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Objects in the *Mirror*: Micro-Narrative and Biomorphic Representation in Tarkovsky's *Zerkalo*

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I. Introduction

The vast majority of cinematic works center on the human form, the character and their concerns, and never leave this overwhelmingly anthropocentric outlook. Experimental cinema sometimes ventures beyond this standard, and a handful of art films, such as *L'Eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962), briefly stray to focus on objects and settings. But such diversions are almost always grounded in a specific narrative motivation, excusing these scenes and maintaining a strong human undercurrent. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (Zerkalo, 1974), however, displays a consistent drive towards the nonhuman. The film contains a complex relationship between characters and their immediate environments that questions the attention and objective of the narrative. By presenting domestic and rural, interior and exterior spaces with a heightened sense of duration and distinctive camera movements and editing, the scenes of Alexei's childhood demonstrate a motion away from a traditional focus on characters and towards micro-stories and events found in the interplay between natural elements (wind, water, fire), human-made objects, and the human figure.

Mirror has been widely written about in terms of its innovative nonlinear structure, its dreamlike imagery, and its complex treatment of memory and remembering. Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie provide a general, contextual reading of the film, including a brief history of its production; Thomas Redwood takes a formalist approach, segmenting *Mirror* and analyzing its first scene in particular;[1] P. Adams Sitney writes of *Mirror*'s relationship to poetry, especially that of his father, Arseny Tarkovsky, which is

1. See Redwood, Thomas. *Andrei Tarkovsky's Poetics of Cinema*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

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spoken throughout the film;[2] memory is the focus of Nariman Skakov's study; and David George Menard examines the film with Deleuze's theory of the cinematic time-image in mind. No reading can accommodate all of *Mirror*'s facets, which include but are not limited to its use of historical and found footage, its autobiographical mechanisms, its dreamlike qualities, its remote soundscape, its phenomenological overtones, its impenetrable structure, and its thematic concerns of the human formation of meaning, memory, and life's stages. With the present paper, I aim to examine *Mirror* using an integrative methodology involving the close reading of neoformalism with the broader strokes of ecocriticism and phenomenology in order to bring out one of its overlooked aspects: the active local, nonliving environment. By ecocriticism I here mean an area of study concerned with the physical world, including its multitude of living things and its other nonliving substances. Stephen Rust and Salma Monani describe the scope of the field as being "the whole habitat which encircles us, the physical world entangled with the cultural. It is an ecology of connections that we negotiate to make our meanings and our livings" (1). This area of study is often focused upon current social issues involving the environment, but, as this paper demonstrates, overt political content is not a necessity. Cinema takes part in ecocriticism in that it can "enable us to recognize ways of seeing the world other than through the narrow perspective of the anthropocentric gaze that situates individual human desires at the center of the moral universe" (Rust and Monani 11).

Throughout the paper, I will also demonstrate how *Mirror* encourages the predominance of one of the dimensions of cinema's worlds, as outlined by Adrian Ivakhiv in his innovative book, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature.* Ivakhiv draws upon C. S. Pierce and Alfred North Whitehead to explore the possibilities of human interaction with images. The three dimensions he explicates are the object-world (to which he attaches the term geomorphism), the "seemingly stable, material-like world that is there, given for agents like us to act within" (Ivakhiv ix), the subject-world (anthropomorphism), and the life-world, or biomorphism, the "world of things that are lively and dynamic, that see and hear and respond to one another, and that are constituted by an interactive to and fro between subject- and object-making" (Ivakhiv ix). It is this third dimension that will later be shown to

2. See Sitney, P. Adams. "Andrey Tarkovsky's Concept of Poetry." *The Cinema of Poetry*, Oxford UP, 2015, pp. 67–112.

dominate the world of *Mirror*.

To consider *Mirror* through an ecocritical perspective, there must be clarification of the possibilities of human vision. Film is a visual and aural medium, a medium where participation is looking. With such a seemingly passive mode of engagement, how is a questioning of narrative superiority of the human over the nonhuman to take place? In the introduction to *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, Ivakhiv describes important possibilities of sight and viewing that move beyond traditional ideas of the dominance and power of the gaze. The passage is worth quoting at length:

> This view of visuality as objective, or objectiv*izing*, and at the same time as controlling, as an exercise of power masquerading as knowledge, is rivaled by a second view that has re-emerged forcefully in recent visual and cultural theory. According to this alternative view, while visuality *can* stabilize the world and render it a manageable and inert object, it can also destabilize, dissemble, and jostle. It can set off oscillations in the viewer and the viewed, flood the subject with emotion, and set off ripples around the object and between the object viewed and the viewing subject. Vision, in other words, can move its beholders in ways that leave nothing stable and inert. (3, emphasis orignal)

For much of his career, Andrei Tarkovsky directed works with effects similar to those Ivakhiv describes. Indeed, all of his seven features could be said to open up meanings rather than close them off in completion or resolution. In his writing likewise, the director believed in the life within as well as in front of the camera: "the image does not signify life or symbolize it but embodies it, expressing its uniqueness" (*Sculpting in Time* 111). Through narrative ambiguity, movement, language, and other avenues, he attempted to express emotions, beliefs, and sensations in new ways. With Ivakhiv's more positive definition of vision in mind, treating the film as a sensorial text that questions, pushes, and negotiates with the viewer through vision itself becomes possible.

