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THE ABSENT FATHER, THE STILLNESS OF FILM: TARKOVSKY, SOKUROV AND LOSS

Stephanie Sandler

No topic occupies the cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky more relentlessly than that of loss. The tale of loss is fragmented, and it always involves a child.¹ Transposed into poetic form, its images and rhythms look remarkably like this poem, written by Donald Justice:

Vague Memory from Childhood

It was the end of day—
Vast far clouds
In the zenith darkening
At the end of day.

The voices of my aunts
Sounded through an open window.
Bird-speech cantankerous in a high tree mingled
With the voices of my aunts.

I was playing alone,
Caught up in a sort of dream,
With sticks and twigs pretending,
Playing there alone

In the dust.
And a lamp came on indoors,
Printing a frail gold geometry
On the dust.

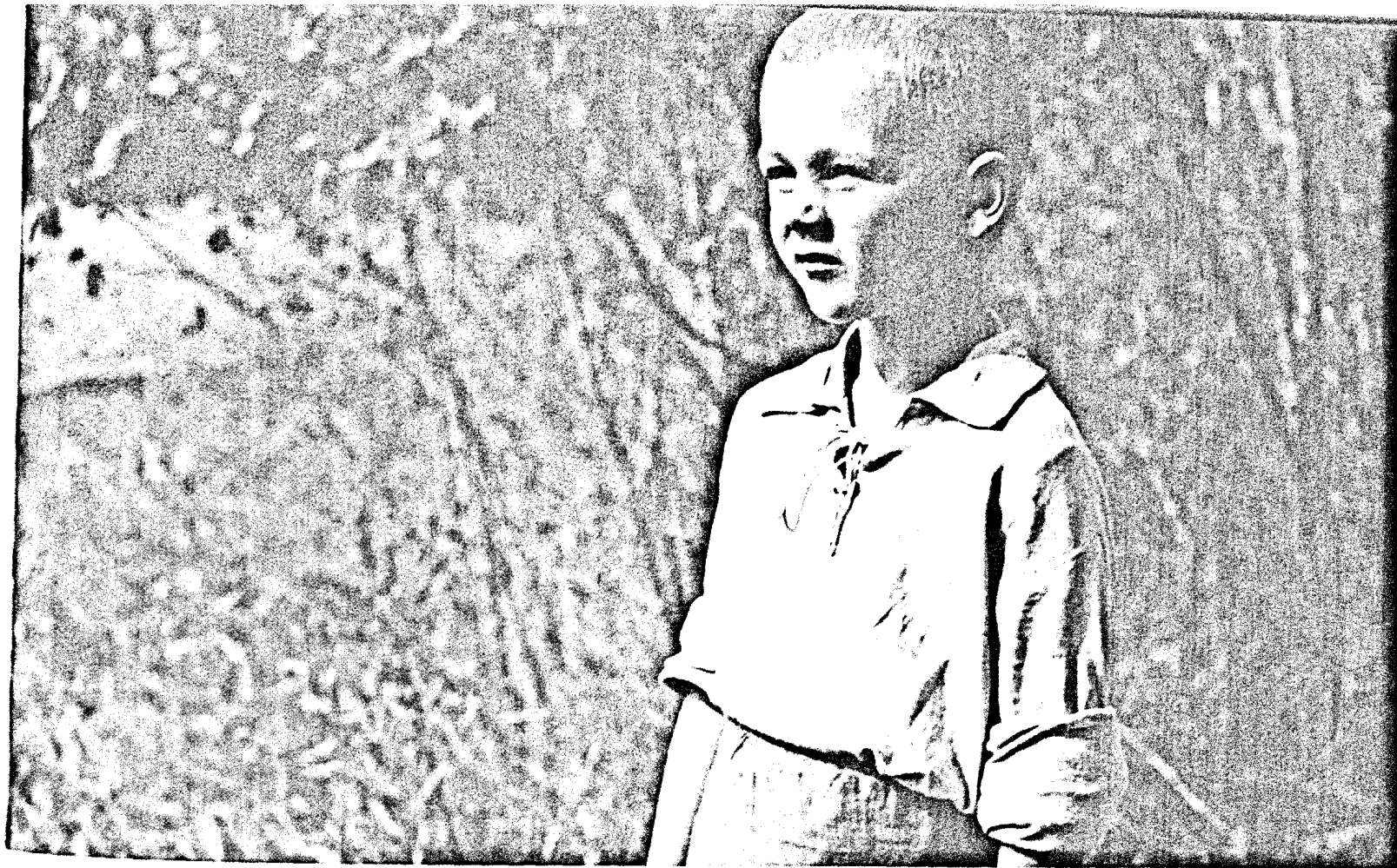
Shadows came engulfing
The great charmed sycamore.
It was the end of day.
Shadows came engulfing.²

Viewers of Tarkovsky's films will shiver with recognition at the poem's ominous sense of impending disaster, its glow of light threatened by shadow, the child's absorption in solitary play, the evocation of family but at some remove, the creation of an outdoors scene in proximity to domestic space, and the sounds of indistinct voices and birds barely cohering into the "frail gold geometry" of the light.³ The poem's form also points toward two features of the film form.⁴ First, the poem's repetitions, including the resonant phrase "shadows came engulfing", which rephrases the line, "it was the end of day". Repetition is perhaps the strongest technical feature of Tarkovsky's films: images or camera angles are repeated across the films (the spilled milk, lacy curtains, the camera that drops down to study the earth); *leitmotifs* within films expand as if with symbolic weight (the fringed fabrics in *Solaris*, or the shawls and kerchiefs in *The Sacrifice*). Repetition has great psychological force, allowing a filmmaker or poet to hold on to words and images, to keep them from disappearing. The repetitions in "Vague Memory from Childhood" bespeak this wished-for retention, and its difficulty. Repetition allows the viewer to hold a word, an object, or even a rhetorical device in place—holding it still. Given Tarkovsky's famous insistence that cinema is the only art form that can fix time, such a wish to hold an image or a feeling in place is at once the most interesting aspect of his work and perhaps its greatest illusion.⁵ A motion picture can create the sense that movement has stopped, indeed such gestures may give palpable reality to the emotion of loss, but it can only perform stillness for so long. Justice's poem forewarns that fragility, for its repeated phrase reiterates that darkness will soon engulf the precious images seen from childhood.

