

Photons and Electrons in the *Mirror*

**A verbal understanding of photon and electron mechanics
and their role in Andrey Tarkovsky's film *Mirror*.**

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'Physics is unable to stand on its own two feet, but needs a metaphysics on which to support itself, whatever fine airs it may assume towards the latter.'

- Schopenhauer¹

¹ (Moore, 1994, p.176)

Abstract

Our concepts of a concrete reality and the material nature to things set in a continuity of time are only a small aspect of what our consciousness truly holds. We define this reality by the many systems of code, belief, habit, nurture, nature and biology that we inherit. From an early age human beings are presented with a spatial, emotional and cognitive awareness of those things in their immediate spheres and orbits namely; family, play, games, expression, mirrored identity etc. The problem, or adventure, for a human being therefore becomes the ability to begin to stand alone and apart from these codes and systems, grow and adapt to them and begin to define themselves in relation to these systems whilst also surviving, living and communicating with many others in order to build meaning into the unfathomable question of existence both collectively and privately.

Since early in the last century these same concepts and systems have become more obsolete as the keenest minds on the planet trained all their efforts on an understanding of the mechanics at play in the natural world, in the 'ether' and continue to emerge with more and more certain and puzzling findings today. Classical physics became quantum physics became quantum electro dynamics. These things still do not penetrate the average psyche and have yet to manifest in any 'visible' way that humans can comprehend.

I believe the film *Mirror* by Andrey Tarkovsky presents one of the first and most direct engagements in art with these phenomena. Tarkovsky wrote extensively about film and art and perception theory in his masterwork 'Sculpting in Time'. The compression of light into rhythm and time presented a multi-faceted, deeper view of life. How this relates to memory is one of the lesser investigated, yet understood, areas of this film in particular. I want to look at how emotion reacts with physics, how this perhaps goes beyond our cognitive, spatial and temporal understanding of the world around us and is a fine illustrative tool for the

abstract qualities behind quantum mechanics, the play of light photons and electrons and metaphysics.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to draw the spheres of emotion and cognitive modes of consciousness closer to the world of theoretical quantum physics. I have chosen to represent the phenomena of light play involved in human immersion and interaction with photons through the art of cinema. In order to discuss these abstractions in the most direct path available, I have chosen one film *Mirror* by the Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky to be the prime example of the form for my theoretical analyses. The interplay of memory, perception, light, rhythm and time in Tarkovsky's film along with his pioneering book on cinema, truth and the artists path *Sculpting In Time* present invaluable first hand resources for a theoretical analysis and interpretation of the artist's application of his theories.

The work of Tarkovsky, though regarded, is in my opinion one of the most underexplored yet most fruitful starting points for any modern analysis of immersive environments, spirituality, human consciousness and metaphysics. Max Born, the leading German physicist, inspiration and backbone to most of the groundbreaking work of quantum theory done at Göttingen University in the early parts of the 20th Century, stated, 'I am now convinced that theoretical physics is actual philosophy.'² These compelling words have motivated me to explore the many chasms existing between the theoretical and what we perceive as reality, indeed, the inability for logic to allow for an actual limit and to accept humanity and unknowns simultaneously.

Within this thesis, I propose the concept of experience to be greater than that of time. I propose Tarkovsky's monumental concept of 'Sculpting in Time' to be a forerunner to a deeper understanding of cinema I will refer to as 'Compressions on Light and Shadow'.

² (Bronowski, 1973 p.229)

2. Mirror

“It is a mistake to talk about the artist looking for his subject
in fact, the subject grows within him like a fruit
and begins to demand expression
it is like childbirth
the poet has nothing to be proud of
he is not master of the situation but a servant
creative work is his only possible form of existence
and his every work is like a deed he has no power to annul
for him to be aware that such a sequence of deeds is due and right
that it lies in the very nature of things
he has to have faith in the idea
for only faith interlocks the system of images
(for which read: system of life)”³

- Andrey Tarkovsky

Andrey Tarkovsky stands beside only a handful of filmmaker in this first century of cinema as a pioneer of the form. He is one of the few figures to have explored the deeper levels of relevance of cinema and to have created a body of work outside of mainstream narrative cinema language as we know it. His work stands the test of time like significant architecture of all that is achievable, imaginable and inspiring to the filmmaker and the viewer simultaneously. His most daring work and, in his own opinion the most important, is the film *Mirror*. In this chapter and throughout this paper I will reference the myriad of relevant examples and points of departure that this film presents. With this film, Tarkovsky succeeded in showing how cinema and the viewer can combine at an enormous height of engagement that pushes the film and the universal elements captured in it closer to a metaphysical experience once the viewer engages. The film stretches the viewers concepts of time, memory, coherence, adherence, feeling and faith within the ‘ether’, that unknown quantity that surrounds us all, everything that is ‘I’ and is not ‘I’. Otherwise the film falls apart as slow-moving dross that bares very little resemblance to more commercial ‘plastic’ cinema in terms of language and tone and representations of ‘reality’.

