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Beyond the Crystal-Image
Perception and Temporality in Tarkovsky's Early Films

Given the subject of this symposium, I think many of us gathered here would agree that cinema is often at its best when it shakes us from our habitual mindset and opens up a new perspective on reality. It can be at its most moving when it rattles the inescapability of our own embodied subjectivity and opens our largely enclosed system of temporal perception and sensation. In this, the films that have been considered for the past few days remain some of the most effective and provocative ever produced. And yet, even here, with all of the study that has gone into Tarkovsky's work, we are perhaps only just now beginning to break through the surface to a greater understanding of the films' treatment of time – time as non-chronological flux and variation – and what they have to teach us about time, perception, and this sensation or expression of something beyond everyday comprehension.

The direction in which I would like to take this paper is really only a single aspect of what over the course of Tarkovsky's career is nothing if not a multi-faceted approach to time and reality, one that develops considerably from film to film. But I think that as perhaps a point of entry – and really, only a point of entry – the ideas of Gilles Deleuze on time and cinema provide one of the most expedient theoretical tools available. With the relative rise in popularity of Deleuze's cinema books over the past decade or so, we see more and more the ideas of the philosopher and the filmmaker linked. And quite rightly; though the impact is certainly not comparable to that of Bergson or Nietzsche, Deleuze's idea of the time-image is clearly influenced by the writings of Andrei Tarkovsky, as the philosopher himself acknowledges several times in Cinema 2: the Time-Image. Indeed, in Cinema 2, Deleuze describes the emergence of the time-image

from the movement image with a specific reference to Tarkovsky's article „On the cinematic image":

> The movement-image can be perfect, but it remains amorphous, indifferent and static if it is not already deeply affected by injections of time which put montage into it, and alter movement. ‚The time in a shot must flow independently and, so to speak, as its own boss': it is only on this condition that the shot goes beyond the movement-image and montage goes beyond indirect representation of time, to both share in a direct image of time. (Deleuze 1989, 42)

But bringing this back to the films, the force of time altering movement is something we find throughout Tarkovsky's work – and not only in the examples I am going to use here. Time makes itself felt as a force of creative difference and change working not only in the interval between shots created through traditional montage techniques, which Deleuze suggests here and throughout *Cinema 2*, but also – and this is perhaps where Tarkovsky truly shines – within individual shots themselves. Indeed, the greatest of Tarkovsky's long-takes are those in which (to use Deleuze's terminology) an injection of time as a force of creative difference engenders the aberrant movements and broken spatiotemporal relationships symptomatic of the time-image. I will show a number of examples here to demonstrate the point though I am fairly sure we are all probably well acquainted with them.

But first, I should say that while the comparisons here are compelling, Deleuze's engagement with Tarkovsky's actual films, though occasionally promising, is largely disappointing – particularly in comparison to his lengthy discussions of other western filmmakers. Perhaps most troubling is his seemingly negative description of what he calls Tarkovsky's „liquid crystal-image" and the overly generalized reading of the films themselves, which focuses almost solely on those completed in the 1970s – SOLJARIS, ZERKALO, and STALKER.

A number of the recent studies on Tarkovsky that consider Deleuze's theories tend to ignore the philosopher's rather scant engagement with the films themselves – and quite correctly! His description of the „sodden, washed and heavily translucent images" and the „morbidity of something aborting, a closed door", are vague at best (Deleuze 1989, 75). Moreover his description of Tarkovsky's opacity, though not entirely wrong, seems to me somehow unjustified – particularly when we deal with the question of time, the time-image and this subcategory of the crystal-image in which the actual and the virtual, dream and reality, present and past coalesce into an indeterminate or ambiguous figure. It is this figure which, in Deleuze's words, reveals the temporal process of „differentiation into two flows, that of the presents which pass and that of the pasts which are preserved" (Deleuze 1989, 98). This preservation of the past, of course, is something that comes up

