

Time, place and empathy: the poetics and phenomenology of Andrei Tarkovsky's film image

KRISTEN KREIDER and JAMES O'LEARY

*Acclaimed Russian film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky's specific understanding of what constitutes the 'film image' is outlined in his collection of writings, *Sculpting in Time* (1986), and evidenced by his body of film work. Our aim in this article is to identify the specificity of Tarkovsky's theory and practice of the film image and to argue that the film image is a meaningful composite of poetic, spatial and material properties. We unpack this complexity through a close, careful and attenuated reading of a single scene from Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia* (1983). In this scene, the film's protagonist – the poet, Gorchakov – carries a lit candle across the expanse of the Santa Catarina pool. The pool, a geothermal bath in the Tuscan hillside town of Bagno Vignoni, Italy, is emptied for this shot, but still steaming. This infuses the film image with atmospheric qualities of place. We read these qualities in relation to Tarkovsky's use of symbol, the relationship of this scene to others in the context of the filmic narrative, and the filmic syntax of the long take and tracking shot. We also examine how the film image is received, as a projection, by an embodied recipient, and to what effect. Through this discussion, we defend Tarkovsky's work against charges that it embodies a naïve realism, exposing the critical potential inherent in Tarkovsky's nostalgic impulse.*

Prior to shooting the penultimate scene of *Nostalghia* (1983), acclaimed Russian film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky told the actor Oleg Yankovsky his intention of 'displaying an entire human life in one shot, without any editing, from beginning to end, from birth to the very moment of death' (Bird 2008b, 192). Should Yankovsky succeed, Tarkovsky told him, 'the act may be the true meaning of my life. It certainly will be the finest shot I ever made – if you do it, if you endure to the end' (Bird 2008b, 192). Yankovsky endured, so Tarkovsky succeeded in filming one of the most celebrated long take and tracking shots in the history of cinema. Lasting nine minutes and four seconds, the shot depicts the poet protagonist, Gorchakov, played by Yankovsky, as he attempts to carry

a lit candle across the expanse of the Santa Catarina pool. The pool, a natural thermal spring in the Tuscan hillside village of Bagno Vignoni, is emptied for this shot, but still steaming, thus infusing the film image with a vaporous atmosphere through which Gorchakov appears.

In what follows, we discuss Tarkovsky's specific understanding of the film image as outlined in his collection of writings, *Sculpting in Time* (1986), and evidenced in his film work. Our aim is to identify the specificity of Tarkovsky's theory and practice of the film image and to argue that the film image, as a visual image, is a meaningful composite of poetic, spatial and material properties. We pursue this discussion through a close analysis of the scene just described from the film *Nostalghia*. This scene with Gorchakov and the candle literally frames our analytical discussion of the film image since each section of critical writing relates to a specific durational unit of the scene, and begins with a written description of it. Thus oscillating between descriptive writing and analysis, we read the atmospheric qualities of this film image in relation to Tarkovsky's use of symbol, the placement of this scene within the context of the filmic narrative, and the filmic syntax of the long take and tracking shot. We also examine how the film image is received in cinematic space, and to what effect. Through this discussion we defend Tarkovsky's work against charges that it embodies a naïve realism, exposing the critical potential inherent in his nostalgic impulse.

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TO OPEN (SYMBOL)

Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul.

Andrei Tarkovsky (1986, 57)

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Kreider + O'Leary collaborate to make performance, installation and time-based media work in relation to sites of architectural and cultural interest. This article relates to their project, *Gorchakov's Wish* (2011), in which they engage specifically with the final three scenes of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia* (1983). See: <http://www.kreider-oleary.net>.

The scene opens with a close-up of hands. Gorchakov's hands: candle in the left, lighter in the right. He sparks the lighter three times to produce a flame and lights the wick. (A gust.) Placing the lighter into his right pocket, he then transfers the candle to his right hand and shields the flame with his left. Turning his back to the camera, he walks to the stone wall at one end of the pool's length. With the camera panning for a full view of the poet's body, he turns again – this time to profile – and takes a step . . . He steps, then stops and turns again – facing the camera; a single surprise of white hair. He touches the wall to begin. (To befog.)

How might we begin to interpret the penultimate scene of *Nostalgia*? As noted above, Tarkovsky himself described the scene as depicting an entire human life, from beginning to end, from birth to death. He was, of course, speaking metaphorically; however, we can see how this translates into the film image through the deployment of the candle carried by Gorchakov. In *The Poetics of Space* (1964), philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes that '[t]he flame is an image of life, a living substance, a poeticizing substance . . . an image of life which consumes but surprisingly rejuvenates itself' (Bachelard 1994, 45). Following Bachelard, we are led first along an axis of association where we see the flame as a life continually threatened with extinction by the blustering wind that circles around Gorchakov's palm through the course of his journey. It is the poet's task to protect the vulnerable flame, to 'keep the flame alive' throughout his venture across the pool.

Arguably, such an interpretation induces an emotional effect. In his essay 'Space and Image in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*: Notes on a Phenomenology of Architecture' (1994), philosopher Juhani Pallasmaa develops Bachelard's theme and suggests that the 'curious sense of empathy felt by the viewer in the scenes with Gorchakov and the candle becomes understandable through [this] association of flame and life' (Pallasmaa 1994, 162). Observing the poet with this vulnerable flame, and making the association between this flame and life, we are shifted into an empathic state co-existent with the image.

While this interpretation seems plausible enough, it is perhaps too easy – or too quick. For we have only just begun to examine the scene and already we have arrived at this symbolic meaning with all of its apparent unity and consequent emotional effect. Bearing in mind such swiftness, let us turn to Walter Benjamin's description of the 'measure of time' for the artistic symbol in his essay *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1963).

Benjamin's main concern in this essay is to theorise the representational trope of allegory, which he does by

specifically locating allegorical manifestation within the Baroque form of the German *trauerspiel*. In the course of this discussion, Benjamin offers insight into the temporality of the artistic symbol when he traces allegory's theoretical roots back to Romantic thinkers Creuzer and Görres. In their discussion of the Classical symbol, Creuzer and Görres introduced time into the field of semiotics and this, according to Benjamin, allowed for a distinction between symbol and allegory predicated on the temporality of each. 'The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might ~~way~~ so, wooded interior', Benjamin writes (2009, 166).¹ This 'momentary totality' of the plastic symbol contrasts with the 'series of moments' that characterises Baroque allegorical script (Benjamin 2009, 165). Whereas the meaning of the former is 'self-contained' and 'concentrated', the latter, Benjamin (2009, 165) argues, is developed through a 'successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time'. Taking into account what Benjamin here deems the characteristic temporality of the artistic symbol, it seems apt that we would arrive so quickly at our interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the flame carried by Gorchakov. And yet, as Pallasmaa notes in the aforementioned essay, '[t]he many images present in *Nostalgia* are not intended to be symbols but rather emotional miniatures, riddles that vainly seek their own explanation' (Pallasmaa 1994, 146). This comment suggests that, in fact, there is something missing from our interpretation so far: a further complexity of the flame that must be taken into account in our interpretation of it.

Let us change orientation: 'the flame is an image of life . . . an image of life which consumes'. In the scene preceding this one with Gorchakov and the candle, the character Domenico – a man who held his family prisoner in fear of *el fin del mundo* and who solicits Gorchakov to carry the candle – dies by his own hand. This harrowing act of self-immolation is the crescendo to Domenico's inflammatory speech in the piazza of Rome's Capitoline Hill, ~~in Rome~~ where he cries out to the masses for a greater social empathy. There (then) as here (now), the lighter flicks; there (then), as here (now), the flame burns. The solitary flame of the poet's silent journey thus extends 'back' along a line – along the axis – of contiguity to this hyperbolic act of the madman's public display and protest. So the light of Gorchakov's flame, Bachelard's 'image of life', becomes weighted with its reference to the death of Gorchakov's alter ego. We can thus appreciate that the emotional effect of the penultimate scene of *Nostalgia* is due not only to an

association between the flame and a (vulnerable) life but also, by extension, to the sense of mourning we feel in relation to the flame's oblique reference to Domenico's death.

The movements so far – the poet crossing the pool with the lit candle; we, following him, shifted along the vectors of metaphor and metonymy – generate meaning through the symbolic properties of the flame, as contextualised within the construct of the filmic narrative. This sees the flame emerge into the sign of a vulnerable life and, coextensively, a life that is lost. We, in turn, are moved into the emotional states of empathy

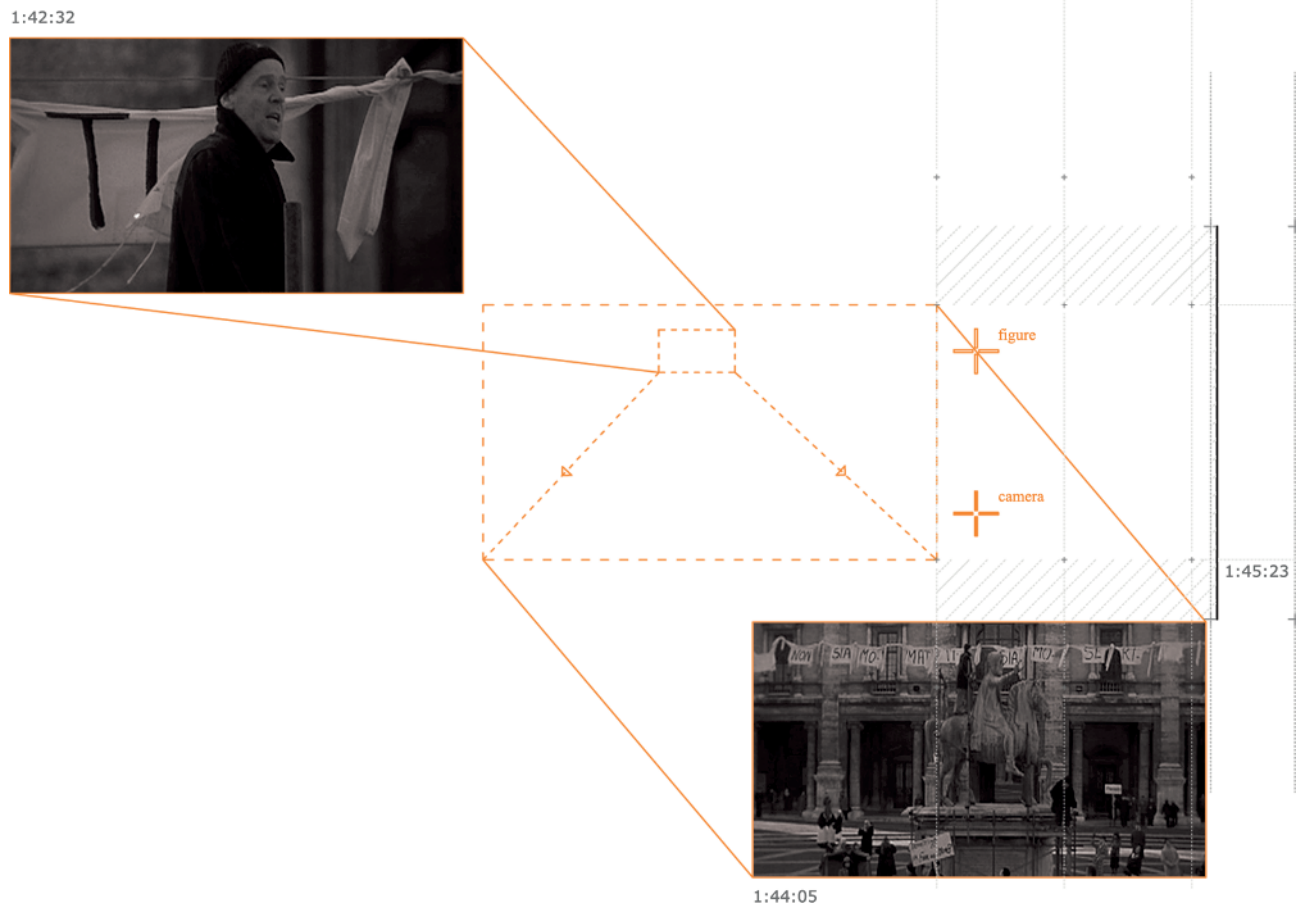
Outlined in *Sculpting in Time*, and evidenced in his film work, Tarkovsky's writing on and construction of the film image will serve to complicate our initial interpretation of this scene with Gorchakov and the flame.

0 min 35 sec

TO BEGIN (IMAGE)

An image is not a certain meaning . . . but the entire world reflected as in a drop of water.

Andrei Tarkovsky (2004, 12)



and mourning. The flame thus embodies, in Pallasmaa's terms, an 'emotional miniature'. But what of Pallasmaa's further designation of Tarkovsky's images as 'riddles'?

Q: What is the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul?

To answer this riddle we **must** move from a discussion of symbol toward one of image: a shift from the flame to the frame and, with it, the contradictions inherent in Tarkovsky's theory and practice of the film image.

Why this touch to begin? This point of contact before the venture? Because hand touching stone is ground and grounding. A proximity prior to movement and spacing, without which there is no distance – (interval) – without which there is no meaning . . . 'the act may be the true meaning of my life' (Bird 2008b, 192) . . . So this first touch marks a first separation and the poet's exile toward horizon: an entry into meaning coextensive with the borderless state of nostalgia. Meanwhile the eye – lid fluttering – is drawn to the flame that, central to the frame, is screened by the poet's protective palm.

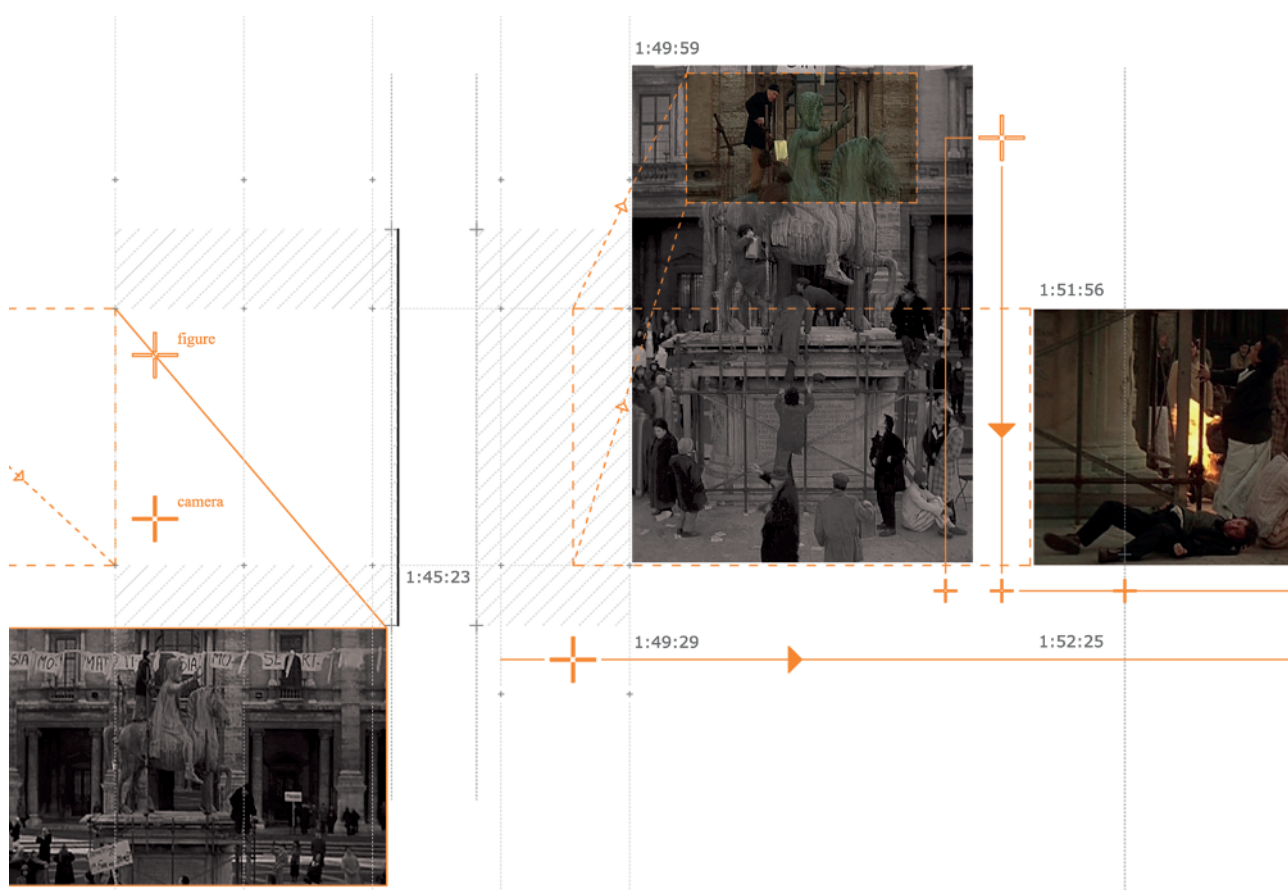
In *Sculpting in Time* (1986), Tarkovsky posits that the first principle of the cinematic image is observation. He arrives at this understanding through a more general discussion of what he terms the 'artistic image'. The artistic image is, for Tarkovsky, a means of capturing a singular and unique moment of existence. The artist's aim, he argues, is to make incarnate 'a precise observation of life' by re-presenting it as image (1986, 106). And this, he argues, 'takes us straight back to Japanese poetry' and, specifically, the poetics of Japanese *haiku* (1986, 106).

The defining characteristic of Japanese *haiku* is its attempt to capture a moment of consciousness through

definition above of the artistic image. Tarkovsky references the following *haiku* by Bashō:

The old pond was still
A frog jumped into the water
And a splash was heard.

'How simply and accurately life is observed', Tarkovsky ~~then~~ exclaims. 'What discipline of mind and nobility of imagination. The lines are beautiful, because the moment, plucked out and fixed, is one, and falls into infinity' (1986, 107). These lines are full of beauty for Tarkovsky, and full of meaning: 'The Japanese poets knew how to express their visions of reality in three lines



precise observation: this rather than to impart a message through the choice and manipulation of ~~the~~ objects depicted with ~~their~~ reified symbolic value. Formally, the *haiku* is characterised by an economic 5-7-5 syllabic count and the inclusion of a seasonal reference, or *kigo* (季語). The *kigo* is significant in that it exhibits a fundamental relationship to time and place, offering readers a sense of locatedness in the ritual and cyclical movements of the world. Conceptually, *haiku* embodies the principle of *shasei*: to copy life objectively or 'sketch from life', thus aligning *haiku* with Tarkovsky's

of observation. They did not simply observe it, but with supernal calm sought its ageless meaning' (1986, 107). For Tarkovsky, the *haiku* beautifully, and meaningfully, (re)presents one's vision of reality through the poetic rendering of a precise observation that 'plucks out' and 'fixes' a unique and singular moment of existence, ushering it into being as image.

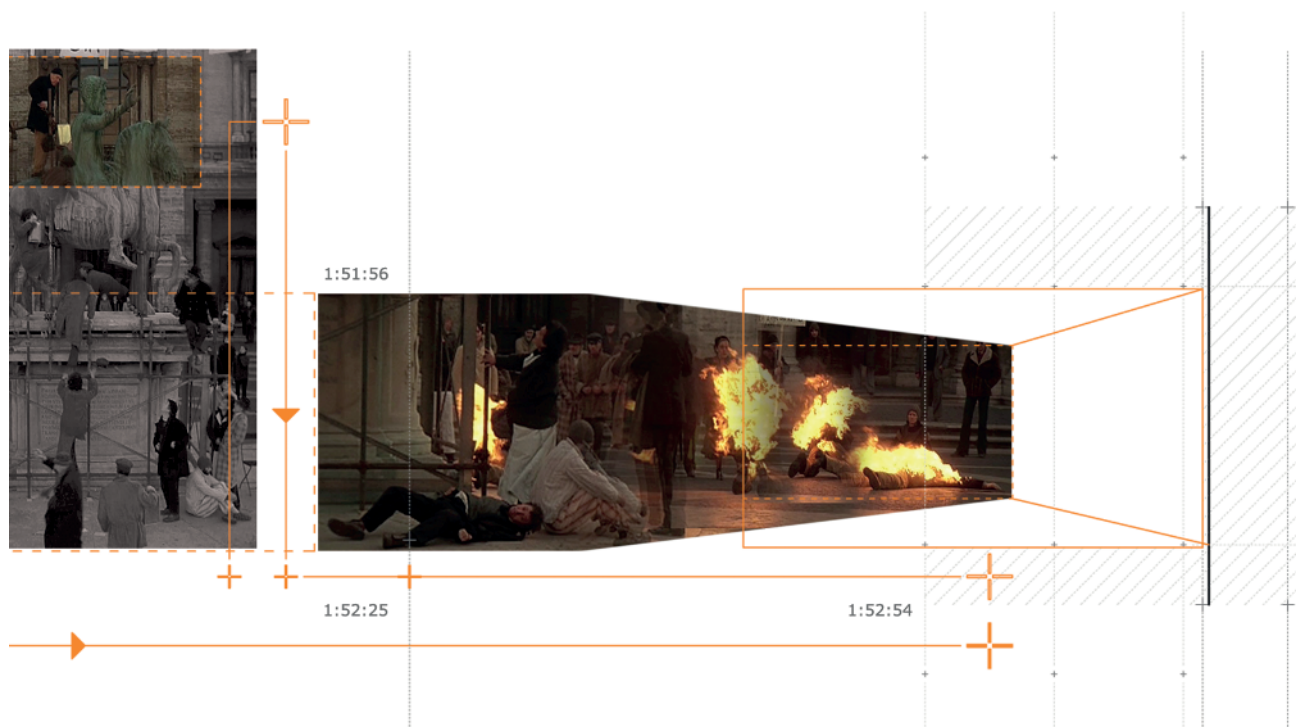
That Tarkovsky bases his understanding of the film image on precise, accurate observation modelled on the Japanese *haiku* underlies his desire – at least in his

theoretical writing – to dispel symbolism in the film image. Drawing specifically from examples in film that produce this effect, Tarkovsky describes a scene from Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* (1954) as follows:

A medieval Japanese village. A fight is going on between some horsemen, and the samurai who are on foot. It is pouring with rain, there is mud everywhere. The samurai wear an ancient Japanese garment which leaves most of the leg bare, and their legs are plastered with mud. And when one samurai falls down dead we see the rain washing away the mud and his leg becoming white, as white as marble. A man is

People were running after him, he was hurrying. Then he jumped. What would this man have seen and felt as he flew for the first time? He didn't have time to see anything, he fell and was shattered. The most he could have known was the unexpected, terrifying fact of falling. The inspiration of the flight, its symbolism, were [sic] eliminated. (1986, 73)

It is the reality of the situation, not the symbolism inherent in it, that Tarkovsky was interested in: 'The screen had to show an ordinary, dirty peasant, then his fall, his crash, his death. This is a concrete happening, a human catastrophe, observed by onlookers', he writes



dead; that is an image which is a fact. It is innocent of symbolism, and that is an image. (1986, 73)

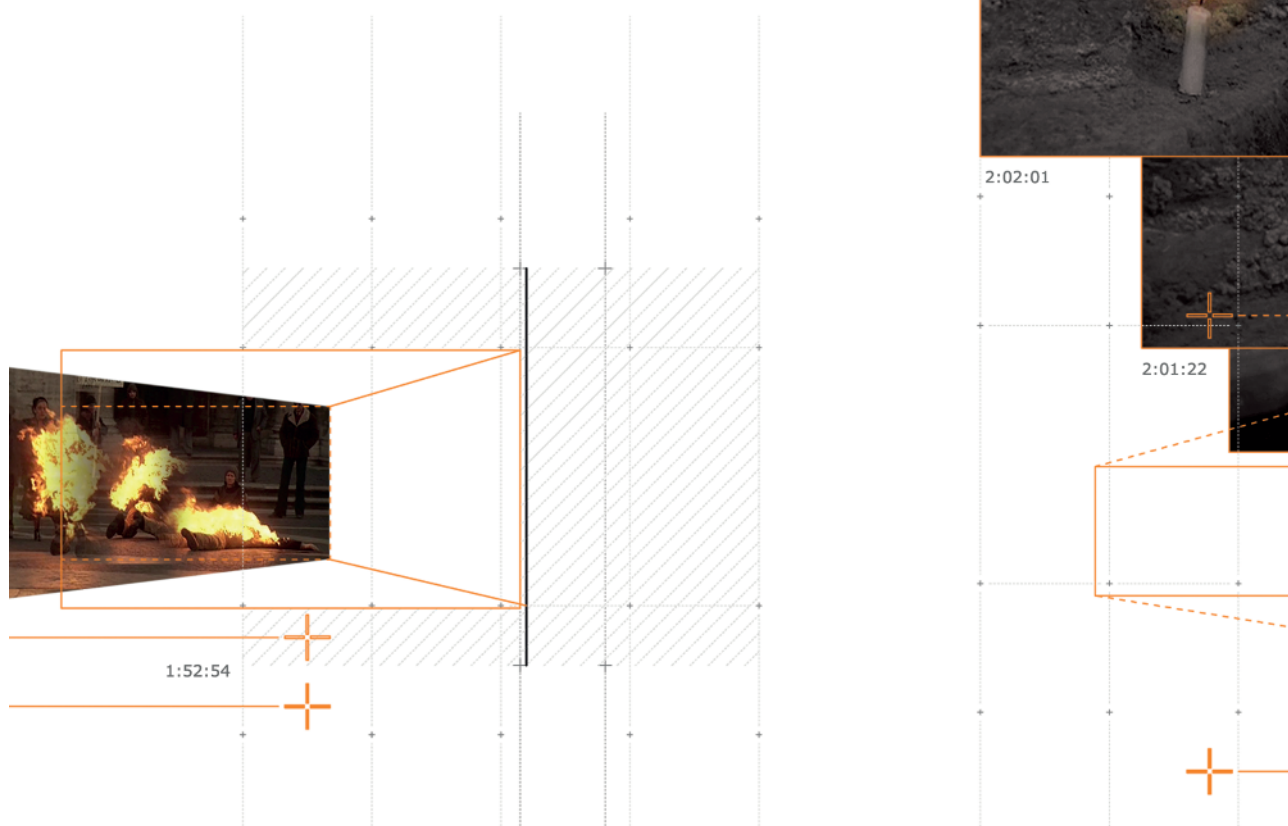
The image as 'fact' is absent of symbolic meaning or, as Tarkovsky terms it, 'innocent' of symbolism. He then draws an example from the making of his own film *Andrey Rublyov* (1966) to illustrate how he attempts to cultivate this innocence in his own work: 'The script includes an episode in which a peasant, who has made himself a pair of wings, climbs up on to the cathedral, jumps, and crashes to the ground', he writes (1986, 80). This episode clearly evidences a man's desire for flight. However, in portraying it, Tarkovsky was not interested in depicting the Icarian overtones of the man's fall. Instead, he asked himself how this really would have occurred:

(1986, 80). In order to effect this, Tarkovsky describes how he had to work out a way to 'destroy the plastic symbol on which the episode was built'; hence, his decision to get rid of the wings and, instead, use an air balloon, 'a clumsy object put together from skins, ropes and rags' (1986, 80). All of this suggests that Tarkovsky was clearly intentional about the deployment of objects in the *mise en scène* of his films. However, in choosing particular objects his intent was not so much to manipulate as to minimise their symbolic value, thereby bringing them closer to the image as it manifests in a form like Japanese *haiku*.

Without question it is difficult, if not impossible, for any artistic message – even Japanese *haiku* – to completely dispel the symbolic value of objects appearing within it.

Moreover, Tarkovsky's desire for an image 'innocent' of symbolism appears at odds with his choice and manipulation of objects laden with symbolic, and particularly Christian, meaning, in many of his films. There is a contradiction, then, between Tarkovsky's theory of the film image, predicated on *haiku* and an absence of symbolism, and his practice as a film-maker, producing films rife with symbolic meaning. In what

(Rush.) *The candle goes out for the first time. The poet turns, facing the camera, and puts his left hand into his pocket. He walks back to the wall at the far end of the pool, his steps retracing the path from whence they came, and we follow. This time, without a focus on the flame, the scene before us flattens: stone inner wall and outer boundary; moss-mottled floor; the poet in his brown coat – a figure enmeshed in ground.*



follows, we look at how Tarkovsky's theory and practice of the film image is riddled with even further contradictions that, allowed to stand, serve to amplify the complex meaning of his filmic message.

1 min 17 sec

TO FAIL (TIME)

The image becomes authentically cinematic when . . . not only does it live within time, but time also lives within it, even within each separate frame.

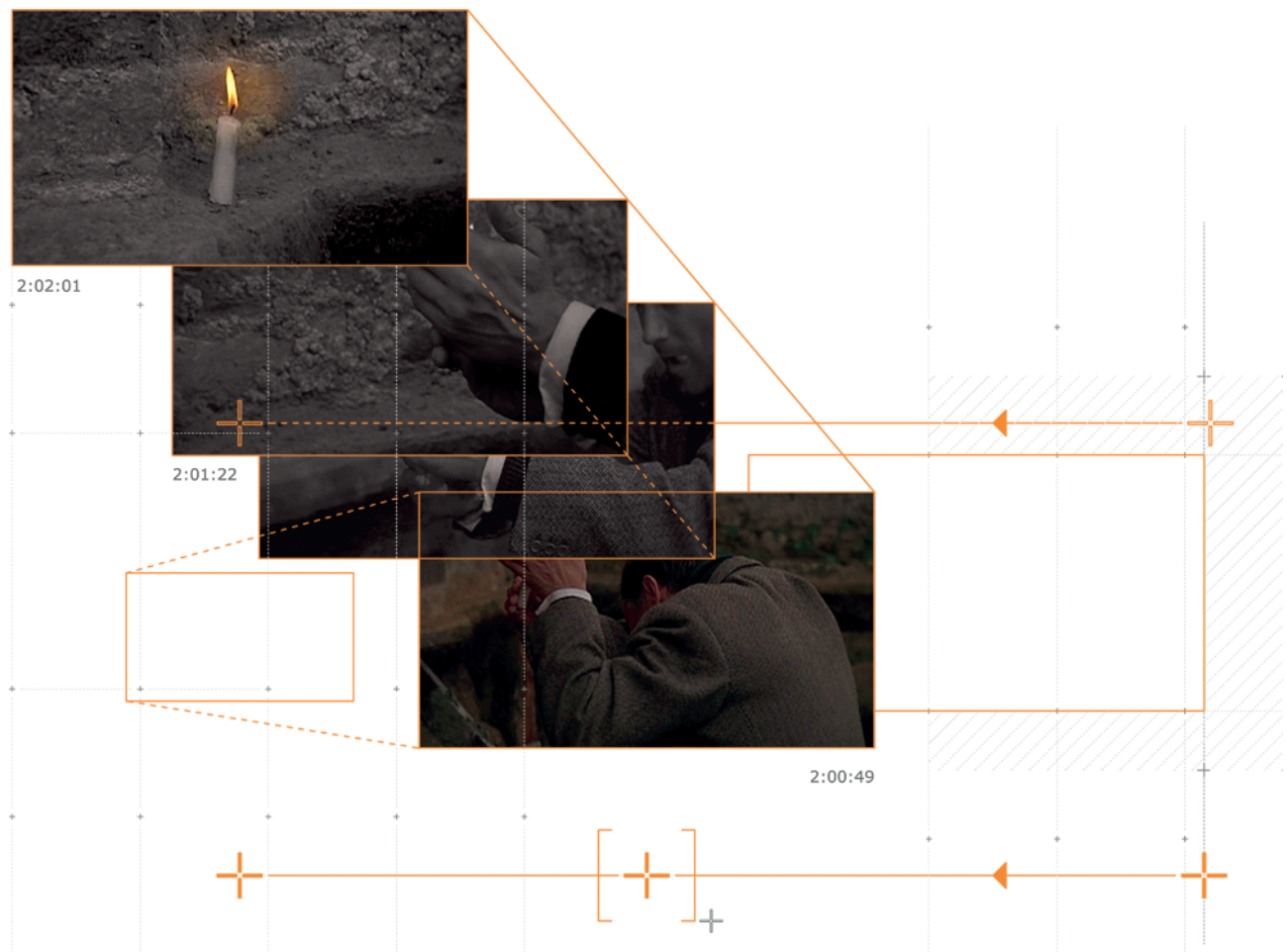
Andrei Tarkovsky (1986, 68)

We have seen that, for Tarkovsky, the first principle of the cinematic *is* observation. This, in turn, implies a fundamental relationship between the film image and perception: '[t]he image in cinema is based on the ability to present as an observation one's own perception of an object', Tarkovsky writes (1986, 107). Tarkovsky's emphasis here on the *act* of perceiving and, in turn, the *presentation of this act* underlies an ontology of the film image: '[t]he cinema image comes into being during the shooting, and exists *within* the frame', Tarkovsky posits (1986, 114). In other words, there is no film image before the film shoot, in the film-maker's idea of what it might be; nor is the film image constructed afterwards, on the editing table. Instead, the emergence of the film image is

coextensive with the act of perceiving/recording, thereby framing, an act of perception that is later presented to the viewer. Moreover, and most crucially, the fact that any act of perception implies a duration suggests the inextricable link between Tarkovsky's conception of the film image and time: time, he argues, is literally 'imprinted in the frame' during the film shoot. This brings us to the primary characteristic of the film image

Benjamin in contradistinction to the artistic symbol: just as allegory is characterised by the 'very fluidity of time', so 'sculpting in time' is, Tarkovsky argues, at the heart of the cinematic art. Now, remember our riddle?

Q: What is the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul?



for Tarkovsky: 'Time, imprinted in its factual forms and manifestations: such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art', he writes (1986, 63). We can now appreciate that what distinguishes the film image from other art-forms is its particular relationship to time recorded 'as fact'.

If Benjamin claims that the temporality inherent in the (plastic) artistic symbol is that of the momentary and the instant, we can see how such a temporality is clearly at odds with Tarkovsky's conception of the film image as an 'imprint of time'. Interestingly, such disparity would therefore appear to align Tarkovsky's film image with the allegorical mode of representation that is theorised by

The answer to this riddle (as much as the question) lies in the following quote from Tarkovsky: 'Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul' (1986, 57). And we can begin to unpack this enigmatic quote in light of our discussion of time and the film image, alongside this comparison between the film image and allegory.

