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*Sculpting in Time:
Tarkovsky and the Thinking of Cinema*

Abstract

This essay explores the theoretical implications of cinema as "thinking". In his books on cinema, Gilles Deleuze has often observed that cinema has the capacity to produce its own concepts of time, memory and consciousness. While Deleuze's influence on cinema studies has increased, cinema is still widely regarded as a type of representation of reality or a projection of it, an idea which is based on cinema's use of "the real". When the idea that cinema is a type of thinking is introduced, it is easier to analyse the medium specific techniques it employs to create concepts about time and space that are representative of the world it creates. The idea of cinema as thinking is employed within an analysis of the concept of the "crystalline image" in Tarkovsky's films, *The Mirror* and *Stalker*.

Keywords: Film thinking, Gilles Deleuze, time-image, crystalline cinema.

1. Preliminaries. The film "thinks"

What do we see at the beginning of *Stalker*? An old desolate room, the walls gradually deteriorating before our very eyes, windows that don't seem to allow any natural light to come into a room which bears signs of its construction and signs of the passing of time. The walls "breathe" as though they were made out of human tissue, as though they were part of a living organism. The room at the beginning of Tarkovsky's film is a space that "expresses" itself independently of the plot and the movement of the characters. The room's lines are disrupted by inexplicable folds in space which create a density of time. It is almost as if the film unveils a baroque-like structure. There are two types of *folds* unfolding to "infinity". First of all, there are the "folds of matter", which are embodied by the continuous metamorphoses of space (buildings, industrial structures interwoven with natural landscapes, the ruins of humanity superimposed on natural spaces), and second of all, the "pleats in the soul" (dream sequences, images filmed through water membranes which hold the mark of inner life). As the author of *The Fold* writes, "folds are in the soul and authentically exist only in the soul" (23). But this is no less true for the cinema image. As Deleuze argues, "The whole world is only a virtuality that currently exists only in the folds of the soul which convey it, the soul implementing inner pleats through which it endows itself with a representation of the enclosed world".

The "soul" of the cinema (or the camera) – as in most of Tarkovsky's films – moves as if it was floating through air, casting an almost unreal gaze in which space is constructed as a "fabric of experience" (Bird 53). Even at this stage, the film constructs its own field of consciousness. The film is a "thinking" entity. Outside of our thinking the film uses its own speed (long takes, slow tracking shots in the case of Tarkovsky), its own notions of movement, its own concepts of space and time. It constructs very specific ideas about memory, identity and being. It creates a very specific, medium oriented type of knowledge, which is delivered through images of "crystalline description" (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 67). The film is a kind of non-philosophy, it produces a type of non-thought which takes place "in the hiatuses, intervals and meantime of a non-objectifiable brain" (Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 209). It disrupts the principles of reason and judgement while becoming a choice of existence with its own will.

In an interview on *The Time-image*, Deleuze makes a plea against the idea of a cinema-image defined by the concept of representation. The cinema-image is not a representation because it is never that which is in the present, thus arguing against a very established idea in cinema studies.

The image itself is an ensemble of time relations from the present which merely flows, either as a common multiple, or as the smallest divisor. Relations of time are never seen in ordinary perception, but they are seen in the image, as long as it is a creative one. The image renders time relations – relations that can't be reduced to the present – sensible and visible. For example, an image shows a man walking along a riverbank in a mountain region; in this image there are at least three coexistent "durations", three rhythms. The relation of time is the coexistence of durations in the image, which has nothing to do with the present, that is, what the image represents. In this sense, Tarkovsky challenges the distinction between edit and shot, because he defines cinema by the "pressure of time" in the shot. (*The Brain is the Screen* 371)

As a field of research, film studies have been governed by the dominant image of thought – representation, with an emphasis on the model of the eye. In Deleuze's vision of cinema, the image becomes a territory of the brain,

It is only when movement becomes automatic that the artistic essence of the image is realized, producing a shock to thought, communicating vibrations to the cortex, touching the nervous and cerebral system directly. Because the cinematographic image itself "makes" movement, because it makes what the other arts are restricted to demanding (or to saying), it brings together what is essential in the other arts. (*Cinema 2* 151)