There have been many appropriations of these universal themes in Tarkovsky’s work for the sake of film criticism and his work has lamentably become a

³ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 43)

shorthand for elitist European cinema conventions. The tone, visionary style and pace are assumed rather than the more meaningful sense of depth of an artists exploration of memory and experience in search of being truthful to him or herself and emerging with a valid presentation of this exploration. To this end, I will essentially be citing Tarkovsky's first-hand interpretation of his own work and the processes of thought and creation that went into conjuring these feats as laid down in his stellar book on cinema, art and the role of the artist, namely, *Sculpting in Time*. With this book, the loose film script treatment to *Mirror* and the resulting film we are presented with a myriad of illustrations of the artists thoughts, process and application. Tarkovsky's words and images present us with a lucid journey through the human mindscape and help the viewer decode the hidden aspects of their metaphysical engagement with his work. Only Van Gogh's paintings, the well-documented letters to his brother Theo and Dr. Gachet's medical reports rival this in terms of a first-hand in-depth analysis of the creative process and fruits of artistic creation in modern times.

2.1 Inspiration

“As far back as 1964 Tarkovsky had put down in writing his idea of making a film about a man's thoughts, memories and dreams in a way which would reveal his interior world without the hero appearing on screen, as he would in a conventional film narrative. Tarkovsky wanted to reproduce, through the medium of film, the lyrical hero of literature and poetry – absent from view but permeating the work with his sensibility. In the same article, Tarkovsky spoke of the importance of childhood memories, but also the need to rework them into a reconstruction of the past informed by art. The great divide between memory and reality meant that the latter, for him, invariably destroyed the poetry of the thing remembered.”⁴

This passage explains the tricky and personal difficulties at the inception of what was to emerge as the film *Mirror* in the year 1975 having undergone a number of drastic rewrites, rethinks right down to a working title.

“The archival history of *Mirror* reveals a long and labyrinthine journey in search of a form to contain meaning and memory. Fragments of stories, dialogue, images, eras and experience were

⁴ (Synessios, 1999, p. 251)

picked up and developed, then abandoned, only to be reinvented in a different form, or with a shift in emphasis and meaning. Endless cuts were called for, changes made, episodes reshuffled, and although Tarkovsky's editor Ludmilla Feiginova, remembered the film coming together quite easily, Tarkovsky's work diaries substantiate his account of a film which refused to cohere and fell apart along the way. Even the stream of prospective titles – 'Confession', 'Redemption', 'Martyrology', 'Why are you standing so far away?', 'The Raging Stream' – reveal this inward confusion. Misharin remembers that they spent at least a month going through dozens of possible titles. Somehow '*Mirror*' came up. Tarkovsky decided upon it because he was fascinated by the way it looked when written down: Зеркало."⁵

It is this difficulty in conjuring the film into existence, the impossibility of the project actually succeeding, this thin line between representing everything or nothing that sets *Mirror* apart from most other cinematic endeavors. Indeed, it is without doubt the most relevant title for a film. Why do people go to the cinema? To see a projection? To project themselves onto the screen? As a hero, a cathartic reaction to a villain, to soul search, to pine romance, to offload fears and horrors? In essence, people attend the cinema to hold up a mirror to themselves and their perceptions of their environment and to affirm or dispel thoughts and feelings that lie beyond their consciousness. Even in the sense of commercial cinema it is these factors that underpin an entertaining, engaging or compelling film. Tarkovsky received a great amount of letters from individuals whom had both loved and abhorred his film and these short notes help to present the great experiential difference in how a viewer may perceive the very same 'mirrored' images. One fan wrote to him,

"There's another kind of language, another form of communication: by means of feeling, and images. That is the contact that stops people being separated from each other, that brings down barriers. Will, feeling, emotion – these remove obstacles from between people who otherwise stand on opposite sides of a mirror, on opposite sides of a door...The frames of the screen move out, and the world which used to be partitioned off comes into us, becomes something real..."⁶

