



JANUS FILMS *presents*

A FILM BY ANDREI

TARKOVSKY

STALKER

“Tarkovsky is the greatest of them all. He moves with such naturalness in the room of dreams.”

—INGMAR BERGMAN

Andrei Tarkovsky's final Soviet feature is a metaphysical journey through an enigmatic postapocalyptic landscape, and a rarefied cinematic experience like no other. A hired guide—the Stalker—leads a writer and a scientist into the heart of the Zone, the restricted site of a long-ago disaster, where the three men eventually zero in on the Room, a place rumored to fulfill one's most deeply held desires. Adapting a science-fiction novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Tarkovsky created an immersive world with a wealth of material detail and a sense of organic atmosphere, qualities that are on immaculate display in this stunning new restoration of a film until now rarely seen in U.S. cinemas. A religious allegory, a reflection of contemporaneous political anxieties, a meditation on film itself—*Stalker* envelops the viewer by opening up a multitude of possible meanings.

Restored by Mosfilm from a 2K scan of the original negative.



Soviet Union | 1979 | 161 minutes | Color | 1.37:1 aspect ratio | In Russian with English subtitles | Screening format: DCP

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THE MAKING OF *STALKER*

Around the time of the release of his autobiographical film *The Mirror*, in 1975, Andrei Tarkovsky began work on a screenplay called *The Picnic*, based on the short science-fiction novel *Roadside Picnic*. *Stalker*, as the film was later titled, would premiere in Moscow in May 1979 after years of technical disasters, the firing of the original director of

photography, and ongoing health issues for Tarkovsky. Several thousand feet of film were shot in 1977 and then ruined, for reasons that were disputed. In the end, Tarkovsky shot the majority of the film in Tallinn, Estonia, throughout 1978, after which Eduard Artemyev set about composing his unique and much-loved electronic score.

ROADSIDE PICNIC

In the January 26, 1973, entry in his diary, among mentions of his debts, a quotation from Rilke, and descriptions of dreams, Andrei Tarkovsky briefly noted the following: “I’ve just read the Strugatsky brothers’ science-fiction story, *Roadside Picnic*; that could make a tremendous screenplay for somebody as well.” That somebody turned out to be him: a little more than two years later, Tarkovsky wrote that he had visited Arkady Strugatsky, who was delighted that a film of his story was being planned.

In a 1977 interview with *Iskusstvo kino* (Film art) magazine that was conducted not long before he commenced production on the film he had by then retitled *Stalker*, Tarkovsky spoke at length about the plot of *Roadside Picnic*: “We are told a story of extraterrestrial beings who visited the earth and left behind them a Zone manifesting many still-unexplained, but for human beings presumably very dangerous, properties.

In order to investigate the Zone, an international scientific research center was created. In the meantime, as the unknown possible influence of the Zone on human life appears fatal, it is forbidden under stiff penalties to cross its boundary.

“There appeared many legends connected to the Zone. And like anything that’s forbidden, the Zone arouses great curiosity. There are daredevils who attempt to penetrate it for various reasons. Even a new occupation has appeared: stalker (from the English word). This name was given to social outcasts who made a living by guiding into the Zone people hoping to become rich or to be the first to find out about the effects of the extraterrestrials on this patch of the earth’s surface. Some of them are consumed by a morbid desire to risk, a wish to experience firsthand something terrible, hostile to man, which is what the Zone is supposed to be. Desire to reach the Zone is so great also because

apparently in its center there is a place where one can count on fulfilling one’s innermost wish.”

Tarkovsky once said that the only things he ended up taking from *Roadside Picnic* (titled after a character’s comparison of the alien visitation to a party of young people who stop by the side of the road, leaving behind all manner of trash and detritus) were the words “Zone” and “Stalker.” But there are in fact many more similarities between the movie and its source material—although Tarkovsky replaced the caustic tonality of the novel with his own metaphysical inflections. As the director told *Iskusstvo kino* about his conception for the film, “One might say that our film begins where the book ends. The whole history of the Zone is thus left offscreen. The film will focus on one single situation taking place under the circumstances set up by the novel’s entire plot, a situation which in a sense concentrates within itself their essence.”



