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Epistemology in *Stalker*

With each successive viewing of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, I have always found some thematic layer in the film that eluded me in prior analysis. In this essay I intend to explore just one of *Stalker*'s many layers, namely its exploration of human tendencies in epistemology, that is, how we can and should gain knowledge of "truth," and how those tendencies relate to our moral and ideological systems.



The film follows the "Stalker" as he guides two men, the Writer and the Professor, through the mystical land known as "the Zone" in order to reach "the Room," where one's deepest desires are said to come true. Soon after the film's demarcated Part 2 begins, Tarkovsky presents a sequence where the Stalker speaks in the tone of prayer that functions as a voice-over narration. The sequence, while containing only two shots and one cut, is approximately four minutes in length, a shot length not unusual for Tarkovsky. The first shot is a close up of a pool of water at the bottom of a pipe. The shot is black and white, which serves to emphasize the silvery film on the water's surface. As the Stalker narrates, praying that "they would believe," the water churns as if something had fallen into it, revealing the black water beneath the silvery surface. The Stalker continues, explaining the benefits of remaining "pliable" and "soft," and that "strength is worthless." During this narration, we see the water continue to move and morph. He goes on, equating strength and inflexibility with death. He explains that just as a living tree is soft and pliable, a dead one is tough and brittle. This idea can be understood in terms of the

philosophy of William James, specifically his critique of intellectualism, as expressed in the following quote from the conclusion of *A Pluralistic Universe*:

[Logic] has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality...Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it. (James 557-558)

To paraphrase both James and the Stalker, there is a certain “locking up” that occurs when we attempt to create an all-encompassing, unmoving worldview. Reality is going to seep through the cracks and prove us wrong any time we think we have it all “figured out.” Any epistemological system that is “perfect” is not an accurate one, as it misses the mystery, flexibility, and imperfection that are actually representative of reality.

The Stalker articulates this same idea: the truth is like the water with the silvery-film. It is “black and white” in the sense that it *is* discernible and actual, but it is in a constant state of flux, reflected by its motion and lack of a solid form. The search for truth, then, requires adjustment, not fortification. Just as a skyscraper that is too sturdy collapses at the first sign of bending, our worldviews become inaccurate when they are solidified. Their strength becomes their weakness, the “overflowing” of which James speaks.

The Stalker feels that this rigidity in the people around him could be remedied by belief. For the Stalker, faith needs no worldview for justification. This faith is a selfless action that allows our worldviews to have the “wiggle room” required for knowledge and wisdom. These beliefs are based on nothing except the dream that there is something in the world we cannot even hope to understand. The belief in the mysterious allows us an explanation for what does not fit even the most unforgiving worldviews. The Zone provides that mystery for the Stalker, and he wants to extend that same benefit to those that he brings there.

Both the Writer and the Professor have their own “unpliable” ideologies to which they orient themselves. The Professor represents the scientific community’s desire to crystallize and solidify truth into something observable and tangible. Instead of accepting the fluidity and ineffability of the truth, he comes to the Zone seeking objectivity. In



some ways, the Professor is beyond hope. He, more so than the Writer, is the perfect example of the “strength” and the “absolute” of which the Stalker and William James warn. There is no flexibility in his worldview, no room for the fresh air of faith and the supernatural.

The Writer criticizes the Professor for this tendency, which he sees as a desire to ruin the magic of the Zone by documenting it to death with math and science, but the Writer has his own crippling epistemology. Representing cynical artists of all types, he is little more than a slave to his audience. He writes not what he thinks is of quality or is true, but what is expected of him. His works might have been profound at one time, when writing something profound was his only goal, but now he must appeal to what would sustain his success. He feels washed up and he has come to the Zone for inspiration. His ideas might not at first appear to be as objective and inflexible as the Professor’s, but in the end, he orients himself towards something just as static. At some point in his career he stopped writing for the truth, that constantly churning, undulating water, and began writing for something more predictable and stationary, namely his audience’s expectations.

