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## **The End of Desire? Love and the Soteriological Significance of Desire, Hope, and Belief in Andrei Tarkovsky's STALKER (USSR 1979)**

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# The End of Desire?

## Love and the Soteriological Significance of Desire, Hope, and Belief in Andrei Tarkovsky's STALKER (USSR 1979)

### Abstract

This article explores the soteriological significance of desire in *Сталкер* (STALKER, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979). At the heart of the film, deep within a paranormal and psychosomatic frontier called the Zone, is a space which signifies the end of all desire: the Room, a preternatural place of mystical power which is said to grant one's innermost wishes. The Zone and the Room become soteriological motifs. Tarkovsky's characters travel there motivated by a yearning for healing, a hope for salvation. This article explores this soteriological journey through the interplay of desire, hope, and belief, for this triad is the key conceptual scheme at work in the film. From analysis of this film that focuses on this framework, several theological and soteriological concepts emerge which can be fruitfully explored. Above all, by focusing on the significance of this triad, a crucial aspect of Tarkovsky's religious thought comes to light: his understanding of the relationship between desire and love.

### Keywords

Andrei Tarkovsky, Soteriology, Desire, Trinity, Christology, STALKER

### Biography

James Lorenz is a PhD Candidate at the University of Oxford in the Faculty of Theology and Religion. His research is situated broadly in the field of modern systematic theology, with a particular focus on religion and the arts, specifically cinema. His doctoral thesis explores the theological concepts that emerge from the films and philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky.

Deep within *Сталкер* (STALKER, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979) is a space which signifies the end of all desire in the film. In a timeless future within some nameless country is the Zone, a liminal space between memory and imagination where a meteor strike has created a paranormal and psychosomatic frontier where phantasmagoria can be fatal. In the very heart of the Zone is the Room, a space of preternatural and mystical power that is said to grant one's innermost wishes. Tarkovsky specifically



Fig. 1: Film still "Entering the zone", *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 00:49:06.

aligns the mysterious power of the Room with the interiority of desire: this is not a space where one can *perform* one's desires and articulate them as if simply "making a wish"; rather, this is a space which draws out honest, essential, and suppressed desire from the depths of the human subconscious. And so the Room inspires pilgrims, those who would venture into the Zone, bypassing the dangerous military guarded perimeter and risking the paranormal "traps" within, in order to pursue the fulfilment of their wishes and the hope of satiating their desire. In this way the Room comes to signify both the end and the source of desire, for the very myth of a place which fulfils desire will engender desire in those who hear of it.

The Zone and the Room become soteriological motifs. Tarkovsky's characters travel there motivated by a yearning for healing, a hope for salvation – whatever each of them believes that entails. (See fig. 1.) There is the Writer, whose creativity is occluded and who has come to the Zone in search of inspiration. There is also the Professor, who is reticent at first about his reasons for entering the Zone, but in time reveals the true nature of his quest: to destroy the Room and save the world from the chaos it could precipitate. Both of their motivations are salvific in shape or design. Then there is the eponymous Stalker, one of the pseudo-alien individuals

who illegally smuggle outsiders into the Zone and guide them through its trials to the Room. Although committed never to enter the Room himself, the Stalker also undertakes a journey of self-healing, one bound up with his own crisis of faith and embodied in his hope to facilitate healing in those he guides.

Such is the salvific framework that Tarkovsky constructs around the themes of desire, hope, and belief in *STALKER*. The film articulates a soteriology of the self, manifested around the three central characters' personal crises. As Tarkovsky later wrote:

It is always through spiritual crisis that healing occurs. A spiritual crisis is an attempt to find oneself, to acquire new faith. It is the apportioned lot of everyone whose objectives are on the spiritual plane. And how could it be otherwise when the soul yearns for harmony, and life is full of discordance. This dichotomy is the stimulus for movement, the source at once of our pain and of our hope: confirmation of our spiritual depths and potential. This, too, is what *STALKER* is about.<sup>1</sup>