several times in Tarkovsky's writings in a similar manner. Perhaps most compellingly when he speaks of the past as „the bearer of all that is constant in the reality of the present" or how „time cannot vanish without a trace, for it is a subjective, spiritual category; and the time we have lived settles in our soul as an experience placed in time" (Tarkovsky 1986, 58). The similarity here with Deleuze's theories of the virtual past, revealed through the crystal-image are simply too compelling to be ignored. However, if we are to apply this concept to Tarkovsky's work – and I do believe it may be a productive tool for revealing new layers in these incredibly intricate films – I think we need to remain open to the possibility that there is much more at work here than what Deleuze's concept actually allows and certainly more than what the philosopher himself sees in them. But at the same time, the terms he uses to describe Tarkovsky's presentation of time strikes me as remarkably apt perhaps despite itself. This idea of a „liquid crystal" is never explained beyond the obvious fact that Tarkovsky's films are saturated with images of water, rain, rivers, oceans, etc. But I think – and I have no idea for certain but suspect the connection was unintentional on Deleuze's part – we can productively expand the reading of Tarkovsky in these terms if we return to Cinema 1: the Movement-Image and relate it to the concept of „liquid perception". Here, as he puts it, the narration's center of reference is put into movement, the traditional subjective and objective poles tend to disintegrate into a system of perception „distinct from earthly perceptions", or, perhaps more accurately „another state of perception: a more than human perception" (Deleuze 1986, 80).

Tarkovsky's striking experiments with cinematic perception and, particularly in the early films, his play with subjective and objective camera angles is, in many instances, a critical component in the sensation of temporal gravity these films create. The constant division and differentiation of time, the branching off of the present from the past and the immediate preservation of a virtual past is rendered perhaps most vividly in the perceptual oscillations we find in isolated, but always striking instances throughout his films. In Tarkovsky's work, I think, the effect of time on perception is perhaps sharper and more complex than has yet been described. And it is here that the films perhaps offer more than what is contained in this sub-category of the crystal-image. Moreover, in this aesthetic integration of time and perception, the films demand perhaps a more nuanced approach. These sequences are not simply representations of philosophical ideas on time and subjectivity, they may in fact be considered as individual and often unique forms of philosophical as well as aesthetic discourse.

So before this paper becomes even more hopelessly vague, I would like to turn to some specific examples taken from Tarkovsky's earlier works, with the caveat again that the explanations are going to be necessarily incomplete. The relationships of time, subjectivity and perception I will try and illustrate here certainly continue to develop throughout the Tarkovsky's career and do so in ways that are sometimes more refined and sophisticated than this scope allows.