⁵ (Synessios, 1999, p. 255)

⁶ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 13)

Another viewer, however, offered a completely different reading of the exact same film,

“How vulgar, what trash! Ugh, how revolting! Anyhow, i think your film’s a blank shot. It certainly didn’t reach the audience, which is all that matters...” this man even feels that the cinema administration should be called to account: ‘One can only be astonished that those responsible for the distribution of films here in the USSR should allow such blunders.’ In fairness to the cinema administration, I have to say that ‘such blunders’ were permitted very seldom – on average once every five years; and when I received letters like that i used to be thrown into despair: yes, indeed, who was I working for, and why?”⁷

This last doubtful question in Tarkovsky’s interpretation of this letter clearly shows the two very conflicting sides to the role and purpose of an artist. Why do they work and who do they work for? *Mirror* is Tarkovsky’s most biographical work and in a great sense, demanded expression rather than being a logical extension of his craft,

“Several years before making the film i had decided simply to put on paper the memories that plagued me; at that point I had no thought of a film. It was to be a novella about the war-time evacuation, and the plot was to be centred on the military instructor at my school. Then i found that the subject was too slight to develop into a novella, and i never wrote it. But the incident, which had made a deep impression on me as a child, continued to torment me, and lived on in my memory until it had become a minor episode of the film.”⁸

It is quite obvious from this statement that something had stirred inside the director and would demand some form of expression or other. To take these nebulous half remembered thoughts that collected in the memory, trapped and triggered with emotion, those deep and murky thoughts that somehow define or influence a child’s mind and bring them into any form of animated existence is to undertake the impossible. This is where Tarkovsky saw the true potential of cinema to lie; in the ability to rouse and stir the universal aspects of these complex themes within each and every frame, in each and every viewer. The

⁷ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 8)

⁸ (Tarkovsky, 1987, ps. 128 & 129)

miraculous depth and understanding of what he was hoping to achieve is best explained in his own words.



Fig. 1 Still from the film *Mirror*

“As something amorphous, vague, with no skeleton or schema. Like a cloud. And only the central event of that day has become concentrated, like a detailed report, lucid in meaning and clearly defined. Against a background of the rest of the day, that event stands out like a tree in the mist...Isolated impressions of the day have set off impulses within us, evoked associations; objects and circumstances have stayed in our memory, but with no sharply defined contours, incomplete, apparently fortuitous. Can these impressions of life be conveyed through film? They undoubtedly can; indeed it is the especial virtue of cinema, as the most realistic of the arts, to be the means of such communication.”⁹

Within this project Tarkovsky felt the ‘artistic calling’ to combine his own interpretation of cinema language to those deeply felt personal feelings that his own memory, the memory of his family members (in particular his mother and his father), his own life as a child and his own adult life as a husband and a father to illustrate the phenomenal metaphysical resonance of these abstract entities and how they manifest on both our individual and collective psyche.

“It occurred to me then, that from these properties of memory a new working principle could be developed, on which an extraordinarily interesting film might be built. Outwardly the

⁹ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 23)

pattern of events, of the hero's actions and behaviour, would be disturbed. It would be the story of his thoughts, his memories and dreams. And then, without his appearing at all – at least in the accepted sense of the traditionally written film – it would be possible to achieve something highly significant: the expression, the portrayal, of the hero's individual personality, and the revelation of his interior world. Somewhere here there is an echo of the image of the lyrical hero incarnate in literature, and of course in poetry, he is absent from view, but what he thinks, how he thinks, and what he thinks about build up a graphic and clearly-defined picture of him. This subsequently became the starting point of *Mirror*.”¹⁰

This process of artistic disembodiment in a striving for a greater expression was something Tarkovsky had been striving towards in the culmination of his formative directing career up to this time. The essence of poetry and literature in helping to express these metaphysical qualities through a separation of the elements of voice, character, composition, intonation, style and expression seem to be ingrained in him since early childhood, especially by his father Arseniy Tarkovsky whom was a poet. His father's poetry features heavily in *Mirror* and enhances the lucid quality of the memory-story and the words spoken. How these expressions could articulate the incomprehensible sought further and deeper illustration in the son's own unique form of visual poetry.

2.2 Description



Fig. 2 Still from the film *Mirror*

From the beginning of *Mirror* we are presented with the uncanny and the strange. A boy turns on a television tube to begin the film. We are in. A young

¹⁰ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 29)

man undergoes a séance to correct a severe speech impediment. This is obviously a real documented event. We see the ability to suffer under the weight of the mind and the ability to focus and concentrate energy on a problem until it disappears in the one instant. The young man speaks loudly and clearly, the tension lifted and his world has changed. The opening title: *Mirror*.

