



Răzvan Cîmpean

Kaleidoscopic History: Visually Representing Community in Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*

Abstract: The paper addresses the manner in which *The Mirror* uses images to create the illusion of an autobiographical discourse, while favoring a larger socio-biographical one. It does so by referring to the movie's three narrative levels and by analyzing the connections between them and the implication of opting for them. At the same time, the paper discusses the nature of the community portrayed in the film and its relation to classic 1920's Russian cinema. Lastly, the paper discusses the art value of the movie compared to different art forms, by referring to what Tarkovsky accomplishes in terms of narrative, structure and aesthetics.

Keywords: Cinema; Andrei Tarkovsky, *The Mirror*; Time; History; Community; Collectivity.

RĂZVAN CÎMPEAN

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
razvancimpean@gmail.com

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2017.32.23

Andrei Tarkovsky's 1975 movie, *The Mirror*, connects three levels of history – two of which are related to the protagonist's life, to his memories and somehow personal events he has heard about, and one to the crucial events happening, on the one hand, in Russia and, on the other hand, all over the world. While time can be described as the most important principle in Tarkovsky's work, it cannot be separated from the notion of memory, be it personal or collective. And no other film of his depicts the importance of cinema being "a means of exploring the most complex problems of our time"¹ as much as *The Mirror* does. This essay will discuss the relationship between the two types of memory in *The Mirror*, but also the need to represent community.

Russian cinema of the 1920's stands out, in part, as the perfect example for a type of visual representation of communities that had nothing to do with the norm of the time. For instance, Dziga Vertov's 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera* superbly mingles its meta-cinematic dimension with images of the marginalized. It is an important statement about the political



nature of film, one that shaped the vision of many directors, particularly in the French New Wave.² Jeremy Hicks argues that what is particular to Vertov's vision about cinema is that the camera has the "right to see whatever it wants,"³ therefore there is no longer a difference between what is personal and what is public or political. And this idea is clearly shared by Tarkovsky, who uses newsreel footage in *The Mirror* (from the Spanish Civil War, the World War II, the border conflict between USSR and China in the late 1960's, the atomic bomb, the Cultural Revolution etc.). The use of such images is in no way accidental: while Tarkovsky was "the darling of the Goskino,"⁴ the State Committee on Cinema, being free to create the movies that he wanted to, in the way he indented to, he also refrained himself from using images that could have heavily censored his movies. Therefore, unlike Vertov, who showed no hesitation in filming marginalized social categories, Tarkovsky expressed this practice by portraying the most relevant "problems of the time."

What Tarkovsky intended to do was to mingle three types of images: interviews with his mother, filmed without her consent, reenactments of childhood memories and a documentary level.⁵ Tarkovsky argued that the perfect film could be the product of filming, without anyone knowing it, someone's day to day life and creating a two-three hour movie from the thousands of hours of footage.⁶ But, as in the case of interviewing his mother, Tarkovsky had a moral and aesthetic problem with this practice, which is why, in the final version of *The Mirror*, he opted for a less intrusive but aesthetically stable approach, which settles his two dilemmas.

We can clearly see here a separation from what Vertov believed to be the unequivocal character of documentary cinema, the ability to film anyone, without consent. That is not to say that, in a different manner, the camera in Tarkovsky's work does not have a will of its own, especially in *The Mirror*, but creating profoundly poetic films means, first, that he had to choose a style that could express what he believed to be the inherent art value of cinema and, second, that he had no choice but to maintain that style throughout the movie.

Despite the film's aesthetics, which might make it seem easy to understand, the fact that the three narrative levels are not that clearly separated suggests otherwise. But this is in no way an attempt to clarify the movie – nor do I believe, in this case, such an attempt bears merit –, as much as it is one to understand the connections between its three dimensions. As Johnson and Petrie state in their introduction to *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*, "by means of interviews, talks, films [...] and his book *Sculpting in Time* [...], Tarkovsky succeeded to a remarkable extent in creating a framework that ensured his films would be discussed and understood in terms largely established by him."⁷ Considering that for Tarkovsky, confronting what he calls the "poetry of the memory" – that is the romanticized version of the memory – with its origin – the current and actual state of the things remembered – results in an inconsistent overlapping, he chooses to focus exclusively on the one charged with poetic power. That is the reason he builds *The Mirror* on the thoughts, memories and dreams of an absent protagonist, which, in turn, helps him create "something highly significant: the expression, the portrayal,



of the hero's individual personality, and the revelation of his interior world."⁸ Moreover, the third narrative level, consisting of newsreel footage, works both as a counterbalance to the film's highly poetic nature, but also as an inseparable link between personal and collective histories. And this is one of the most interesting and, I dare to say, revolutionary aspects of the film: it does not only create a sense of individual time, but it also puts it in the bigger picture, which is one of Tarkovsky's artistic statements.

In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky talks at length about the relation of the individual to events of the time, and one event he refers to as the center piece of the movie is the footage of the Soviet Army crossing Lake Sivash in November 1943: "It was a unique piece; [...] I knew that this episode had to become the centre, the very essence, heart, nerve of this picture that had started off merely as my intimate lyrical memories."⁹ By saying this, Tarkovsky underlines the connection he sees between a personal history and the context within it evolves or the events that shape it. David S. Miall considers this a threat to the conscious self, stating that it works to "distort or negate the mental constructions usually proffered to contain [the consciousness]."¹⁰ This is another way of saying that the effect of mixing personal events with historical ones is to disintegrate the conscious self, which calls for a separation of the two. But contrary to this limited perspective, the effect it has is both to reinforce the self and to create a sort of community of "conscious selves." To try to separate historical events from personal ones means to isolate individuals outside a fundamentally formative context. The movie draws attention to the

physicality of historical events and tries to equate them to individual events, without saying that one is more important than the other, or, moreover, that one can talk about the latter without referring to the first one: "In *Mirror*, I wanted to make people feel that [...] all these things are in a sense equally important as human experience."¹¹ And the link between the two is superbly illustrated; while *The Mirror* focuses on the breakup of family life, it connects this level with the political instabilities of the time, without pointing out even for a second that there is a direct correlation between them. Instead, what it does is it makes sure to keep a sense of uncertainty about its complex narrative structure, mingling aesthetic styles throughout its three narrative levels. But one key element that transpires from this deeply poetic and quite puzzling movie is its struggle to depict family life, and thus a community, without any kind of judgments.

Although it may operate as a means of visually representing collectivity in the film, *The Mirror* uses this kaleidoscopic perspective to also create a sense of confusion in the viewer, to disrupt his attention and to avoid creating a clear and singular meaning. This is also perfectly done through the use of sound: Michel Chion argues that irregular sounds are more unpredictable, but they also constitute a manner of creating the sensation of temporalization.¹² Without going too much into detail, I think it is relevant to underline the fact that sound adds to the movie's puzzling effect; by opting for unequal rhythm, *The Mirror* tries on different levels both to create a sense of time, but also to constantly disrupt the viewer's attention. But not only this juxtaposition of aesthetically different footage



has such an effect. Besides opting for the use of newsreel footage as direct and visible expressions of the physicality of history, Tarkovsky doubles this by the use of a narrator. What can create confusion, both in terms of aesthetics and time, is the fact that there is not always a link between the events visually portrayed and those indicated by the narrator. And this kaleidoscopic perspective is of utmost importance, because it serves as a witness of collective memory. It is true that the movie tries to create the impression, as Tarkovsky himself argued, that it offers an insight to the absent protagonist's individual perspective, but these intentional discontinuities rather serve as a sort of physicality of collective, unreliable memory. Without talking about the newsreel footage, the camera accesses information that could not have been part of a single person's memories, which stands to prove that *The Mirror* is only in part an autobiographical discourse. It can be understood also as the work of multiple perspectives of the same happenings, a sort of a socio-biographical discourse.

