Cinematic Synthesis in the Poetic Work of Tarkovsky

The idea of a poetic cinema has often been reduced to a cinema of contemplation: a cinema of long-takes and a slow moving camera that rejects narrative motivation and causality in favour of creating an aesthetically pleasing image.\(^1\) Therefore, what results may be on one hand described as incomprehensible in terms of a narrative progression. We are to believe that the imagery is instead operating on some sort of mystical level, a level in which emotional response is separated entirely from intellectual discourse. In this sense, many critics seem satisfied to leave the work of Andrei Tarkovsky relatively untouched in terms of analysis; it could be argued that this is following the director’s own instruction perhaps.\(^2\) In focusing on the mystical and often singular quality of his aesthetic, one might either be enraptured to a point wherein analysis becomes futile, or rather be overwhelmed by the apparent tactlessness of his symbolism.\(^3\) The poetic style of Tarkovsky transcends the limits of both these responses. First and foremost, it does not attempt to occupy a space outside of cinema nor does it claim some absolute truth in relation to nature. Its poetry serves to emphasise the potential of the cinematic image as a form of artistic expression. That was Tarkovsky’s primary objective throughout his difficult career. Thus an analysis of the poetry within his work, both visual and narrative, should demonstrate as to why these films are so successful.

Tarkovsky had described himself as a ‘poet rather than a cinematographer,’\(^4\) and thus it is fair to assume the nature of his poetic style as deliberate; however the permeation of this

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\(^1\) Green, Peter, *The Winding Quest*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993, p. 10
\(^2\) Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Sculpting in Time*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000, p. 40. “Understanding in a scientific sense means agreement on a cerebral, logical level; it is an intellectual act akin to the process of proving a theorem. Understanding an artistic image means an aesthetic acceptance of the beautiful, on an emotional or even supra-emotional level.”
\(^4\) Tarkovsky, p. 221
style into every aspect of his work permits more than mere assumption. The most direct example of this overall poeticism is perhaps found in Mirror (1975). In attempting to free both the audience and the work itself from the generally accepted, yet vague and often reductive notion of poetic cinema, the work of Gaston Bachelard can serve to establish a satisfactory and applicable definition of poetic imagery.\(^5\) This essay will therefore attempt to apply a working definition of poetry and the poetic image to Tarkovsky’s film and in turn approach a definition of poetic cinema that does not remove technical proficiency from the poeticism of the images produced.

Bachelard, a French philosopher of science, was by all accounts a modest man who served as director of the Institut d'histoire des sciences in the 1940s and ‘50s.\(^6\) His work, while varied, by the end of his career tended towards a study of literary aesthetics and poetics. His 1958 book *The Poetics of Space*, tackling the apparently unassuming subject of houses, rooms and their contents, serves to define a basic aspect of human existence. We, along with our thoughts and dreams, are shaped completely by our environments; but moreover it is these geometric spaces that allow us to dream, for our imaginations not only to flourish but to function. In his introduction he describes his project as being the study of a ‘direct ontology’ of the poetic image and its phenomenological creation.\(^7\) He relates this only to the written word and on occasion to painting, however over the course of his introduction he does offer up some extraordinarily permissive and extensive thoughts on what the poetic image might constitute:

The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche . . . [It] is not subject to an inner thrust. It is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at

\(^6\) Gilson, Etienne, “Foreword to the 1964 edition”, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xi  
\(^7\) Bachelard, p. xvi
what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away. Because of its novelty and its action, the poetic image has an entity and a dynamism of its own . . .