Tarkovsky's name is not unknown in the discourse of ecocriticism, but discussions involving him in this field almost always revolve around only two of his films: *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979). These works have rich associations with both environmental issues and experiential problems related to one's environment. For instance, Ivakhiv writes of both films as demonstrating complexities between "the worlds produced *by* cinema and the world(s) *from*

and *within* which they are produced" (22, emphasis original); Stanka Radovic claims *Stalker*'s setting as demonstrating traits of terrain vague, the uneasy and nonconforming result of industrialization (114–29); and David Hanley, as well, looks at the use of landscape in relation to modernity in *Solaris*.[3] Yet, Tarkovsky's other films, including *Mirror*, so far have been all but ignored by the field of ecocritical studies, as their narratives do not so directly involve environmental concerns. Upon closer inspection, however, *Mirror* contains radical ideas about immediate environments beneath its surface preoccupations of memory, dreams, and autobiography. In order to reach these claims, close analysis is required of certain moments that occur in the sections of the film set in the 1930s. Along the way, I will draw some important connections between concepts about space/place and the general cinematic approach of *Mirror*, in which shot duration and camera movement set the film apart in its representation of space, as it is in space and duration that common ground can be shared between humans and other beings. This is in one sense central to the ecocritical project, which, stated broadly, looks beyond the scope of species-specific, anthropocentric study.

Ⅱ. Exterior/Interior

The heart of *Mirror* can be found in the sequences depicting Alexei's childhood. These, featuring sparse dialogue and little cause-and-effect plot content, should be considered privileged because of their frame-like placement within the film's structure: near its beginning and at its end. The childhood environment is what the characters (and the film) constantly reach back toward, attempting to reconcile past and present. The most obvious point of convergence between the two temporal periods is the use of actors: Margerita Terekhova plays both Maria (mother of Alexei) in the 1930s sections and Natalia (wife of Alexei) in the 1970s sections, and Ignat Daniltsev plays both the young Alexei in the 1930s sections and his son, Ignat in the 1970s sections.

More than in the doubling of characters, there are hints of the external, fecund spaces of the flashbacks to be found in the 1970s material, in its setting and objects. These also suggest the heightened significance of the 1930s scenes.

3. See Hanley, David. "The Natural and Modern Worlds in Solaris." *Offscreen*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2011. offscreen.com/view/natural_modern_solaris.

Fig. 1. Tarkovsky. 1974. *Mirror*: Maria's gaze guided outdoors by the hung, dried flowers.

Fig. 2. Tarkovsky. 1974. *Mirror*: One view of the dacha and its surroundings.

Such pointers include the flowers that decorate Alexei's residence, the windows that look out onto a courtyard, the door that briefly opens onto the street, and the natural light that consistently illuminates the walls, floors, tables, and faces in the apartment. The majority of *Mirror*'s runtime takes place in interior locations; besides the found footage near its middle, exteriors are limited to

the sequences of Alexei's childhood, in which he is decentered both in the narrative aspects and *mise en scene*. The allusions to the outside that are found in the 1970s interiors are explicitly played out in the flashbacks. During these segments that seem to exist between memory and a presumed historical past, the camera seamlessly moves from outdoors to indoors and back. Windows and doors remain open, bringing vibrant colors and elemental forces within the human-constructed space. In one shot, for instance, as Maria sits and looks out a window, a bundle of dried flowers hung on the window frame seems to direct her eyes upwards and outwards.[4] The camera follows the flowers' lead and tracks forward and to the right, past Maria and into the scene she views. A similar bundle of flowers is found on the wall in the 1970s section, but this reminder of the natural remains inert and decorative. The movement between interior and exterior has deep roots in architectural experience, which Peter Blundell Jones connects to a linguistic practice:

> In and out, and the traversing of thresholds of one kind or another, are fundamental experiences reflected deeply in our use of language, for the prepositions we use daily, such as on, in, at, by, over, under, across and through, are all positional and rooted in physical experience, even if much of the time we use them metaphorically. (99)

But the seamlessness with which Tarkovsky blends interior and exterior upsets the tradition. In the shot of Maria at the window, the sense of "in" does not refer simply to the room she occupies, but to the space of both room and adjacent landscape. The tracking shot is consistent in its movement through space, first capturing Maria and the objects of the house, then viewing the objects on the bench, the green grass, and field beyond. The same materials of wood and leaf, cloth, and metal are present from beginning to end.