The second and final shot of the scene, which is almost three full minutes without a cut, begins with the Stalker traversing the Zone, carefully watching where he goes. His voice-over continues to caution us against “strength” as we see him deftly maneuver the treacherous ground of the Zone. The camera pans to follow him as he moves. He is

constantly pressed up against walls, making the shot feel depth-less. Just as we see the Stalker weave in and out in the Zone, the film begs us to use caution when searching for truth, lest we be distracted from its immediacy and escape into the same problematic world-building of which both the Professor and Writer are guilty.

When the pan ends, the Stalker meets up with the Writer and the Professor and the narration has ended. The three characters are in a tunnel, which creates a frame within a frame while simultaneously increasing the lighting contrast by creating shadows. The Professor asks to turn back, as he forgot his knapsack, while the other two urge him on, believing that the Room will give him whatever he wants. The Professor asks how far away the Room is, and the Stalker replies that it is about 200 meters away, but that there



are no “straight paths.” At this point, the Stalker walks towards the camera, which is simultaneously tracking in towards the Stalker, and out of the tunnel’s shadow. The Writer tells the Professor to “not let doubt set in,” referring to the Professor’s wish to return to his

knapsack, and that “miracles are outside of [the Professor’s] experience.”

This discussion is an example of the themes discussed earlier manifested in the form of dialogue. The “no straight paths” that the Stalker speaks of reflect the idea that while our epistemological systems might seem to create simple, straightforward answers, the true answer is not as easily found. When the Writer describes the Professor as someone who does not experience miracles, he evokes the interpretation of faith introduced in the Stalker’s narration. There is nothing in the Professor’s understanding that allows for the supernatural, meaning reality’s miracles go unrecognized.

The visual elements in this section also reinforce those themes. The Stalker travels from the bright, low contrast lighting we saw during the pan to the darker, high contrast lighting in the tunnel. This shift represents the burden he bears as he guides these two men who have such rigid understandings. When alone, he can weave in and out of the Zone's treacherous landscape, but when he must guide someone who does not share his faith, his challenge is much greater and much darker. The second frame created by the



tunnel weighs down upon the characters, to further emphasize that burden. The only time we see the Stalker's face in clear lighting again is when he moves away from the other men and out of the tunnel, away from the burden. Even this "lightening is thwarted when the Writer

appears above his shoulder, shading the Stalker's face again.

The climax of the film provides the finishing touches to the film's exploration of the effects of "rigid" epistemologies. The three characters reach the threshold of the room, and the Professor reveals that his knapsack contains a nuclear device designed to destroy the Room, preventing evil people from using it. The Stalker urges him not to destroy it, claiming that the Room's existence is necessary to provide hope to the hopeless. During their struggle, the Writer realizes that he does not wish to enter the Room as it would not grant his conscious desires, but his deepest, unconscious ones. He is afraid of what those might be. Hearing the Writer explain his epiphany, the Professor disassembles his device. In an interview, Tarkovsky explains the Professor's action:

...in general people are motivated by things that are extremely basic like money, status, sex...That's why he doesn't destroy the Room. The other reason is that the Stalker convinces him not to do it, by telling him that such a place needs to be saved. Where people can come and still hope, people who want something, who need an ideal. (Giavito, 57)

In other words, the Professor realizes that the good of the Room outweighs the bad. It provides the faith that gives the Stalker, and those like him, the solace that those with more rigid worldviews lack. Perhaps even simpler, the risk is not as great when the Room only grants one's deep desires and fears, which end up being personal and trivial matters in the cosmic scheme of things.

But how does that second point regarding desires relate to the film's messages about epistemology and world building? Tarkovsky argues that despite their grandeur, our strongest ideological beliefs are based in small, pathetic motivations. Faith and the "softness" that the Stalker speaks of are lost when we let our desires control not only our actions but also our worldview. A static understanding of the world becomes like a machine, relentlessly driven forward and fueled by our desires. "Faith" or "belief" loosen up the machinery, so to speak, and allow us to be more successful in our attempts to find truth.

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