Methodologically, this article explores this soteriological movement through the key conceptual scheme at work in the film: the triad of desire, hope, and belief. This methodology stands as an alternative to a primarily theoretical approach. Rather than conducting this study through the lens of a specific soteriological theory or through the exercise of a particular critical or cinematic theory, I wish to interpret the soteriological significance of *STALKER* through the framework which the film itself makes available to the viewer: this triad of desire, hope, and belief. On a basic narrative and thematic level, it operates as follows: desire draws the characters to the Zone and leads them to the enigmatic climax on the threshold of the Room; hope appears in the context of a healing narrative, for the Stalker reveals that the Zone “lets those pass who have lost all hope”<sup>2</sup> and he identifies the recovery of hope with the recovery from spiritual crisis; belief is central to the Stalker's character, as he grapples with doubt and desperately tries to encourage and sustain the belief of his companions. When we analyse the film with a focus on this framework, several theological and soteriological concepts emerge. In particular, following a preliminary analysis of genre, form, and style, a second section explores the recurring motif of journey and the transgression of borders. A further section examines Tarkovsky's prominent Christological imagery. This approach leads to a final section discussing the relationship of desire and love, in which Tarkovsky's own writings are focal.

1 Tarkovsky 1986, 193.

2 *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:03:44.

## Genre, Form, and Style

The film is rightly identified as science fiction, yet Tarkovsky resists many prominent tropes of the genre. Although the film is set in the future, there is nothing in its cosmetic presentation that suggests this. The *mise-en-scène* resembles the Soviet Union of the 1970s; everything from the interior design of buildings to the depiction of the military's weapons resists the fantastical reimagining which usually accompanies a futurist setting. The resultant grungy aesthetic (enhanced by the decision to treat most scenes outside the Zone with sepia tone) could well be the choice for a realist drama like Tarkovsky's first film, *ИВАНОВО ДЕТСТВО* (IVAN'S CHILDHOOD, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1962). There is no attempt to indulge in the standard conventions of science fiction, and Tarkovsky relies on an opening crawl text to establish some rudiments of the genre: an indistinct future, an ambiguous disaster-event. In the end, the aesthetic resembles post-apocalyptic dystopia, but even that description seems to fall short of the world that Tarkovsky has built.

The result of all this is an eerie familiarity. Whereas Tarkovsky's other work of science fiction, *СОЛЯРИС* (SOLARIS, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1972), embraced its otherworldly setting on a spaceship orbiting a distant planet, *STALKER* belies the otherworldliness of its setting by opting for a familiar "real-world" aesthetic. As Turovskaya observes, "far from being the world of tomorrow, this looks more like today, or rather the day before yesterday".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Tarkovsky conspicuously abandons the use of special effects in pursuit of such familiarity. Yet this is not an attempt to reject fantasy for realism in any codified sense. Tarkovsky pursues the supernatural through something altogether more unnerving: the uncanny. For him, it is the "infinitesimal dislocation of the everyday" which primes the affective power of science fiction.<sup>4</sup> For example, in one scene the Stalker and the Writer leave the Professor behind, only for the Professor to somehow overtake them in a seemingly impossible manipulation of geography. In a similarly eerie episode, inside a ruined building deep in the Zone, a telephone suddenly rings with no explanation as to how it still functions, given the derelict and abandoned state of the building. The power of such moments rests in their nearness to the "real", rather than in any sense of the fantastical; "not the inexplicable, but the unexplained", as Turovskaya describes it.<sup>5</sup> This sense of the uncanny, accomplished through a kind of gritty but – crucially – *estranged* realism, makes *STALKER* so unorthodox for its genre.