Bachelard suggests that rather than being a referent to some signifier based on language, a poetic image is one that reverberates in time. This, as he notes, brings one back to the Bergsonian notion of *élan vital*: the force that propels life into onward flow, expressed in terms of time. The poetic act in and of itself is inaccessible to the dissection of psychoanalysis and empirical investigation since the ‘poet does not confer the past of his image upon me, and yet his image immediately takes route in me.’ It is through a phenomenology of the soul, rather than the mind, that one can approach an understanding of the poetic process: we achieve a transcendence of the mind’s objectification of even the most commonplace things and are met with their inter-subjective ‘inaugurated form.’ This form is reached by the poetic image’s contact with our own depths of being (rather than its surfaces) by way of resonance. Bachelard described the inherent limits of an intellectual approach to poetic imagery:

The psychoanalyst, victim of his method, inevitably intellectualizes the image, losing the reverberations in his effort to untangle the skein of his interpretations. He understands the image more deeply than the psychologist. But that’s just the point, he “understands” it. For the psychoanalyst, the poetic image always has a context. When he interprets it, however, he translates it into a language that is different from the poetic logos.

Overall though, the book provides a tremendously deep well from which to draw upon a philosophically grounded theory of poetics. It enables one to gain some understanding of the

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8 Ibid. p. xvi
9 Ibid, p. xxi
10 Ibid, p. xxii
11 Ibid, p. xxiv
visceral, affective qualities of poetic imagery; it allows the reader of poetry to appreciate the relationship that their own experience has on the work; yet all the while it evades the trappings of an inappropriate mode of intellectual dissection. Further to this, many of Bachelard’s ideas parallel the thoughts of modernist theorists of poetry. Time and its relation to the poetic experience come to occupy the utmost importance, which connects Tarkovsky with this poetic and aesthetic tradition. In this sense, perhaps in accordance with Tarkovsky’s own thoughts, the director avoids a symbolist definition of his work and can be seen to be in line with the imagist movement of the early twentieth century. William Pratt has noted that while ‘symbolism expressed the subjective reality of external objects; imagism reversed the emphasis and stressed the objective reality of subjective thoughts.’

Of course explorations of the poeticism in Tarkovsky’s work have been undertaken before; this essay does not intend to suggest otherwise, nor does it claim to constitute some absolute revision. In fact many have provided ample and insightful readings as well as illumination on the poetic experience that an attentive and open audience might achieve. The first major work on Tarkovsky’s career was conducted by Maya Turovskaya in her book Andrei Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry. Coming from the same generation as the director, and having access to the archives of Mosfilm, Turovskaya seems to have had an ideal opportunity to confront all aspects of the director’s work along with his very specific methodology. However, in working through the book one comes to the conclusion that perhaps she was too close and involved to achieve any balanced criticism. While there is no doubt as to her passionate connection with the films and with Tarkovsky as an artist, it becomes evident that the writer begins her task with a pre-existing reverence with regard to the work. This

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14 Turovskaya, Maya, Andrei Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry, London: Faber, 1989, p. 94
reverence, while it provokes some stirring writing and adept analysis of each of his works, does hinder the potential for balanced criticism; in fact, at one point Turovskaya even goes so far as to place total responsibility for a meaningful response to the work plainly on the audience and their respective ‘spiritual’ efforts.¹⁵

As far as poetic cinema is concerned, Turovskaya’s conception is relatively well grounded. She provides a good historical background of the theory that was developed by the Russian formalists before her, notably the writings of Viktor Shlovsky and Boris Pasternak.¹⁶ The problem with this, however, is that these theorists saw cinema in terms of literary technique whereas Tarkovsky’s work can be seen to be emphatically and purely visual. Peter Green’s book, on the other hand, while acknowledging the implicit vagueness of typical discussions on poetic cinema, fails to reach a satisfactory conclusion of his own. While The Winding Quest is also an admirably thorough work, covering the entire output and a personal history of the director, it actually fails in its attempt to construct a cohesive and absolute theory, falling victim to the vagueness which he criticises other works for.¹⁷ Perhaps it is something to be expected with such an elusive title. Robert Bird’s book, however, attempts something far more ambitious: to discover the source of Tarkovsky’s unique ‘atmosphere.’¹⁸ The structure of Elements of Cinema, while retaining the all-encompassing, chronological framework that the previous studies had, operates through an elaboration of Tarkovsky’s thematic and structural motifs. It is interesting in that it attempts to overlay his entire oeuvre with a poetic schema that can at times miss the phenomenological basis of individual images and their imaginative qualities. It is nonetheless admirable for its own poetic aspect. All three books rightly acknowledge both the interdependence and fluidity of each film, and the repetition of motifs, as they relate to an overall poetic style. They also emphasise the