The poem has another rhetorical feature that may offer new insight into Tarkovsky's films: the breaks at the end of poetic lines, enjambment. A strong enjambment begins in stanza three with the words "playing there alone". The blank space that separates this phrase from the rest of the sentence in stanza four—"in the dust"—makes it a lonely bit of language. This poem otherwise uses end-stopped lines, so the enjambment really stands out. In Tarkovsky's films, and perhaps even more in the work of Aleksandr Sokurov, enjambment happens not as one expects in film, through montage, but rather in the gaps of narrative logic, in the spaces that open out in conversations where questions may have no answers and plot lines are suspended, without resolution. As in Justice's poem, the pauses may come unexpectedly, and often thematise a loss of connection to others. Perhaps most interesting are moments when the film pauses for a back-story about an

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Martin in conversation with the absent father
barely shown on screen over the future of their
daughter.

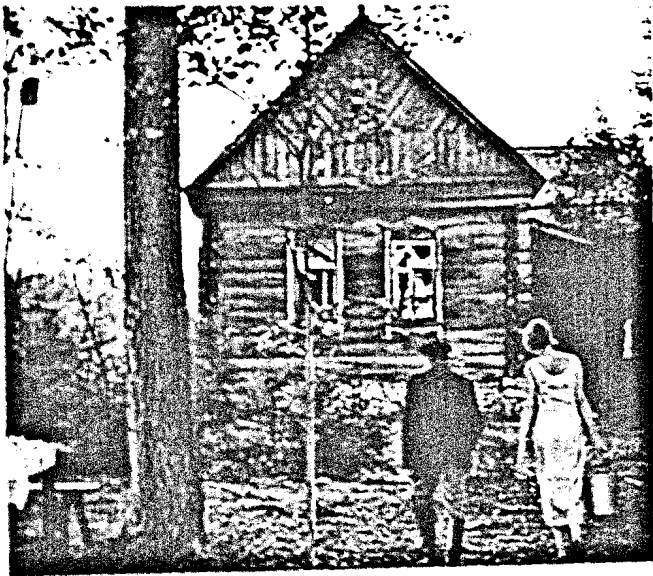


Still from *Mirror*.

unseen but crucially important character. These digressions are nearly always about absence or death, the topic from which the films are unable to flee. These tales of grief define the characters who recount them, showing death, in its most grotesque and dehumanising forms, cannot be avoided.

Pairing Sokurov and Tarkovsky affirms important similarities in their cinematic practice, but it also shows how far Sokurov has strayed from his teacher. The neat symmetries of "Vague Memory from Childhood" suggest the radical difference between Tarkovsky's more harmonious filmmaking and the jagged edges of Sokurov's work. Tarkovsky's films include many compensations for their losses, including the visual beauties of the natural world and the aural enjoyment of music. He turns often to the music of Bach, allowing his audience to relax into the counterpoints and fugues of ever-elaborating musical gestures. Sokurov is tempted by such pleasures, and tellingly he uses Bach in *Moscow Elegy*, 1987, a film he made about Tarkovsky. However, he largely repudiates the consolations of such intensely formal, regularising music. And when he offers visual pleasures, as in the distorted landscape scenes in *Mother and Son*, 1997, he infuses the spectacle of beauty with pain

Both filmmakers are drawn to the theme of psychic loss, which in turn can absorb larger social and existential forms of disaster. A parent's death haunts several of their films. The realisation of the loss of the father joins them in an unusual exploration of



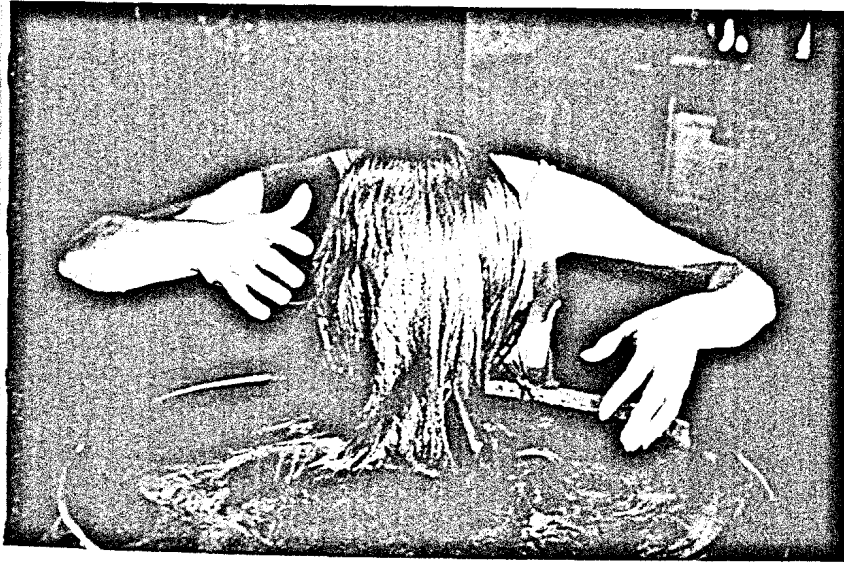
Still from *Mirror*

self-creation through absence. In Tarkovsky's film *Mirror* and Sokurov's *The Second Circle*, 1990, losses of several kinds permeate the films' themes and forms, but loss or absence is treated as a taboo topic. At key moments, absence is figured when motion stops, allowing the films to approach ideas they are most prohibited from touching. Stillness brings the films closest to the inexpressible: it allows the taboo topic or person to be contemplated and studied, if incompletely understood. Stillness registers somewhat differently in their work, however, and in that difference we can recognise how they project cinema's capacity to explore psychic trauma and taboo.