To begin pretty close to the beginning, Каток и skripka, for all of its obvious flaws in comparison with the later films, is a work that already challenges the passive viewing experience and conventional modes of cinematic perception as the camera moves with remarkable and sometimes brilliant fluidity between subjective and objective angles and different levels of time and reality coalesce into indeterminate images. In fact, if we are to approach it from the Deleuzian perspective, it stands quite well under the loose rubric of the „time-image films". As a case in point, we can turn to the sequence early in the film where the young musician Sasha pauses before a shop window on the way to his music lesson (figure 1). The kaleidoscopic montage of this sequence is magnified by a collapse of spatiotemporal continuity – as the boy inexplicably and instantaneously changes position a number of times in this approximately 40 second sequence. Thus the shots are separated by disruptive interstitial gaps, which rather than linking the images together in the traditional sense, disconnect them into singular blocks of space and time. In Deleuze's theory the disruption here is the force of time operating in the interval, giving rise to these aberrant movements and illogical spatial relationships. In this sequence, the experience is further modified by the use of mirrors, which capture an instantaneous but no longer current image of the present moment, the split between the present and the immediate past, and suggest the coalescence of the actual (the physically present) and the virtual (the living past); a past which remains within the present.
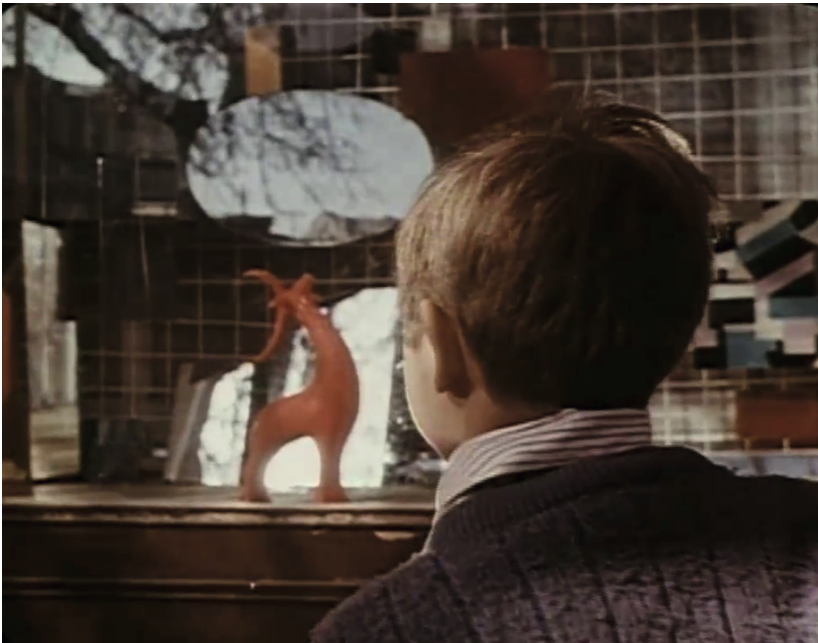

Fig. 1: KATOK I SKRIPKA

What I find rather unique in this sequence, and remarkably precocious for what is still, strictly speaking at least, a student film, is the extent to which the emergence of time „as its own boss" is integrated with an experimental presentation of perspective. Throughout the sequence discontinuous images are interspersed with shots of the boy looking, but many of the things the editing suggests he sees would be, logically, invisible to him, outside his point of view. Thus we are given an illusion of subjectivity but one in which, to bring in the words of Pier Paolo Pasolini, „subjectivity is mystified by a method of false objectivism" (Pasolini 1988, 181). We see what the boy sees in a sense, but subjectivity is bent to the will of something outside the boy's consciousness. Here, through the editing process, we move in and out of the boy's mind, as if there is a kind of split in consciousness as time emerges as a disruptive force.

By itself, the sequence strikes me as a textbook example of what Deleuze refers to as the time-image and, more specifically, the crystal-image. And it is worth pointing out that this again is a student film from 1960 – contemporary to the great works of Alain Resnais and just a few years before Godard and Antonioni really redefine both the long takes and the perception of time in cinema. The film is ahead of its time not only for the Soviet Union but the rest of the world as well. But much more compelling and much more reminiscent of the mature films is a shot which occurs a short time later as the boy struggles through his music lesson.

Here we initially see Sasha in a close up but the camera shifts from this objective angle into what appears to be the boy's line of sight. We scan the sheet music in an extreme close up, the screen blurs as the boy becomes more and more lost in his playing. The teacher's demand that he not get carried away snaps both his attention and the image back into focus and we find that his gaze has wandered over to a carafe of water shaking slightly along with the movement of the camera. So within a single shot we have an objective angle on the boy as well as a qualitatively subjective presentation of his gaze. But if we look a little more closely, this is perhaps more accurately characterized as a simulation or transformation of his gaze, coincident with a rather subtle but nevertheless unmistakable collapse of spatiotemporal continuity. The sheet music, in fact, rests in a position where Sasha could not possibly see it – actually closer to the camera than he is – and the carafe of water rendered in the close up is, as a subsequent shot reveals, actually situated on the other side of the room. If we indeed see the subjective shot as a window or mirror of the gaze, in the case of Tarkovsky's films it is one which is often curved or otherwise distorted.