The story of the film is an interweaving of a mother's life in Russia from two generations and is based on relationships with his own mother and his own childhood and his estranged wife, the mother to his son. The actress, Margarita Terekhova, plays both the wife and mother. This demands a degree of tolerance from the viewer as time and character are broken open and are only present to serve the memory-story. The faces of mother and wife have blurred in memory, the face of the actress is different and interpreted anew upon every single encounter. The film then begins to interweave memories from each of the two generations of women; the mother and the children's memory-stories revolve around the war-time evacuation, the absence of the father and the old country house. The wife's memory-story revolves around the rather strained relationship between her and her estranged husband, predominantly centred around bickering arguments discussing the well-being of their son and their respective relationships – her new lover, his inability to reconcile a difference with his mother etc.

The whole film is seen from the protagonist point of view, he is only present in a voice-over and a naturalized camera movement. The characters around him address him directly, thus, addressing the viewer directly or ignore him as we become witness to events. The broad themes and our familiarity with these tricky human situations and their uncanny depiction begin to fully immerse the viewer in the story and everything becomes familiar.

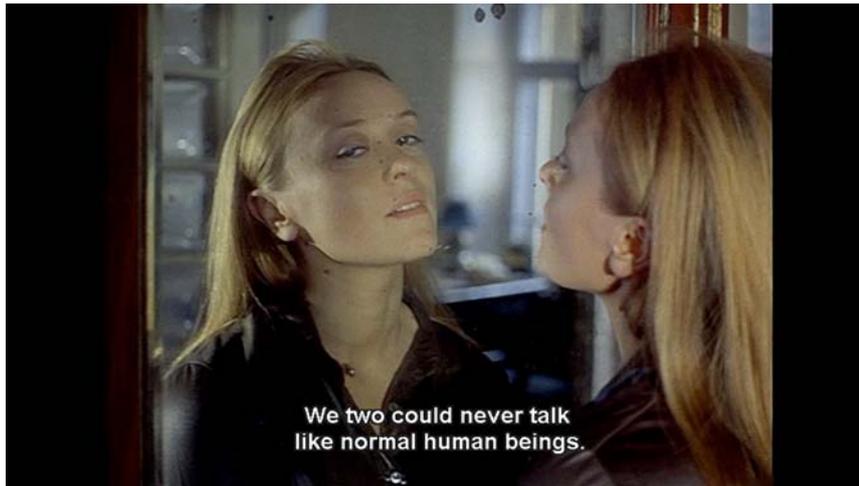


Fig. 3 Still from the film *Mirror*

This is something that was incredibly important to Tarkovsky and this sense of overlap of human interactions in common themes comes to the fore in a naturalistic sense before manifesting in other, deeper and richer ways.

“The dramatic composition of the film lies in the correlation of two generations of people, through the years in which one group were only just beginning their lives, while the other were already mature and concluding the important events of theirs. Finding the high points of the fundamental, determining, emotional commonality in the film, as well as the details and boundaries of their differences, will allow us – we hope – to give an answer to the film’s fundamental question: ‘What did Man live for, what does he live for and what will he live for; by what great, secret powers, invisible to our gaze...’¹¹

The most compelling aspects of this film begin to probe at us once we have accepted the limits of the plastic world we are experiencing. Tarkovsky displays his visual flair on a number of occasions throughout to further compel the viewer into a deeper engagement with the images. The opening scene after the séance prologue is one such scene. A random encounter between the mother and an amorous doctor on a fence becomes effortlessly charged within the greater scheme of things as a freak gust of wind blows up out of nowhere as the doctor departs. The underlying conviction to unveil these deeper stirrings is handled masterfully by Tarkovsky in the understated script and in the profound depiction of this event in the film.