THE FIRST SHOOT AND RUINED FOOTAGE

Tarkovsky was enduring a nagging illness, as well as overseeing a stage production of *Hamlet*, as he began shooting *Stalker* with cinematographer Georgy Rerberg in February 1977 (“We have just filmed *Stalker*’s flat,” he noted in his diary), with outdoor locations in Tallinn, Estonia, scheduled for May. The Soviet Union made its own black-and-white film stock, but color stock had to be bought from abroad and was extremely hard to come by. By July, Tarkovsky had nonetheless rejected all of the color footage shot outdoors. The director blamed Rerberg and the camera operator for being unfamiliar with the Kodak stock being used. It’s possible that the stock purchased was defective. Some footage shot for Andrei Konchalovsky’s epic *Siberiade* (1979) also showed the same problem: a strong green tint.

For his part, Rerberg maintained that Tarkovsky was unhappy with his own conception of the film and manufactured a reason to start over. Whatever the case, a diary entry of Tarkovsky’s from August 26 shows that he was by that point beginning to glimpse a way forward: “A lot has been happening. Total disaster, so conclusive that one actually has the sense of a fresh stage, a new step to be taken—and that gives one hope.”

Arkady Strugatsky, who was working on the screenplay with Tarkovsky, said that the footage disaster at first depressed the director, but that after a few days he came to him elated, and suggested that the film be broken into two parts, and that the science-fiction element of the story be thrown out in favor of something more like a metaphysical parable. Arkady went back to Leningrad to work with his younger brother, Boris. “We wrote not a science-fiction screenplay but a parable (if we understand a parable as a certain anecdote whose personae are typical of the age and carriers of typical ideas and behavior),” Arkady later recalled. “A fashionable writer and a prominent scientist go into the Zone, where their most cherished dreams might come true, and they are led by the apostle of the new faith, a kind of ideologist.”

Arkady wrote that, when he returned to Tallinn with the new screenplay, Tarkovsky “took the manuscript, retreated into the next room in silence, and shut the door firmly behind him . . . Some time passed, perhaps an hour.

“The door opened and Andrei came in. His face expressed nothing, only his mustache bristled as it always did when he was immersed in his thoughts.

“He looked at us absentmindedly, came up to the table, caught a piece of food with a fork, put it in his mouth, and chewed on it. Then he said, staring above our heads:

“‘The first time in my life I have *my own* screenplay.’”

THE SECOND SHOOT

Tarkovsky replaced Rerberg with Alexander Knyazhinsky, and shooting continued in fits and starts over the course of the next year. A planned resumption of production in mid-May 1978 had to be delayed due to the health of the director, who went on to spend a month in a sanatorium. It wasn’t until June 28 of that year that the crew had returned to Tallinn and resumed filming. “This film is terribly difficult to make,” Tarkovsky wrote on September 20. “Nothing is turning out as it should. I don’t think Knyazhinsky’s work is up to much . . . We are failing to achieve the most important thing: consistently developed sense of place.”

Set designer Rashit Safiullin later described in an interview how this second shoot was more difficult than the first. The new money raised was nominally only for part two, and yet as a result of the unusable footage, it had to serve for the entire film. Resources that were delivered in abundance on the first set, such as tanks and armored troop carriers to be filmed as dilapidated and overgrown by the Zone’s vegetation, were significantly curtailed the second time around, with much less time to work with them. Still, Tarkovsky’s attention to detail was unrelenting: the aforementioned army vehicles had to be driven onto the location in such a way that their tracks wouldn’t trample the surrounding overgrowth, and the director subsequently asked Safiullin and his crew to remove dandelion blooms from the scene without leaving traces of their presence.