In creating these discrepancies, even in such an early film, we are confronted with the defamiliarization of time, a reorganization of the conventional time-space relationship. But there is more to this: the manipulation of perception here forces the viewer to confront what is normally beyond quotidian thinking, a new

consciousness of time's unfolding or, at the very least, flashes of a deeper reality largely hidden or unnoticed in the everyday.

There are similar instances to be made in IVANOVO DETSTVO, a film which, again, is far more complex than it is usually given credit for being. Here it is not simply that the camera slides in and out of subjective and objective angles – though this certainly happens quite a bit. In many instances, particularly those involving Ivan and Galtsev, sequences seem to take on what could actually be a kind of intersubjective quality of open, shared perspectives belonging to both of the characters at once. And particularly in the later films, many of the more striking moments are those in which a character is confronted with the extreme alterity of the other person, what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls „the locus of metaphysical truth […] indispensible for my relation with God" (Levinas 1969, 78). Perhaps the most vivid example here is that of Gorchakov and Domenico in NOSTALGHIA, but I think in fact this is something that continues from film to film and more often than not is veiled by a kind of antagonism on the surface. In the present case I am thinking in particular of the scene where Ivan and Galtsev examine an album of Dürer's engravings but also, and on a much larger scale the unsettling prelude to the final dream sequence of the film, in which we hear what Ivan hears in the last moments before his execution but see, in an apparently subjective presentation, what Galtsev sees after he finds the boy's file. However, the overlapping perspectives and layers of time in this film are, to my mind, realized most effectively in Ivan's waking dream approximately midway through the film. Here the perspectives which overlap are not those of the boy and the young lieutenant specifically, but those of Ivan himself. To see this as a facet of the crystal-image in Deleuze's design is hardly difficult. Again, we have a clear collapse of the sensory motor schema characteristic of the time-image as well as an indiscernible presentation of what in the diegetic sense is the physically real with aggregates of memory, a virtual past which erupts into the present. As before, all of this is magnified by the presence of mirrors and mirroring devices. But here again we have an intricate play with perception, signaled almost immediately as voices roll over the soundtrack when Ivan begins his game of war. In the darkened room we follow Ivan's gaze through the bright circle of his flashlight, rendered most clearly as he reads the message on this wall. But now this illusion of subjectivity collapses and the boy himself steps into his own line of sight – a perceptual breakdown which occurs in tandem with the collapsing distinction between dream and reality and, again, logical spatial coordinates. We continue to follow the boy's gaze but, in addition to these figures of memory that emerge from his consciousness, the circle of light several times comes to rest on the figure of the boy himself – most tellingly as he stands with the dagger raised and his back to a mirror (Figure 2).

The fact that we are seeing this at all suggests an immersion into the child's consciousness. And here again, the mirror works as a figure for the simultane-

Fig. 2: IVANOVO DETSTVO

ity of the actual and the virtual. But why then this play with the subjective and objective poles, if not to at least suggest a split within the child's consciousness itself, a fracture in the identity of the child warrior the boy assumes for so much of the film. In fact, the scene is even more than this. Throughout the entirety of the sequence we are ostensibly looking at Ivan through Ivan's eyes but the fact that we see him suggests the presence of an outside consciousness – a division in the boy's psyche or, perhaps as the uneven angle of the mirror suggests, a crooked reflection; the boy, non-coincident with himself, looking at himself as something other. In more simple terms, a figure split open by time.

Moving beyond these early films, the use of subjective angles develops into something quite different – indeed, we may even say that the classic example of the subjective camera angle no longer applies. In ANDREJ RUBLEV the experiments with perception continue, and in many instances seem to be considerably more subtle. Here, to take a case in point, and a shot with which we are probably all very familiar – the scene in the barn in the episode „Skomorokh" in which the rotating camera circles from a shot of Rublev and Kirill staring, apparently at Rolan Bykov's village jester, and takes in the entirety of the room. Unlike the previous examples, there is no direct imitation of the character's perspective. Indeed, as the camera starts moving from the shot of Kirill and Rublev, the impression is created that we are at a seemingly neutral angle, one which somehow merges or at some points coincides with the perspectives of the two characters as the camera moves from one center of interest to another; a modification of the characters'