Tarkovsky: The Wordless Embrace

Father figures appear in each Tarkovsky film, but nowhere more powerfully than as the missing father in *Mirror*. The modulations of the father figure include the father who feels his bond to his children so strongly that it becomes an obsession (Domenico in *Nostalghia*) and the quiet, enduring father to whom a prodigal son returns (Kris Kelvin's father in *Solaris*). Tarkovsky reached deeply into his own experience as a father in *The Sacrifice*, as evidenced by the dedication of the film to his son, Andriusha, and by the hero, Alexander, a *pater familias* struggling to protect his family against unimaginable catastrophe. The opposite of Alexander's futile hope for salvation is surely the compromised position of Aleksei in *Mirror*. An ineffectual father, he offers to take in his son, Ignat, who refuses in near disbelief; he watches skeptically when Ignat sets brush on fire out of boredom. Aleksei is never shown in full on screen, an absence emphasised when, in a late scene in the film, he is dying and viewers see one of his arms.⁶ He narrates the film and thus, "speaks", in many scenes, further stimulating a viewer's wish to see the film's ostensible protagonist. His felt presence offscreen marks paternal absence as the film's theme. More significantly, Aleksei's father who, like Tarkovsky's father, left his family before the Second World War, seems also just beyond the frame of what *Mirror* shows.

The genesis of the film demonstrates the symbolic power of that absent father. The tale has one curious source in a vision of the father standing on a road. Tarkovsky's original title for the film, *A Bright, Bright Day*, comes from a poem by his father, the poet Arseny Tarkovsky.



Still from *Mirror*, where Maria is seen in a mask of hair, rendering her slightly monstrous among a vision of domestic ruin.

The lines with that image for the title read as follows:

Father stands on the road.
A bright, bright day...⁷

The image of the father standing on a road remained in the unconscious of the film long after Tarkovsky changed the film's title. To stand on a road is to be in the context of movement—to be proximate to departure—but not in motion. That paradox of stillness and motion defines the treatment of loss in *Mirror*.

Indeed, it enlivens the first scene, when the narrator recalls the road from the station to their house in Ignat'ev. When a person was spotted, the narrator recalls, you could tell who it was from a distance: "If he turns from the bush toward our house, then it's Father. If he doesn't, then it's not him, and that means that he would never come." The missing father, defined by the road, stands as a remnant of the father's poem, but the stakes of the imagery have been raised: the appearance of someone else means not that father has yet to come, but that he is lost forever. When *Mirror* begins with the appearance of a false substitute, the son acknowledges that loss.

However, the father does return, shown in a wordless embrace with his children later in the film to create a still, silent scene. Prior to that embrace, the film offers one glimpse of the father, a memory (or a dream?) of his presence in the family's life. The child awakens, and says the word "Papa" before moving through the lacy fabrics around his bed toward a fleeting view of the father pouring water over the mother's hair; this slow motion shot features the actor Oleg Yankovsky for three or four seconds, but the mother at much greater length.⁸ She appears in a mask of hair, her long fingers parting the strands, rendering her slightly monstrous. Visions of domestic ruin follow—water drips from the ceiling, small fires spring from objects in the room, bits of the ceiling plaster fall down. The brief presence of the father is associated with a distortion of the mother's image and with the architectural space of family life coming to pieces.

To return, then, to the scene of the wordless embrace: when the father arrives, his words ("Marusia! The children? Where are the children?") are heard before he is seen. He is shown in brief close-up before the camera returns to the children playing in the woods, where his voice is heard, shouting his daughter's name.



The children gasp and run to meet him. The mother's rueful stare precedes the sustained shot of the father embracing the children. His face, and his son's (the child Aleksei) are marked with tears, and Tarkovsky intensifies the emotion of the visually quiet scene with music. Rather than the soothing fugues and suites heard in other parts of *Mirror*, he chooses a dramatic organ passage from a Bach chorale.

The iconic scene of the father's return is remembered for the snapshot-like quality of the father reunited with his children. But what exactly does the image suggest? Its stillness and its refusal of language are essential: the father has no words to speak to his children, nor do they say anything to him. (It is as if the prologue to *Mirror*, where the stuttering child announces on command "I can speak", predicts not access to language as a highlight of the film to come, but its repeated blockage.) The visual image overwhelms the possibility of speech, and becomes a fantasy of pure presence. But not for long. The military uniform suggests that he has come from the war, and presumably must return.⁹

This image is the most significant visual presence of the father 'as a father' in *Mirror*. In addition to the earlier intimate scene where he rinses the mother's hair, he appears in the dreamy vision when she levitates above the bed; and he is included in the film's final sequence, lying down with the mother in the grassy field. In that scene, once the camera has moved from his face to hers, he asks from offscreen whether she wants a boy or a girl. His words focus on the mother's desire, but what of his? The film is nearly over, but his relationship to his child cannot be reached by language. The effect of the film's disrupted chronology is to challenge that image of the embrace. There, he is fully theirs, and his words to Maria ask for the children. But as the film ends, the father has drifted from view.

Tarkovsky shows little context for the father's departure, only to render the absence more intense. The director's diaries comment explicitly on the tortured relationship with his father.¹⁰ An odd silence characterised the relationship, apparently: an inability on the part of either father or son to speak of emotions. Tarkovsky said that he could not bear to see people express their feelings and, importantly, the context for this remark was a funeral.¹¹ How extraordinary that Tarkovsky would bring his father into *Mirror* by having him recite four poems, all elegies—poems about loss. These poems fill in the gap created by the missing narrative of the father's departure. The scenes with these poems repay fuller

The iconic scene of the father's return in *Mirror* where the visual image overwhelms the possibility of speech, and is accompanied by a dramatic organ passage from a Bach chorale.



Left

*Still from *Mother**

Right

*Still from *Mother*, featuring a close-up of the father's face prior to the levitation scene, one of the few moments in the film where the absent father is revealed to the viewer*



attention: they thematise the topic of loss, and they reveal the full complexity of the paradox of motion and stillness.¹² In the first and longest poem, "First Meetings", the poet writes about the intimate connection to a woman who is loved to the point of deification, and yet that poem's most memorable line is its last, in which fate chases after the loving couple "like a madman with a razor".¹³ In "Eurydice", the poet reflects on the quintessential myth of loss for modernist lyric poetry, when Orpheus loses Eurydice by turning to look at her as they leave Hades. The third poem, "From the morning I was waiting for you yesterday", briefly shows that the delayed arrival of the beloved is remarkably unconsoling, with drops of rain coasting along tree branches in a final image suggesting the poet's own body as cold and untended. Even the last poem, an elegy that recounts an affirmation of life's power to defy loss, "Life, Life", with its Pasternakian title, turns by its conclusion into a bizarre lament at the loss of mortality, as if life without the boundary of death were a ghost-like existence.