¹¹ (Synessios, 1999, p. 261)

“Mother said nothing. He smiled, waved and strode down the beaten path, towards the turning to Tomshino. For a long time, mother followed him with her eyes. Then she slid off the fence and walked slowly home. A breath of wind sprang up and bowed the alder bush that grew by the fence.”¹²



Fig. 4 Stills from the film *Mirror*

How Tarkovsky penetrates the deeper meaning of these memories and how they mark the unconscious is something to behold throughout. These common, everyman themes, such as, experiencing freak weather is something familiar to all, thus, alluding to a greater scheme of things that we have all inherited. This insight into a broader interpretation of general themes is something now present throughout. Familiar emotions and environments are depicted and the world becomes wholly familiar to anyone who had interaction with others as a child or an adult. Family life, encounters with strangers, strained relationships, transgressions and altered realities all come to the fore and, though strange, they bare an uncanny resemblance to the emotional landscape of the viewer. We meditate on the elements, fire and water existing simultaneously, the natural world, a natural soundscape depicting a slow pastoral experience in the

¹² (Synessios, 1999, p. 269)

woodlands, a pressurized working environment, exposure to other cultures (the Spanish immigrant scene). Animals, cruelty, poverty and strife, déjà vu, reading books, sickness, childhood treasures, dramatic events, pining, longing, arguing, bickering on and on in an endless list of themes all with different degrees of intonation and weight that allow multiple readings. These are all presented under the thinnest possible veil of what is required for them to hold together.



Fig. 5 Stills from the film *Mirror*

A number of technical devices are employed to present these memory-stories and their emotional relevance in the greatest possible light. Devices such as slow motion, interchanging colour and black and white imagery, voiceover and disembodied voices, point of view camera, 'dream'/altered state sequences, intercutting these staged events with archival stock footage, the incorporation of an 'episodic narrative', the long take and deep focus photography, reverse zoom techniques and magical realism. These devices are used to atomise time and space into tiny elements and allow the viewer many portals into the images and into their own emotionally triggered responses to the images. In one last acknowledgement of how his mastery combined all of these elements in a way that has never been experienced before there is no-one better equipped than a physicist to define how far Tarkovsky had stepped into the 'ether'.

"A member of the Institute of Physics of the Academy of Sciences sent me a notice published in their wall newspaper: "The appearance of Tarkovsky's film *Mirror* aroused wide interest in IPAS as it did all over Moscow. By no means all who wanted to meet the director were able to do so; nor, unfortunately, was the author of this notice. None of us can understand how Tarkovsky, by means of cinema, has succeeded in producing a work of such philosophical depths. Accustomed to films as story-line, action, characters and the usual 'happy ending', the audience looks for these things in Tarkovsky's films and often enough leaves disappointed. What is this film about? It is about a Man. No, not

the particular man whose voice we hear from behind the screen, played by Innokentiy Smoktunovsky. It's a film about you, your father, your grandfather, about someone who will live after you and who is still 'you'. About a Man who lives on earth, is part of the earth and the earth is part of him, about the fact that a man is answerable for his life both to the past and to the future. You have to watch this film simply, and listen to the music of Bach and the poems of Arseniy Tarkovsky; watch it as one watches the stars, or the sea, as one admires a landscape. There is no mathematical logic here, for it cannot explain what man is or what is the meaning of life."¹³

2.3 Cinema as Technology

Cinema is an art form that inhabits a unique place being the first art form to be born of technology. With the invention of the recorded image a new mode of expression was derived and at this very same time a new mode of perception was received. The consequences of this are staggering and have spent this last century covering the whole planet, mapping and documenting places, peoples, experience, commonalities, difference, warfare, committing it all to a manmade 'ether' whereby all exists simultaneously and, outside of the edit, exists in the pure form of its original capture. It has set the precedent for every technological invention since and has become an ingrained aspect of reality in all people that experience cinema and media from an early age.

Cinema beholds a magic. It is a framed box of light, the modern equivalent of the snow globe, the stained glassed window and the illustrated codex manuscript. Deities have been raised and destroyed by it. Cinema enables superficial dream states and a moral compass for intellectual and emotional betterment. Cinema can bring down or enforce power structures, it can isolate the individual and collect the whole all by the power of will and effort.

Cinema has collected all the other artforms and modes of human expression and put them under a timeless magnifying glass to be broken apart and reassembled whenever and wherever this is required. To deprive a culture of cinema in this age is deemed an infringement of their rights. In the age of digital technology we

¹³ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 9)

have moved into a significantly accelerated realm, though it is simply a continuation of the same principles. Tarkovsky strikes at the very core of this paradigm shift in this last century, in particular at the aesthetic principles of this in relation to thousands of years of artisans and the inherent craft and responsibility that comes with artistic representation.

“I still cannot forget that work of genius, shown in the last century, the film with which it all started – *L'Arrivee d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat*. That film made by Auguste Lumiere was simply the result of the invention of the camera, the film and the projector. The spectacle, which only lasts half a minute, shows a section of railway platform, bathed in sunlight, ladies and gentlemen walking about, and the train coming from the depths of the frame and heading straight for the camera. As the train approached panic started in the theatre: people jumped up and ran away. That was the moment when cinema was born; it was not simply a question of technique, or just a new way of reproducing the world. What came into being was a new aesthetic principle.