Even after the second shoot had finished, as he was preparing for postproduction, Tarkovsky was still articulating the form he wanted the film to take. He wrote, “What I am trying to do in it is tear apart the way we look at the present day, and turn to the past, during which mankind made so many mistakes that today we are obliged to live in a kind of fog. The film is about the existence of God in man, and about the death of spirituality as a result of our possessing false knowledge.”

MUSIC

After shooting was completed in late 1978, Tarkovsky began collaborating on the soundtrack with composer Eduard Artemyev, who had done the memorable music for Tarkovsky's previous two films, *Solaris* and *The Mirror*. The filmmaker, a Christian, told Artemyev that he had recently been interested in Zen Buddhism, and that he wanted the score of the film to bring together Eastern and Western musical traditions.

Artemyev first produced and recorded a conventional orchestral score—with an Azerbaijani and Iranian instrument, the tar, leading the melody—but Tarkovsky rejected it. Artemyev then “turned to electronics and passed the music through effects channels of the Synthi 100 synthesizer, having invented many various and unusual modulations for flute,” as he recounted in a 1988 interview. “With regard to the tar, it was recorded by me first on one speed, and then it was lowered, so that the ‘life of one string’ could be heard, which was incredibly important for me.” When Tarkovsky visited Artemyev’s studio and heard what he had produced, the director accepted it for the film without any changes. Due to the heavily atmospheric nature of the music, there are many moments throughout *Stalker* when the distinction between film sound and score becomes blurred.

In his 1986 book *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky wrote about the harmony that should exist between music and image: “Properly used, music has the capacity to change the whole emotional tone of a filmed sequence; it must be so completely one with the visual image that if it were to be removed from a particular episode, the visual image would not just be weaker in its idea and its impact, it would be qualitatively different [. . .] I have to say that in my heart of hearts I don’t believe films need music at all. However, I have not yet made a film without it, though I moved in that direction in *Stalker* and *Nostalgia* . . . For the moment at least music has always had a rightful place in my films, and has been important and precious.”

RELEASE

Although Tarkovsky recorded his despair in January 1979 that the film wouldn’t be accepted without major cuts, something he would not agree to despite his need to pay off his debts, *Stalker* would actually be the only Soviet film of Tarkovsky’s to which major changes were not required. In May 1979, *Stalker* premiered at the Peace cinema in Moscow. Soviet officials in particular reacted negatively to the film’s slow pace—prompting Tarkovsky to respond, “I am only interested in the views of two people: one is called Bresson and one called Bergman.”

The Soviet authorities declined to send *Stalker* to Cannes in 1979, saying that they wanted to reserve the film instead for the Moscow Film Festival (where it was never shown). But the following year, the film appeared at Cannes—courtesy of its French distributors, and not the Soviets—where its premiere was temporarily interrupted due to an electrical workers’ strike. The Cannes jury wound up giving Tarkovsky a special prize for the film, but as it trickled into commercial release around the world, *Stalker* remained a divisive work.



ANDREI TARKOVSKY

Son of poet and translator Arseny Tarkovsky, and proofreader Maria Ivanovna Vishnyakova, Andrei Tarkovsky was born on April 4, 1932. He would grow up to become one of cinema's great poets. Marked by the trauma of the departure of his father, who left the family in 1937, he spent his childhood with his mother in Moscow as well as in Yuryevets, the home of his maternal grandmother. Abandoning studies in Arabic and geology, Tarkovsky applied to the prestigious Soviet film school, VGIK. His student thesis film, *The Steamroller and the Violin*, about a talented young violinist who befriends the driver of a steamroller, earned the young Tarkovsky his diploma as well as first prize at the 1961 New York Student Film Festival.

