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Stalking the Zone: An Interview by Aldo Tassone

Abstract.

Shortly after the release of *Stalker* in 1980, journalist Aldo Tassone sat down with the filmmaker, Andrei Tarkovsky, to discuss his film in further depth, and to illicit responses for many of the film's unanswered questions. The resulting interview provides insight into the film, the Stalker, and "the Zone." As well as Tarkovsky's motivations behind this particular adaptation, and what it means to him, as an individual, a filmmaker and a human being. Ultimately, the interview also reveals Tarkovsky, himself, may not know much more than his audience, intentionally instilling in the work, an air of ambiguity, in order to further reflect the film's complex themes of belief versus faith, and the powers of hope and the imagination.

Description.

Tassone begins his interview by posing questions strictly related to plot, structure and character, eventually driving towards the film's deeper philosophical questions, in addition to Tarkovsky's own thoughts on the work and the world he created. *Stalker* (1979) and *Roadside Picnic*, the short science fiction novel on which it is based, share few defining elements, the most prominent being the "the Room of Desire" and the golden orb; both are mystical forces with the power to grant wishes. Tarkovsky comments, "[I]n the Strugatsky story, the desires are truly fulfilled, whereas in the script this remains a mystery. You don't know whether this is true or

whether it's the Stalker's fantasy." The filmmaker's conscious decision to avoid concrete truths works to add to the film, while evoking the film's more abstract notions of faith, belief and the mystery of life.



(*Stalker*, Tarkovsky, 1979)

Tarkovsky later relates that “[f]aith is faith. Without it, man is deprived of any spiritual roots. He is like a blind man.” The subject of spirituality and “spiritual roots” is one of particular concern to *Stalker*, surfacing numerous times throughout the interview. However, Tarkovsky believes the Stalker, himself, is the film's true spiritual center.

If the Writer represents artistic expression, and the Professor, scientific reasoning, then only the Stalker stands between them, as a physical manifestation of faith and fidelity to cause. Whereas the others waiver in their beliefs, the Stalker is steadfast in his convictions, committed only to the Zone and (to a lesser extent) his family. “The truth is that in the contemporary world, people want to be paid for everything. Not necessarily literally, with money. But a person who behaves in a moral way wants to be recognized as being a moral person... and I believe it results from the loss of a spiritual life.” As such, Tarkovsky relates that it is the Stalker's duty and purpose in life, to restore faith, inspire hope and guide lost souls through the great unknown that

is the Zone. And why? Because “[the Stalker’s] a prophet who believes that humanity will perish for lack of a spiritual life.”

And if the Stalker represents faith, then as a metaphorical and physical extension of him, “the little girl... She represents hope, quite simply. Children are always something hopeful. Probably because they are the future.” Monkey’s unusual but telling powers, revealed in the final moments of the film, encompass broader notions of promise and progress to Tarkovsky. Though a perplexing mystery, “[f]rom a symbolic point of view, they represent new perspectives, new spiritual powers that are yet unknown to us, as well as new physical forces.” Most importantly, Monkey and her abilities signify a digression from the old world, and a movement towards the new. Though she may lack the Stalker’s commitment to cause, Monkey, and subsequent generations, will have new tools at their disposal, to navigate the world’s ever-changing and evolving landscape.



(*Stalker*, Tarkovsky, 1979)

Tarkovsky’s ultimate resolve is to leave his audience feeling hopeful, for whatever may come. And, despite its bleak narrative, the film’s ultimate aspiration, like the majority of the speculative fiction genre, is to inspire. “It’s a tragedy and a tragedy isn’t despairing. It’s a story

of destruction, which leaves the viewer with a sense of hope, because of the catharsis that Aristotle describes. Tragedy purifies man.” Tarkovsky’s command of Aristotle’s *Poetics* reflects a much deeper understanding of form and its intimate relationship with content, as well as a consummate respect for history and its teachings. And just as Tarkovsky feels modern society must regress in order to maintain a more spiritual existence, so to must humanity return to its roots, and look to the past for example and guidance.

Statement of Relevance.

The whole of the speculative fiction genre is characterized by perplexity and subtlety, but plague by abstruseness. Often times, intent or purpose can be lost in translation, particularly concerning works as enigmatic as Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*. It is of particular importance then that all analysis of the work be firmly rooted in knowledge, and not simply in opinion and interpretation. And what better guide through the Zone than Tarkovsky himself? This insightful interview illustrates many of the key principals and values instilled in and expressed through the work, as well as a firm understanding of the film’s story as a whole. Most importantly, however, is the revelation that even Tarkovsky does not hold all of the answers. Like the mysterious Zone, much must be left to speculation and faith, because, as is true in life, no one individual holds all the answers. The audience is responsible for deriving their own significance, through the film’s subtle clues and inferences. Unfortunately, this realization does little to imbue the text with additional meaning. Instead, the filmmaker allows the gaps in knowledge and what is left unsaid to be as revealing as what is explicitly stated on camera. What results is a complex narrative that deftly balances the known and the unknown in order to pose more elaborate post-modernist discoveries on the nature of knowledge and of human existence.

Resources.

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