The setting of most of the 1930s sections is a dacha with a well and barn nearby, and a field beyond a wooden fence.[5] The topography of these objects is never fully explicated, the scenes only alluding to spatial layouts. David George Menard writes that "[t]he re-constructed house of Tarkovsky's childhood, set against a buckwheat field backdrop, recreates a personal history that is both real and imaginary; and where there is no distinct separation between interior

4. See Fig. 1.
5. See Fig. 2.

and exterior spaces" (Menard). By decreasing the boundaries between what is traditionally considered the "natural" (a contested term, by which I mean those things not necessarily dependent upon human activity for existence or life) and the domestic, Tarkovsky does more than recreate spaces of dream or memory. He demands a rethinking of domestic and natural spaces, and even suggests their fusion. The two resemble each other in their mutual familiarity. The exteriors in the flashbacks (yard, meadow, forest), like the dacha's dining room, are not so open or vast as to be unknowable. They are carefully chosen (at times even crafted) and captured in order to create a sense of space involving all three dimensions. The arrangements of trees and bushes, field and forest bring together the space, rendering it not formidable and foreign but familiar and dynamic.

The dacha and its surroundings form the perfect arena for the interaction between human and nonhuman, along with the questioning of narrative agency, because this space incorporates both conformity to human presence and human needs (the home is a human one, after all) and nonconformity through the presentation of stories depicting the nonliving. Even as *Mirror*'s representation of the land seems knowable, it goes well beyond its precedents by maintaining forms of objects that are not reshaped into the image of hominids. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard writes of "the original fullness of the house's being" and quotes Rainer Maria Rilke: "House, patch of meadow, oh evening light / Suddenly you acquire an almost human face / You are very near us, embracing and embraced" (qtd. in Bachelard 8). But while the domestic scene Rilke so eloquently describes seems to take on human characteristics, Tarkovsky's film proposes natural stories that are not conformed to the human image. This is what sets it apart from other texts involving nature: its end is not simple conformity to the human but a mixing of human and inhuman elements until these categories lose their significance. The abating of individuation extends to experience: Bachelard mentions the compression of temperatures and sensations that takes place in the act of recollection, writing, "it is hard to say through what syncretism the attic is at once small and large, warm and cool, always comforting" (10). This effect is enhanced in *Mirror* via the lack of physical needs of the characters. The outdoors never seems too warm or cold (though there are visual references to a range of temperatures), and in spite of the moist conditions, the windows and doors remain open, and the children sleep on a hammock and walk around with bare feet. Personal needs and wants become lost in the multitude of

potential sensations experienced through vision.

Menard notes the stunning visual presentation of *Mirror* and its emphasis on materiality and time:

> There is a unified, temporal feel to the film that makes the objects and events look real and virtual at the same time; in short, they become crystal-images. The overtonal qualities of Tarkovsky's compositions go beyond those of Eisenstein's juxtaposition of stationary shots because they achieve a greater dynamic range of temporal timbre. (Menard)

The idea of crystal-images might be seen in *Mirror* not as a fantasy of the artist, but as a break from culturally curated perspectives of objects and spaces. The idea of the virtual overtaking the real in terms of space is important to Bachelard as well: "He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspects that the house is really 'lived,' nor is it only in the passing hour that we recognize its benefits. An entire past comes to dwell in a new house" (5).

Tarkovsky takes advantage of this common imaginary activity in his presentation of the dacha, which needs no introduction for the viewer but exists already in its virtuality. The film does more, however, by harnessing the virtual to present the space differently than dominant cultural traditions in which the setting always and immediately gives way to the character or person. Menard writes, "The 'dacha' is the predominant chronotope of *Mirror*. It is the intrinsic connection that links the temporal and spatial relationships presented in the film whose polyphonic nature is expressed in the last sequence where the blending of space and time occurs as the past merges with the present" (Menard).

The appearance of the dacha carries out to an unusual extent the reason Brian Price offers as to why spectators are drawn to places in film and what images of places provide the viewer. "I want place to be located in and by the image," he explains, "like a genre—as something familiar, relatable in its familiarity, but different enough to sustain both my interest and what may become of my particularity, which can only be shown by way of what recurs or overlaps" (299). *Mirror* fulfills this desire in its easily identifiable but never rote presentation of its interior and exterior spaces, yet the film destabilizes that attraction to the familiar with its focus on objects. *Mirror*'s display of space is privileged but spatially limited, inviting, yet resistant to domestication.

Fig. 3. Tarkovsky. 1974. *Mirror*: The doctor and the broken fence after the fall.

The opening of the film provides an excellent introduction to its revelatory procedure.