If Chekhov's or Dostoyevsky's work can be seen as the epitome in literature of all things Russian, *The Mirror* is in a way its equivalent in cinema: by using, poems written by his father or a passage from Pushkin, the movie demonstrates both Tarkovsky's love for Russia and its struggle to depict Russian society as idyllic as possible, while remaining true to historic facts. But, as Tarkovsky points out in *Sculpting in Time*, cinema has to convey these things in a particular manner, without borrowing too much from other arts: cinema can no longer be perceived only as a "composite art," it needs to understand and properly use its own instruments. And I believe Tarkovsky

superbly demonstrates this in the film: to portray Russia through what seems like an individual storyline, it does not only use literature, but also visual aesthetics to link them together.

The distinction that Tarkovsky makes between literature and cinema is extremely important:

Cinema is capable of operating with any fact diffused in time; it can take absolutely anything from life. What for literature would be an occasional possibility, an isolated case [...] is for cinema the working of its fundamental artistic laws. Absolutely anything! Applied to the fabric of a play or a novel that "absolutely anything" might well be inappropriate; in film it is germane.¹³

Tarkovsky uses the camera as an independent machinery, able to understand and display not only the passing of time, but also what is really at the heart of a scene. That is why the camera *chooses* to follow, for instance, an empty cup falling on the ground instead of following the children going outside to see the barn catching fire. Moreover, with the exception of human faces, the camera stays at a distance, capturing the events with a sense of understanding the bigger picture, both what it displays but also what the characters' reactions says about their feelings. This is the best way to illustrate the inherent art value of cinema, by creating the conditions to dishabituate the viewer from certain expectations. As I have said before, Tarkovsky creates in *The Mirror* the perfect environment in which most of what he considers false presupposition about cinema are put into question, offering an alternative,



seen as the pure form of cinematic expression. All the different layers of the movie are perfectly brought together, but only an attentive and aware viewer can begin to understand the play between them. As a movie that lacks both a linear plot and a visible protagonist, *The Mirror* is at the same time enigmatic and explicit in its intentions. It is true that the understanding comes mostly from accepting Tarkovsky's own system and definitions, as they offer important insight into what he wanted to express with the movie. However, this should not entirely be seen as limiting interpretations, but also as promoting the belief that cinema can and should define itself as an independent art form.

By encouraging the expression of a different type of cinematic image, Tarkovsky succeeds in creating a palimpsestic

and kaleidoscopic movie that addresses a variety of issues, starting with what constitutes the passing of time in cinema and how it can be displayed, how the cinematic image can capture a character's inner feelings, what is the relation of the individual to his historic context, how cinema can separate itself from the other art forms it has been traditionally linked to, etc. This establishes *The Mirror* as an essential event in the history/ histories of cinema. In it, history is seen as more than just a confrontation with important happenings of the past: it is as an active force that defines communities. That is why, although somehow difficult to see at first, the notion of collectivity is so much emphasized here: despite appearing as a movie about a family history, it proves to depict a bigger and more important picture, that of a community in its entirety.

NOTES

1. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair, London, The Bodley Head, 1986, p. 80.
2. "The French New Wave, including makers of fiction films, was also attracted by Vertov. The increasingly political character of 1960s film-making and scholarship found their agenda vindicated in Vertov's attitudes to art and politics," Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film*, I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, Londra, 2007, p. 134.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 35.
4. Vida T. Johnson, Graham Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 13.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 111.
6. Tarkovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
7. Johnson, Petrie, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.
8. Tarkovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
9. Tarkovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
10. David S. Miall, "The Self in History: Wordsworth, Tarkovsky, and Autobiography," *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 27, no. 1, p. 9.
11. Tarkovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
12. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, translated by Claudia Gorbman, New York, Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 15.
13. Tarkovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.