main character guides two grey-souled individuals towards a colourful and hopeful place. This place represents the human mind at its maximum splendour; they visit it with the intention of finding hope inside them and, therefore, of accomplishing their true aspirations. However, they gradually realise that they do not know what they desire, as there is darkness and selfishness within them. Hence, they are not worthy of reaching the powerful Room and cannot be truly happy in their current state.

Finally, they return home hopeless and face a world that is always sepia when seen through their eyes. Still, they now know that there is a hopeful place called The Zone where those who are ready and truly understand it will find real happiness and accomplish their honest desires. With this movie, Tarkovsky brilliantly criticises those who surrender to a dark state of mind and adopt a hopeless attitude towards the world. Also, *Stalker* cleverly illustrates a contrast between

the hope of emerging generations and the corruptive inner state of many adult individuals. As the stalker cleverly stated (Stalker, 1979):

Let them be helpless like children, because weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing. When a man is just born, he is weak and flexible. When he dies, he is hard and insensitive. When a tree is growing, it's tender and pliant. But when it's dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are death's companions. Pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being. Because what has hardened will never win.

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[Accessed 1 Jan. 2020].