Through herculean and sometimes manic effort, Tarkovsky went on to make seven films before he died at the age of fifty-four. His first opportunity to direct a feature came in 1961, when another filmmaker had to abandon a project named *Ivan's Childhood*. Tarkovsky shaped the film into an apocalyptic vision of childhood torn apart by war. The film was an international success and won the Golden Lion at the 1962 Venice Film Festival. While Tarkovsky was shooting *Ivan's Childhood*, a conversation he had with his cowriter, fellow VGIK alum Andrei Konchalovsky, led to his next film: a sprawling meditation on the life of medieval Russian painter Andrei Rublev. After extended battles over script approval, budget, and censorship, the film screened once in 1966, but a wider release was delayed for years as Tarkovsky fought further cuts to the film.

With *Andrei Rublev* unreleased, and an autobiographical screenplay (whose title, *Bright, Bright Day*, was taken from one of his father's poems) rejected by the state, Tarkovsky decided to adapt Polish writer Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, a philosophically tinged science-fiction novel about a sentient planet. Tarkovsky's adaptation turned the material into an extended meditation on moral consequences, spirituality, and death. While Lem felt it strayed too far from his original conception, the film was a great success and won the Grand Prix Spécial du Jury at Cannes in 1972. Tarkovsky returned to his previously rejected screenplay, which would become his next film, 1975's *The Mirror*. Nonlinear, enigmatic, and at times opaque, the film would be Tarkovsky's most personal. (As he wrote in his diaries, "In cinema only the author's intimate truth will be convincing enough for the audience to accept.") Following *The Mirror*, Tarkovsky began adapting a sci-fi novel by the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*. After various technical difficulties, personnel changes, and halts in production, *Stalker* was finally released in 1979. It would be Tarkovsky's last film produced in the Soviet Union.

Traveling to Italy in 1979 and 1980, Tarkovsky made a documentary called *Voyage in Time* with renowned screenwriter Tonino Guerra. Returning in 1982, Tarkovsky again collaborated with Guerra to make *Nostalghia*, a surreal film about an expatriate Russian writer traveling in Italy. Finished in 1983, it went on to show at Cannes, where Tarkovsky won best director (in a tie with Robert Bresson for *L'argent*), though the film's chance at the Palme d'Or was sabotaged by Soviet officials. Tarkovsky announced his defection from the USSR in 1984. While his religious beliefs informed his work throughout his life, his last film, 1986's *The Sacrifice*, would be his most explicitly spiritual, antimaterialist work. Made in Sweden, starring Erland Josephson, and shot by Sven Nykvist, the film was also a success at Cannes, where it won a number of prizes, including the Grand Prix.

Growing increasingly ill, Andrei Tarkovsky received a terminal lung cancer diagnosis in 1985. He went to Paris for treatment, and died there on December 29, 1986.

TRIVIA

- It is rumored that editor Lyudmila Feyginova kept the rushes of the first version of *Stalker* in her home for years before they were destroyed by a fire that also claimed her life.
- Plans to shoot the film in Tajikistan had to be abandoned on account of an earthquake there. Eventually the production was relocated to a deserted hydroelectric power station in Estonia.
- To get the color to shift over the course of extended shots, as it does during several scenes that take place in the Zone, Tarkovsky made his own processing vat that allowed him to expose the film strip at different temperatures.
- During the film, the Stalker is referred to as "Chingachgook" and "Leatherstocking"—references to characters in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, a series of novels that includes *The Last of the Mohicans*.
- The director's monogram ("AT") appears in the film as a logo on the policemen's helmets and on the Stalker's wife's pack of cigarettes.
- Sound designer Vladimir Sharun believes the deaths of Tarkovsky (in 1986); his wife, Larissa (in 1998); and actor Anatoly Solonitsyn, who plays the Writer (in 1982)—all from cancer—were connected to contamination from a chemical plant near the set.
- The film has remained influential among a wide variety of visual artists and storytellers: for instance, director Mark Romanek referenced *Stalker's* final scene in his 1995 video for Madonna's "Bedtime Story," and more recently *Westworld* cocreator Jonathan Nolan cited the film as a major influence on the hit HBO series.

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