However, it remains vital to recognise that the film is a work of science fiction. The film's genre is integral to how we understand its form and style. One great

3 Turovskaya 1989, 111.

4 Turovskaya 1989, 111.

5 Turovskaya 1989, 111.

potential of science fiction is its capacity to transform the way the viewer thinks about familiar themes and paradigms. Where other works of fiction bring cultural and political contexts to bear on the themes they explore, works of science fiction can eschew this contextual baggage to some extent, opening up new corridors of thought to the viewer. In other words, science fiction can function like a philosophical thought experiment; it can (partially) dissolve the viewer's contextual partisanship for certain ideas and transform the way she thinks about familiar concepts. This is an essential feature of *STALKER*, especially through its presentation of theological concerns. Tarkovsky's Trinitarian and Christological imagery, for instance, takes on novel meaning given the science fiction setting. Iconic images of Christ and various Trinitarian motifs, which recur throughout Tarkovsky's films, are refreshed in *STALKER* (1979) since they are not accompanied by a visible ecclesial presence, as they are in *АНДРЕЙ РУБЛЁВ* (*ANDREI RUBLEV*, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1969), for example.

Tarkovsky's minimalist approach is also evident in his rendering of time. In form and chronological structure, *STALKER* is deliberately simplified. Gone are the convoluted anachronisms for which Tarkovsky is celebrated, while his usual narrative preference for flashback is curtailed. In this regard, it could not be more different from his previous film, the semi-autobiographical *ЗЕРКАЛО* (*MIRROR*, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1975). The effect is felt most palpably through a simplicity of storytelling. The Writer, the Professor and the Stalker's journey through the Zone unfolds as if in real time. The passing of time is not rendered through any form of abstraction, but is marked by concrete signs, such as the events of the plot or the characters' debates and the evolution of their feelings towards one another. A quotation from Tarkovsky illustrates this well:

In *STALKER* I wanted there to be no time lapse between the shots. I wanted time and its passing to be revealed, to have their existence, within each frame; for the articulations between the shots to be the continuation of the action and nothing more, to involve no dislocation of time. [...] I wanted it to be as if the whole film had been made in a single shot. Such a simple and ascetic approach seems to me to be rich in possibilities [...] I wanted the whole composition to be simple and muted.<sup>6</sup>

This is the context of genre, form and style within which Tarkovsky engages the themes of desire and soteriology, a context which will determine the director's construction and use of various motifs. The supernatural power of the Room, for example, allows him to deal directly with desire in a way that is not possible outside science

6 Tarkovsky 1986, 193–194.

fiction, while a setting detached from the reality of Christian theology transforms the perception of the Stalker as a Christological figure. With that said, this article now turns to one of the film's most important soteriological and eschatological motifs.

## The Motif of “Journey”

Of Tarkovsky's seven films, *STALKER* is the only one with a linear narrative, structured around a physical journey. In this regard, the narrative is (literally) straightforward: at the beginning the characters express their desire to journey through the Zone to the Room; the middle of the film depicts this journey and the trials it entails; the end of the film sees the three of them reach the Room and documents a brief period after they have left the Zone. However, the journey through the Zone is anything but straightforward. As the Stalker tells us: “There's no going straight here.”<sup>7</sup> This is made explicit almost as soon as the three principal characters have set foot inside the Zone. The Stalker reveals that the Room is just metres away, in a straight line across a seemingly unremarkable field. The Writer makes the first move, ignoring the Stalker's warnings that it's too dangerous and stepping out across the expanse. Soon, though, something unseen begins to affect him. Eventually he turns back and rejoins the group. And then, as he looks back at the Room, so tantalisingly near, he sees that an ethereal mist has rolled in, consuming the space in which he walked just seconds earlier.

This episode demonstrates two things. First, that the Zone is both dangerous and sentient, able to react to trespassers. Second, that a journey is never as simple as going from A to B; journeys are not about starting points or endpoints, but about the “way” that is taken. This is crucial to the film, for the motif of physical journey represents the idea of spiritual journey, and the soteriology of self-making therein. A journey is transformative: the traveller is never the same person she was at her origin after she reaches her destination. This formation and transformation of self are captured in one recurring idea, repeated by the Stalker throughout the film: “Here you don't go back the way you came.”<sup>8</sup> The simple idea that anyone who ventures into the Zone and reaches the Room must find a different way out represents the wholly transformative power of the film's journey.

It is in this motif of journey/spiritual journey that the film's soteriological framework is most clearly constructed around the triad of desire, hope, and belief. Desire, manifest both as desire for the wish-granting power of the Room and as the “soul

7 *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:09:31.

8 *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 00:49:21.



yearn[ing] for healing” that Tarkovsky describes, is the first mover of the film’s journey. This healing is identified with hope, or the restoration of hope, for the Zone only permits the presence of those “who have lost all hope”. The Room, also, is identified with hope: when the Professor reveals his plan to destroy the Room, the Stalker despairs, appealing to the Writer that “he is trying to destroy your hope!”<sup>9</sup> The motif of journey signifies the hope of self-healing, where the restoration of hope is in many ways its own salvation. Yet the restoration of hope requires a final step – it requires belief, for how can one intend to hope without believing in the future? This is the key to the Stalker’s prayer, a rare sequence that breaks the film’s linear structure with a dream event, in which he prays for his companions, culminating with the petition: “Let them believe in themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Again, the Room, their journey’s destination, is connected with belief. When the three travellers finally reach the threshold, the Stalker prepares them for their encounter by telling them enigmatically: “Most importantly you have to believe.”<sup>11</sup> Afterwards, once the Stalker has returned from the Zone to his wife and daughter, he laments that “they don’t believe in anything”.<sup>12</sup> The symbol of the Room is used to explore the interplay of desire, hope, and belief in the film. At its threshold all three are interrogated in light of their place in the salvific motif of journey.

The episode at the threshold of the Room conveys another significant aspect of the motif of journey: borders or boundaries and the transgression of them. The characters’ journey to the Room involves many such “crossings”. There is the border of the Zone, guarded by a substantial military presence; there is the threshold of the Room; and there is the disturbing traversal of the “meat grinder” (see fig. 2), the greatest trial with which the Zone tests trespassers. Within the motif and metaphor of journey, such boundaries represent significant transitions. This is enhanced by Tarkovsky’s cinematographic choices. For example, once the characters enter the Zone, the change from sepia to colour emphasises the significance of the “crossing” they have made. It is as if the characters now find themselves in a different world, as with the transition to colour in *THE WIZARD OF OZ* (Victor Fleming, US 1939). Metaphorically, the shift from sepia to colour signifies a transformation of perspective: the sudden saturation of the image signifies the sudden saturation of meaning for the characters – this is what they have risked so much to reach, this is “home at last”<sup>13</sup> for the Stalker. Soteriologically, Tarkovsky is again using the motif of journey to explore transformation. The Stalker is transformed (and indeed transfigured into

9 STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:11:55.

10 STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:07:25.

11 STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:06:16.

12 STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:30:28.

13 STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 00:39:50.





Fig. 2: Film still "The meat grinder", *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:50:33.

colour) by the transgression of this border, renewed in the presence of the seemingly sentient Zone.

Sound is also used to signify the transition of entering the Zone, which is physically achieved by driving a trolley train along the tracks from the military perimeter (see fig. 3). At first the viewer is presented with the natural sounds of the trolley's wheels clacking against the rails, but slowly this sound is blended with synthetic music. The effect is a gradual transformation, rather than sudden change. As Stefan Smith describes it, this "sound design leads to an ambiguity of time and space that makes the scene so profoundly effective".<sup>14</sup> At some imperceptible moment the naturalistic clanking of the trolley is transformed into something completely different, just as at an equally imperceptible moment the reality of the world changes and the Zone is realised.

Crucially, Tarkovsky returns to the sound and presence of trains at vital moments in the film, so that it becomes a kind of *leitmotif*. The three companions use a locomotive for cover as the Stalker smuggles them into the Zone, just before they take the trolley train the rest of the way. Most importantly, though, Tarkovsky uses the

<sup>14</sup> Smith 2007, 46.