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¹⁵ Ibid, p. 98
¹⁶ Ibid, p. 100
¹⁷ Green, p. 92
importance of audience reception in the construction of poetic meaning in the films. It becomes apparent that, just as he himself alluded to in a definition of art, what Tarkovsky strove for was an absolute cinematic truth.\textsuperscript{19}

Again following the director’s own theoretical course, time must be fully considered in its relation to the creation and reception of Tarkovsky’s poetic imagery. Within this field the philosophy of Bergsonian duration has emerged in a position of dominance as it relates to art cinema especially. Gilles Deleuze has formed the most powerful argument for this in his \textit{Cinema II – The Time-Image}, charting a complex history of art cinema as it developed after World War II and exploring cinema’s relationship with memory, reality, perception and thought.\textsuperscript{20} He touches on the work of Tarkovsky briefly throughout, but does not venture to provide detailed analysis. It can be argued however that Tarkovsky is the director that most encapsulates Deleuze’s theories on cinematic time. It is in their respective interpretations as to the implications that the two differ slightly. Matilda Mroz appears to have reached the most accommodating conclusion in how to define these temporal processes, specifically as they operate in \textit{Mirror}.\textsuperscript{21} Mroz describes the textural qualities of the film and suggests the term ‘aesthetic transfiguration’ to accommodate both the material and experiential elements of the film’s images. In this sense time and temporality, as they manifest onscreen, become the aspects that connect the points of poetic experience with the application of cinematic technique.

And so to \textit{Mirror}: initially we can attest to its consistency with vague notions of ‘poetic cinema.’ It forgoes typical narrative linearity; it apparently mystifies subjectivities, even so much as having actors play dual roles; and it is full of obtuse imagery that remains difficult to locate within any sort of overall thematic. And yet it is undoubtedly beautiful and

\textsuperscript{19} Tarkovsky, p. 18
undoubtedly comprehensible on an emotional level. The primary reason for this is its poetic quality. This emerges on many levels over the course of the film since the structure is so layered and at times complex. The poetic process I will follow is that of Mroz’s transfiguration. Images of elemental texture are ‘inaugurated’ via the cinematic apparatus and its implicit temporal manipulation. In this sense the most conspicuously poetic scenes are those that appear to disrupt the discrete narratives, employing slow motion camera movements, evocative music, no dialogue and powerful aesthetic imagery.

The first major example of this structural motif occurs in the first third of the film: it involves the child Alexei (Filipp Yankovsky) waking and moving through the bedroom, the camera drifts to an alternate space just as a cloth is blown across screen. What follows is impressionistic bravura. After moving to slow motion in the following shot, Tarkovsky goes one further, having the film run in reverse only to leave the elements in shot appear to be moving forward in time. In slow motion, Alexei’s father (Oleg Yankovsky) turns to pour a ladle of water into his wife’s basin. They are close and sensual, partially dressed and inhabit fully this slow passage of time. His mother (Margarita Terekhova) emerges from the basin, her hair soaking and lingering on the surface of the water. The camera pans out and somehow the basin is no longer there, but what is more remarkable is how the temporality shifts and what follows actually occurs in reverse. It is imperceptible and exists completely within the perceivable duration of the scene. Then there is a cut as the space is emptied and begins to crumble, almost melting as water pours through the ceiling. On a side table burns a single flame, which in turn is reflected by the mirror on the left-hand side of the frame. Nature’s elements overwhelm the constructed home as Masha walks away, almost grinning at the camera as water brings chunks of plaster down around her.