For the first time in the history of the arts, in the history of culture, man found the means to *take an impression of time*. And simultaneously the possibility of reproducing that time on screen as often as he wanted, to repeat it and go back to it. He acquired a matrix for *actual time*. Once seen and recorded, time could now be preserved in metal boxes over a long period (theoretically forever).”

Indeed, with this invention man found a way of recording time and also preserving time, lifting us out of our ties to systems and presenting a time matrix. In the following sections i will discuss how, more than this, man actually found a way to capture light. However, unfortunately we are in a very small minority with these analyses of the magic of cinema as it quickly took on a more plastic and profitable form.

“That is the sense in which the Lumière films were the first to contain the seed of a new aesthetic principle. But immediately afterwards cinema turned aside from art, forced down the path that was safest from the point of view of philistine interest and profit. In the course of the following two decades almost the whole of world literature was screened, together with a huge number of theatrical plots. Cinema was exploited for the straightforward and seductive purpose of recording theatrical performance. Film took a wrong turn, and we have to accept the fact that the unfortunate results of the move are still with us. The

worst of it was not, in my view, the reduction of cinema to mere illustration: far worse was the failure to exploit artistically the one precious potential of the cinema – the possibility of printing on celluloid the actuality of time.”¹⁴

It seems as if mankind became engrossed in the spell of cinema and ushered it in in its most superficial capacity. An obvious mirror to our own identities, perhaps it is the most normal and natural means of appropriation of the new? However, this is of no consolation to the artist whom struggles to be heard and seen and in this age of technological fetishism the true path of meaning has been replaced with an endless line of discovery and product, at best, pioneering, at worst, a simple stimulus for an infant consumer. What if, one day, we look in a mirror and there is no reflection? This century old struggle for the mantle of the cinema art form appears to ebb and flow on an almost daily basis as more and more opinion and discussion is heard about the individual works under banners such as unique, compelling, genre, festival winner, box office receipts etc. In the greater scheme of things these discussions are frivolous and have only proven to take us further from the origins of the cinema, as each and every filmmaker strives to recapture a similar reaction to the cinematic experience of the Lumiere brothers on that particular screening night. Tarkovsky stresses the difference between the two distinct ‘embodiments of the creative human spirit’ namely; the artist and the scientist.

“Art, like science, is a means of assimilating the world, an instrument for knowing it in the course of man’s journey towards what is called ‘absolute truth’. That, however, is the end of any similarity between these two embodiments of the creative human spirit, in which man does not merely discover, but creates. For the moment it is far more important to note the divergence, the difference in principle, between the two forms of knowing: scientific and aesthetic. By means of art man takes over reality through a subjective experience. In science man’s knowledge, with one discovery often enough being disproved by the next for the sake of a particular objective truth. An artistic discovery occurs each time as a new and unique image of the world, a hieroglyphic of absolute truth.”¹⁵

¹⁴ (Tarkovsky, 1987, ps. 62 & 63)

¹⁵ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 37)

2.4 Sculpting in Time

Tarkovsky's approach to film-making and cinema language is best described under what he labelled 'sculpting in time'.

"What is the essence of the director's work? We could define it as sculpting in time. Just as sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of the features of his finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it – so the film-maker, from a 'lump of time' made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image."¹⁶

This goes a long way to explaining the creative processes behind creating the images of a film. Here Tarkovsky depicts cinema as an act of defiance of time, an impossibility that somehow comes into being under the severe concentration of human individual and collective will. It also extends into the process of editing or crafting the images into a certain form. The word time is the decisive element of Tarkovsky's description. For him, everything hinges on the pressure cinema applies to time and how this interrelates with rhythm. It is this dynamic between compressing time and interweaving the results that exist in his unique cinema vision. His is a philosophical and poetic interpretation of the phenomenon of time.

"Time is a condition for the existence of our 'I'. It is like a kind of cultural medium that is destroyed when it is no longer needed, once the links are severed between the individual personality and the conditions of existence. And the moment of death is also the death of individual time: the life of a human being becomes inaccessible to the feelings of those remaining alive, dead for those around him."¹⁷

¹⁶ (Tarkovsky, 1987, ps. 63 & 64)

¹⁷ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 58)



Fig. 6 Still images of the burning barn continuous sequence from the film *Mirror*

The role of memory next to time instantly begins to complicate a description of time as a real concept. How does it exist inside a person? How valid is our external interpretation of time? Is not all of this a consequence of experience?

