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# THE CINEMA OF TARKOVSKY

**Labyrinths of Space and Time**

Nariman Skakov

**I.B. TAURIS**

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*To my mother*



# KINO: THE RUSSIAN CINEMA

## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

Cinema has been the predominant art form of the first half of the twentieth century, at least in Europe and North America. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the former Soviet Union, where Lenin's remark that 'of all the arts, cinema is the most important' became a cliché and where cinema attendances were until recently still among the highest in the world. In the age of mass politics Soviet cinema developed from a fragile but effective tool to gain support among the overwhelmingly illiterate peasant masses in the civil war that followed the October 1917 Revolution, through a welter of experimentation, into a mass weapon of propaganda through entertainment that shaped the public image of the Soviet Union – both at home and abroad and for both elite and mass audiences – and latterly into an instrument to expose the weaknesses of the past and present in the twin processes of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Now the national cinemas of the successor republics to the old USSR are encountering the same bewildering array of problems, from the trivial to the terminal, as are all the other ex-Soviet institutions.

Cinema's central position in Russian and Soviet cultural history, and its unique combination of mass medium, art form and entertainment industry, have made it a continuing battlefield for conflicts of broader ideological and artistic significance, not only for Russia and the Soviet Union, but also for the world outside. The debates that raged in the 1920s about the relative merits of documentary as opposed to fiction film, of cinema as opposed to theatre or painting, or of the proper role of cinema in the forging of post-Revolutionary Soviet culture and the shaping of the new Soviet man, have their echoes in current discussions about the role of cinema *vis-à-vis* other art forms in effecting the cultural and psychological revolution in human consciousness necessitated by the processes of economic and political transformation of the former Soviet Union into modern democratic and industrial societies and states governed by the rule of law. Cinema's central position has also made it a vital instrument for scrutinising the blank pages of Russian and Soviet history and enabling the present generation to come to terms with its own past.

This series of books intends to examine Russian, Soviet and ex-Soviet films in the context of Russian, Soviet and ex-Soviet cinemas, and Russian, Soviet and ex-Soviet cinemas in the context of the political history of Russia, the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet 'space' and the world at large. Within that framework the series, drawing its authors from both East and West, aims to cover a wide variety of topics and to employ a broad range of methodological approaches and presentational formats. Inevitably this will involve ploughing once again over old ground in order to re-examine received opinions, but it principally means increasing the breadth and depth of our knowledge, finding new answers to old questions and, above all, raising new questions for further enquiry and new areas for further research.

The continuing aim of this series is to situate Russian, Soviet and ex-Soviet cinema in its proper historical and aesthetic context, both as a major cultural force and as a crucible for experimentation that is of central significance to the development of world cinema culture. Books in the series strive to combine the best of scholarship – past, present and future – with a style of writing that is accessible to a broad readership, whether that readership's primary interest lies in cinema or in political history.

**Richard Taylor**  
Swansea, Wales



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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration system used for proper names in the text of this study is that of the Library of Congress, without diacritics, with the following emendations:

- 1) When a Russian name has a clear English version, such as Eisenstein, Dostoevsky, that is preferred.
- 2) When a Russian surname ends in -ii or -yi, this is replaced by a single -y, e.g. Tarkovsky.
- 3) When a Russian given name ends in -ii, this is replaced by a single -i, e.g. Arseni.

The standard Library of Congress system is used in the Notes, the Filmography and the Bibliography.

## ON SPACE(S) AND TIME(S)

*If the flow is slow enough and you have a good bicycle, or a horse, it is possible to bathe twice (or even three times, should your personal hygiene so require) in the same river.*

Augusto Monterroso

On 15 February 1971 the Russian film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky noted in his diary: 'For many years I have been tormented by the certainty that the most extraordinary discoveries await us in the sphere of Time. We know less about time than about anything else.'<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon of 'Time', not just mere 'time', was a central preoccupation of the director throughout his career. Tarkovsky's enigmatic and occasionally disjointed remarks were supplemented by repeated references to ideas about time from Heraclitus, Montaigne and Schopenhauer. However, while one does not find a comprehensive and uniform philosophical treatment of time in the director's texts and notes, his cinema reveals a highly original and consistent *vision* of time. The unhurried and elongated nature of Tarkovsky's films makes time an almost palpable, yet elusive and fragile 'entity'. It was probably this kind of time that the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam compared with a 'shy chrysalis, [a] cabbage butterfly sprinkled with flour'.<sup>2</sup>

Mandelstam's metaphor makes us think of inconspicuous change, slow movement and permanent evanescence – qualities which are strongly associated with the image of time encountered in each of the seven feature films by the Russian master. However, the vividness of the given metaphors is achieved by virtue of their physicality: the muffled chrysalis and the butterfly wings sprinkled with flour are palpable, spatial images. Time is spread out in space, and it evolves into the notion of plastic temporality. Cinema, which

organizes spatially localizable visual elements in time, testifies to this evolution. Tarkovsky appeared to ignore the apparent fact that extraordinary discoveries await us also in the sphere of 'Space'.

## Time

Time as such lies at the core of Tarkovsky's aesthetic framework, which he discusses intricately in numerous texts. The two English-language publications of his writings – his diary and his book on film art – both have the word *time* in their titles: *Time Within Time* and *Sculpting in Time* constitute a quest to comprehend and to locate the fourth dimension. But, more importantly, the director's thoughts about various temporally bound components of the cinematic image, such as the colour and texture of filmed objects, his trademark long take and, lastly, his major aesthetic formula – cinema as 'sculpting in time' or 'imprinted time' – celebrate the temporal qualities of cinema. These strategies reveal time respectively as an agent of change, as duration and as an all-encompassing reservoir of being and creativity.

In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky claims that 'even though the world is coloured, the black-and-white image comes closer to the psychological, naturalistic truth of art'.<sup>3</sup> However, if the cinematographer is to use colour, he or she should do it with the utmost care, since colour reveals the condition of physical matter over time, its change and its endurance. Thus, leaves changing colour or rust on an old gate are ideal filmic images revealing a natural process – nature immersed in duration. Physical matter faces the unpalatable fact of impermanence and decays with the passage of time. Tarkovsky's sensitivity to colour partially explains the use of variable types and gradations of colouration in every single film with the exception of *Ivan's Childhood*, which is shot entirely in black and white. Each time there is a transition from monochrome into colour photography, usually accomplished through images of nature, the viewer is made aware of the temporal motion – the textures of objects reveal the passage of time.

The same passage of time is a key feature of the *long take* – the embodiment of Tarkovsky's vision of cinema. It is undoubtedly the director's most celebrated stylistic device, the abundant use of which was justified as an attempt to represent 'real time' within a single shot. The long take can be defined as an uninterrupted – and in Tarkovsky's case usually slow-paced – cinematic shot which lasts longer than the conventional editing pace of the film. The long take remains open and refuses to be closed (edited), striving towards continuous presence. It invites the viewer to put aside the narrative

framework and to contemplate time in its pure form – to locate ‘TIME within TIME’.<sup>4</sup>

However, the centrepiece of Tarkovsky’s preoccupation with the notion of time remains his vision of cinema as a process of ‘sculpting in time’. The formula emerges in the third chapter of his book:

What is the essence of the director’s work? We could define it as sculpting in time... the film-maker, from a ‘lump of time’ made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image.<sup>5</sup>

Time captured, imprinted, and preserved in its natural forms and manifestations, is the ultimate foundation of film art for Tarkovsky. Reality, as living facts plunged into the flow of time, is turned into its impression – a cinematic image – by means of temporal cuts. Thus, an ability to detect the passage of time becomes a necessary cinematic tool: a film-maker should observe mundane and simple events through the prism of time in order to reveal cinema’s essential ambition ‘to convey a sense of fact and of texture [*fakta i faktury*], dwelling and changing in time.’<sup>6</sup> In this light, it becomes clear why Tarkovsky sees documentary chronicle as ‘the ultimate cinema’;<sup>7</sup> the genre stands for the process of observation and reconstruction of reality per se, where fact regains its texture.

The ‘sculpting in time’ formula, together with his penchant for the abundant use of long takes, naturally places Tarkovsky in opposition to the intellectual montage advanced by Sergei Eisenstein. For the early Soviet film-maker, cinema provides a largely figurative reference to reality, and its essence lies in the director’s ability to assemble disparate and usually short shots to form a coherent and assertive discourse. Montage is thus generally perceived to be a process in which reality is fragmented and then reorganized into a dialectical framework, where new ideas emerge from the collision of disparate visual elements. It strives to deliver an unambiguous emotional or political message. As André Bazin notes, this type of montage does not show the viewer an event, it merely alludes to it.<sup>8</sup> For Tarkovsky, on the other hand, cinema reveals reality in its full objective glory. Montage should always remain hidden, since its obtrusive presence disrupts the passage of time.<sup>9</sup> Its mission is to juxtapose shots filled with time and not with meanings.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, ‘time flows in a film not by virtue but *in defiance* of montage-cuts’.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the switch from the linear, semantic plane of the

montage of representations to the temporal domain presents an abstract image of 'captured' time – the 'sculpture' of time.

The film-maker's fixation with the notion of time has been noted by many commentators,<sup>12</sup> among whom Gilles Deleuze occupies a special place. Some of the most illuminating pages of Tarkovsky criticism are connected with the discussion of the influential film theory concept of *time-image*, and its derivative, *crystal-image*. Deleuze's famous dichotomy – the pragmatic, character-bound *movement-image* of so-called classical cinema vs. the abstract *time-image* of post-war cinema – can be read as a clash of subordination between two fundamental concepts: space and time. Movement-image is a bearer of narrative, and comprises a linear progression of spaces and characters organized by means of montage. Time-image, in contrast, presents an abstract situation with loose narrative ends – it 'creates paradoxical movements'.<sup>13</sup> Deleuze also suggests that one of the ways for the direct time-image to come into existence is through the crystal-image – a convergence of an actual present and a virtual past image, to the extent that they cannot be distinguished.<sup>14</sup> The cinema of Tarkovsky, for Deleuze, is an embodiment of the latter:

There are crystallized spaces, when the landscapes become hallucinatory in a setting which now retains only crystalline seeds and crystallizable materials. Now what characterizes these spaces is that their nature cannot be explained in a simply spatial way. They imply non-localizable relations. These are direct presentations of time. We no longer have an indirect image of time which derives from movement, but a direct time-image from which movement derives. We no longer have a chronological time which can be overturned by movements which are contingently abnormal; we have a chronic non-chronological time which produces movements necessarily 'abnormal', essentially 'false'.<sup>15</sup>

This 'chronic non-chronological time' helps to reveal cinema's potential to organize time in a non-empirical way. Time in *time-image* seems to liberate itself from the burden of the three spatial dimensions – setting or character relations no longer represent a linear progression of narrative in time, but are presented in a completely disjointed state. Space is no longer a location of action and a site of interaction. Indeed, many of Tarkovsky's characters inhabit hallucinatory landscapes, completely lose the sense of spatial orientation, and, consequently, dwell in the 'chronic non-chronological time'.



However, there is a striking difference between Deleuze's theory and Tarkovsky's praxis. While the former's metaphysics of time is based on the mathematical-structuralist concept of controlled variation and presents the image of time devoid of any moral or theological 'burden', the latter's temporal 'sculptures' are overwhelmingly anthropocentric, and they strive towards a certain divine ideal. Time for both, though differently conceived, is an essential category, and discussions of it almost stagnate into a fixation of habit. Deleuze's time-argument in his two-volume study and Tarkovsky's reflections on cinema are supplemented by a recurring reference to Hamlet's perception of the universe, where 'time is out of joint' – this assertion about temporality reveals the dramatic essence of the discourse at stake.

### Space and Time

However, the argument of this book is that space is also out of place, and this displaced place is an intrinsic part of the 'out of joint' time, for *joint* refers to a junction at which two entities (that is, space and time) are joined or fitted together.<sup>16</sup> The topographical curve of the river of time is too prominent to be ignored. *Space* does matter, and the notion still shapes Tarkovsky's and his commentators' temporally 'obsessed' discourses. At some points space emerges as an idea-trace in the process of complete erasure and at times as a concept that endures drastic reformulation. The persistent attempts to underrate or even suppress the spatial constituent of cinematic experience by elevating its temporal qualities, so vigorous in the second half of the twentieth century, expose themselves in their full glory in the cases of Tarkovsky and Deleuze. However, space evades the underrating and suppression – as Michel Foucault puts it, 'it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space.'<sup>17</sup> Time is an event which takes place.

The situation is akin to Borges' story 'The Garden of Forking Paths', which presents an artefact – a combination of book and maze – invented and written by the former governor of Yunnan, Ts'ui Pên.<sup>18</sup> In the story, the labyrinth-text comprises an attempt to rethink the category of time; it describes a world in which all possible outcomes of an event occur simultaneously, and this leads to a further proliferation of possibilities – the forking takes place in time, not in space, though the metaphor used ('forking') is inherently spatial. What is striking is that while time is the sole point of concern for the fictional author, he does not use the word that signifies time in the narrative. As Borges writes: '*The Garden of Forking Paths* is an

enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time; this recondite cause prohibits its mention. To omit a word always, to resort to inept metaphors and obvious periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing'.<sup>19</sup> Borges' apophatic narratives create a sense of mystifying presence by advancing a blatant absence. In a way, the cinema of Tarkovsky and critical discourses around it follow this path, with one exception: the victim of suppression, and hence the subject of expression, is the notion of space. To follow the metaphor further, forking paths regain the three spatial dimensions and evolve into a spatio-temporal labyrinth.

Space as such emanates from Tarkovsky's three time-sensitive concepts mentioned above. The colour photography reveals the progression of time by exclusively spatial means: time manifests itself on the surfaces of objects such as a rusting gate or changing leaves – texture expresses the specific state of matter in the film. The long take, in its turn, is an elongated dwelling in a single (though extended) space, while sculpting in time is literally a process of the spatialization of time. A vision of time is always accomplished through the spatial prism. The two entities are interrelated and, as Éric Rohmer suggests, 'spatial forms of expression must correspond to a film's general method of expressing time'.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, film is divided into static frames which are then projected or spatialized to produce an illusion of continuity. Indeed, spatialization of time lies at the heart of cinematic experience, for cinema organizes spatial elements in time, and Tarkovsky's art is no exception.

In a diary entry of 11 January 1981, omitted in the English edition, Tarkovsky entertains the idea of making a film which would consist only of ten episodes, with time or temporal progression as their sole foundation.<sup>21</sup> Time in these episodes would function as the main aesthetic feature and would be imprinted through varying emotional, atmospheric and optical states. The director chooses transitional, unstable and difficult-to-capture natural phenomena – twilight, dispersing fog, air without a breeze, intermittent rain – as states conveying temporal qualities. However, as is the case with colour, time manifests itself through space – natural topoi allow temporal progression to be perceptible. If this project were executed, the viewer would be presented with an abstract image of time located in a concrete spatial framework.

The spatio-temporal dynamics are even more intricate in the renowned Tarkovskian long take, with which the director created some of the most memorable images of temporal flow. The single continuum of the long take purposely stretches a monotonous,

mundane experience and provides an alternative mode of perceiving reality.<sup>22</sup> Once external spatial markers are removed, time is exposed as a fleeting phenomenon. Action or movement, as agents of space, cease to have a purely narrative end – the very fact of their continuous presence in time becomes more significant. In Deleuze's words, the real plane is 'no longer represented or reproduced but "aimed at".'<sup>23</sup> The importance and uniqueness of each moment is thus underlined and temporal markers are glossed over, so that the viewer can experience an instant of life in its singularity, which reveals 'the dominant note of every moment of existence'.<sup>24</sup> This shift of accent from narrative to duration culminates in the semblance of a semantic crisis – the meaning is not imposed on the viewer, but is hidden away or scattered in time. The constant expectation that semantic implications will reveal themselves in the single continuum of the long take tends to exhaust the viewer. No quick-and-easy resolution is available – hence Tarkovsky's notoriety as a challenging or even 'boring' director.

The elevation of the temporal plane, taking place in the long take, is achieved through spatial manipulation – the way space is perceived by the viewer undergoes a qualitative change. The camera movement in the long take reveals a single vision of an event, instead of providing a multiplicity of views of it. The physicality of space becomes manifest because of identification with the camera. This feature is underlined in the early writings of Béla Balázs, who describes an experience of a long take in the following way: 'Spatial continuity is not disrupted. We feel the space, not merely as a container, a frame for the objects, but *the space itself*, independently of the individual objects it contains.'<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in addition to the sense of embodiment, the long take can be described as a temporal continuity where every moment is a memento of a transcendental quality, since the viewer tracks a sweeping movement without any motor effort on his or her own part. As some critics suggest, the viewer's glance occupies a privileged, unique space, which is also 'the place of God, or the all-perceiving subject, gifted with ubiquity'.<sup>26</sup>

The extreme examples of the long take in Tarkovsky's cinema are those sequences in which time becomes an almost palpable, that is, spatial, entity. Of this temporal materiality Walter Benjamin writes with respect to Baudelaire's poetry: 'time is reified: the minutes cover a man like snowflakes'.<sup>27</sup> The panning circular sequence in a peasant's hut in *Andrei Rublev*, the shots of nature in *Solaris*, the recurring forest images in *Mirror*, the threshold of the wish-room sequence in *Stalker*, Gorchakov carrying a candle in the

pool in Bagno Vignoni in *Nostalgia* and Alexander's apocalyptic vision in *Sacrifice* are all expressions of the long take in its pure form: the viewer is enveloped in time. Moreover, the apparent absence of action, and hence the monotony, in these instances creates a narrative emptiness that generates an urge to fill it with some kind of meaning or metaphysical presence.

Finally, the 'sculpting in time' formula also contains in itself traces of space. The terms of cartography (the science of registering space) and chronology (the science of registering time) make one think that space is usually associated with writing (*graphia*) and time with speech (*logos*). The term 'cinematography' thus consists of two spatial terms: in addition to *graphia* there is *kinēma* ('movement') and the combination of the two makes 'inscribing motion'. 'Sculpting in time', as an alternative to cinematography, preserves the *graphia* part, for 'sculpting' is synonymous with 'inscribing'. However, movement is sacrificed for the sake of time: *chrónos* takes over *kinēma*. The director's formula becomes a spatio-temporal entity.<sup>28</sup> It should be noted, however, that this rhetorical move does not constitute a ground-breaking concept, since Bazin as early as the late 1950s, claims in his discussion of the ontology of photography that 'the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were'.<sup>29</sup> Cinema's characteristic feature, for the French critic, is an ability to remove art from the state of 'catalepsy' and to present an image of duration.

What makes Bazin's and Tarkovsky's metaphors unique is their inherent ambiguity: 'change mummified' and 'sculpting in time' are impossible amalgams, which are bound to remain mere figures of speech. The cinematographic objective 'merely' to record motion is replaced by an ambition to capture temporal flow. Time, however, is not a palpable substance and is never static. Even in its recorded form, as an edited cinematic sequence with 'the actuality of time'<sup>30</sup> being printed on celluloid, or more abstractly as 'a matrix of *actual time*',<sup>31</sup> time still resists that occupation of a certain spatial point that is a prerequisite for sculptural material (physical matter). Time cannot be conceived of using the three spatial dimensions because it itself constitutes a fourth, qualitatively different dimension. Thus, Tarkovsky defines his art in impossibly possible terms – his definition is based on the constant striving towards the unachievable.

The given confusion is a relatively common problem, for time is often thought of as space-like (for instance, in the concept of temporal topology), and some philosophers suggest that instead of two separate empirical realities, space and time, there is but one entity,

an extensive continuum called *space-time*.<sup>32</sup> Physicists also believe that time is not independent of space, and the theory of relativity posits that there is no categorical distinction between the space and time coordinates, just as any two spatial coordinates belong to the same empirical category. Moreover, it is commonplace to claim that the human awareness of time is spatially bound: the progression of externally localized events (causal relations) makes temporal relations manifest themselves.

Space and time are indeed fundamentally interrelated – neither taken by itself can exist without the other. Points and moments are interconnected – time is intrinsically spatial, while space is intrinsically temporal. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin follows this presupposition and unites the two categories in the influential concept of the *chronotope* (literally ‘time-place’). The chronotope is the matrix governing all narratives, and the concept derives from the stance that ‘time is *profoundly spatial and concrete*. It is not separated from the earth or from nature. It, as well as the entire life of the human being, is all on the surface.’<sup>33</sup>

The essential interdependence between space and time is reflected in the ways in which their meanings are negotiated in dictionaries. ‘Time’ is traditionally defined as a ‘limited stretch or space of continued existence, as the interval between two successive events or acts, or the period through which an action, condition, or state continues’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, henceforth *OED*). This standard definition situates time in the chronological or narrative domains, and spatial *marking*, as it has been known since the time of Aristotle, is crucial to this understanding of temporal flow (seconds of the clock, tree-rings, pendulums, the sun and stars, actions – all serve as indicators). To complicate the matter further, the *OED*’s definition of ‘space’ is also an intricate ‘confusion’ between space and time. The first entry defines space as ‘[d]enoting time or duration’ and is followed by a definition which construes the same term as ‘[d]enoting area or extension’.

The confusion dates back to the most famous attempt to spatialize time in the history of philosophy – Zeno’s paradox. It comprises a thought experiment which posits that Achilles can never overtake the slow tortoise once he has allowed it a head start because whenever the speedy warrior reaches a point where the tortoise has been, he still has farther to go because his contender has moved on slightly. This physically improbable but mathematically plausible condition results from the fact that Achilles must reach an infinite number of points in space – an endless series of tasks – before overtaking the

moving reptile, whatever its speed. This infinite spatial progression means that it is impossible for the race to end in time: temporal eternity emerges from this spatial infinity.

According to Henri-Louis Bergson,<sup>34</sup> this paradox is a mere illusion because Zeno of Elea represents time by spatial means; that is, time and movement coincide with the line that underlines them – the path of Achilles and the tortoise. Movement, however, is indivisible and not ‘made of immobilities’.<sup>35</sup> Nor can time be represented by static instants. The *OED* definitions thus fall into a trap by applying spatial markers to represent time. They seem to ignore the fact that the essence of time – duration – lies beyond the stasis of space. The confusion results from the fact that language always ‘translates movement and duration in terms of space’,<sup>36</sup> and that is why *expérience*, for the French philosopher, should become the gateway to the domain of time. The discontinuity of physical life seems to be an issue for Bergson, and he suggests as an alternative the concept of *durée* – an endless continuity perceived not by some kind of abstract analytic skills but by first-person intuition.

Bergson clearly tries to make the notion of time assume a role of dominance over space: he suggests that ‘[q]uestions relating to subject and object, to their distinction and their union, should be put in terms of time rather than of space’.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, his definitions of *durée* are permeated with spatial sentiments: duration is ‘the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which *swells* as it advances’; it is also ‘a stream against which we cannot go’ or, finally, ‘[w]herever anything lives, there is [...] a register in which time is being *inscribed*’.<sup>38</sup> Swelling, stream and inscription are manifestly spatial terms. Deleuze, the author of *Bergsonism*<sup>39</sup> – a text that attempts to foster ‘a return of Bergson’ and extension of his project – occupies a similar antinomic stance. The critic dedicates three chapters to Bergson in his two-volume cinema study and puts forward the concept of aberrant movement, as illustrated in the cinema of time-image. While movement-image comprises the subordination of time to movement in space, time-image is liberated from space by the deconstruction of the spatial coordinates. Time, which evades empirical, spatial rigidity, is Deleuze’s alternative to Zeno’s linearity of spatialized time.

In the passage cited above on Tarkovsky’s crystal-image and chronic non-chronological time, Deleuze refers to spatial concepts undergoing a process of self-deconstruction: crystallized topoi, hallucinatory landscapes, abnormal and aberrant movements constitute a set of non-localizable relations. These ‘spaces’ avoid centring,

resist being placed on the Cartesian system of coordinates, and become emptied and disconnected ‘any-space-whatever’,<sup>40</sup> which replaces qualified, extended space. ‘Any-space-whatever’ is a domain characterized in purely optical or sonic terms, and has clear affinities with Tarkovsky’s imagined film project about time where scenes from nature, as opposed to dramatic action, comprise the sole filmed matter. The resulting disembodied view of the world lacks an acting subject. Instead, it presents a ‘mere’ seer. Deleuze’s intellectual project resulted in a substantial shift in theories of cinema. However, this resolute attempt to liberate time from the dictatorship of space on the cinematic screen is still infiltrated by spatial categories. ‘Any-space-whatever’, though reconceptualized, remains a space.

### Spaces and Times

Space and time, once withdrawn from the theoretical domain and put into the realm of cinematic praxis, cease to be conceived of as forming a homogenous entity and evolve into discontinuous spatio-temporal threads. Diverse takes, made at different times, are woven together by film-makers to create what appears to be a continuous cinematic image. Thus the evident continuity of film, as Robert Stam suggests, ‘consists of a perpetual discontinuity’.<sup>41</sup> Tarkovsky’s cinematic project is remarkable not only because it does not hide the discontinuous nature of cinema; its distinctive essence lies in the fact that it amplifies the discontinuity of the filmic experience. The director’s films, from *Ivan’s Childhood* to *Sacrifice*, create non-linear relationships between separate times, places and people. By exploring the ephemeral qualities of cinema – its imaginary, oneiric and hallucinatory potential – Tarkovsky implies that homogenous, ‘real’ reality is also an artificial construct.

The status of the cinematographic apparatus, as ‘a realist guarantee for the unreal’,<sup>42</sup> has led a number of film theorists to find inspiration in the revealing/concealing space of Plato’s cave from *The Republic*. Chained people watching shadows on the wall in the allegory of the Cave – that is, immobile viewers in a movie theatre – offer a powerful metaphor for how reality manifests itself in a ghostly fashion. However, René Descartes’ ‘dream argument’ from *Meditations on First Philosophy* may be related more plausibly to the spatio-temporal discontinuity of Tarkovsky’s cinema. The argument posits that the act of dreaming functions as evidence that the senses we trust to distinguish reality from illusion deceive us from time to time. The Cartesian postulate that there are ‘never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being

asleep<sup>43</sup> tells us that imaginary spatio-temporal frameworks do infiltrate the objective domain of the real. A dream, a phantasy or an illusion of the senses is an experience that fails to fit into the unitary spatio-temporal scheme. The same concerns caused the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky to claim: 'For, on the scales of truth, intensity of imagination counterbalances and at times outweighs reality.'<sup>44</sup>

The British idealist philosopher Francis Herbert Bradley<sup>45</sup> continues the Cartesian line of scepticism, and suggests that there is no single all-embracing space-time but a plurality of spaces and times. Bradley wonders: why should we take time as one succession and not as a multitude of series? In support of this challenge, he draws attention to the relation between events in dreams and those in fictional stories. In these imaginary narratives, events are indisputably temporal entities, since they are temporally related to other events in the same imaginary narratives. Yet these events cannot be located in the framework of objective historical time. In addition, the temporal span of a fictional story or dream is usually much greater than its actual duration, and events are not always arranged in a linear manner – memories from childhood or flashbacks can easily interfuse with current events. Bradley underlines differences between physical (objective, vast and systematic) and experiential (subjective, minute and fragmented) space and time.

Unlike these philosophers, Tarkovsky does not *represent* various spaces and times through coherent argument, but rather *enacts* relationships between them on the cinema screen. Thus the viewer experiences the argument. While the phenomenological nature of space and time is tackled by thinkers by exclusively verbal means (for instance, as a reflection on the ontological status of objects, or on certain grammatical phenomena such as the reality or unreality of tensed sentences), the director's films present *visions* of space and time. Spatio-temporal discontinuity and disconnectedness are characteristic features of Tarkovsky's cinema: it lacks the homogeneously stretched four-dimensional continuum. The director displaces topographical coordinates and imposes temporal leaps: he enters the cinematic labyrinth at times by means of a spatial aberration and at times through a temporal anomaly. These displacements and leaps create narrative digressions, which consequently disorientate the viewer.

While storyline in conventional cinema functions as a spatio-temporal regulator, the loose narratives of Tarkovsky's films do not create a linear progression in space and time (these are not the clear waters of the Heraclitean river) but constitute a multiplicity of muddled (muddy) streams – they accomplish a move 'from established



absolutes to unstable conditionals'.<sup>46</sup> Tarkovsky contrasts the latter with the linear logic of the former when describing his aesthetic strategy: 'I am seeking a principle of montage, which would permit me to show the subjective logic – the thought, the dream, the memory – instead of the logic of the subject. [I try to] show things which are not necessarily linked logically.'<sup>47</sup> Spatio-temporal discontinuity and disconnectedness indeed mark the processes of thinking, dreaming and remembering.

\* \* \*

The theory and praxis of Tarkovsky's cinema in many ways follow the forking path of Deleuze's time-image discourse. Space undergoes a conceptual modification while time emerges as a renewed phenomenon with great force. The Russian verb the film-maker uses in his key aesthetic formula for 'to sculpt' is *vaiat*, which is connected with *vit* – 'to weave', that is, to form a continuous web of interlacing yarns. 'Weaving in time' strengthens the spatial aura of the formula: 'sculpture in time' becomes 'texture of time'. Tarkovsky's films, one may suggest, have a certain complex texture, a textile labyrinth, where the relationship between individual temporal threads (past–present–future) is not immediately apparent. The result is a consistent re-enactment of non-linear relationships between various spatio-temporal frameworks. Every point in space 'remembers' events at different dates, while every instant of time is 'filled' with events at different places. Both space and time always already contain spatio-temporal multiplicity, and the director simply amplifies this quality.

The absence of a linear continuum is one of the key features of the seven films that will be discussed in the present book.<sup>48</sup> Dreams, visions, phantasies, memories, revelations, recollections and illusions are phenomena which present alternative spatio-temporal patterns; they disrupt the linear progression of events and create narrative discontinuity. Within each chapter, dedicated to the discussion of one of Tarkovsky's seven feature films, one of these phenomena will function as a refrain. The films' characters constantly re-enter atemporal zones where rigid frontiers between present and past are removed, where the past is revisited by the present and vice versa. Their quests, which are usually spiritual in nature, are not connected with a place governed by a single temporal pattern. Memories from the past, visions of the future and mere 'irrelevant' hallucinations all displace them both temporally and spatially. A number of stylistic traits and recurring motifs of Tarkovsky's visual universe function as spatio-temporal destabilizers. Irrational cuts, filters, and the use

of varied film stock (monochrome, black and white, colour) disturb linear narrative. The Tarkovskian soundtrack, or rather soundscape, does not transparently cue emotions or moods, but adds to spatio-temporal disorientation. The director employs cinematographic means to deliver a commentary on the human condition, which for him constitutes an experience of reality as a subjective layering of inextricable snippets of various times and spaces.

## DREAMS OF IVAN'S CHILDHOOD

The production history of *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962), Tarkovsky's debut feature film, is a story of drudgery and labour in vain, but with a triumphant ending. The Mosfilm studio initially commissioned Eduard Abalov to adapt a novella by Vladimir Bogomolov for the screen, but then stopped the production due to the unsatisfactory quality of the rushes. A year later, in June 1961, a new artistic team was appointed, with Andrei Tarkovsky as its director. The script, which was based on a typical Soviet war-hero text, subsequently underwent drastic changes and the previously filmed material was discarded in its entirety. The resurrected film features key elements of Tarkovsky's aesthetics and launches his intricate cinematic journey in space and time. In spite of being rooted in the socialist-realist tradition, however, *Ivan's Childhood* transcends the rigid boundaries of the genre. The film still traces the fate of Ivan: it shows how the wandering child becomes a war hero by joining reconnaissance troops and providing crucial information for the Soviet army at the cost of his life, but the heroic war narrative is transformed into a drama of lost childhood. Ivan's military achievements are overshadowed by his castaway, orphaned condition – the boy is stripped of heroism and glory.

This transformation in some way explains why Abalov's film project and the novella, both succinctly titled *Ivan* (a simple personal name), became the film *Ivan's Childhood* (the noun 'childhood' paired with the possessive adjective of 'Ivan' in the original Russian). The chronotope of childhood is non-existent in the text, while it shapes the cinematic adaptation. A vision of real and at the same time abstract childhood,

not the figure of Ivan with his military exploits, is the sole concern of the film. First lieutenant Galtsev, the conventional first-person narrator of the text, gives way to Ivan – the visionary narrator within the film. The child-protagonist, however, does not direct or oversee the progression of events – there are no internal monologues or off-screen commentaries: he is merely a seer who longs for his childhood.

The difference between the literary precursor (the novella *Ivan*) and the cinematic successor is striking, and already manifests itself in the way the two works begin their narratives. 'I intended to check the battle outposts that night, and, giving orders to wake me at 4.00, I turned in a little after eight'<sup>1</sup> is the straightforward and somewhat uninspiring opening sentence of Bogomolov's novella. It announces the military setting and provides precise and factual information. The writer, who himself joined the Soviet army in his teens and served in military intelligence, offers competent knowledge of warfare, and the reader gets a sense of what lies ahead from the very first sentence – a tragic but life-affirming heroic narrative, which unambiguously presents the heroism of the Soviet people in their struggle against the ruthless enemy. More importantly, the novella begins with the pronoun 'I' – a definite grammatical construction. The reader is not yet aware who this 'I' is, but its presence is already established. The beginning of the film, on the other hand, is characteristically Tarkovskian – it disorients the viewer from the very start. *Ivan's Childhood* begins with a dream, while the dreaming subject is not yet introduced. The socialist-realist artefact is transformed into a product of 'socialist surrealism'.<sup>2</sup>

The very first shot shows Ivan, curious and carefree, looking through an improbably massive spider's web. The boy listens attentively to a cuckoo, as if observing the Russian belief that the bird can predict how many more years a person will live. His face seems to be an image of innocent, happy childhood, but his countdown to death has indeed already begun. The boy then explores the peaceful Central Russian landscape until he encounters a butterfly. The image of the flying insect is followed by Ivan's own flight – a crane shot lifts him right off the ground. The implausible elevation of the hero signals that the filmic reality encountered by the viewer has an improbable character. A rejoicing Ivan is raised above the surrounding trees and then gradually approaches the land as if sliding down a hill. The lightness of the flight is consequently balanced by the heaviness of gravity; the boy carefully observes tree roots interweaving in the clay earth. A cuckoo is once again heard, and the sound is followed by Ivan's encounter with his mother, who carries a bucket