The images seen as one hears these poems further emphasise their role as signifiers of loss or absence—the poems are no mere commentary on the sequences shown.¹⁴ The screen image may include an overt reaction to loss (the sad face of the mother, for example, as "First Meetings" is recited, with a tear wiped away at the poem's last line). Sometimes the counterpoint is more complex: "Life, Life" is heard as documentary footage of soldiers in Lake Sivash unfolds. The match in this case is extraordinary: the tense,



Maria walking down a long corridor in the printing house of *Mirror* after she has resolved there was no typesetting mistake. The sequence is accompanied by the Arseny Tarkovsky poem "From the morning I was waiting for you yesterday".

hard work of the soldiers pulling heavy equipment through muddy currents of water enacts a resistance to death that the poem recounts.

The most complex use of poetry in the film is via the poem "Eurydice". The footage shown on screen changes several times to include Alyosha and his mother retreating from the rich doctor's wife and walking along the muddy river, as well as a dreamy sequence of the young child walking around in the countryside to find not the young beautiful mother one expects from earlier scenes but the older mother who turns in surprise to ask the child what he wants. The sequence is preceded by a fantasy of the mother floating above the bed, a recurrent Tarkovsky image here occasioned by the rare appearance of the father's face. Once again, the father is still, wordless, and the poem's words substitute for his absent speech.

The sequence that accompanies "From the morning I was waiting for you yesterday" may appear simpler, but that is a false impression. The poem is heard after Maria fears she has permitted a shameful typesetting mistake. She has just assured herself that there was no mistake after all. The scene shows her walking down a long corridor with windows on both sides. She walks quickly, expressing neither fear nor relief. As the poem is heard, nothing is advanced in terms of the plot, yet the stakes are very high.¹⁵ The film is on a strange pause, heightening the tension still further. The formalists would call this putting the brakes on the plot, but what a strange metaphor for this scene, where the action consists entirely of one character's movement toward the audience.¹⁶

This scene is a perfect example of the paradox of stillness in *Mirror*: stillness realised as physical motion with no obvious destination. Tarkovsky will give a more prolonged example of the same paradox at the beginning of *Stalker*, in the nearly four minute scene where the Stalker, the Professor, and the Writer travel in the handcar into the heart of the Zone, compare the nearly five minute scene of freeway driving in *Solaris*, which presents a diagonal vector of direction, given the crossing streams of light and speed.¹⁷ In *Mirror*, the motion is more primitive—a person moving quickly, propelled only by the will to keep moving—and, perhaps because it is so individualised, more urgent. Maria comes toward the camera as if she cannot reach it fast enough. Yet the corridor seems just to get longer and longer, and the motion lengthens in what feels like an infinite opening of time.



Still from *Mirror*

Time, rather than loss, is the topic on which Tarkovsky had the most to say in his published essays and interviews. He used metaphors as a way to convey indirectly his views of how one experiences time in daily life and when watching films.¹⁸ Time is not experienced as linear, nor does it obey the laws of physics: "I am convinced that time is reversible. At any rate it does not go in a straight line."¹⁹ Tarkovsky's thinking about time includes, then, the possibility of moving backwards to the past, and he represents time in his films with a feel for the elegiac. Real time is the past, which is more resilient than the present.²⁰ His version of the elegy is distinctly modernist: he shows the mind's capacity to loop back into the past and rearrange it, to seek out the meaning of what feels like lost time, and to resist the temptation to be defeated by those fragments of memory and meaning that often result. The peculiar temporality of the elegy as he recreates it can be described by what Carol Jacobs once wrote of Walter Benjamin: "Benjamin returned again and again, although differently, to this strange figure of the moment in which memory of the past is seized in the present, in which recognition takes place always coincident with irretrievable disappearance."²¹ That combination of return, recognition, and irretrievable disappearance marks Tarkovsky's films repeatedly, and it gives particular, identifiable shape to his recreation of the elegy in cinematic terms. The cliché that Tarkovsky's films are poetic thus could yield an important insight: loss takes on meaning in the films through structures available to poetry, rather than to prose narrative.²² In *Mirror*, the presence of poems also becomes a tangible representation of the kind of thinking about loss that the film itself aims to perform.

The lost father is thus constantly felt in the film. The few silent appearances of the actor Oleg Yankovsky emphasise, rather than diminish, the father's absence. Arseny Tarkovsky's taped poems become a failed recuperative gesture, but a quest that the filmmaker cannot give up. The father's voice is heard not as a father but as a poet, as the source of ideas about the representation of time and the experience of loss. By comparison, the actor playing the father is seen emphatically in the context of his family, calling for and embracing his children, asking his pregnant wife whether she wants a boy or a girl, and staring dreamily at the inquisitive son in Oedipal protection of the mother's sexualised image washing her hair or floating above a bed. The recuperative gesture cannot fully recover the father, which is perhaps why Tarkovsky saw fit to note his father's disappointed observation about his absence from the film: "When my father saw



Still from *Mirror*, where Maria watches the doctor's figure recede into the landscape surrounding the dacha.

it, he said to my mother: 'See what short shrift he has given us?' He said it with a smile, but there must have been something that hurt. They did not notice what short shrift I gave myself—only how I treated them."²³ The son who imagines his absence from the film as a complement to his treatment of the father again creates the impression of a strangely Oedipal competition. However, the end result is unchanged. The many ways in which the father's absence is imprinted in the film produces an elegy that keeps trying to recover some consoling fantasy of the father's presence. The failed recovery effort has very much to do with the way Tarkovsky balances stillness and movement in the film. In Sokurov's work, to which we now turn, the balance is tilted almost completely toward stillness. Can a motion picture work if it is trying all the time to stop movement?