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22 Ibid, p. 92
The scene is the film’s first real foray into typically cinematic, avant-garde modernism. It is supposed to stand out and it does. The failing on the viewer’s part would be to accept its radical difference as the ultimate reason for its being. Of course an aesthetic appreciation is permitted with such visually striking imagery. And the temporal shifts of pace and direction are designed to mesmerize. The reason, according to Bachelard, that such an image can be poetic is the intimacy it creates. Aside from the obvious alienating features that such modernist motifs might provoke in an audience, what is portrayed in the scene is a young boy’s dream-like memory of a relationship he did not see fulfilled. His parents were going to separate or already had, with obvious negative outcomes for the child; but it is in his memory as it relates to the house that he can experience a potentially imaginary ideal. The slow movement of the camera heightens this idealised image’s separation in time from the inevitable reality. The subsequent decay shows how once this essential relationship breaks down, the house and its function as a reliquary of past memories cannot exist. We experience the pain of this pair’s separation almost in the same shot as we experience their sensual closeness (but for one violent cut); we understand the effect this had on the child and his memory of his parents. We receive this information by way of a condensed image. The elements flow freely yet the image is filled with an abundance of signification. It achieves what Ezra Pound calls the ‘permanence in human experience that does not change but endures through time.’\(^{23}\) It offers enough specific information so as to be enticing, but refuses to indulge in personal histories, which in turn retains the personable universality.

All of these sequences serve a similar function. They appear uncanny enough while not becoming overtly symbolic. However, how can individual, unique occurrences account for an overall definition of poetic cinema? While acknowledging the motifs that Tarkovsky employs, as well as their effectiveness, one must move beyond the more superficial elements

\(^{23}\) Pratt, p. 136
to examine his overall style. Many have referred to it as transcendent in its aspirations, attaining an absolute truth by way of the image in and of itself.\textsuperscript{24} It is obvious that many sequences produce great resonances with the audience, especially with regard to nuanced performance. It is interesting to note how much significance, then, critics have placed on the simple objects that Tarkovsky litters throughout his screen. Mroz, referring to the earring scene, explains how these objects are not imbued with any innate significance, but that this significance emerges through cinematic technique:

There is then a cut that singles out several elements in extreme close-up: two potatoes and a small puddle of milk on a dark wooden shelf. This sequence can be seen to perform, cinematically and through time, something that is in fact a concern of still life painting: decay and deliquescence, more aptly expressed by the French term \textit{nature morte}. The passing of time that it suggests, however, is cinematic, in the use of a cut from long-shot to a close-up, the pan, and the isolated sound of the dripping milk.\textsuperscript{25}

Time and its flow within the shot becomes the overriding force that propels Tarkovsky’s aesthetic. Like the elemental flow of water or fire, the cinematic image can produce this ephemerality through its technique. The materiality of the image is something that arises almost simultaneously with the very point of its passing; cinematic technique serves as the actuator of poetic resonance. In this sense the cinematic image itself becomes synonymous with memory. Just like the fluctuations in colour and speed throughout the film, or the spilled milk dripping off the shelf, memories exist in varying degrees and only for fleeting moments. They are subject to change. This is what Bachelard refers to when he defines us all as ‘near

\textsuperscript{25} Mroz, p. 118
poets’ rather than historians, as we remember our homes and interior spaces. Memory involves a creative and imaginative process, but it is continuous. As it is the primary determinant of our perception of reality, the space in which we remember is essential also.

‘A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality.’

The importance of the house within the narrative of the film, therefore, cannot be underestimated. We shift from the country dacha to urban apartments and back again. In each case too, we witness an ongoing structural decay. On a formal basis we witness a dialogue between the director and the relevant spaces throughout his life: there is equal part pastoral idyll and decay. Retreating to past spaces functions like occupying a shell. Bachelard sees an immanently positive aspect to remembering one’s home – the intimacy it involves produces a sense of well-being.

The faltering spaces, however, seem to suggest that Tarkovsky’s thoughts on the matter are not in full accordance. Again it is a matter of degree, but we encounter spaces in a whole range of states: from luxuriant decadence, to simple spillages on the floor, to flaking paint on walls, and crumbling plaster. We encounter the ultimate destruction of the Home within the first twenty minutes, with both its collapse under the weight of water (and a broken relationship) but also with the hut being engulfed in flames. Nature appears to be struggling against the home, potentially vying for that position of stability as it relates to the director’s own subjective reality. In that particular scene, however, it is Tarkovsky’s technique that prevails over nature. Its temporal control is only strengthened by the ‘miraculous’ communion of elements that signals the director’s first crisis.