“Time is said to be irreversible. And this is true enough in the sense that ‘you can’t bring back the past’, as they say. But what exactly is this ‘past’? Is it what has passed? And what does ‘passed’ mean for a person when for each of us the past is the

bearer of all that is constant in the reality of the present, of each current moment? In a certain sense the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more resilient than the present. The present slips and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in its recollection. King Solomon's ring bore the inscription, 'All will pass'; by contrast, I want to draw attention to how time in its moral implication is in fact turned back. Time cannot vanish without trace for it is a subjective, spiritual category; and the time we have lived settles in our soul as an experience placed within time."¹⁸

It is this dynamic between interior and exterior perceptions of time that *Mirror* touches upon so succinctly. Taking a step back from the inner world of time and its role in the process of image-making, Tarkovsky posits a justification as to why people go to the cinema.

"Why do people go to the cinema? What takes them into a darkened room where, for two hours, they watch the play of shadows on a sheet? The search for entertainment? The need for a kind of drug? All over the world there are, indeed, entertainment firms and organisations which exploit cinema and television and spectacles of many other kinds. Our starting-point, however, should not be there, but in the essential principles of cinema, which have to do with the human need to master and know the world. I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is *time*: for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience: for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person's experience – and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer. That is the power of cinema: 'stars', storylines and entertainment have nothing to do with it."¹⁹

It is here that I must disagree with Tarkovsky. I believe that the word time is improper for the above description. I think the word experience is much more exacting in trying to ascertain how viewers engage with the cinema, with art in general and with the 'real' world around them. Time is indeed a relative thing and is of great importance to our relation to the world around us, however, the interior landscape of memory and the non-existent 'real-world' present that Tarkovsky rightly touches upon are both devoid of time as a true entity and the complexity is only added to when we apply an acceptance of isolated, individual memory. It is this relationship between the two that Tarkovsky seeks to explore.

¹⁸ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 58)

¹⁹ (Tarkovsky, 1987, p. 63)

“Time and memory merge into each other; they are like the two sides of a medal. It is obvious enough that without Time, memory cannot exist either. But memory is something so complex that no list of all its attributes could define the totality of the impressions through which it affects us. Memory is a spiritual concept! For instance, if somebody tells us of his impression of childhood, we can say with certainty that we shall have enough material in our hands to form a complete picture of that person. Bereft of memory, a person becomes the prisoner of an illusory existence; falling out of time he is unable to seize his own link with the outside world – in other words he is doomed to madness.”²⁰

Once again we are left in this void of all that can be presented and expressed on a screen, in a plastic or material form. Rather than seek to define and close down these concepts of time and memory *Mirror* succeeds in doing the exact opposite. The film presents a way into these issues that disturb and excite our consciousness. In his review of the film Ryland Walker succinctly states the duality of the film as a memory-story and a real experienced event.

“These mirrors act as frames—within the physical frame of the film as well as frames within framed memories. The amount of multivalent imagery is staggering. *Mirror* is convoluted to be sure, as one would expect from a labyrinth of memory, but, as a work of poetry premised on metaphors, coherence isn’t its main goal. The film is not a string of scenes, per se, but a thread of luminous moments of memory, each triggering and echoing one another, back and forth. *Mirror’s* best moments are poetic leaps through time, jumping between memories just as they are triggered by unique sights and sounds, like the layering of poems over images, which marries visual with literary literacy—stream-of-consciousness meets Cubism. *Mirror* wants to look at each affective event independently of its surrounding refractions but also all at once—to look through the prism but also see the prism as a whole.”²¹

The visionary ambition of the film goes beyond human comprehension and the constructs of the form. We, as the viewer, are still trapped in our bodily forms and we do understand there is a running length of just over two hours of this film in the strict sense of time.