In cinema, images have specific, intrinsic characteristics. Their classification thus demands a material conception. Deleuze goes so far as to even question the utility of notion of the "imaginary" in cinema. He always underlines that *cinema produces reality*. It does so in the sense that it does not produce *an image of the world*, but forms *a rhizome with the world*. There is an aparallel evolution of cinema and the world. Images produce *encounters* that enable thought, a new kind of thought and a new kind of knowledge which is non-conceptual, but material and sensorial in nature. Focusing, editing, camera movement, sound, framing, rhythm, all "think" a certain relation to the image being formed. While philosophy produces ideas in the precise sense, film is a poetical thinking that produces a different type of "ideas". The "concepts" take the form of the event. It is a thought which owes a great deal to its *plane of immanence*. Whenever a frame is shot, the thinking of cinema throws into play another event of thought. Every

director, with every film and every frame and every shot filmed brings into existence an event of film thinking. With every shot, the thinking of cinema is an ever changing reality, a reality that has its own "voice", which opens itself to a multiplicity of virtual images. Although cinema uses the real, it does so in a way which immediately transforms and refigures it. In order to fully understand the potential of cinema one should be able to acknowledge that film is not a fiction about the world but that *film is a world in its own right*.

As a director, Tarkovsky has always repeated that cinema needs to develop medium specific techniques, which are independent of linguistic practices. In *Sculpting in time* he argues that "the dominant all-powerful factor of the film-image is *rhythm*, expressing the course of time within the frame" (113). He also emphasises that the cinema image comes into being in the course of shooting – existing within the frame. Tarkovsky once declared that during shooting he focuses on trying to record the passing of time. But he does not make any reference about the nature of the time being recorded. It is certainly not real time, but a time which is specific of cinema. In *Stalker* we don't have a clear time reference. It is this "sense of time", and not time as personal duration that gives every director the opportunity of revealing his individuality in the medium. *The creation of the sense of time makes the event of filmic thought possible*,

It seems to me that time in a shot has to flow independently and with dignity, then the ideas will find their place in it and without fuss, bustle or any trace of haste. Feeling the rhythmicity of a shot is rather like feeling a truthful word in literature. An inexact word in writing, like inexact rhythm in film, destroys the veracity of the work. ... Assembly, editing, disturbs the passage of time, interrupts it and simultaneously gives it something new. The distortion of time can be a means of giving it rhythmical expression. *Sculpting in time!* (Tarkovsky 120–21)

Tarkovsky goes on to underline the fact that the merging of shots of uneven time pressure may result in compromising the integrity of the shot. The merging of shots in montage has to come from inner necessity, as an immanent process going on in the frame.

2. Tarkovsky and "crystalline cinema"

As a film-maker, Tarkovsky belongs to the group of directors that Deleuze considers responsible for creating the break between the movement-image and the time-image. The history of cinema is seen by Deleuze as a set of

conditions necessary for the actualization of certain types of images. In the first part of the twentieth century cinema functioned according to an organic regime. Sensory-motor actions were represented in different types of images such as: The perception-image, the affection-image and the action-image. Perception was organized in the image according to spatial criteria, while time was represented indirectly through movement and, more importantly, through montage, as was realised by montage pioneers like Sergei Eisenstein.

According to Deleuze, organic cinema also meant a rather considerable trust in the qualities of narrative continuity. He assumes that, in an organic description, the real is recognizable by its continuity. We recognize that which we call the "real" in cinema by the continuous shots which establish it and also by the laws which determine successions, simultaneities and permanencies,

It is a regime of localizable relations, actual linkages, legal, causal, logical connections. It is clear that this system includes the unreal, the recollection, the dream and the imaginary but as contrast. Thus, the imaginary will appear in the forms of caprice and discontinuity, each image being in a state of disconnection with another into which it is transformed. This will be a second pole of existence, which will be defined by pure appearance to consciousness, and no longer by legal connections. ... The organic system will, therefore, consist of these two modes of existence as two poles in opposition to each other: Linkages of the actual from the point of view of the real, and actualizations in consciousness from the point of view of the imaginary. (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 123)

After the war, cinema produces a new kind of image, *the time-image*, which belongs to what he describes as a "crystalline regime". For Deleuze, the crystal-image has in fact two sides: The actual and the virtual, which are not to be confused, as someone would confuse the real and the imaginary. That does not affect their discernibility. On the other hand, indiscernibility is an "objective" illusion. It does not erase the distinction between the two sides, but rather makes it non-attributable in a relation of reciprocal reversibility. He argues that "there is no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual, the latter becoming virtual through the same relation" (67).