gaze. Of course, by the conclusion of the shot this would seem to be false, as we have yet another of the impossible movements that Tarkovsky does so well in this film and all of the later ones. Kirill, by the time the camera returns to his position, has not only abandoned his seat by the window but moved outside and into the distance; it is now only Rublev looking through the aperture. Is this slowly spinning camera then reflective of his perception? Yes, or partially at the very least – in fact the image of him staring through the screen of rain into the distance is clearly an analogue to the activity of the spectator. But it is also mixed with the mechanical objectivity of the camera. Again, this quasi subjective movement – or perhaps this is better described by Jean Mitry's idea of the semi-subjective angle – is tied with another instance of false continuity, an irrational cut within the shot itself as successive action is disrupted and, more so than in the previous examples, offscreen space ceases to exist in any rational, logical form. Indeed, it is in this interstitial space that time works strongest as a creative, disruptive force.

Admittedly, my point is probably not helped very much with this example unless we see this shot as a kind of prelude. Moving ahead a bit, I think it is a kind of early version of something that was attempted again in Soljaris – and with what seems to me to be considerably more success. I am certainly not going to say that Soljaris is a better film, but the shot to which I am referring certainly strikes me as one of the most exquisite in any of Tarkovsky's work. This is Kris's second visit to Snaut at approximately one hour and 5 minutes into the film.

The movement of the camera here, circling the room, is similar to the shot from Andrej Rublev, but obviously the setting is very different. Moreover, there is no overt indication of a shared gaze, as in the two previous films, but constant movement between the interest focus of two different characters. Here, as in Andrej Rublev, we don't really get the imitation of the character's gaze that we do in Katok i skripka and Ivanovo detstvo, yet the camera sits just on the objective side of their perception, and seems to be taking its cues from what they see – and what we don't. It is really one of Tarkovsky's most fascinating single shots – and an obvious predecessor to Gorchakov's visit to Domenico in Nostalghia. Not only are there a number of instances which break from the norms of the sensory motor schema – such as the falling tool and the surprising appearance of Kris with his back to the camera late in the shot – if we actually pay attention to the eyes of the characters, it seems that they seldom match up with what we assume they are looking at. Their own perception does not seem to conform to what ours should be based on the clues given by the camera. In a way, I think we have just seen the same thing, in perhaps an embryonic form, in Katok i skripka; this move suggesting the assumption or approximation of the character's perspective – only to have this bent by an unexpected refraction in the wake of time's differential force.

To be more specific, and to highlight the underlying association of Kris and Snaut – despite their outward animosity – the shot actually creates doubles with

them, a pair of graphic matches, in what is one of the most subtly brilliant moments of the film. Earlier in the shot, the camera passes close to the face of Kris and then scans the various details on the panel just as the tool falls and Snaut appears at its end (Figure 3). And I have to add incidentally that this sweeping pan across the face and into an approximation of the character's perspective is also very much what we have just seen in Каток і skripka – I think it would perhaps be mistaken to say this short film has little in common with Tarkovsky's mature works. This move is actually repeated a moment later but with the positions reversed – just as Snaut talks about sanity and just before the striking and seemingly impossible reappearance of Kris (Figure 4). By the time Kris turns and faces in the general direction of the camera, Snaut must be in his chair again, a move which pulls everything in this shot full circle – enclosing, as it were, this plurality or multiplicity into a living and moving singularity. Having drifted between the perspectives of both characters as well as drifted into seeming objectivity, the shot ends where it begins.
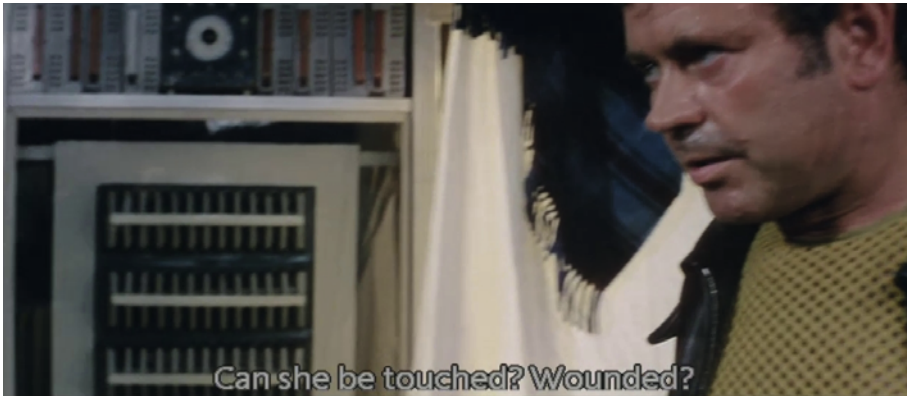