“However, a film cannot physically present all moments of time

²⁰ (Tarkovsky, 1987, ps. 57 & 58)

²¹ (Knight, 2006)

simultaneously, as the kind of idealized eternal return of immortality *Mirror* preaches of, or compile all the moments of a life, in the compact confines of a celluloid yarn. To compensate, Tarkovsky must rely on the rhymes and repetitions of his established tropes to trigger our own memories as we build the film, and bridge the timeline in our heads, collapsing the dialectic relationship between the screen and audience—which is the implied motive of its title. Just as we see the bird and the narrator in the field we see ourselves in the film—the first person point of view of the narrator becomes our point of view: in *Mirror's* diffuse temporal sphere, past is present is future, each memory and each present moment of the narrator's odd non-narrative—each forged image of the film—refracts its abutted, multiplied mirrors.”²²

Tarkovsky has succeeded in opening a doorway, a portal into this complexity. When we immerse in the film the viewer is presented with further portals and domains in which they can meditate on whatever thoughts or memories the film has been able to trigger within them. The use of mirrors within the frame is a significant sign of these further refractions, distortions, fractals and facets of memory that exists outside of time and forever probe at the subconscious, summoning more and more concentration on thoughts of ever-shifting events passed from the viewer. We travel through our mindscape at different speeds, closer or further away from the images depicted, confusing the emotional landscapes and disturbing and confusing our own minds with clarity and fuzziness in our recall. We become processors of experience. In this meditative immersion the light becomes the trigger of feeling and memory of other light, something familiar, something that bypasses time and consciousness and essentially operates at a much deeper level, on the subatomic level.

2.5 Compressions on Light and Shadow

When the film ends and we stand up, gather ourselves and leave the cinema space back into something more familiar we are tingling. Our senses have been alerted and we have a confusion of thought and feeling that words cannot explain. The film has succeeded and will continue to succeed upon every

²² (Knight, 2006)

subsequent viewing. A mirror never fails. We are not back in 'real-time' however. In essence we have exchanged quite a lot of energy with the light play we have experienced. The light was projected at us, into our eyes, the wavelengths were processed and downloaded in a familiar form, we then projected this energy back outwards and entered into a reification, an exchange of charged energy, a subatomic exchange. The concept of viewing time and time in general, pales in terms of relevance next to the experience. Our mindscapes and even our physicality have been altered as a result of the experience. In simple words, we have become better people, and we now have the experience of another dimension of emotional recall as we have connected our own deep-rooted memories both warm and disturbed with those of Tarkovsky, he has touched the very soul of us.

The 'Pandoras Box' of light that he has conjured into existence is the prime example of the true powers of cinema. Where the individual will becomes an open channel and allows the light play to enter us, the film takes on a sublime quality and like all true masterworks of art, it stands as a guardian of these delicate and precious human states.

It is obvious that a great many events in a Tarkovsky scene could not take place in the 'real' world as we know it. We are presented with an emotional sequence of events through which we process at a magical rate. It is Tarkovsky's use of camera movement within these frames that draws attention to the time aspect. Time does not exist, it is only relative to the motion that we engage with it. Sculpting in time as a time-rhythm, a time-pressure construct is only an element required to gain the trust of a viewer, to allow them a position of space to explore their own minds, no more. The triggers are obvious and can be well rendered but is it not the tone and feel, the visceral nature of light, the dark interior of a house with sun begging to burst in through a door that truly grips us? The sensory response to the elements of water and fire, earth, those shiny objects called mirrors that we surround ourselves with, portals, domains, departure points from our view of reality. All these things that are so familiar to us, act as a recall, outside of the character and shape of a face.

Is it not the familiarity of the light and the exchanges of light that mark us so profoundly? Indeed, couldn't *Mirror* be performed in any language or no language at all and still carry meaning? Could it be presented to a blind person, one whose other senses are honed to perfection, however, they have never experienced the visual aspect. In this level of immersion would the light emanating from a forest, a dark log cabin, an industrial landscape not wash over them in the same way, exchange the same energy with a different set of emotional triggers? As I will discuss in the next section. On a subatomic level it is all energy exchange between photons and electrons, creating an electromagnetic charge. The wavelengths emanate both inside and outside of our visible spectrum and exchange with the subatomic particles that are the sum of 'I', of 'You', from the skin down. In essence, I believe Tarkovsky has created something closer and more tangible in a physical and metaphysical sense to a tanning sun-bed than a classical Hollywood narrative.

"We believe that the creation of such a film will be a fundamental cornerstone in the development of the cinema. The cinema should make use of, and imitate, human experience. In our opinion, the viewer goes to the cinema precisely for this. And by making use of this experience the way the writer uses the word, we must try to find the fundamental answers to the questions which we have put to the film's heroine, to the viewer and to ourselves."²⁴

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO READ THE FULL THESIS PLEASE EMAIL ME AT andrew@breadandcircus.ie AND I WILL PROVIDE IT.

²⁴ (Synessios, 1999, p. 261)

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