If the movement-image linked perception-images to affection-images and action-images, the "crystalline-image" can no longer give a response depending on recognizable logical, legal or causal connections. As a counter effect to this break, the images become dependent

on the constructions of the mind: Creations of memory and perceptions of time. It is what Tarkovsky explains when he writes that a director has to make his imagination available for recording the passing of time which is present in the frame – his task being, of course, to create images that capture the "sense of time" through their immediate, unique and irreplaceable character.

In a crystalline regime, perception is no longer linked to actions and affections, thus becoming purely optical. That was also Tarkovsky's goal: To create a purely optical language, to give the language of cinema a greater autonomy, to create, within a frame, a pure being of time. The crystalline regime comes into being whenever in a movie we can no longer determine the path from the virtual (the past or the future) to the actual (present). The virtual is contained within a mental image, such as the image of the man in *The Mirror*. For Deleuze, Tarkovsky has set out to create in his film one of the greatest crystal-images in the history of cinema, "*The Mirror* is a turning crystal" (*Cinema 2* 73). The same is said about Herzog's film, *Heart of glass*.

The man in Tarkovsky's film is the reference of all the memories, thoughts and dreams of which we are spectators. But, throughout the entire film, we can hardly catch a glimpse of his face. There is only one scene where we see part of his hand. That is because the memories, thoughts and dreams that make up the film are the creation of his memory, of his mind and of his perception of the passing of time. In fact, the actual present is quite scarce in *The Mirror*. The actual and the virtual crystallize into one another, creating what Deleuze calls the crystal of time, which is *the indivisible unity between the actual image and the virtual image*. In *Mirror*, Tarkovsky creates something which can be called never-seen time (the passing of time), the crystallising of the actual and the virtual (the virtual is opposed to that which is actual). For instance, Marcel Proust calls "virtual" a memory that is real but not actual. The virtual is also that which is ideal but not abstract because it is contained in a regime of pure immanence. The prototype image for the virtual is the mirror, thus making Tarkovsky's title even more accurate. Deleuze explains his understanding of the virtual in *Bergsonism*,

... We give ourselves a real which is ready-made, preformed, pre-existent to itself, and that will pass into existence according to an order of successive limitations. Everything is already *completely-given*: All of the real in the image, in the pseudo-actuality of the possible. Then the sleight of hand becomes obvious: If the real is said to resemble the possible, is this not in fact because the real

was expected to come about by its own means, to "project backward" a fictitious image of it, and to claim that it was possible at any time, before it happened? In fact, it is not the real that resembles the possible, it is the possible that resembles the real, because it has been abstracted from the real once made, arbitrarily extracted from the real like a sterile double. ... Evolution takes place from the virtual to the actual. Evolution is actualization, actualization is creation. (98)

The Mirror makes another one of Tarkovsky's points clear: In capturing the sense of time through the creation of time-images (as Bergson and Deleuze would say) a chronological representation of the past present and future is no longer needed. In the film, the three instances of time overlap and are sometimes linked by the same image: The image of the mother, which is also the image of the wife. In the logic of crystalline description this is not a mistake or an error. It's not a question of the main character confusing his mother's image with the image of his wife. He is very aware of the difference and this is obvious in his acknowledging it. In fact, in *Mirror*, the two aspects of time – the actual image of the passing present and the virtual image of the past that is preserved do not have assignable limits. They exchange during the process of crystallization to such extent that they can become indiscernible. Deleuze is very clear on this point,

The relationship between the actual and the virtual takes the form of a circuit, but it does so in two ways: Sometimes the actual refers to the virtual as to other things in the vast circuits where the virtual is actualized; sometimes the actual refers to the virtual as its own virtual, in the smallest circuits where the virtual crystallizes with the actual. (*Dialogues* 151–52)

The indiscernibility of the actual from the virtual within the crystal-image is also conveyed in *Mirror* through what Robert Bird calls "the material thickness and opacity of the cinema screen" (85). He assumes that *The Mirror* is not a film of Tarkovsky's life but of his visual imagination. Even though Robert Bird does not mention it in his study, it is well known that the film-maker struggled to make the scenery of the film as close as possible to the memories of his childhood, using photographs to reconstruct a life-size version of the dacha in Ignat'ev forest in which he lived with his mother before the war. These details, coupled with the fact that he cast his own mother in the role of the old woman and the film had over twenty versions of montage contribute even more to the allusiveness of the images in *The Mirror*. As Robert Bird observed, several discrete levels of memory

are coupled and intermingled with several scenes from history and significant paintings and photographs. We must not forget the episode where the Pushkin letter about the faith of the Russian people in history is read. But the most allusive images in the film are, of course, the dream sequences. All of them have in common the fact that they convey the awakening of the child's consciousness. The task in *The Mirror* was a very difficult one for the director.