Fig. 3: Film still "The trolley", *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 00:35:06.

sound of a train clanking against its tracks in his ring composition. Despite the absence of an actual train, the sound underscores the opening scene of the film in the Stalker's house; it then recurs after the climactic struggle on the threshold of the Room and again, a final time, in the last scene of the film, the inscrutable finale of the Stalker's daughter and the suggestion of her telekinetic powers. In the first and last instances, the sound is accompanied by the Ode to Joy from Beethoven's Ninth. The train signifies journey, and such a particular use of sound is a fitting reminder of this central motif, as well as its soteriological connotations with transformation.

## Christological Imagery

The otherworldly setting of *STALKER*, its futuristic circumstance, situates the film far from any systematised theology or ecclesial context. Yet the film is suffused with Christological imagery. Such imagery is a familiar and essential part of Tarkovsky's cinematic style, for his Orthodox faith is manifest throughout his cinematic corpus. In *ANDREI RUBLEV* the story's Christological imagery is situated within an explicit ecclesial locus; in *SOLARIS* the overt resurrection scene adds an element of theodrama



Fig. 4: Film still "The Ghent Altarpiece", *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:26:37.

to the aesthetic expression of Christology. In *STALKER* this Christological imagery finds expression again, this time through a variety of visuals and character motifs.

The most striking of these visuals is delivered in the second of the Stalker's sepiac-lensed dreams, when one remarkable tracking shot passes over a shallow pool of water. Collected beneath the surface are the detritus of long-lost years: a steel tray; a painting of some trees; discarded syringes juxtaposed with the astounding visual of a fragment of the Ghent Altarpiece, glassing the image of John the Baptist (see fig. 4). Fish swim among the strange accumulation, "a symbol for the Christ who has been with the Stalker both night and day".<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, this dream-image of water, altarpiece, and symbolic fish is accompanied by a voiceover from Revelation 6:13–17, which picks up on the eschatological tremors reverberating through the narrative. The dream sequence, then, resonates with the apocalyptic vision as the sixth seal is opened in these verses, making the eschatological significance of the Zone unavoidable.

Tarkovsky's Christological imagery is always situated, however, within a wider Trinitarian range of visuals. The film's motifs, which are not always explicitly the-

<sup>15</sup> Turovskaya 1989, 113.

ological, recur in trinities: fire, water, and mist seen as the three travellers congregate in their camp; rainwater, still water, and running water, whose sounds blur into each other, are briefly isolated, and then distorted with electronic music.<sup>16</sup> Yet there are more distinctly theological trinities, the most prominent of which is that of the three travellers. Here is an interpersonal trinity, which Tarkovsky treats fluidly, using it sometimes to represent the divine persons and sometimes to explore social dialectics, such as that between abstraction and practicality, which is the respective dialectic between the Writer and the Professor. Always, though, it is used to explore relationality, as evidenced by the way the film unfolds as one long conversation between the travellers.

In representing the divine persons, the character of the Stalker is crucial, for he is portrayed as a Christ-figure. The journey, rendered vain by the climactic fight on the threshold of the Room, is a reconfigured Passion narrative. Ultimately, the Stalker's prayer for the Writer and the Professor ("let them believe in themselves"<sup>17</sup>) goes unanswered and neither has the faith to enter the Room. According to Tarkovsky, "They had summoned the strength to look inside themselves – and had been horrified; but in the end they lack the spiritual courage to believe in themselves."<sup>18</sup> In other words, they doubt the goodness of their desires and fear that the Room might grant some suppressed and shameful wish. The Stalker, their guide to the salvific promise of the Room, is rejected and spurned at the end of the film, despairingly asking, and with no apparent answer, "Who am I going to take there?"<sup>19</sup> (See fig. 5.)