In the field of allegory, Benjamin argues, the image is a fragment.² Moreover, he claims, '[i]t is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of

allegorical script' (Benjamin 2009, 176). Suggestively, salamanders are characterised uniquely by their ability to grow back limbs. The salamander can thus be associated with the fragmented body; therefore, with the 'amorphous fragment' of the allegorical image. However, in Tarkovsky's quote, it is not just any salamander, but the salamander of *the human soul*. We associate the 'soul' – disembodied, transcendent – with the (Christian) symbol to suggest that intrinsic to the flame is the unified symbol within which lies the allegorical fragment. By analogy, intrinsic to Tarkovsky's film image is a symbolic meaning wherein is encased, and unfolds, allegorical meaning. Reading all of this back into the flame carried by Gorchakov, within the flame's symbolic (momentary, transcendent, unified) meaning as an image of life lies its allegorical (temporal, material, fragmentary) meaning that, for Benjamin, is associated with ruin, time and historical reference. Extrapolating this even further, the flame is emblematic of a genuine contradiction at the heart of Tarkovsky's work: the tension between his materialist bent and symbolic striving; between the realism of his image and the poetics of his imagery.

1 min 57 sec

TO BEGIN, AGAIN (RHYTHM)

The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is *rhythm*, expressing the course of time within the frame.

Andrei Tarkovsky (1986, 113)

Back at the wall, the poet moves the candle over to his left hand and reaches for the lighter with his right. With one look behind at what lies ahead, he lights the candle to begin, again, touches the wall for second time and turns – returns – to cross the pool. And we follow . . .

We have looked at how the specificity of Tarkovsky's film image stems from its particular relationship to time, and we have explored the implications of this in light of the allegorical as theorised by Benjamin. However, the film image as an imprint of time is actually characteristic of the medium of film, generally – itself inseparable from the photographic record – and so can be said of *any* film image. What, then, is *unique* about Tarkovsky's theory and practice of the film image? Moreover, how is such uniqueness embodied in another contradiction?

Having argued at one point in his writing that what distinguishes the film image from other art forms is its particular relationship to time recorded 'as fact', Tarkovsky later writes: 'Naturalistically recorded facts are themselves utterly inadequate to the creation of the cinematic image' (1986, 107). In yet another

contradiction, Tarkovsky suggests that although film presents its images as 'fact', and this imprint of time in the image is mechanically reproduced, the film image is not in any way objective. Indeed, for Tarkovsky, both the generation of the film image and the editing together of different shots are highly subjective acts. The key to understanding this – and, in turn, to unlocking the uniqueness of Tarkovsky's film image – is *rhythm*. 'The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is *rhythm*', Tarkovsky writes, 'expressing the course of time within the frame' (1986, 113). A later passage allows us to explicate this statement:


Rhythm in cinema is conveyed by the life of the object visibly recorded in the frame. Just as from the quivering of a reed you can tell what sort of current, what pressure there is in a river, in the same way we know the movement of time from the flow of the life-process reproduced in the shot. (1986, 120)

In this analogy the quivering reed bears a meaningful relationship to the dynamics of the running river: the movement of this object indexically signifies the river's current and pressure. Similarly, the rhythm of the cinematic image – conveyed by the 'life' of recorded objects, the 'flow' of their life-process in the frame of a shot – makes us aware of the 'course' or movement of time: the rhythm of a shot is an index of time passing. The task of the film-maker is to recognise and capture this indexicality through the film shoot, then gather together different shots, each with their inherent temporality or *rhythm*, in order to express his or her perception of time. Drawing from his own experience as a film-maker, Tarkovsky writes:

During shooting . . . I concentrate on the course of time in the frame, in order to reproduce it and record it. Editing brings together shots which are already filled with time, and organizes the unified, living structure inherent in the film; and the time that pulsates through the blood vessels of the film, making it alive, is of varying rhythmic pressure. (1986, 114)

This, in turn, becomes the sign – even signature – of the film-maker. Tarkovsky again:

In so far as sense of time is germane to the director's innate perception of life, and editing is dictated by the rhythmic pressures in the segments of film, his handwriting is to be seen in his editing . . . You will always recognize the editing of Bergman, Bresson, Kurosawa or Antonioni . . . because each one's perception of time, as expressed in the rhythm of his films, is always the same. (1986, 121)

Drawing all of this together, we can now appreciate that, for Tarkovsky, the *film-image*  *represents as an observation the film-maker's perception of an object*, and the resulting rhythm – that is, movement of the object within the frame – *expresses his/her perception of time*. This understanding of rhythm is key to appreciating the uniqueness of Tarkovsky's theory and practice of the film image, ~~and also~~ suggestive of an even further contradiction inherent in his work.

We looked at how Tarkovsky predicates his conception of the film image on Japanese *haiku*; however, this discussion of the rhythm of the film image is actually counter to the formal tenets of *haiku*. This is because, for Tarkovsky, the rhythm of the film image is subjective: expressing the perception of an object, it is unique to each film-maker – indeed, Tarkovsky goes so far as to compare it with a signature. In contrast, the *haiku*, with its constant ~~5-7-5~~ syllabic count, cannot be deemed subjective or expressive in the same way.³ Interestingly, ~~this~~ discussion of rhythm aligns Tarkovsky's film image more with Western poetic lyricism – particularly certain conventions of free verse lyric in which rhythmic patterns and lineation are associated with a certain expressiveness of subjectivity and voice – ~~than with haiku~~. Such an alignment seems all the more convincing given that Western lyric is ~~also~~ concerned with plucking out or capturing a moment of perception, ~~thereby articulating~~ a state of heightened consciousness. And yet, where the lyric is a particularly subjective poetic form, often employing strategies of figuration in order to generate the meaning of its message, Tarkovsky claims to diminish such effects; hence, his turn to *haiku*. ~~Such~~ diminishment ~~is~~, as we argued above, ~~more~~ in theory than in practice. This contradiction is further suggested by the quote in which Tarkovsky extols the virtue of ~~such~~ poetic modes of semiotic operation: 'I find poetic links, the logic of poetry in cinema, extraordinarily pleasing. They seem to me perfectly appropriate to the potential of cinema as the most truthful and poetic of art forms' (1986, 18). Ultimately, to posit that Tarkovsky's work embodies aspects of poetic lyricism is accurate, even if it suggests a contradiction, insofar as there is a marked difference between the rhythmic constraint, precise observation and objectivity of the *haiku*, upon which Tarkovsky bases his theory of the film image, and the expressive rhythmic 'freedom', figuration and subjectivity of the lyric. Nevertheless, the contradiction offers further insight into Tarkovsky's cinema. He writes:

Artists are divided into those who create their own inner world, and those who recreate reality. I undoubtedly belong to the first – but that actually alters nothing: my inner world may be of interest to some, others will be left

cold or even irritated by it; the point is that the inner world created by cinematic means always has to be taken as reality, as it were objectively established in the immediacy of the recorded moment. (1986, 118)

Logical contradiction thus becomes poetic complexity as Tarkovsky's film image uniquely conflates the precise observation characteristic of *haiku* and the imaginative, subjective expression that characterises lyric. In turn, we can begin to identify Tarkovsky as a realist, but of a particular ilk: one who depicts an 'inner world' through his careful observation and recording of the 'outer world'.

3 min 41 sec

TO FAIL, AGAIN (PLACE)

The first half of the film will probably be set in Bagno Vignoni. But not in the real place – in an invented one . . . I shall have to recreate the atmosphere of the place in detail.

Andrei Tarkovsky (2004, 102)

(Hush.) *All this talk – the candle has gone out again . . . Where is our poet? There he is – almost across the length of the pool with the candle. Blasted air. Now he must turn back, again. Another verse. He looks tired now, and wipes his brow. Stumbles once, but catches himself. (Push.) Once more the candle transferred to the left hand; right hand in his pocket to retrieve the lighter.*

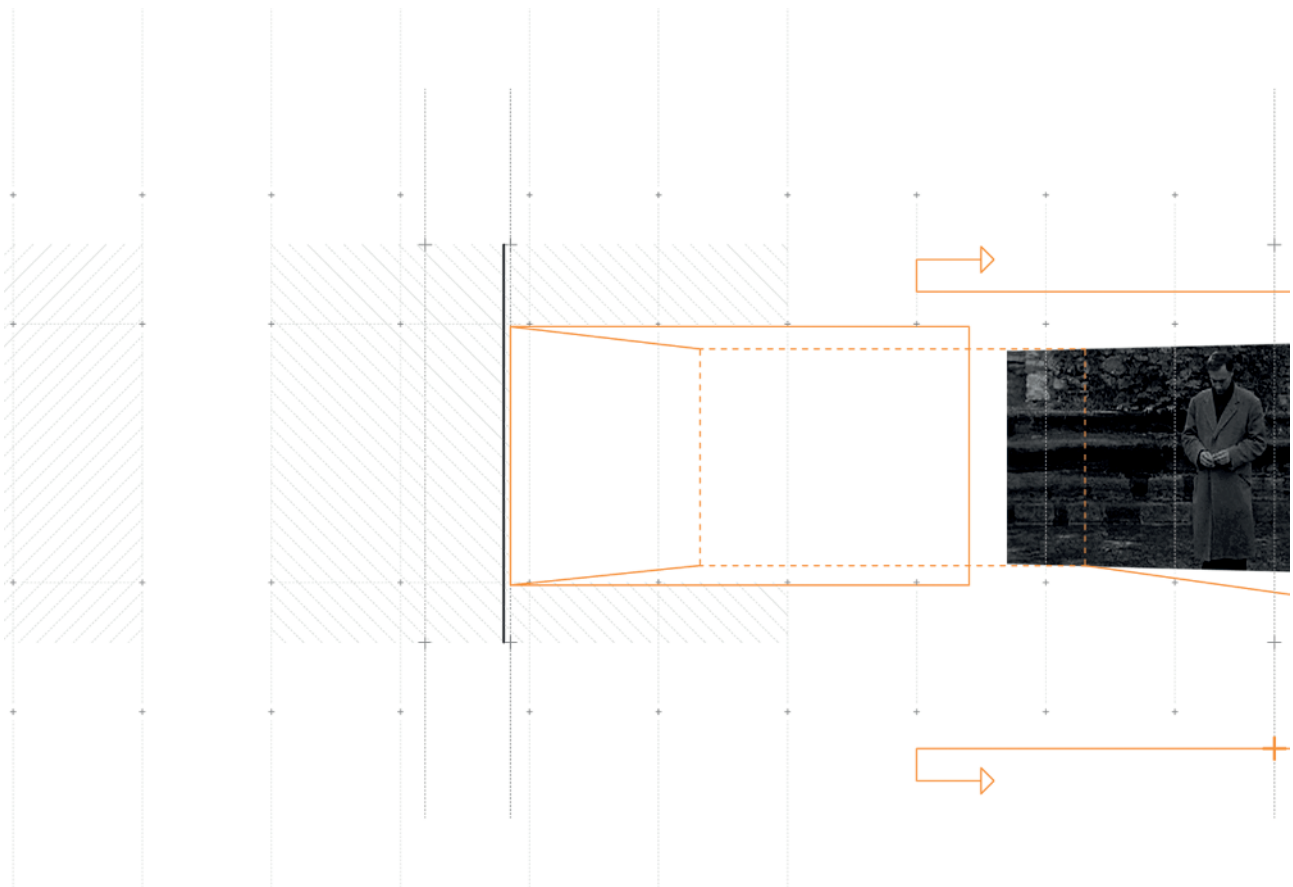
Tarkovsky's theory of the film-image is evident in – but also extended by – his own practice as a film-maker, and particularly his signature style of the long-take and tracking shot. One can see quite clearly how the long take allows for the presentation, as an observation, of the film-maker's perception of an object. Throughout the take the object is held in focus by the camera's eye: the object is perceived by the camera – thus, implicitly, by the film-maker – over the course of a given instance. All the while, the camera records subtle movements and changes on film, thus generating the rhythm in the frame as an expression of his/her perception of time. Now, couple this long take with the tracking shot: that slow, mechanical movement of the camera as it scans its visual horizon. If the long take records the movement(s) of an object *in the frame* as an 'imprint of time' the tracking shot implies the movement of the apparatus *beyond the frame*. In doing so, it extends Tarkovsky's theory of the film-image from its relationship with time to a relationship with place. How is this so?

In his writing and thinking, Merleau-Ponty takes up the philosophical project of phenomenology in its rejection of strict scientific empiricism, on the one hand, and

Cartesian rationalism, on the other, to seek instead a radical way of 'doing' philosophy based upon a return to the life-world and our subjective experience of it prior to any such objectifications and idealisations. Thus in keeping with phenomenology's slogan of 'returning to the things themselves', Merleau-Ponty aims to reawaken our immediate contact with the world, encouraging us to 'relearn' how we look at this world through returning to a 'pre-reflective' or 'pre-predicative' situation in which the unique corporeal *perceptions* of our 'lived body' are intrinsic to understanding – even primary to it.⁴ He writes:

Merleau-Ponty thus suggests that through the actions of the living-moving body we are *in* contact with the world, *inhabiting* space and time. In this respect, actualising our corporeal intentionality through *movement* allows us to experience and perceive our surroundings, thus giving us intimate access to the knowable world-as-object.

We can conceptualise this emergent understanding of the world through embodied perception and movement in terms of a coming-into-being of *place* by drawing from Edward Casey's reading of Merleau-Ponty in *The Fate of*



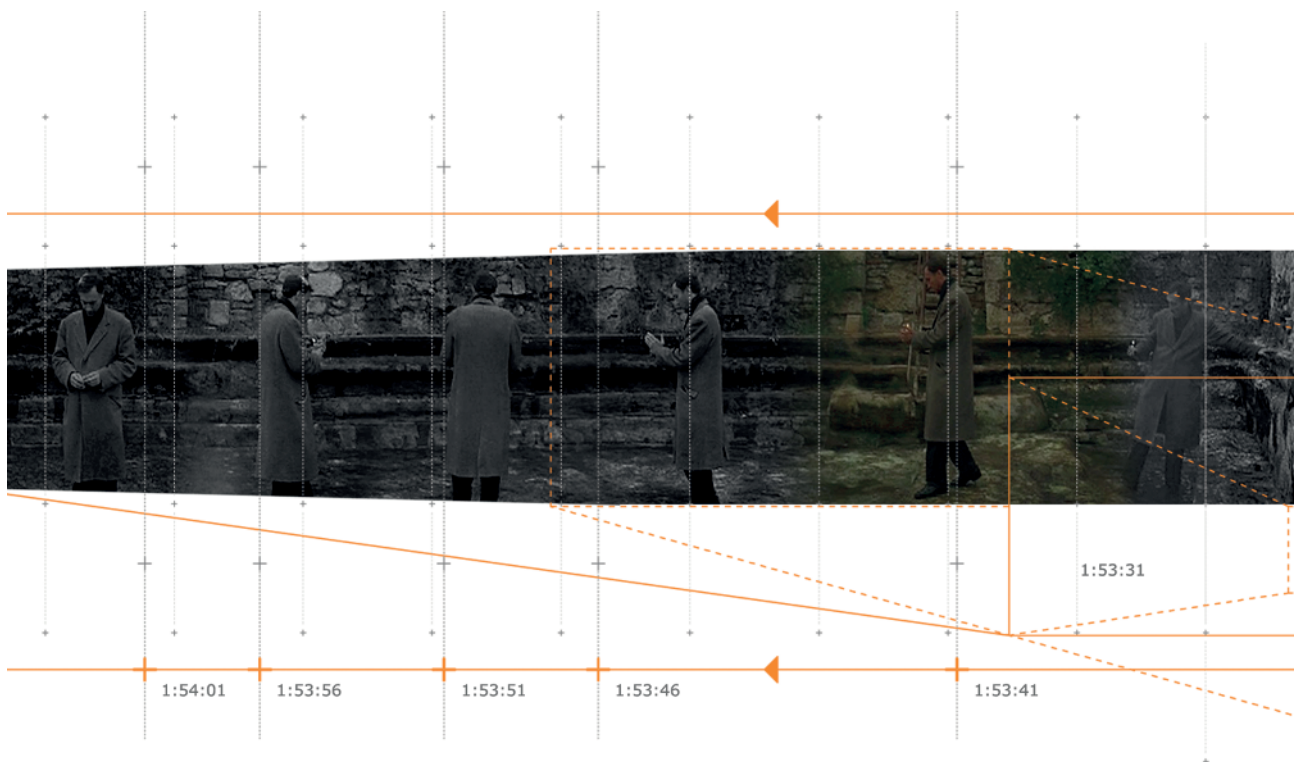
In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness, and into which it draws my body. I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them . . . Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the object, with a 'praktognosia' which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary. (1962, 140)

Place (1997), a narrative account of place throughout the history and development of Western philosophical thought. Here Casey uses phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, to re-conceptualise place, in his terms, 'by way of the body'. Casey begins with a discussion of how the lived body in Merleau-Ponty's thought challenges conventional quantitative conceptions of space (i.e. space as a collection of points, a conglomeration of sheer relations or a matter of containment) with a more active understanding of 'spatialising' and 'spatialised' space:

For Merleau-Ponty, the lived body is the origin of 'spatialising' as well as 'spatialised' space . . . The lived body does the spatializing that eventuates via various formal operations in the spatialized world of geometry (and physics). Its empowering force, most completely manifested in bodily movement, is what lends to space a 'universal power' to connect things that would otherwise be consigned to isolated positions in the indifferent vacua of homogenous space. Galileo's apothegm 'It moves!' . . . is superseded by Merleau-Ponty's operative dictum 'I move' (1997, 230)

of space ultimately has implications for re-thinking place in terms of what Casey calls 'lived place'.

Lived place, Casey argues, is not an abstract co-ordinate location but, rather, imbued with material qualities and scale as experienced uniquely by the lived body that inhabits it. Moreover, and further in keeping with Casey's reading of Merleau-Ponty, it is not just a phenomenally-stationary, unmoving body that experiences place, but the living-moving body: the body that spatialises and therefore not only actualises, but also makes possible places. 'A place is somewhere I *might*



Through the living-moving body of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, argues Casey, space becomes subjective: both expressive and orientated. 'Just as the body continually exhibits "expressive movement" . . . so the space in which it moves becomes an expressive space, having its own physiognomy and moods, its affectivity and style', Casey writes (1997, 230). 'Likewise, the same mobile body is continually orienting us in the particular space in which we find ourselves' (1997, 230). Combining expressive movement and bodily orientation – and here let us recall the movement of objects in Tarkovsky's film image 'expressing' a perception of time; the tracking shot orienting movements of the filmic eye – this corporeal inhabitation

come to; and when I do come to it, it is not just a matter of fitting into it. I come into a place as providing an indefinite horizon of my *possible* action', writes Casey (1997, 232). In this sense, through the spatialising actions of the living-moving body, lived place has not only an *actual* dimension whose material quality, scale and temporality are perceived and experienced by the lived body, but also a possible or *virtual* – one might even say temporal – dimension made possible by the perceptions and movements of the lived body.

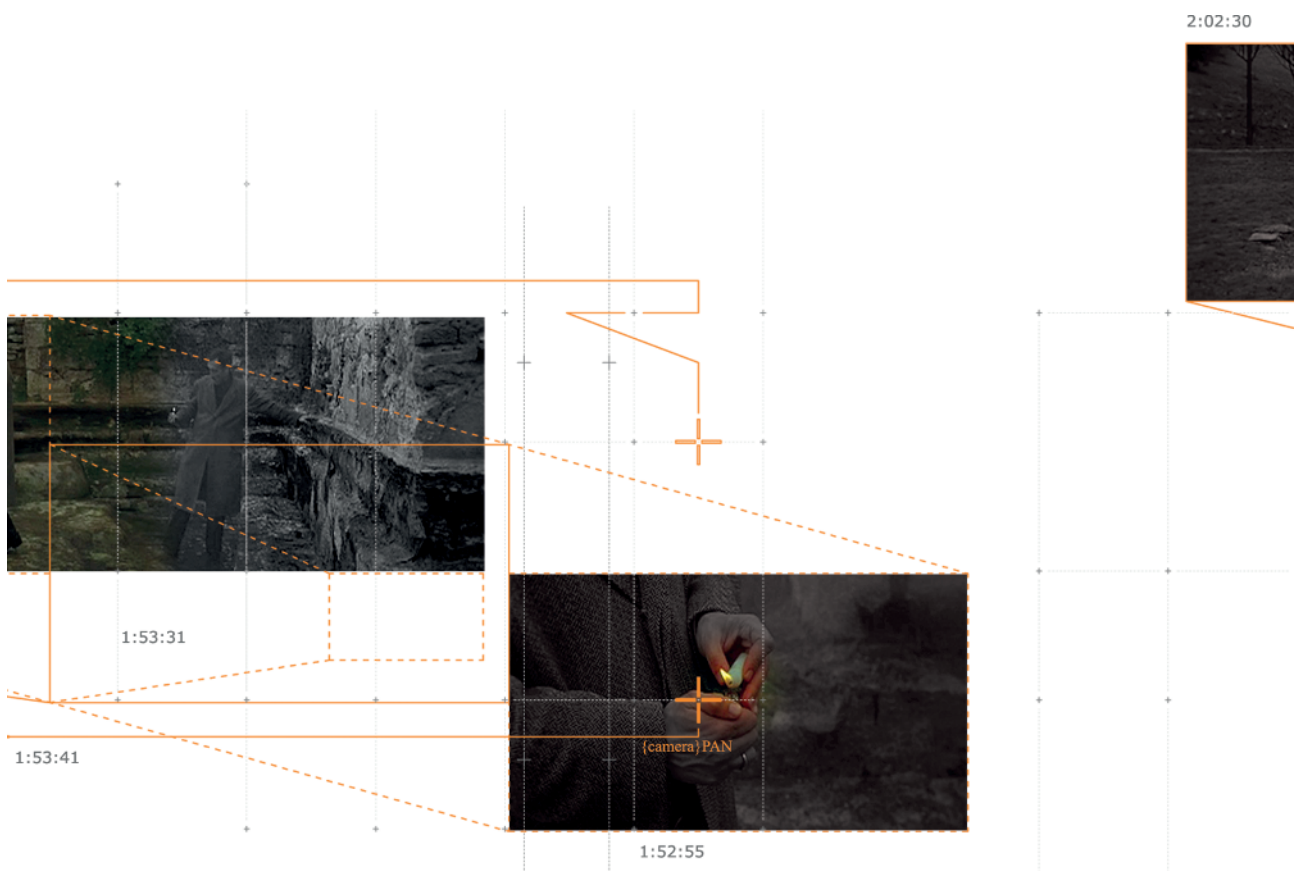
Let us now relate all of this discussion back to Tarkovsky's cinematic practice of the long take and tracking shot. The long take, as we have suggested,

records the act of perceiving, which we can now appreciate as a primary act that awakens our contact with the world and leads to an intimate, corporeal and subjective understanding of it. Meanwhile, the tracking shot orients that perception beyond the edges of the frame. This movement beyond the frame – that is, beyond the visual extent of the image – journeys from the perceived into the yet-to-be-perceived; thus, from the known into the unknown, made knowable through the sustained perception held throughout the shot. Taken together, the long take and tracking shot suggest the actions through which the living-moving body inhabits a

invented one. Where there is only the pool, and everything is dilapidated, more intimate, more provincial. From the very beginning, everything will take place near the pool by the hotel.

Therefore I shall have to recreate the atmosphere of the place in detail. (2004, 102)

As this quote suggests, Tarkovsky's films do not offer a direct presentation or documentation of objective reality. Rather, they are representational, imaginative spaces that are designed and constructed, be it through the careful framing of a shot, the composition of the *mise en scène* or



location in space and time – *perceiving* the location's material qualities, scale and temporality (the long take) *while moving* (the tracking shot) – thereby actualising and making possible lived place.

It is important to note that lived place as it is actualised by Tarkovsky's long take and tracking shot is not to be confused with 'real place'. This is evident in the following comment made by Tarkovsky as quoted in Tarkovsky and Chiaramonte (2004) in relation to the film location for *Nostalghia*:

The first half of the film will probably be set in Bagno Vignone. But not the real place – in an

the cultivation of a filmic 'atmosphere' through, for example, including elements such as fire, water and steam. (Or, as Tarkovsky famously did for the film *Sacrifice* (1986), painting the grass green to get the appropriate colour on film.) This nuances our appreciation of Tarkovsky as a realist, but of a particular ilk: we now appreciate him as one who carefully constructs the reality of an 'outer' world in order to record it as a means of expressing an 'inner' one.

In sum, the film-image is comprised of (a) rhythmic movements *within the frame* that record the perception, and consequent understanding, of the object coupled with (b) a concurrent movement beyond the edges of the

frame, shifting into the unknown-made-known through an ongoing act of perceiving. This coupling preserves the process of an emergent understanding: the coming-into-awareness of the knowable world (that is, the knowable world of Tarkovsky) that, to use Casey's (1997) terms, can also be understood as the coming-into-being of 'lived place'. All of which would seem to suggest the futurity of Tarkovsky's film image. And yet, as the camera does not dwell, but ventures ever onward, the emergence of lived place occurs, necessarily, in the wake of its figurative death. The question arises: is there, in fact, an inherent nostalgia to Tarkovsky's film image?

5 min 28 sec

FINALLY, TO BEGIN (NOSTALGIA)

Cinema lives by its capacity to resurrect the same event on the screen time after time – by its very nature it is, so to speak, nostalgic.

Andrei Tarkovsky (1986, 140)

Again Gorchakov lights the candle, and this time carries it in his left hand. His right hand holds open his brown coat, shielding the flame in its fold. His hair wisps. But isn't all of this sounding familiar? Like we've heard it all before? Is there anything else that the image says? But perhaps better

2:02:30



2:05:13

End

to ask, how else is this image saying and, in turn, what are the poetical, ethical and political implications of this address?

One way of arriving at ~~this~~ understanding of the relationship between Tarkovsky's film image and nostalgia is by turning to one of the major criticisms waged against Tarkovsky. Frederic Jameson argues that Tarkovsky's cinema evidences a naïve belief in the objectivity of the cinematic image. 'The deepest contradiction in Tarkovsky', argues Jameson, is 'that offered by a valorisation of nature without human technology achieved by the highest technology of the photographic apparatus itself. No reflexivity acknowledges this second hidden presence, thus threatening to transform Tarkovskian nature-mysticism into the sheerest ideology' (1992, 100). Jameson's critique sees Tarkovsky's cinema as an art form at the height of modernity and the age of mechanical reproduction that nonetheless yearns for an unmediated relation to the world or to nature. Stemming from this critique, one might see Tarkovsky's conception of the film image as an attempt to capture and restore a moment of time past in which nature is experienced directly, which is then presented to a viewer. One might therefore describe Tarkovsky's cinema as inherently nostalgic, in the sense that Svetlana Boym refers to as 'restorative nostalgia': 'Restoration (from *re-staure* – re-establish) signifies a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment' (2007, 15). Restorative nostalgia attempts to re-construct or re-build the (mythical) place, or time, that has been lost – and that one mourns. In this light, the film image as an 'imprint of time' appears fundamentally conservative. However, a counter-argument to Jameson's critique will allow us to nuance this understanding, offering an alternate reflection on Tarkovsky's nostalgic impulse.

In the essay 'Andrei Tarkovsky and Contemporary Art: Medium and Mediation' (2008), Tarkovsky scholar Robert Bird directly refutes Jameson's strict interpretation of Tarkovsky as a naïve realist by placing an emphasis on the *projection* of Tarkovsky's imprinted image. 'If he sought to recoup the real', argues Bird, 'it was as a function of the projected image, as it is imprinted within the apparatus' (Bird 2008a, 4). In this sense it is not so much a dream of escaping to a reality beyond the apparatus that is at stake in Tarkovsky's cinema, but an appreciation of the immediacy and 'reality' of the projected image itself or, as Bird phrases it, 'a recognition that the closest thing to immediacy is when mediation itself becomes the object of

representation' (Bird 2008a, 11). Tarkovsky, himself, indicates this when he writes:

Let us say that I want to have time flowing through the frame with dignity, independently, so that no-one in the audience will feel that his perception is being coerced, so that he may, as it were, allow himself to be taken prisoner voluntarily by the artist, as he starts to recognise the material of the film as his own, assimilating it, drawing it in to himself as new, intimate experience (1986, 120).

This allows us to appreciate Tarkovsky's film image – what Bird labels the 'imprinted image' – less in terms of a restoration of time past than, coupled with its subsequent projection onto the film screen, an experience of time passing *in the present moment*. This, in turn, is suggestive of a 'reflective' nostalgia: Boym's counterpoint to the aforementioned restorative nostalgia. 'Re-flection means new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis', writes Boym (2007, 15). Nostalgia of this sort is not a collective identification of the 'truth' of the past, with an attempt to return to or restore this ideal; rather, it is a focus on experiential time, personal memory and the idiosyncratic, non-conclusive, individual narratives woven from it. Boym again:

Nostalgics of this kind are often, in the words of Vladimir Nabokov, 'amateurs of Time, epicures of duration', who resist the pressure of external efficiency and take sensual delight in the texture of time not measurable by clocks and calendars. (2007, 15)

Nostalgia understood less as an attempt to recover time past than as an experience of time's passing – this, we suggest, best encapsulates the nostalgic impulse inherent in Tarkovsky's theory and practice of the film image.

We can further use Bird and Boym's arguments, combined, in order to nuance our understanding of the nostalgic impulse of the film image as it relates to place. We looked above at how, during Tarkovsky's long take and tracking shot, the camera moves through a given location: an act of spatialisation that – concomitant with the passage (and imprint) of time – engenders the emergence of lived place. We then suggested that this emergence of lived place as it *occurs* in the film shoot is distinct from that which *appears* in the projected image, and is then received by a viewer. As a filmic projection, lived place exists, at least in part, only in memory. We can now appreciate that this existence is not within a collective memory as structured by some grand narrative; rather, it exists within the personal, subjective

memory of each embodied viewer. This, again, aligns Tarkovsky's film image with a reflective, rather than a restorative, nostalgia.

Bird's emphasis on projection – that is, on the film image as mediation – combines with Boym's argument concerning reflective nostalgia ~~returns us~~ to our discussion of how the film image generates meaning, and the emotional effect this has on the viewer. However, in order to appreciate this, we must further explore how the film image, as a projected image, is received.

8 min 47 sec

TO FALL (EMPATHY)

In a world where there is a real threat of a war capable of annihilating mankind; where social ills exist on a staggering scale; where human suffering cries out to heaven – the way must be found for one person to reach another.

Andrei Tarkovsky (1986, 206)

The poet falls. His heart fails. He, his hands, disappear from the frame. Still, although the poet has stopped breathing (his movement from A to B complete, his goal attained) the flame continues the dance . . .

Vivian Sobchack (1992) highlights the intersubjective communicative capacities of cinema as a perceptual experience. Film, as Sobchack explains, *represents* a prior direct and reflective perceptual experience on the part of the film-maker; it then *presents* this direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive existence as the projected film; this is then received and perceived by the viewer who must interpret it *as experience*.⁵ Cinema is 'based on bodily perception as a vehicle for conscious expression', she writes; it entails 'visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visibly, audibly, and haptically' (Sobchack 1992, 9). Our reception and perception of the film thus constitutes an intersubjective perceptual experience, argues Sobchack, wherein the vision of the film – its 'address of the eye' – solicits me, and 'I' respond through an active, intentional viewing. In this exchange, ~~the film's vision and my own~~ do not conflate but, rather, constitute a space of shared vision that is not only intrasubjectively dialectical, but also intersubjectively dialogical. There are, Sobchack argues, *two viewing subjects* in the cinema 'sharing a world' and 'constituting an experience'. How does Sobchack's argument combine with Bird's emphasis on mediation and Boym's understanding of reflective nostalgia to suggest how the film image generates meaning, and to what effect?

When the film image, understood as the record of the film-maker's perception of an object, is projected and offered as an observation for the viewer to perceive and receive, it functions to halt narrative progression temporarily: an experience of duration or of time passing (i.e. a reflective nostalgia) that stops or syncopates time. This – what might be termed a 'lyrical compression', as rendered through the material poetics of the film image – in turn opens a contemplative space: slow, but still active; not escape from, but reflection on the world. This contemplative space is, as we have seen, an intersubjective space. And we would now like to suggest that this intersubjective space is the very framework of empathic engagement, when understood as an embodied relational process: a dynamic and complex construct of perception, imagination, cognition and affect; a process that allows for a freedom and mobility between different subject – and even object – positions. A process that, as such, holds emancipatory and critical potential insofar as it allows us to move 'beyond ourselves' in order to understand and appreciate alternative points of view.


Bearing this in mind, might the 'curious' sense of empathy that we feel in relation to the scene with Gorchakov and the candle, as we alluded to at the start of this essay, be ascribed less to our symbolic reading of the flame held by Gorchakov, as per Pallasmaa's suggestion, than to our embodied engagement with the screen space itself? What Bird describes, with specific reference to Tarkovsky's work, as a 'sensate membrane of material forces, eliciting from the viewer not only intellectual participation but also physical presence' (2008a, 8)? In other words, can we appreciate how the address of the eye speaks to us through the fire of the flame, the earth of the stone, evaporated water of the steam as well as that other element, air. What Luce describes as 'irreducibly constitutive of the whole, [that] compels neither the faculty of perception nor that of knowledge to recognize it' (1983, 8). *Air*. 'Always there, it allows itself to be forgotten', ~~she laments~~ (1983, 8). But have we not been engaging with the air throughout this poet's journey? Virtually, in the memory of the scene of Domenico's inflammatory speech. Visually, in the *belch* of steam, *gust* of wind, flicker of flame all framed by the long take and tracking shot. Perceptually, in the mediation – presumed transparent, but exposed as, in fact, reflective through its re-mediation by the lamplight of the projected image. Also between us, the material space we share and breathe and through which voice travels to tympanum, across ossicles, toward the oval window of another's inner ear where we make our appearance, both body and story. In a shared space such as this – a complex construct of

imagination, cognition, perception and affect – the air is not forgotten, being always felt.


9 min 04 sec

End.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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NOTES

- [1] A discussion of narration and focalisation within the visual arts would certainly counter this association between the plastic artistic symbol and a temporality of the 'momentary'; however, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this present article.
- [2] Benjamin continues: 'In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished . . . The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight, which is still available to the confused investigator' (1963, 176).
- [3] This is not to say that one cannot find personal inferences or emotional expression in haiku.  simply to distinguish the expressiveness of haiku from that of Tarkovsky's film image.
- [4] Merleau-Ponty says this in his preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception*: 'To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematisation is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is' (1962, ix).
- [5] Sobchack notes the term film-maker is used throughout her own argument not to name a biographical person, his or her style or manner – as is the case in Tarkovsky's argumentation – which stems from his much more authorial bent. Rather, she argues, the term refers to 'the concrete, situated, and synoptic presence of the many persons who realized the film as concretely visible for vision' (Sobchack 1992, 9).

Illustrations

Kreider + O'Leary – Fragments from a Filmic Analysis for *Nostalgia* (Dir: Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983). Research Assistant - Andrew Walker. © Kristen Kreider + James O'Leary, 2012.

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