The film was mostly seen as a vanity project by the bureaucrats at Mosfilm who did not understand the complexity of the images and the experimental character of the film's narrative. The image of the film follows one of Tarkovsky's most cherished principles: The more personal the images are, the more open they will be to audiences. The awakening of consciousness is conveyed through a couple of scenes of startling beauty. There is the image of the forest and the tall grass in Ignat' evo, with the table in the middle of the meadow (see fig. 8.1). The wind of an upcoming storm blows the objects on the table so that they fall on the ground. This is all filmed in subtle slow-motion as if it would be seen in someone's imagination. In fact, previous to that, a door is opened by the small child and he can see his mother peeling potatoes for dinner. The door is opened as if someone would open a "door" in his mind, discovering layers of memory. The scene with the table is followed by an image of the dacha filmed in slight slow-motion with the sound of the storm-wind as a kind of soundtrack to the sequence. This creates a very allusive account of the awakening of a child's consciousness, but it is this allusiveness that makes the images more authentic. Tarkovsky had received a lot of letters from people within the USSR that have seen the film. They all congratulated him on making a film which was very close to their own childhood experience. The director had in fact accomplished what he set out to do: To create an *image of consciousness* which would be very open, in the sense that it would create the feeling of seeing things for the first time – which is how many people describe childhood consciousness. He had accomplished this through very complex and often disconcerting images. At the top of these images is the now famous image of levitation included in the dream sequence. We can acknowledge that it is an important moment in the film because it is the only time we see the face of the father. Because of the overlapping of images, whether or not it is the face of the protagonist's father we don't know. In *Mirror* there is a constant indiscernibility of dimensions in space and of dimensions in time. Robert Bird writes that this seems to convey the borderline moment of awakening. He also analyses how the clash of real and imaginary is underscored by the camera, "in a single tracking shot too smooth to be Alexei's point of view" (87).

The Mirror is regarded as Tarkovsky's most allusive film because the multi-layered sequences of memories and dreams, coupled with newsreel footage do not seem to provide the sense of a plot. There is no clear question to which the spectator may come to an answer. The plot of the film mainly consists of images of childhood consciousness and dream consciousness, each borrowing traits from one another. If there is a sense of *The Mirror* that escapes the spectator at the first viewing, it is because it's impossible to find an exit from *imaginary space and time* – which is the realm of the film. Even though a lot of people can relate to the film as a very authentic depiction of consciousness this is possible only within the close space of the screen. The allusiveness of the meaning of the film is in fact not being able to escape its own thinking and logic (see fig. 8.2).

3. *Stalker* – The "Image" of Interiority

The case of *Stalker* coincides with a period of extreme struggle in Tarkovsky's work as a director in the USSR. Even though it is not the focus of this essay to discuss the film-maker's complex relationship with the officials at Mosfilm and his struggle with censorship, we have to mention that most of his films were marked by great trials. The most dramatic of these is probably the case of *Stalker* which, after repeated postponing, was finally approved for filming. We know from Tarkovsky's diaries that he lost a whole year of filming because of bad experimental Kodak film which could not be developed and, as a result, was ruined. The episode was probably the cause of the director's heart problems that followed the ruining of the film. Tarkovsky had a heart attack at the age of forty-six and suffered from deep depression after his first year of work on the film was compromised. He committed himself to an asylum following his health problems.

When the opportunity for re-filming had presented itself, the director was only approved enough funds for the first half of the film. He also changed a lot of the members of the original film crew, choosing to do a lot of the work himself.

The case of *Stalker* is very unique in the director's career. The plot of the film has been very much simplified in order to give the images more autonomy. The most part of the film's narrative takes place on the same day, in the same place, without much "action" or time elapsing. The setting can be divided into two parts: What happens inside the Zone and what happens outside the Zone. These settings differ in colour, style, rhythm, and camera movement. They also include the third world of dream sequences that belongs to both spaces. What happens inside the Zone is filmed in

colour, while outside the Zone is filmed in sepia. Perhaps the most important aspect of the film's style is the movement of the camera – the slow-tracking signature Tarkovskian rhythm. The camera gazes upon a world which is created and very closely observed. The slow pace of the film – which some find excruciating compared to the dynamic style of today's cinema – is very much a result of the careful, slow scrutinizing of space and objects in outdoor locations. The "floating" camera does not only reveal the location of objects and the movement of the characters, but also their inner life.