Sokurov: Embracing the Dead

Tarkovsky could have said the following, but these are Sokurov's words: "My father has seen my films about the war. And he has never said a word about them to me."²⁴ The son's futile hope for his father's approval and the silence between father and son are familiar.²⁵ *The Second Circle* dramatises nothing more than a son's struggle to provide a dignified closing ritual to his father's life. Of the father himself, one learns almost nothing. Whereas Tarkovsky provides a few salient biographical details and the substantial psychic richness of the father's poetry, Sokurov shows only the remains of the father's life, including the physical remains of his body. The impoverished nature of the father's material and spiritual life is felt in the emptiness and debris in his apartment.²⁶

The epithet 'poetic' has probably been applied to Sokurov's work as often as to Tarkovsky's. He does not feature quoted poetry in his films, but Sokurov leaves no doubt as to what kind of poetry his films resemble: the elegy. The word itself figures in the title of nine of his films, and others, such as *Mother and Son*, are vividly elegiac in tone and construction. Sokurov entitled his film about Tarkovsky *Moscow Elegy*, and there he does quote poetry, repeating Tarkovsky's technique: he layers a poem read by Arseny Tarkovsky over a scene from *Mirror*.²⁷ *Moscow Elegy*, with its homage to Tarkovsky's achievements and footage from his films and funeral, performs the work of mourning that has been articulated as a function of the modern elegy by Peter Sacks.²⁸



Still from *Mirror*, featuring Oleg Yankovsky
as the youngest father

The film mourns and praises Tarkovsky, even as it shows that public mourning rituals have become shams, indicated by the lengthy footage from the funeral of Leonid Brezhnev. Many of Sokurov's films have a similar sensibility, performing the work of mourning in a culture that has lost its ability to stage authentic commemorations of those who have died. *Moscow Elegy* mourns the death of a filmmaker, not a private man. It refers to his wife and to his two grown sons, but sustains itself with lengthy passages of Tarkovsky at work. The filming of *The Sacrifice* occupies a large part of the film toward its end.²⁹ Sokurov concentrates on how Tarkovsky directed his actors and set up scenes with extraordinary attention to detail. The narrative voice-over lovingly recounts how production crews respected Tarkovsky. Thus the loss of Tarkovsky means (for Sokurov) that Tarkovsky will make no new films.³⁰ The only visual shot of Tarkovsky that betrays the idea of impending loss is when he is shown recovering from his first cancer treatments. These images from the Swiss hospital are familiar from Chris Marker's film, but Sokurov does something different, removing the clarity and sharpness from the image, making it slightly fuzzy and presenting it at an angle and in weird close-up.³¹ The soundtrack, which features Tarkovsky discussing the editing process of *The Sacrifice* with Sven Nyquist and others, is softened, almost faded.

Moscow Elegy does not prepare viewers for the bitter tale of death's aftermath in *The Second Circle*.³² Sokurov, in the former, makes film into a medium that can mourn, whereas *The Second Circle* shows how impossible mourning has become in a context where human relations are marked by cruelty, violence, and an absurd indifference to norms of decency. Loss is not expressed by absence in this film, but by its opposite, as a dreadful presence. The dead body of the father is shown in many scenes and it is often the target of ghastly activity (moved, cleansed, embalmed, awkwardly stuffed into a casket that is itself moved with great difficulty). What is most disturbing about the corpse is that it has no agency to move of its own volition, and its stillness is a feature that disrupts cinematic movement. Much of the film is still, and the camera behaves as if it were taking photographs of someone who is stationary.

The first words heard in the film, "he has stopped breathing", tersely announce a death. They state that the body's barest movement, of air in and out of the lungs, has ceased. So reduced is movement in this film that exhalation, even wind, becomes meaningful. As the opening scene unfolds, the stillness is broken



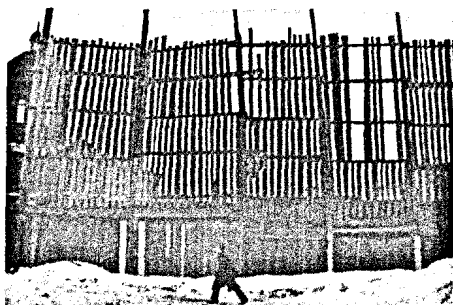
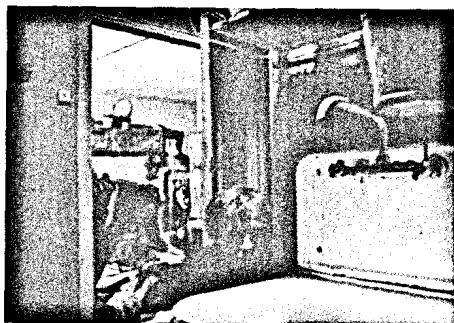
Still from *Mirror*, where the young woman looking up from beside the fire reveals the advent of Alyosha's sexual identity.

when the son's hair is ruffled by a blast of cold air. A similar shot occurs much later, when the son (Malianov) goes outside as if to escape the ordeal of death's aftermath. If there is no movement, there is no film, and surely one is meant to see the material of *The Second Circle* as a threat to cinema itself. What, after all, can cinema show of death if there can be no mourning, and no knowledge of the one who has died? The unavoidable presence of the dead body raises precisely this question.

The corpse is always uncanny, both familiar and utterly strange as famously described by Freud.³⁵ An inert physical object, it signifies the extinguished life of the person whom it appears to resemble, but it is more object than subject. To gain access to the experience of the Other is what much human interaction entails, and yet to be in the presence of a dead body is to be reminded that such access is impossible. Sokurov exaggerates this uncanniness by juxtaposing scenes in which the corpse is manipulated by others with sequences in which it is manifestly apprehended but barely visible on screen. It may be in the background, as when Malianov sleeps in the same room as his father's body, or in the foreground, a visible shadow, its presence looming all the larger as a result of this diminished visibility. An exemplary instance of the latter is when Malianov finishes washing his father's body with snow: we can tell what his hands are doing just below the screen, even though they and the body they touch are not in view. The scene is astonishingly silent, as if a corpse's inability to speak means that no sound may be heard.