Fig. 3: SOLJARIS

Fig. 4: SOLJARIS

To say just a few more words about cinematic perspective, we hover in a spot usually just outside the perspective of these characters – as in the free indirect subjective shot. But then again, this is perhaps quite different from what Pasolini describes, or Mitry's description of the semi-subjective camera angle – as time erupts into space, we have an aesthetic approximation of integration. I would think that perhaps this is very much a kind of liquid perception, though not necessarily in the way Deleuze describes it. The effect in this shot, I think, brings to mind what Levinas refers to as the curvature of intersubjective space. The aberrant movements and spatial displacements which, in Deleuze's theory, are rendered by the supremacy of time over movement or the disruptive force of actual time, particularly in Tarkovsky's later works, force a refraction rather than a reflection of the gaze. Indeed, we could say that it is time which opens this intersubjective space – or perhaps it is here that subjectivity in the more conventional, individualized sense simply slips away and instead what we find is something that approaches Merleu Ponty's idea of the „anonymous visibility" of the flesh, „that primordial property" of „being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal", a momentary glimpse of intercorporeal being (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 142). So the force of time may be expressed not only in the noncoincidence of active consciousness with self as Deleuze describes it, as in the example from Ivanovo detstvo, but in this collision and opening of perspectives we find here.

Looking at the earlier films in a kind of retroactive manner, we can perhaps hypothesize that this is something hinted at all along, but only finds its full articulation later – and certainly there are a number of similar shots in Zerkalo, Stalker and Nostalghia. It is the movement of the camera which opens the perception of the viewer to this trace of the curvature, out of the direct, flattened face to face encounter with the Other, embodied in a traditionally and even loosely anchored attachment to conventional cinematic subjectivity.

So, returning to Deleuze's terms, it seems to be that in all of these instances, and numerous others throughout these films, the indiscernibility between what is physically real and what is invisible – the actual and the virtual – extends critically to the traditional subjective/objective distinction. Though I am concentrating on Tarkovsky's earlier works here, I think it may be possible to make the case for this happening in the later films as well. Indeed, in these examples we can already see him moving further away from the traditional structures of the subjective angle in favor of the refracted gaze.

To sum up, the sensation of time and the effectiveness of what we can loosely call the crystal imagery which, to again quote Deleuze, „reveals or makes visible the hidden ground of time" is only part of the story (Deleuze 1989, 98). In Tarkovsky's work the experience of time is, critically, one that constantly divides subjectivity and in this interstice opens out into a field of something greater. The split, which accompanies the breakdown of logical space and movement in these

films is not something destructive, rather it enables an experience similar to the preindividuation suggested in the curvature of intersubjective space I referred to a moment ago, described by Levinas in Totality and Infinity as the essence of true relations between human beings and, as he puts it, „the very presence of God" (Levinas 1969, 291). Thus, if we consider these films as crystal-images – and Deleuze's theory does consider not only entire films but entire careers as crystals, with a multiplicity of facets and experiences of time – it is perhaps best to move beyond words like opacity, morbidity, etc. In fact, rather than „morbidity" or „opacity" the works themselves give us something quite the opposite – an opening, a transparency, or a revelation.

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