An air of "consciousness" surrounds everything and everyone in the film. We know from Tarkovsky's diary that for him the contemporary world had become a spiritual waste land and that, in his view, this was the source for much of man's suffering. During the years of *Stalker* he often wrote that the drama of contemporary man was his flight from inner life, the fear of interiority. As a counter-effect, the film possesses a very deep sense of the character's inner life and the "inner life" of space. From the opening of Stalker's home to the landscapes of the Zone and the home-coming ending, everything seems to be a continuation of inner life. In a sense, the film has no outside. Everything happens inside. There is no sense of the exterior. In fact, interior and exterior function as a continuum. From this point of view, the Deleuzian metaphor of the fold is appropriate to describe the space of the film.

It is presumptuous to assume that one can write about *Stalker* in a short essay but, for now, I am interested in one aspect of the film's multi-layered image. As I mentioned before, the third world (the dream world) belongs to both places, the Zone and also outside the Zone. What interests me most is the famous water sequence or, as it has become known in film studies, "the pool sequence". It is probably one of the most enigmatic scenes in cinema.

"Stalker's dream" begins with a shot of Stalker's face (see fig. 8.3). The image reverts to beautiful sepia while following objects immersed in water (see fig. 8.4). The immersion of the objects in water gives us a very waking-dream type of consciousness. It is as if the film of water through which the objects are filmed represents the "ocean" of consciousness, a "sea" of inner life. And it is also significant that the shot starts from the image of Stalker with his eyes closed and arrives at the same place, ending with the same image it has started with. There is no trajectory. The tracking shot has no real trajectory. It is as if it has "travelled" from point A to point A. From a logical point of view it has not moved at all. This kind of "still" movement illustrates the progress of ideas in the mind. It is the movement in

the character's mind but, more importantly, the movement of thought, the thought which is produced by the film.

There have been many speculations about the meaning of the Zone and especially about the meaning of this particular scene. I suspect the debate will continue for many years to come. It is one of the most powerful images in the history of cinema. For now, I wish to draw the attention to the potential of film as a "type" of thinking. If we analyse the scene from this point of view, it gains a medium oriented meaning. If the film is a new kind of thought, then the time and the place of the scene become the time and place of the film's "mind". The spiritual implications of the film have been analysed quite often, most of them converging on the meaning of the Zone. Some have speculated that it is the space or the image in which dream is indistinguishable from memory. For Slavoj Žižek, the Zone is "the material presence, the Real of an absolute Otherness incompatible with the rules and laws of our universe" (237–39). He even makes a list of USSR specific connotations of the word "zone".

His inventory contains the zone as the Gulag, a space which was poisoned by a nuclear disaster like Chernobyl, the secluded domain in which the communist nomenclature lives, the foreign territory to which access is not permitted like the enclosed West Berlin in the former East Germany and a place where a meteorite struck – like Tunguska, Siberia. He comes to the conclusion that the question, "What is the meaning of the Zone?" is false and misleading – which is a good escape from a hermeneutic dead-end. He concludes that the idea of the Zone as a "limit" is important, because it is the primary condition for the presence of the Other. I want to even go further to value Robert Bird's account that makes a bold statement: The Zone is the demarcation area in which an event can occur "akin to the screen of the cinema" (69). I want to take his analysis to the extent of its conclusion: The Zone represents "the thinking of cinema", it is the non-place (non-movement or interior movement) in which its non-thought is produced.

What remains for us is to give the knowledge produced by "the thought" of cinema the autonomy it deserves. Independence is needed if cinema is to create its own very unique kind of truth: A truth in which the effect of the real is indistinguishable from that of the imaginary, a place where the actual and the virtual melt into one another to create the "crystals of time".

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Fig. 8.1. Andrei Tarkovsky.
The Mirror.
Table scene. 1975.
Freeze screen capture.
Film. Artificial Eye. DVD.



Fig. 8.2. Andrei Tarkovsky.
The Mirror.
Levitation scene. 1975.
Freeze screen capture.
Film. Artificial Eye. DVD.



Fig. 8.3. Andrei Tarkovsky.
Stalker.
Stalker's dream.1979.
Freeze screen capture.
Film.Artificial Eye. DVD.



Fig. 8.4. Andrei Tarkovsky.
Stalker.
Pool sequence. 1979.
Freeze screen capture.
Film. Artificial Eye. DVD.