What is most remarkable about *The Second Circle*, however, is that Malianov absorbs the stillness, not to say the deadness, of the father. Sokurov shows Malianov's identification with the father most obviously in the scene in which the father's face takes on the features of the son's. Doubling also marks the embalming scene, which reverses the iconography of Malianov's washing his father's body in the snow. Here, Malianov's body hovers in the foreground. Through an open door, the embalming is shown. Workers walk around and over the body, treating it as if it were a prop. But what of the son's body? He leans at the door as they work on his father, magnetically drawn to this grotesque spectacle but not able to confront it, indeed he looks away for much of the sequence. In the foreground, at one point, he kneels and the camera drops down, too, the large kitchen sink obscuring his face and leaving the impression of his stillness as workers pour chemicals into his father's body, draining its fluids. Later in the film, dirty bottles, an open refrigerator, and dripping water turn the kitchen scene into a still life not unlike the telephone room in *Stalker*.³⁴

The apartment's debris recreates a pathetic fallacy where objects take on a character's emotions, but it is the son taking on the father's deadness that centres the film's psychic and aesthetic insight. A similar psychological process has been brilliantly described by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas in his essay "Dead Mother, Dead Child", concerning a mystifying patient known as Antonio, who became "an often mute, distraught, and lifeless looking self", something like "a figure out of the 'Walking Dead' films".³⁵ Bollas comes to understand Antonio's lifeless behaviour as an effect of his mother's abrupt disappearance from the child's life. Antonio reacts by cultivating violent fantasies, which Bollas describes as follows: "... when he had a bad thought he would set up a cinema within himself, popcorn stand included, and sell tickets to the other portions of the self which in states of carefully deployed innocence could walk into an unfolding scene of horror to their extreme fright".³⁶ The split self goes on living, but a terrible half life it is. Bollas describes an ill man, but Sokurov turns his eye on a diseased culture. As one knows from the work of Jacques Lacan, the split self is inherent in subjectivity. This is not a malfunctioning psyche, but psychic life as it must be experienced. The film's disturbing bus scene reveals the violent, pained tenor of Malianov's imagination. The crowd of bodies and the confused sense of conflict appear choreographed, and the scene is silent except for the sound of gasping breath. Malianov is brutally held down, but by strangely slow movements, as if in a dream,



Stills from Aleksandr Sokurov's
The Second Circle, 1990.

or perhaps simply the truth of his unconscious.³⁷ The attack is also real, as Malianov discovers later when his money is gone. Unlike the violent fantasies Antonio recounts to his psychoanalyst, Malianov is the victim rather than the perpetrator of violence. The underside of his apparent deadness to the world is a dramatic scene where his body is trammelled. His impassivity remains intact as he is shoved and apparently robbed, but the anger and desperation of the scene mark it with explosive rage rather than stoical endurance.³⁸

The scene of assault occurs on a bus, in a context of movement as passengers are transported from one place to another. Sokurov frames these shots so tightly that there is no 'outside' to the bus, and the sensation of movement is conveyed by the way in which the passengers brace their bodies. As when Maria walks down an interminably long corridor in *Mirror*, this scene involves a paradox of motion (bodies moving through space) and stillness (a pause in the story of a son burying his father). There are many scenes in *The Second Circle*, in fact, where Malianov walks slowly in empty, patterned, or snowy landscapes. One striking instance of this seemingly aimless peregrination occurs against the background of a gigantic barrier, reducing the figure in the foreground to an abstract visual interruption of the vast blank space behind him. The relationship of figure to ground is splendidly aestheticised. Sokurov's orientation toward the visual arts is better seen in other films, such as *Mother and Son* and *Russian Ark*, 2002.³⁹ *The Second Circle* partakes less of painting, important to those two films, than of photography: the kind of visual image it leaves in the mind is akin to that of the snapshot. Each shot is carefully framed, but the way that objects fill the father's apartment, or that jumbled architectural debris spills over in the outdoor shots, creates an air of the accidental, the fortuitously captured image in which a meaningful set of symbols may co-exist. Photography also reveals an aspect of Tarkovsky's aesthetic, and it takes the evocation of loss as far toward stillness as it is possible for eye and self to go

Tarkovsky's Photography; The Split Subject

Tarkovsky took Polaroid photographs for many years, and a selection is now available in a small book, *Instant Light*. The images show him capturing moments when life itself seems to pause, they feature objects collected as in a still life or figures seated in repose. Tarkovsky used the metaphor of cutting away at time to describe

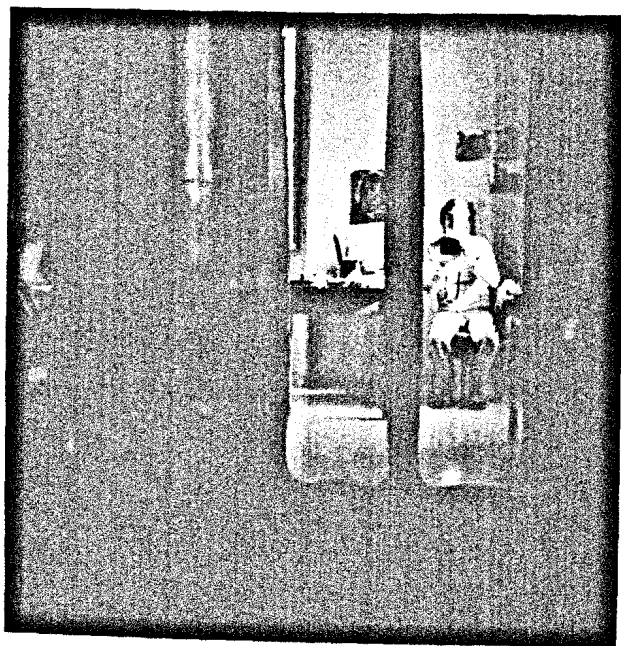


Window photograph taken by Tarkovsky
in *Reflections*, p. 100, May 1972-1973

the work of creating cinema, and the photographs similarly push away the clutter of time to leave behind objects that announce themselves as a memory. Many of the photographs involve strong contrasts of light and dark, including patterns of shadows. The effect is to make the photographs closer to abstract, non-representational art than to the record of specific experiences one expects from polaroid pictures. Tarkovsky aims to capture contrasts of light and dark as much as he focuses on specific persons or objects. The fascination with light leads to many pictures that include a window; the glass becomes a duplication of the camera lens behind which the photographer stands. The windows create framing effects within the pictures, too, and the way that light copies the shape of a window on an otherwise shadowed wall is striking. The shadows are equally important, providing a visual doubling of the forms in a landscape and outlining the shapes of light that come into a room. These photographs invite comparison between an object (trees or persons, most often) and a dark version of the object's shape. Tarkovsky's polaroids may be read as illustrations of the phrase "shadows came engulfing" from Donald Justice's poem. Darkness encroaches on many of these images, rendering them elegiac in mood and effect.