Ⅲ. The First Scene: The Fall into Wonderland

Immediately after the title credits, *Mirror* makes explicit its concern with the environment. The character who verbally brings up the natural world is a stranger to the dacha's inhabitants, a passing doctor (Anatoli Solonitsyn) who starts a conversation with the reluctant Maria. After sitting on and breaking the wooden fence separating the field from the dacha's yard (a significant event in itself of breaking down the boundaries between natural and domestic), he makes a statement while still lying on the ground that changes the direction of the human encounter, moving it from the flirtatious to the environmental: "You know, I fell and found strange things here — roots, bushes… Has it ever occurred to you that plants can feel, know, even comprehend…the trees, this hazel-nut bush…." "This is the alder-tree," Maria responds. He continues: "It doesn't matter. They don't run about. Like us who are rushing, fussing, uttering banalities. That's because we don't trust nature that is inside us. Always this suspiciousness, haste, and no time to stop and think" (Tarkovsky, *Mirror*).

The fall (which can be easily interpreted as Biblical or Carrollian) becomes a revelatory event for the doctor. He begins to understand something he did not before, a fact communicated in the performance as well as the dialogue. After laughing and remarking how "[i]t's a pleasure to fall down with an attractive woman," he turns sober and looks around himself, changed by something within, or, more likely, outside himself. Their dialogue also brings about a critique of language when the doctor misnames the plant and responds to Maria's correction with "[i]t doesn't matter." The importance of his surroundings is at this moment not tied up in naming or recognizing, but in being with.

The revelation is clearly perspectival, but seems to be more than purely visual; indeed, what catches his attention could just as likely be olfactory or aural as related to the eyes. As he lays on the ground, the camera tracks in closer to him.[6] His abdomen visibly moves up and down as he breathes; then he begins to speak. Some new awareness seems to be felt in that moment by the doctor about his environment. Not only does he introduce the possibility of plant consciousness with his evocative question, but he also draws an unmistakable comparison between humans and nonhuman things: the incessant movement of human beings and the stillness of trees. The cinematography, as well, treats the figure of Maria within space as something to be placed during the conversation. The camera moves around her in a circular tracking shot, capturing her smoking a cigarette as if in three dimensions. Earlier, as the doctor makes his way toward Maria, the camera moves past her in a track in, simultaneously zooming out, creating a dolly zoom and seemingly lengthening the landscape as Maria looks on. Such elaborate movements work to situate and relate the figures in the frame with what surrounds them. These shots do not, however, encompass the totality of objects in the setting like an establishing shot would. The emphasis is not on factually conveying spatial information as the establishing shot often does, but on the fluidity and heterogeneity of the space.

As the doctor resumes his trek after the conversation, a powerful gust of wind moves across the field in which he walks. Is this a response to his words, a display of movement that contradicts his characterization of the environment as still? Perhaps, but the message is not for him, as after stopping for a moment to look back, he continues on his way just the same. The scene as a whole enacts an encounter, the doctor in the role of a messenger or angel, proclaiming

6. See Fig. 3.

news. The news he brings is not about what is far off, but what is immanent. The fall to earth heralds a change in thematic direction, taking Maria—and more importantly the viewer—down to the ground, to the grass, to growing, dead, and birthing things, to things moving and unmoving. The breaking of the fence now has resonances with the fall of the Berlin Wall, an event that literalized the destruction or emancipation of regional and national borders; the results of the doctor's weight are more radical, though, as he unknowingly enacts the blending of not just regional cultures or political ideologies, but of species. As described below, *Mirror* plays out moments where the nonhuman, even the nonliving, is elevated to the position of character, if only briefly, to tell a simple story, or just to be seen and heard, to be represented.

Ⅳ. The Natural Acting

Shelton Waldrep, in his essay "Bodies in Space," makes a comment about *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) that has import for *Mirror*: "Kubrick's film, like Gilles Deleuze's theories of the baroque or the fold, would have presented filmgoers with an enfolding of meaning, a spatial disruption of the linear unfolding of the temporal experience of film narrative" (166). *Mirror* contains not so much spatial disruptions as spatial ambiguities and unorthodox dynamism through its use of transgressive editing (breaking the 180-degree rule) and long takes. Although *Mirror*'s presentation of space is not as directly disruptive as *2001*'s final scenes, it does not provide many traditional patterns of shots, instead presenting the dacha in long takes that include objects and spaces both near and far from the camera's position. It is the duration and deliberate slow-to-medium speed with which the camera pans and tracks that creates the effect of alien perception and plays into Tarkovsky's idea of time-pressure. In all of this there is, like Deleuze's idea of the fold, an enfolding of dramatic possibilities that pushes beyond human agency and toward the action of other forces and objects.

Stephen Heath, in his essay "Narrative Space," argues that it is movement that harnesses the excesses of the cinematic image and keeps its meaning in line with narrative concerns: "Meaning, entertainment, vision: film produced as the realization of a coherent and positioned space, and as that realization in movement, positioning, cohering, binding in" (385). While *Mirror* does not wholly contradict Heath's theory, it takes part in this process in a very

different way than most other films, not just in allowing spatial elements to remain outside of strict narrative concerns but actually retraining the film to follow these excesses of meaning. Instead of meaning becoming ever more unified through the pointed narrative function for a space, space becomes an opportunity for wonder at the undefined and malleable. The movement of the camera is an important part of this, as it fails to cohere and bind, instead moving within the space in an exploratory, transitory manner. For the most part, Tarkovsky bypasses establishing shots and begins sequences with close or medium shots. In this way the space is less "positioned" than experienced, the viewer thrown into the space rather than approaching it.

The question of precisely what desire or subjectivity drives the camera is beyond the scope of this paper, but it can be said that this force moves beyond the human, even as it does not completely leave the human behind, relating objects and characters, even if the relationship is one of absence. By reorienting his camera, Tarkovsky allows the objects to tell a story, though not in a traditional sense. "But when a film works on an audience," Ivakhiv writes, "that audience is taken to places within the world opened up by the film" (6). Ivakhiv's three dimensions of cinematic representation could be expressed as a spectrum, whose end points are the geomorphic and the anthropomorphic. He writes that "the crucial difference between the geomorphic and the anthropomorphic is that the first pertains to the way in which a world is presented *as given*, while the second pertains to the way in which a world is presented *as open to action and change*" (10, emphasis original). While it is up for discussion if and how exactly "*as given*" might exist outside the realm of the human psyche, *Mirror* shows the third category, life-world or biomorphism not to be simply between the two end points of this specturm but somewhere outside of the polarity. By capturing moments of action and change carried out by the nonhuman, even the non-sentient, the "anthro-" of anthropomorphic is here nowhere to be found. Yet neither is the world of *Mirror* presented as a passive environment to be acted upon, as the category of geomorphic would necessitate. Ivakhiv describes "a world of subjects, objects, and things in between" (11). The following examples do more than bend what would be the spectrum's middle portion (what Ivakhiv calls "things in between") as they contradict both extremes, the final few even integrating human figures into biomorphic images.

It is in the moments after the characters leave the frame that the most stunning — and potentially important — action occurs. In these brief instances the environment shines through with unparalleled intensity. Humanity is not

completely unrelated to these scenes, as characters leave their imprint on their surroundings, but the surroundings have a life of their own. A focus on the elemental is also found in the post-departure scenes. The wind stirs up motion in the frame. Bushes and trees bend beneath its weight, and meadows wave and sway. Lantern chimneys blow off of tables. Fire, with its spirited rhythms, also plays an important role. During the visit to an acquaintance's home, the lamp in the room in which Alexei waits flashes and sputters. With a single cut the embers of the fire suddenly fill the screen. A flaming brand illuminates the human hand, making the skin seem translucent. A barn catches fire. Rain soaks Maria on her way to work at a newspaper press, and a shower again soaks her after the stress is over. The dreamlike primal scene near the film's beginning features indoor precipitation and a depersonalized and alien-like Maria, her hair covering her face. Later, a spray of water follows after the young Alexei as he runs inside, its source unknown and its path unlikely. All of these are examples of the natural seeming to act on its own in the film. A few of the examples deserve closer attention.

The first example is one in which a character views a nonhuman event. From a section set in the 1970s, the scene depicts Ignat, Alexei's son, left alone by his mother in Alexei's apartment. He turns around and is hailed by a woman sitting at a table being served coffee by a maid. She asks Ignat to read from a certain notebook (writings by Pushkin). As he reads, the woman looks at him and stirs her tea, and the light from the windows changes dramatically, darkening as the camera tracks toward the woman, then brightening as the camera holds in medium close-up on the steaming tea. After answering the door to a woman he does not know (who later appears as his grandmother), Ignat returns to find an empty room. Already the nonhuman elements of light and steam have been the most active elements within the frame. The simple structure of the shifting light resembles a basic narrative framework: introduction (light), conflict (dark), and resolution (light). The steam, while bearing the trace of human agency, is a display of evaporation, a shifting from one state of matter to another. It is an object in transition.

The scene becomes (to use Ivakhiv's term) more biomorphic in its final moments, once the woman's disappearance occurs. By literally and suddenly removing one of the people in the scene, the film gives dramatic weight to the absence of the person, to the trace that is left. The significance of the event is heightened by the increasingly loud and dissonant non-diegetic music. After Ignat walks into the empty room, there is a cut to a forward tracking shot,

Fig. 4. Tarkovsky. 1974. *Mirror*: Wind acting upon a loaf of bread and lamp.

resulting in a close-up of the surface of the table where the tea previously sat. It displays the heat signature left by the teacup as well as the bright reflection of the window's light. The two earlier elements of light and steam are now layered one on top of the other. The camera stops its track and holds on the heated spot as it shrinks to nothing. The shot ends upon the completion of this process and Ignat leaves the room. Here a diegetic viewer is present to witness the nonhuman event and so there is some diegetic justification for the event. Even so, the scene is not so much about Ignat's reaction to the disappearing mark as it is about the event itself: the decreasing size of the mark produces increased intensity, until its complete disappearance brings a moment of serene inevitability. The music supports but shifts this movement, as its crescendo peaks and the instruments and voices die off well before the end of the shot. The silence that ensues releases the pressure that the linear action produced, and instead the dwindling mark becomes a peaceful denouement. The fact that there are contours and developments to these shots of objects gives the sense of story, albeit of another kind than most filmgoers are used to.

The diegetic presence of humans is not always necessary for these scenes. Twice in the film, a shot of a fierce wind blowing out of the forest is shown. The shot occurs, unlike the other examples, in black and white, potentially labeling it as dream material. The camera tracks to the left in slow motion as a wind

bends stems and shakes leaves on branches and brambles. A table comes into frame, on which a lamp and partial loaf of bread sit.[7] The bread wobbles and the lamp tips over and rolls off the table on its right side. The next shot reveals a track in on the side of the dacha following young Alexei as he looks behind him and runs inside. The wind again blows from right to left. After he passes out of frame, a shower of water fills the screen and traces Alexei's path. Of all the shots in the film the shot of the wind seems the most devoid of human presence. The wind's strength overpowers the domestic objects of bread and lamp. In Ivhakiv's sense, the shot is more than contradicting the geomorphic sense of "presented *as given*," (10, emphasis original) since this environment is not only active but also turns over the human structures it encounters. The second shot furthers this hypothesis, as Alexei moves alongside the elements of wind and rain. A spatial disruption, as mentioned by Waldrep, eliminates the possibility of a character's perspective. Because of the progression from viewing a set of objects to viewing a character looking, it would be natural to assume that the first shot is a point of view shot from Alexei's perspective. However, the setting of the second shot reveals that it is not in or near the meadow (the setting of the first shot), but on the other side of the dacha. The misleading cut constitutes what Brian Price identifies as a pleasurable space to view, in that its shots can be related to one another, yet this one breaks anthropocentric viewing codes and requires more attention and activity to correctly identify and place than is usually necessary.

Such spatial complications communicate a larger message about the film. Philip Rosen introduces Heath's article on filmic space with these words: "Throughout the essay, there is an emphasis on a dialectic between the representational effort to position, and the representational excesses and lacks which the former must constantly encounter and process" (277). It is not that *Mirror* directly attempts to disrupt the spatial relationships in the mind's eye—usurping the "representational effort to position"—but that it questions what story should be told. The "representational excesses and lacks" are faced directly, decentering what would classically be the primary story: Alexei's growing up. In this way, Tarkovsky's film can be connected to explicitly environmental texts, such as Andrej Zdravic's *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons* (1997) in which the events depicted are naturally occurring, and even more so to Peter Hutton's *Time and Tide* (2000), in which human

7. See Fig. 4.

impact on the environment is captured through the focus on place over people (MacDonald 20–29).

Early in *Mirror*, during the 1930s section, there is a sequence shot in which Maria and her sons move from the dining room to the other side of the house in order to watch a barn burn. The shot does not immediately follow the characters out of the room, but lingers behind. The boys rush out, exclaiming about the fire, and the camera makes a slow track backwards out of the room, keeping the table and bench in frame. A black cat sits on the bench. After a few seconds, a glass lamp chimney rolls off the table and falls to the floor without breaking. Before it falls, the chimney is still, as is everything else in the room. There is no visible cause for the object's movement and yet it moves. Tarkovsky's writing shows that he is very aware of life outside the human sphere: "Rhythm in cinema is conveyed by the life of the object visibly recorded in the frame" (*Sculpting in Time* 120). In the sequence shot, the camera seems complicit in this material event, as it waits for the action and then resumes its track soon after it happens. Johnson and Petrie write, "Frequently in *Mirror* the camera will linger over such images, creating the effect of a painting" (118). What is essential in these scenes, however, is an element that the medium of painting can never fully capture: movement and stasis *in time*. The chimney's fall is not sweeping or broad, but it is stunning precisely because it frees the scene from being a still life. *Mirror* advocates for the life of objects and the actions that they perform without the exertion of humans' power on them. It does so how it can: as a mechanical witness.

Although much of the writing on *Mirror* posits its formal qualities as expressing memory, a major difference between the functions of memory and the experience of *Mirror* is the film's sense of duration. Bachelard writes:

> Here space is everything, for time ceases to quicken memory. Memory—what a strange thing it is!—does not record concrete duration, in the Bergsonian sense of the word. We are unable to relive duration that has been destroyed. We can only think of it, in the line of an abstract time that is deprived of all thickness. The finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of long sojourn, are to be found in and through space. (9)

Tarkovsky not only exploits space, but he does so through film, a medium predicated upon time. The compounding of these two results not in the

replication of the experience of remembering, but in the spaces and times that have the potential to become remembered material. Thus Tarkovsky transports the film out of the realm of subjective fantasy and allows things beyond the human characters to have their say. In the first 1930's sequence, there are twenty-two shots over the course of fourteen minutes and thirty seconds, averaging a shot length of forty seconds. The film makes substantial use of its durations, with frequent camera movement in slow pans and tracks that underscore the consistency of the single take while at the same time evolving the content of the shot. Writing of the ways people use space and time in living with the mind-body dichotomy, Jones states:

> Yet much of it is due to our taken-for-granted mastery of time. We possess only the present moment, but we are convinced of continuity with a past that no longer exists. Our confidence is not misplaced, for the causal chains we read in the world must have some basis, and, if we failed to trust our memories and our ability to locate ourselves in time and space, we could no longer live and act. However, we remember only such things as our minds are able to sustain and recall, by transforming them into schemata, and memory is far from permanent, complete or accurate. (96–97)

The passage stresses the active role that the mind takes in giving meaning to present sensory information by linking it to memories of past sensory and logical information. Each moment of cognitive experience is a piecing together from these two sources. In *Mirror*, however, it is made clear that there is no choice in sensory information. The viewer is given what the screen gives. Locked into the specific time and space set by the film, the viewer experiences the spaces in a way distinct from both direct perception and memory, a new type of exposure that makes available an awakening to what lies beyond our species. All cinematic works could be said to contain this strange mixture to some extent or another, but few so potently contain it as does *Mirror*.

There are also moments of strange confluence between human and nonhuman action. Early in the film, Maria walks toward the dacha, the camera following her in a tracking shot. Ahead of her, a book sits on a windowsill. As she continues to walk, a tree blocks her (and the camera's) view of the window, placing the camera, Maria, the tree, and the window along an imaginary line. After the window comes back into view, a sequence of events occurs: she stops, the book falls from the sill, and she turns around to look at her son. It is

Fig. 5. Tarkovsky. 1974. *Mirror*: Human figures situated between the elements of water and fire.

unclear whether or not it is the book's fall that causes her to turn. Although the sequence is brief, it opens up an ambiguous interaction that seems less causal than fortuitously conversational. Maria's knowledge of the book falling is not necessary for the sequence to take place; it is for the camera that the figures perform. Or, more radically, the objects' movements are for themselves.

In addition to Tarkovsky's harnessing of space in time, he sets in action this combination of events through the mobility of the camera. In the scene, the camera moves eloquently through space, transforming Maria, book, dacha, and tree with its own autonomy, determining relationships between objects by capturing their movement and stasis with its motion. Yet, these objects and patterns quickly pass out of view, returning to the undefined, imaginary, and malleable world of off-screen space. The movement of the camera is important not just for its result in the present, but also for what occurs in the mind of the viewer as the apparatus continues on its journey, as it leaves things behind. In the case of these complex and fecund spaces, motion is momentum for the import of the image. As time moves and the camera moves, the viewer builds an imaginary and shifting landscape of the totality of the environment. This relates to Tarkovsky's own idea of time-pressure, but with the inclusion of space and the mental activity of spatial mapping. Although the viewer

does not know the particular spaces of the dacha and its surroundings, the setting invites the viewer because of the presence and absence of those (Alexei, Maria) who know them so intimately that they take the spaces for granted. Through duration, movement, and the knowledge of an inhabitant (present or absent), the scenes have it both ways, inviting and alienating, allowing for new perceptions and even revelations.

Perhaps the most direct example of nonhuman and human action converging in a biomorphic tableau takes place directly after the previously described instance of place acting on itself in the characters' absence (the lamp falling off the dinner table). The camera tracks through the dacha, capturing in a mirror the two young boys watching the barn burn. It tracks forward to follow a third boy as he walks out of the house. A man and a woman stand in front of the burning barn. The camera stops its track on a covered porch, its roof spanning the top of the frame. Water drips from the roofline, creating a veil of droplets through which the people and barn are seen.[8] Already in this shot there is the sandwiching of humans between the natural elements of water and fire. Significantly, the active elements of the frame are the water and fire, their activity not caused by the people, but completely autonomous from them. The human characters' passive position as viewers reorients traditional hierarchy of cinematic *mise en scene*. Humans are here caught in the very spectacle that they view.

The next shot reveals Maria walking toward the barn. She stops at a well and pours water from a pail onto her hand, rubbing the water on her neck and face. While this takes place, the fire is not directly in frame but its orange glow penetrates the top of the screen, taking the place of the drenched roof in the previous shot. Instead of the burning building centered in the upper part of the frame, now it is the well. The elements have traded places. The shot continues as Maria sits on the edge of the well and the camera pans up to capture the inferno as a man moves toward the flames. Again the humans are caught between fire and water, but Maria's act breaks the passivity of the previous shot. She responds to the frantic activity of the fire with a baptism of water, wiping it on her face and neck. Fire and water are two of the most obviously mobile and dynamic of nonliving things and the human characters take notice. Their attention has finally been caught by one of the many nonliving events around them. Maria's response also signals the larger body of water in the

8. See Fig. 5.

well, whose movement is another example of a substance performing its own dance. Here the biomorphic presentation reaches outside of the present image. Unseen, unknown, the water moves and is, like countless other incidents and entities beyond the frame.

