

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Stalker 1979

Andrei Tarkovsky 1932-1986

STORY

As in his space investigation, *Solaris*, Tarkovsky knows how to make the surrounding world uncanny, as he does in *Stalker*, a word with a richness of connotation, in Russian, which it lacks in English. Stalker, in the present film, is a man with a mandate to explore barred or shut off areas, an intruder with a license. (For the entrance to which areas, as it happens in the present films, the stalker provides his services. The stalker, in the present case, can offer his services to a mysterious area called the Zone—from the outside we think of those areas of the Urals which the Soviets closed off, after a 'mysterious nuclear explosion' in 1957, or of course the Chernobyl disaster site in 1986, which though it occurred after *Stalker* still reverberates with the dangers and concealments of the world Tarkovsky is summoning up.) The man we come to know as the stalker, in the present film, is a creation of the underground world of threat and secrecy which surrounds the secret operations we associate with Soviet government policy.

Opening. We are stunned, from the beginning of this film, with the complexity of its offering to our senses, and can never forget, as we let the loose plot play out, that we are living it as if we were visitors to the most carefully designed museum. The bar in which we first meet the stalker, and his two clients for the present day, is presented in crinkly sepia tones, with its outdated country bartender, antiquated (and barely maintained) furnishings, and textured air—as though grains or drops were forever drifting down through it. The music of the film, which attunes subtly throughout to a variety of bruising or even delicate metal impacts, distant bird calls, or even the dripping of stalactites at varying speeds, assures our constant attention to the often thin march of events. And at that we are only at the portal to the human machinery which will set this drama in motion.

Upstairs We see the day coming to a groggy life, as the three occupants of the flat slowly wake in the dreary half dilapidated living headquarters where life starts out for them. Mom is up, clearly the control center of the dwelling, Monkey, the handicapped daughter, is waking, and dad, the stalker, is pulled out of his bed and begins to stuff himself indifferently into his clothes. Downstairs, in the bar, will be waiting the two customers for the day, a writer and a scientist. But before descending for his day's work, stalker must suffer from one of those miserable domestic fights that tear apart this family. Stalker's wife is fed up, has perhaps long been so, with her husband's frequent absences. (These absences may be extensive, we gather, though on this particular day it is question of a day trip; the life status of the stalker is menacingly unclear, his distinctive skill, exercised on behalf of the 'government,' is to undertake missions into the zone, where undefined clients wish to travel to obtain happiness and personal success.)

En route. Having scorned his wife's reproaches, and met his two equally dingy clients in the bar, the stalker makes some effort to determine the nature of the two guys. As the men talk we realize that the stalker is (or at least considers himself) a prisoner, a zek, and yet he is driven to demonstrate the powers and mysteries of the zone, which we start to guess may be the after product of some original bomb or meteorite. The two clients of the day, in any case, seem to know what they want, and compliantly set off behind the stalker, where setting off simply means jumping on a train car, easily eluding the white helmeted guards, and making their ways into the in fact, on the whole, quite ordinary rural landscape—which was in fact a part of Soviet Estonia.

The day's trip, which will conclude, back at the bar, with nothing concrete accomplished, and with the stalker's sense once more of having failed his mission, nonetheless brings its blessings along. Under stalker's close and irritable supervision, in the course of which he leads his clients to the door of The Room, the most secret part of the zone, Stalker does a great deal of preaching, which we have reason to guess is manna to the clients. Stalker reflects on the ways we become kinder, as we think more about the past; he pulls out Zen thinking, the *supple is stronger than the hard, the abstract, like music, is the realm*

of the greatest purity. As Stalker shares these thoughts, to the hiking and painting scientist and writer, he works with the special angles from which they view the human experience. A gentle black dog joins the walking crew, the feet of the pilgrims scrape through the artefactual debris of previous civilizations, which lie in shatters on the rocky stream beds through which they pass. The Writer and Scientist get through the experience as best they can—it was their desire—the writer a cynic and intellectual, an obstreperous who clings to his gun and his liquor, the scientist, on occasion feisty toward the stalker, and inclined, as he shows us, to consider blowing up a bomb he is carrying with him.

Climax? The three men are last seen together around a desolate blue tinted pond somewhere in the zone: it would be hard to speak of this bleak scene as an epiphany, and yet?

Finale. In the end, Stalker's wife declares that she will remain faithful to him forever, no matter what suffering is involved. (The tones of Russian Orthodox passion insist on themselves here.) The daughter, Monkey, handicapped by the kind of post nuclear affliction lying in the background of the film, appears in mystical profile, exercising her touching skill of psychokinesis, which leaves the trademark of 'spirituality' on the entire film.

THEMES

Mystery. There is a mystery central to this film. Where did the Zone come from? What does it offer to the experiencer of it? What is frightening about it? None of these questions are meant to be conclusively answered. They are mysteries.

Suffering. At the end of the film, the Stalker's wife insists that she will remain with him faithfully through suffering—a suffering which is sure to join the two of them to the end. She makes very little demand on happiness.

History. The zone itself, especially that part of it over which endlessly dripping waterways circulate, seems fertile with human history, which moistens the soil below it, depositing sharp rich artifact sherds

Fidelity. The stalker's wife is a model of fidelity, even though she cracks for a moment, on the day the film deals with. She will stick with the stalker to the end—which will be suffering.

CHARACTERS

The stalker is a 'prisoner' though of what we are not certain. (Perhaps he is simply a prisoner of himself, and will never escape.) His 'job' is to take qualified applicants on tours of the zone.

The stalker's wife appears forcefully twice in the film: in the beginning, where she berates him for leaving her so frequently, and for his indifference to her and to their child; at the end, when she concedes she will remain with her husband til the end, though that decision is bound to result in suffering.

The writer. The writer is one of two clients who visit the stalker, on the day of the film, for the purpose of visiting the Zone. He is world weary and cynical.

The scientist, who nastily threatens to set off a bomb, which he has brought with him, seems to be thinking above all, of his chances of winning a Nobel Prize.

STALKER

Parallels. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) tracks the same emotions as Tarkovsky's film; especially the anticipation of some epiphany, which refuses to draw near. The theme of impending spiritual suffering—the deep failure and loss that haunt the stalker and his wife-- throws us back onto the deep Russian Orthodox religious tradition; we think again of the mindsets of Solzhenitsyn, or, in earlier literature, of Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, as Russian tintured thinkers for whom the greatness of life is the struggle as spirit for adequate acceptance of the human experience.

Illustrative moments

Waking. At the outset we see the stalker waking in his dejected quarters, slowly dressing, and taking on a new day's assignment. He begins the day tired, and without confidence.

Quarreling. As he is about to leave the flat, the stalker is stopped by his wife, who has had all she can stand of their lifestyle. The stalker responds by refusing to respond.

Guiding. The stalker is a severe guide, insisting that his two clients follow his orders precisely. Yet at the end, around the 'epiphany pond,' he seems to warm toward them.

Despairing. At the end of his own day, the stalker seems to feel he has failed in his mission. He is depressed. Yet during the day he has come open certain moments of reconciliation and peace.

Discussion questions

Is *Stalker* a religious allegory, or a fable about the advance of science?, or is it a mockery of a certain political establishment?

Is Stalker himself an heroic figure, who is fighting to give mankind experiences of peace and pleasure; a kind of Prometheus working on humanity's side? Or does he seem to you more like a narrow spirited warden, hanging on to his narrow corner of peace?

What kind of power does Monkey exercise, over the glasses on the table? Is there a 'mystery power' there, which resembles the power mode in the zone?