Reflection can also do the work of darkness. Reflected trees in water suggest shapes duplicating themselves before one's eyes. Some pictures are literal presentations of doubling, as when Tarkovsky photographs himself in a mirror.⁴⁰ The photographer who records a mirror image indulges in something of a cliché, however, it is made interesting here because the mirror is double-panelled; one side showing Tarkovsky holding his camera, the other a small table with still life objects. The split mirror operates as a split screen, as if the right-hand side shows the man holding the camera while the left-hand side shows what his camera photographs. The darkness that surrounds the mirror is again engulfing. A barely-seen window, split by the dark border, creates a further doubling: glass repeats the mirror's surface, and the window glass is also split by the thick wood of the cabinet door.

The doubling corresponds to the structure through which subjectivity is represented in Tarkovsky's films. The identity-forming experience of seeing oneself in a mirror was made famous by Lacan's essay on the mirror stage, and, although his French term "stade", does not permit the precise pun on 'stage' that is heard in English, it can denote a stadium or a sports arena.⁴¹ Thus the mirror stage conveys a sense of performance. In Lacan's essay, the mirrored image



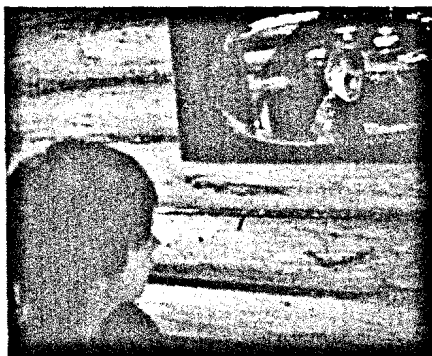
Self-portrait polaroid photograph taken
by Tarkovsky in San Gregorio, Italy,
23 November 1983.

before one stands is perceived as if for the first time as separate from oneself and, as an audience. One is always on stage when before the mirror, and the moment of self-examination is a moment of splitting. The experience of selfhood is not unifying, but rather a contest among disparate parts, a struggle that might occur in the stadium or on a battlefield. In the work of Sokurov and especially Tarkovsky, that struggle is Oedipal, and selfhood in all its pain is comprehended in the context of an agonistic encounter with the father. Significantly, a lost father, one to whom connection is tenuous, structures the subject's experience of being thrown back onto an awareness of the self as permanently split.⁴² In scenes of self-inspection in *Mirror* and *The Second Circle*, to which we now turn, the son sees that split self as the sight of the father.

Mirror or Screen?

The use of a mirror in a film with that title draws attention inevitably to the doubling of images. In *Mirror*, Natalya unsentimentally examines her face during an unpleasant conversation with her husband, and Maria sees her face reflected in the glass that covers a Renaissance-style painting in the apartment. The most telling instance of this gesture, and the one that most strikingly revises the Lacanian theory of mirrored subjectivity, occurs late in the film, when the teenage Alyosha is left alone by the doctor's wife.⁴³ His mother has taken her behind a closed door to discuss what she calls a "tiny feminine secret"; the adolescent boy is left to contemplate his own emerging identity, in a room that contains a strangely oval-shaped mirror. The mirror is visible on the right side of the screen as the women close the door behind them, and Alyosha takes a seat opposite the mirror.

First, in a reverse shot, Tarkovsky reveals that Alyosha is staring at some milk that drips onto a polished wood surface. Elsewhere, these dishes of milk are pools of excess that counter an impression of penury or need.⁴⁴ Alyosha and his mother are placed closer to necessity than is usually the case in Tarkovsky's family narrative, largely an effect of the historical moment of war and evacuation. When Alyosha looks at himself in the mirror, he immediately reaches up to fix his hair, a gesture that shows he has unexpectedly seen himself as he is seen—a boy with dirty feet and itchy skin whose mother corrects him mercilessly. He looks away as if to dispel the awkwardness suggested by his image, but he returns his gaze and the camera begins a close-up. He looks



Stills from *Miror*, where the adolescent Alyosha contemplates his image in an oval-shaped mirror after being left alone in the wealthy woman's house.

at his face without flinching and, as the camera tracks, the oval shape of the mirror passes out of the frame, and the seen image is now coincident with the screen image. At this moment, the mirror becomes a screen, and what Alyosha sees is not just an image of subjectivity that barely recognises itself, but also the image that is projected out to the viewer. He sees himself in a film.

Tarkovsky follows with a reverse shot, and what was a mirror, then a screen, becomes a lens.⁴⁵ It is as if the mirror looks back at Alyosha and the viewer sees him from that angle: his whole seated body, not just the close-up of his face. He is now fully composed, his facial expression altered and the parts of his image reassembled as if they had never been disconnected.⁴⁶ Once again the camera moves closer. Alyosha is completely still, his facial muscles shifting slightly. Those minute changes in his expression may be nothing more than the involuntary movements of a young, untrained actor, or they may be signs of his changing internal state. Alyosha is trying to accept the image he sees in the mirror as that which the world will inevitably associate with him; he is recognising the split between internal selfhood and the way he is seen from the outside.