Christological analogy is a theological method common to many of Tarkovsky's films. For example, the working title of *ANDREI RUBLEV* was "The Passion according to Andrei", while *IVAN'S CHILDHOOD* analogously explores the gratuitous sacrifice of innocence. I have already mentioned the resurrection scene in *SOLARIS* in this regard. Such Christological analogy is nothing less than a way of doing theology in his films, a way of opening up theological concepts to the viewer. As David Bentley Hart has written, "analogy is the felicitous coincidence of the apophatic and the cataphatic [...]; it 'clarifies' language about God not by reducing it to principles of simple similitude, but by making it more complex."<sup>20</sup> Tarkovsky operates theologically in a similar way, and both Christology and Trinity are especially receptive to this kind of analogical discourse, particularly in terms of the relational language which theologians use: Christ is to God as son is to father, yet Father and Son are one God.

16 Consider especially the waterfall scene; see Smith 2007 for a discussion of the use of sound in this scene.

17 *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:07:25.

18 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.

19 *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:33:15.

20 Hart 2003, 310.





Fig. 5: Film still “The stalker’s passion”, *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:19:58.

What, though, does the film’s Christological imagery actually accomplish? And what does the Christological analogy of the Stalker add to the film? These questions can be answered by returning to the role of soteriology, for Tarkovsky intends to align the Stalker’s struggle, his passion, with the striving for spiritual healing that Tarkovsky considers a main concern of the film.<sup>21</sup> However, he also images the Trinity in the three travellers in order to emphasise the salvific significance of the supreme form of interpersonal relation – love. As he wrote while reflecting on *STALKER*, “In the end, everything can be reduced to the one simple element which is all a person can count upon in his existence: the capacity to love. That element can grow within the soul to become the supreme factor which determines the meaning of a person’s life.”<sup>22</sup> This is the key to Tarkovsky’s soteriology and the reason for his extensive use of Christological (and indeed Trinitarian) imagery, for love extends between persons and the apotheosis of love is the Trinity. Hart has described the soteriological significance of the Trinity similarly: “Trinitarian doctrine [...] is first and foremost a ‘phenomenology of salvation’, a theoretical articulation of the Church’s

21 See again the quotation from *Sculpting in Time* in the introduction above.

22 Tarkovsky 1986, 200.

experience of being made one in Christ with God Himself.”<sup>23</sup> Here, a final trinitarian analogy within the film is especially important, that of the Stalker, his wife, and his daughter. This image of family, and the love that it signifies, will be the concluding focus of this article.

## The End of Desire as the Beginning of Love?

The first and last shots of the film point to this particular significance of the Stalker’s family. While the scene on the threshold of the Room is one of discord, the film opens on the threshold of the Stalker’s bedroom, within which the Stalker, his wife, and his daughter peacefully share one bed. The film’s first shot tracks through the opening of the double doors and slowly closes in on the bed; then Tarkovsky cuts, and another tracking shot (this time a close-up) moves over the faces of the three bedfellows, serenely asleep. Much later in the film, Tarkovsky breaks his general rule of treating all scenes outside the Zone with sepia tone and presents the viewer with a vision of the Stalker’s family walking together, in resplendent colour. These images appear in contrast to those within the Zone; the two “portals” (one to the Room and one to the family bedchamber) and the two “trinities” (of the three travellers and of the three family members) seem to embody alternative meanings – or rather alternative approaches to finding meaning.

Journey implies an end, an eschaton. Within the motif, destination is at once an end-space and an end-time, and the end of the film’s journey – the end of desire – is the Room. It represents a tremendous salvific end (the fulfilment of one’s innermost desire), achieved through faith (“most importantly you must believe”<sup>24</sup>). Except, crucially, none of Tarkovsky’s characters enter the Room. At face value, this is because the Writer and the Professor lack the requisite faith, because “they don’t believe in anything”.<sup>25</sup> Yet the Room does not represent salvation for the Stalker either. A friend of the Stalker’s, nicknamed Porcupine, is revealed to have had his hope spurned and distorted by the Room. The viewer is told that Porcupine sought the Room to wish for his brother’s resurrection but when he reached the Room, the wish that was granted was not his conscious desire to bring his brother back to life, but his subconscious desire to become rich. Porcupine’s story ends with his guilt-ridden realisation of this, which drives him to suicide. Here, then, is an alternative presentation of the Room by Tarkovsky: it is an idol of salvation, in which the characters mistakenly place their hope.