V. Conclusion: Seeing More, Detecting Infinity

In the examples discussed above, there is a range of events from those being intently watched by human characters to those that seem to be witnessed by the camera alone, implying a multiplicity of such stories happening all the time and only rarely noticed by people. Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes begin their edited collection *Taking Place* by citing Siegfried Kracauer: "Kracauer wonders if the 'small units' of contingent, material existence captured on and by film have a power over and above their service and enchainment to a film's plot-driven, narrative project" (vii). While they call Kracauer's project "explicitly humanist" (vii), Tarkovsky's project can be seen as similar yet moving beyond Kracauer's, as the very foundation of the film shifts toward these nonhuman (though sometimes touched-by-human) stories, these micro-narratives. Using the object-oriented moments as more than support for the human tale, the film questions who or what *Mirror* is really about. For all its autobiographical pathos, there is a strain of underlying interest that could easily be labeled childlike or dreamlike, but, more radically, reveals itself as environmental and biomorphic.

This is not to say that the focus on place in Tarkovsky's film is devoid of human influence. As Gorfinkel and Rhodes note, "Recent scholarship in human geography has sought rigorously to demonstrate, however, that place itself is constructed and is something that has been acted on prior to its acting on the human subject" (ix). The trace of humanity is always felt, even in the shots of wind blowing out onto the field, for that field was sown. *Mirror* would not seem to be advocating for the removal of humanity from narrative, but instead is encouraging viewers and other filmmakers to look down, up, and to the sides of where they normally fix their gaze. Ultimately, this leads outside the borders of the screen. "Films," Ivakhiv writes, "in displaying and beckoning us into cinematic worlds that refer to places in the 'real' world, charge these uneven geographies with film's conjuring magic, amplifying differences or minimizing them, strengthening stereotypes or challenging them" (8).

Mirror demands multiple readings, readings that contradict and complement one another; ecocritical readings on the type of subjectivity presented by the film and the sort of viewer identification invoked are areas wide open for further study. Tarkovsky's film is one that pushes beyond assumed practices of centering film on human characters in that it lets its glance slip off to corners, linger on tables, and capture a few of the innumerable nonhuman events that take place all the time, everywhere. Such a project should hardly be considered marginal, as the ethics, value, and legitimacy of human dominance continue to come under greater scrutiny and suspicion. When what is anthropomorphically thought of as absence becomes biomorphic presence, a new type of thought and sight is involved, one that takes steps away from the self. As Tarkovsky himself wrote, "and so there opens up before us the possibility of interaction with infinity, for the great function of the artistic image is to be a kind of detector of infinity" (*Sculpting in Time* 109).

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Fig. 1. Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Zerkalo* [film still, 00:13:23]. Goskino, 1974.
Fig. 2. Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Zerkalo* [film still, 01:18:20]. Goskino, 1974.
Fig. 3. Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Zerkalo* [film still, 00:08:59]. Goskino, 1974.
Fig. 4. Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Zerkalo* [film still, 01:19:04]. Goskino, 1974.
Fig. 5. Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Zerkalo* [film still, 00:15:23]. Goskino, 1974.

Abstract

A few of Andrei Tarkovsky's films have become touchstones for their ecocritical and geographical content, but *Mirror* (Zerkalo, 1975) has, for the most part, been left out of environmental conversations. From its opening images and lines of dialogue, however, the film maps a number of striking possibilities about the role of landscape and objects in relation to both the human characters and the film audience. Throughout its duration, there can be found sections of film that continue to play after the characters leave the frame. These could be called "empty" frames or "dead" time, but upon closer inspection they reveal themselves to be full of life, movement, and even depict what I call *micro-narratives,* small-scale stories told by objects and environments themselves. These sometimes act in isolation, and other times involve the human figure in decentering ways. Using phenomenology and neo-formalism to investigate a number of moments of divergence from the anthropocentric narrative, I show that the film can be seen to point towards what Adrian Ivakhiv terms a *biomorphic* perspective that creates rare modes of sight and participation through the involvement and interaction of entities often considered to be within separate categories (e.g. living and nonliving). Tarkovsky leverages cinema's distinctive combination of image, movement, time, and the illusion of space to allow viewers to notice what might otherwise remain overlooked or invisible. The paper draws on the work of philosophers, film theorists, ecocritics, and Tarkovsky scholars, especially Ivakhiv, Gaston Bachelard, David George Menard, and Tarkovsky's own writings. "Objects in the *Mirror*" promotes dialogue between the discourses of ecocinema, landscape, phenomenology, and film theory by demonstrating a cinema's ability to question the assumed hierarchy of content within the profilmic event.

Keywords: ecocriticism, *Mirror*, Andrei Tarkovsky, micro-narrative, cinema studies, biomorphic

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