Before the women return to the room, the film makes clear the relationship between this scene of self-inspection and the advent of male sexual identity.⁴⁷ Bach's music, heard earlier, continues, and there is a sharp cut to an image of lit coals, glowing red and brown as the heat rises. One sees a reflective surface (a mirror?) in the fire, its surface too dulled by heat to offer a reflection. This mirror has become an object like any other, something to be discarded. But another mirror is seen, on a cabinet door being pulled close by a woman's hand.⁴⁸ A man's back stands in the framed doorway. He quickly moves away to reveal a young, beautiful woman looking up near the fire. These two figures suggest a sexual encounter, and a sharp contrast of power and control. She is scantily dressed, he wears a coat; she looks up as if to offer her beauty to his gaze, he is seen only from the rear and cannot be identified with any certainty. The editing suggests that the encounter may be Alyosha's, when he is older, yet the maturity of the male figure suggests that it may be his father. Alyosha sees some glimpse of the pleasures of sex, and perhaps its complexities.⁴⁹ The Oedipal structure remains in the figure who could be either son or father, both desiring the young woman.⁵⁰ The moment of reflection is over and the women return. Tarkovsky makes almost parodic use of the oval mirror as the doctor's wife looks at herself, wearing the earrings she thinks of buying. Her



Still from *Mirror*.

admiring glance and her fidgeting with the earrings create a strong contrast to the calm self-regard of Alyosha. The sexual difference is vast, a woman taken by the possibility of new trinkets, versus a young man seeing a future of encounters with a desired other.

A stronger, quite different contrast can be found in a comparable, but much briefer, scene in *The Second Circle*. It begins with the sleepless son, Malianov, dreaming of himself walking along a snowy street against the background of a towering wooden fence. As he wakes, restless, he notices the toes of his dead father sticking out from under the covers nearby. When he has convinced himself that he cannot sleep, he goes to the body of his father, uncovers his face, and pushes open his eyes. The action is urgent, as if the son seeks to reassure himself that his father is dead. But once the eyes are open, they seem to see him, the face becoming a mirror. The camera lingers over the father's face and then, with equal intensity, it reverses to show the face of the son.

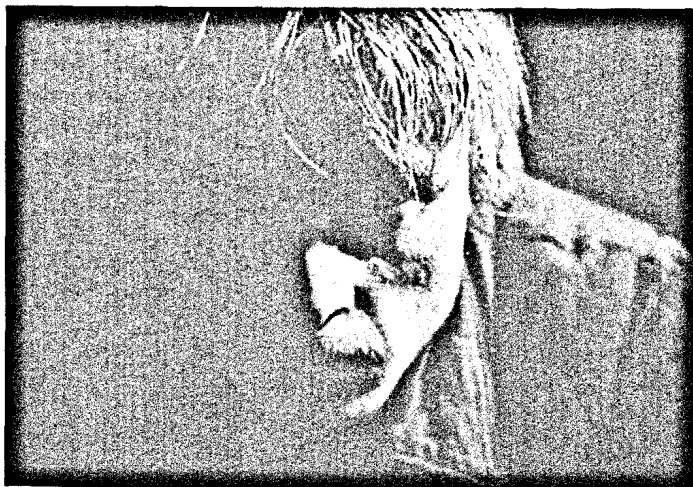
The scene has drawn critical attention for its use of hologram technology, the father's features being made to look like those of the son.⁵¹ The hologram is arresting, given its connections to photography and its ability to yield life-like, three-dimensional results. The use of life-like technology to represent a corpse is more than mere irony, for Sokurov's point has to do with the interchangeability between the appearances of life and death. Technologically, the hologram is at a significant remove from Tarkovsky's polaroids

The hologram is not the only technological intervention in this scene, however; the camera angle calls extreme attention to the corpse's face in extreme close-up. By showing the father's face lying horizontally, slowly turning to create a slight diagonal, Sokurov makes the face appear abnormal. He repeats the oval shape in *Mirror*, and allows the face to fill the screen so as to appear disproportionately ballooned. The creased lines under the father's eyes form a grotesque pattern, like misplaced lines on a forehead.

The shape of the mouth, and the steady gaze of the now-opened eyes are clearly those of the son. The fact that he has received no consolation is emphasised by the eruption of anger in the scene that follows, when the undertaker arrives, spewing aggressive words. Her entry creates an explosion of rage comparable to the assault scene on the bus, and again Malianov is the witness and victim, not the aggressor. Before she enters, however, Sokurov holds the camera on the son's face for another interminably long pause. He fashions a situation like the mirror that looks back at Alyosha, but Malianov cannot quite face up to what he sees. The horizontal of the father's face becomes a vertical representation of the son where the father-turned-mirror may be the focal point for the camera's concentration on Malianov. Lacking the calm solidity that Alyosha exudes, Malianov cannot quite meet the camera's gaze. Tarkovsky's camera is steadier with Alyosha, while Sokurov's subtly, slightly moves, as if betraying the unease Malianov must feel. He stares at a point just below the lens, below what would otherwise be the father's gaze, and the camera slowly raises its lens almost to meet his eyes. He has every reason to avert his eyes, for this mirror shows him not the potent sexuality of his future life, as Alyosha sees, but an apparition of death.⁵²

Having begun with concepts of loss and absence, we conclude with the image of a dead body. Moving from the abstract to the physically concrete, from sexual maturity to philosophical maturity, these films come upon the prospect of living in a world in which there are no aesthetic compensations, no consoling memories, for the experience of loss that grounds subjectivity. Commenting on "the subject's fundamental dependence on the faults it finds in representation and in itself", the film scholar Joan Copjec has written the following:

The desire that it precipitates transfixes the subject, albeit in a conflictual place, so that all the subject's visions and revisions, all its fantasies, merely circumnavigate the absence that anchors the subject and impedes its progress.⁵³



Still from *The Second Circle*, 1990.

Copjec shows the lengths to which persons, not to say cameras, will go to avoid confronting subjectivity. The stillness of the filmic subject in *Mirror* and *The Second Circle* has progressed to the near stillness of the camera itself. To dispense with movement entirely would be to negate cinema and, for all the apocalyptic feeling in Tarkovsky's and Sokurov's work, cinema itself never seems subject to destruction. The prolific Sokurov has his own answer to the seven films Tarkovsky was fated to make. One should resist the temptation to imprint a further Oedipal struggle on this material, as if Sokurov were overcoming Tarkovsky in the ways that Harold Bloom has argued based on the succession of English poets.⁵⁴ Sokurov's *Moscow Elegy* leaves quite a different impression, that of successful mourning and working through. It honors the legacy of a filmmaker who taught at least this one pupil how to see stillness, and yet still see.⁵⁵