23 Hart 2005, 31.

24 *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:06:16.

25 *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:30:28.

In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky ruminates on the vain journey to the Room by pointing to a scene after his characters' return to the outside world, the scene in the café, where the Writer and the Professor are suddenly confronted "with a puzzling, to them incomprehensible, phenomenon".<sup>26</sup> This is the arrival of the Stalker's wife, "who has been through untold miseries because of her husband, and has had a sick child by him; but she continues to love him with the same selfless, unthinking devotion as in her youth."<sup>27</sup> For Tarkovsky, this encounter with the loving presence of the Stalker's wife is at odds with the notion of seeking the Room to satiate one's desire. Tarkovsky writes that "her love and her devotion are that final miracle which can be set against the unbelief, cynicism, moral vacuum poisoning the modern world, of which both the Writer and the Scientist are victims."<sup>28</sup> Confronted with love, the cynical notions of desire that trouble the characters' faith, as in Porcupine's story, dissolve.

In light of Tarkovsky's comments on this scene, the film's triad of desire, hope, and belief can be considered differently. Perhaps it is the end of desire that marks the beginning of love in the film: the unsatisfactory ending of the quest to seek the Room ends and the possibility of love begins. As Tarkovsky puts it, "in *STALKER* I felt for the first time the need to indicate clearly and unequivocally the supreme value by which, as they say, man lives and his soul does not want".<sup>29</sup> In other words, true existential wellbeing, the spiritual healing Tarkovsky describes, is the alleviation of desire. Moreover, Tarkovsky intimates that the expression of love in the film precipitates the renewal of hope: "In *STALKER* I make some sort of complete statement: namely that human love alone is – miraculously – proof against the blunt assertion that there is no hope for the world."<sup>30</sup> And, in turn, he suggests that the encounter with the Stalker's wife restores belief in the film's characters: "Even though outwardly their journey ends in fiasco, in fact each of the protagonists acquires something of inestimable value: faith."<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps, then, Tarkovsky sets desire and love in contrast. Turovskaya captures this contrast when she writes about the film's penultimate scene. This scene, the last containing the Stalker himself, shows his wife caring for him in the midst of his despair, comforting his fears, undressing him, and putting him to bed. It is a remarkably tender sequence and, afterwards, the viewer is invited to participate in the intimacy of the scene as the Stalker's wife looks directly into the camera and

26 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.

27 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.

28 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.

29 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.

30 Tarkovsky 1986, 199.

31 Tarkovsky 1986, 199.





Fig. 6: Film still "The stalker's wife", *STALKER* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:36:33.

begins an emotional soliloquy about the state of her husband and her love for him (see fig. 6). Turovskaya describes this scene as "perhaps the strongest part of the film, for unlike the short-sighted seekers after the meaning of life, she is motivated by the simplest, most concrete and unfeigned of all emotions: love."<sup>32</sup>

Is Tarkovsky's portrayal of love and desire as simple as to say that the latter restrains the former? Perhaps, given the director's reflections on "the supreme value by which, as they say, man lives and his soul does not want",<sup>33</sup> but I am not convinced. The desire that drives pilgrims to seek out the Room cannot be wholly negative, like Augustine's disparaging treatment of desire as craving (*appetitus*), for it is more substantial than mere wishes, or lust, or fancy. It is a sincerely felt hope for spiritual healing, even if it is a misplaced or misarticulated hope. Desire, as the film presents it, resists taxonomy. It cannot be neatly indexed under categories like desire for wealth, or inspiration, or flesh. If not impossible, it is at least exceedingly difficult to define desire in such a way. In the end, perhaps all that Tarkovsky

<sup>32</sup> Turovskaya 1989, 114.

<sup>33</sup> Tarkovsky 1986, 198.

can say about desire and love is something of their respective staying power: desire may manifest fleetingly; every journey to the Room will have an end, after all, but love is eternal, and the gift of love remains long after the journey is over, even if you never reach your destination.

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