The home must therefore be constructed with nature in mind; one must realise nature’s integral position in the existence of the home. The order of the home is essential to
the preservation of an ideal environment for artistic and poetic creation, with nature as the outward force that helps inspire that creation. In this sense one can see the film itself as Tarkovsky’s attempt at reformulating a home in which he can store his memories and cultivate future dreams. It is in the very fact that this psychological model works for the entire audience that we see the proof of his poetic cinema. Of course there are constructed homes and spaces within the narrative that operate with enough separation and distance so as to allow us to occupy them as well. This is clearly evident in the apartment, as Alexei (voice of Innokenty Smoktunovsky) talks on the phone with his mother (Maria Vishnyakova, Tarkovsky’s own mother). The camera tracks steadily and slowly through the hallway, down past the tactile images of walls, towards a curtain which just keeps the sunlight from creeping in. There is enough spatial detail, along with enough innocuous dialogue, to allow the audience to exist and partake comfortably in the space for the scene’s entire duration. We also encounter spatial junctions in a much more intrusive manner, as Arseny Tarkovsky recites his poetry, the camera follows (almost as if it’s chasing) Masha out of the corners she retreats to. This further problematises the positive nature of intimacy and poetry’s connection with it, since not even the corner offers enough privacy for Masha to think in without the overbearing subjectivity of her husband, and ultimately her son and his camera, from interfering.

The film taken as a whole, however, is what constitutes this virtual home and its positive nature. We can accept that the central question of Mirror is an exploration of memory and how it works. The fragmentary, non-narrative structure of the film illustrates the patterns of memory construction, aestheticizing the actual process, but simultaneously functions as a home in itself. Thus we can see the necessity for such variation in style of narration: like the rooms and nooks of any house, the numerous styles and indeed temporalities that make up the cinematic space allow for a richness of and clear delineation of
memory. As we have discussed previously, there are the overt dream sequences; there are the chronologically and subjectively ambiguous narrative portions that re-enact Tarkovsky’s past as it reverberated through three generations; and finally in the extensive use of documentary footage, both from the Spanish Civil War and of the Sino-Soviet Border conflict. The variety in form throughout is coupled with even broader artistic, religious and other historical references: da Vinci, Breughel, Bach, and Pushkin, the death of Hitler, Soviet military manoeuvres and even Tarkovsky’s own work as seen in the poster for *Andrei Rublev* (1971). And of course the copious reflections, often tarnished by time: Russian identity thus comes into crisis along with Tarkovsky’s own familial complications. In this position as some reconstitution of the Russian imaginary, as it corresponds to the overall trajectory of art, Deleuze has this to say:

*Mirror* is a turning crystal, with two sides if we relate it to the invisible adult character (his mother, his wife), with four sides if we relate it to two visible couples (his mother and the child he was, his wife and the child he has). And the crystal turns on itself, like a homing device that searches an opaque environment: what is Russia, what is Russia..?29

This correlation of mother as the face of this formal reconstitution of memory coincides with Bachelard’s suggestion that a reader of poetry reverts to a childlike innocence in order to comprehend the poetry of the past.30 What results involves the intensification of the maternal qualities of the shelter, bringing the walls closer together while strengthening their respective protective qualities. This manifests itself in Tarkovsky’s film right at the very end, where we see his real mother leading the incarnation of his childhood from out of the woods and into the field, into the openness of nature. As the child shouts triumphantly behind his mother, he

29 Deleuze, p. 75
30 Bachelard, p. 16
announces the conflation of cinema finally with a home. This is encapsulated, along with nation and identity, in the body of his mother, of Mother Russia. As poetic as that image is in itself, it is not in its aesthetic qualities that Tarkovsky’s film achieves what could be referred to as a true poetic cinema. That is borne out of the creative connection that is provoked in the audience: they have an imaginative task, but it is Tarkovsky who enables them to achieve their poetic goal.
Bibliography: