

Transcendental Images of Time and Memory in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*

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In this thoughtful and lucid analysis of Tarkovsky's film, Michael Vesia applies Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze's philosophies of time and memory to Tarkovsky's long-take, deep-space aesthetic. Textual examples reveal how formal strategies operate to bring the filmmaker's sentient ontology of reminiscence to stunning life in *Nostalghia* (1983).

NOSTALGHIA (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983) is a melancholic journey through a Russian poet's personal history and his feelings of nostalgia for his homeland. The protagonist, Andrei Gorchakov (Oleg Yankovsky), is a poet undertaking research in Italy on the life of an eighteenth-century Russian composer. During his stay in Italy, Gorchakov feels increasingly alienated and he develops an inner conflict in which he is overwhelmed by memories of his past life in Russia. Gorchakov effectively embodies the close emotional attachment that most Russians feel towards their native land. As Andrei Tarkovsky writes:

I wanted the film to be about the fatal attachment of Russians to their national roots, their past, their culture, their native places, their families and friends; an attachment which they carry with them all their lives, regardless of where destiny may fling them. ^[1]

Accordingly, the film is structured around the protagonist's internal and immeasurable personal time. This oneiric structure creates a continual sense of temporal instability throughout the film that is

exemplified through smooth, seamless transitions between the protagonist's different states of consciousness and temporality. Most importantly, Tarkovsky employs a long-take aesthetic to express constant durational shifts between the "exterior" world and Gorchakov's "inner" world.

French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) believed that our past experiences in life, collected and preserved in our minds as memories, are never forgotten. According to Bergson, there are two kinds of memory: habitual memory (*motor mechanisms*) and pure recollection (*independent recollections*). ^[2] The difference between the two is that habitual memories are stored in the brain (resulting in routinized behaviour) [3], whereas pure recollections are stored within consciousness. Bergsonian scholar David Gross further differentiates between these two types of memory by stating that independent recollections are "based not on automatic responses but on separate, individual acts of recollection whereby some singular image from the past is brought to mind." [4] Bergson saw independent recollections as being superior to habitual memories because the formation of independent recollections allows for creativity and individuality, while habitual memories do not. [5] Moreover, Bergson suggested the possibility of a third kind of memory (left unnamed) that Gross describes as being "unsolicited by the needs of perception." [6] Gross believes that the notion of "involuntary memory," developed in the work of French novelist Marcel Proust, is the equivalent of Bergson's unnamed third memory. According to Gross, Proust believed that both habitual memory and pure recollection are

part of voluntary memory, “a type of memory initiated by the mind which summons up images from the past in order to apply them to an immediate situation.”^[7] A voluntary memory is summoned by a situation in the present, whereas involuntary memory is more distant; it is unbound from the pragmatic necessities of everyday life and triggered by specific sensations. Gross remarks that involuntary memory is not intentionally called up by the conscious mind:

A sensation, in other words, activates forgotten memories. It helps recall not only an antecedent sensation but, more importantly, the entire ambience surrounding the sensation: the feelings, thoughts, impressions, and mood of the self that experienced these things long ago.^[8]

As I shall demonstrate, the concept of involuntary memory is prominent in much of Tarkovsky’s work and central to the cinematic style of *Nostalghia*, in which the character’s present reality is seamlessly merged with his memory.

In order to better understand the manner in which Tarkovsky expresses time and involuntary memory in *Nostalghia*, a brief description of Gilles Deleuze’s concept of time-image cinema is needed.^[9] As is well known, Deleuze (1925-1995) established two types of cinema: the movement-image and the time-image. The former is mainly associated with classical cinema, which organizes itself through movement and action as opposed to time and duration. The latter refers to a film aesthetic that is dependent on the duration of an image, not on a rational continuity of action and movement.

In the movement-image, time is subservient to character action, whereas in the time-image, movement is subservient to time and duration. For example, Deleuze associates the movement-image with the traditional visual style of Hollywood narrative films made before the Second World War. He also considers the Russian “montage” films created by Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein to be movement-image cinema. To varying degrees, these types of films share a common aesthetic that is constructed according to a close visual interrelationship between specific graphic and kinetic elements within the shots that compose each film. In classic Hollywood films, character movement and action are usually determined by events that shape narrative organization. Shot-reverse-shot compositions, establishing shots/close-ups, and conventional point-of-view structures are all employed to maintain coherent sensory-motor links

between the characters, their actions, and cinematic space. In the Russian “montage” films, however, the approach to cinematic spatialization is more complex and not completely contingent upon narrative action. Instead, the films are structured according to a system of sensory-motor variations that form “the cinema as machine assemblage of matter-images.”^[10] Deleuze explains Vertov’s cinema as follows:

[A]ll of the images vary as a function of each other, on all their faces and in all their parts [...] everything is at the service of variation and interaction; slow or high speed shots, superimpositions, fragmentation, deceleration *démultiplication*, micro-shooting *micro-prise de vue*.^[11]

Conversely, in the time-image cinema shots are no longer linked through a balanced sensory-motor system. The time-image is best exemplified in the modernist style of European art films that emerged after the Second World War. The images in many of these films form illogical connections that create temporal gaps through a montage and/or long-take style that is not subservient to movement. In his book *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine*, scholar D.N. Rodowick describes the Deleuzian time-image as follows:

Since the linking of images is no longer motivated by action, space changes in nature, becoming a disconnected or emptied space. Acts of seeing and hearing replace the linking of images through motor actions; pure description replaces referential anchoring.^[12]

Rodowick notes that with the time-image “[t]he interval no longer disappears into the seam between movements and actions. Rather, it becomes a ceaseless opening of time – a space of becoming – where unforeseen and unpredictable events may occur.”^[13] In *Nostalghia*, for instance, the camera often moves independently of character action within the frame, thus allowing the spectator to witness the passing of time as duration. Also, character movement often does not signal a cut, therefore, when a character leaves the frame the shot usually continues along with the camera movement. This seemingly unmotivated montage style creates temporal “intervals” that allow for the surfacing of images from Gorchakov’s past and memories, taking him beyond the “actual” (present) world and into a “virtual” (past, memory) world.

Furthermore, Deleuze argues that through its ability to have different visual planes exist simultaneously

within an image, depth-of-field can serve as a device for expressing time and memory within cinematic space. Deleuze uses the term “sheets of past” to describe the use of depth in a shot that provides a visualization of a space where a virtual memory of the past is evoked from an actual present.^[14] As Deleuze notes, “[depth] gives rise to all kinds of adventures of the memory, which are not so much psychological accidents as misadventures of time, disturbances of its constitution.”^[15] Therefore, the different planes of an image (foreground, mid-ground, and background) operate as regions or “slices” of the past; they become “sheets of past.” This Deleuzian approach to cinematic space functions as a visualization of Bergson’s notion that memory does not exist within us, but that we reside within a world-memory in which there is simultaneity of past, present, and future.

The organization of memory-images in *Nostalgia*, in which visual depth is used as a device to represent memory and consciousness, closely relates to Deleuze’s connection of depth-of-field and memory. A good example of this occurs after Gorchakov’s Italian interpreter, Eugenia (Domiziana Giordano), witnesses a sacred ceremony unfolding in an Italian country chapel. This scene ends with a straight-cut from Piero della Francesca’s painting *Madonna del Parto* [Madonna of the Fields] to a medium close-up in black-and-white of Gorchakov with a sullen expression on his face. This sudden shift to monochromatic imagery creates a puzzling effect for the viewer because the film has been in colour up until this point. Gorchakov is outdoors, looking up towards the sky as a feather falls from above. This image is then followed by a shot of his hand lifting the feather out of a muddy puddle at his feet. His hand exits the top of the frame and the camera then slowly tilts up and frames him in a medium-shot, with the background out of focus. He then turns his head and glances at the space behind him. At this point, the camera tracks right, leaving him offscreen, and the background comes into focus to reveal a house in the distance.

For viewers familiar with Tarkovsky’s work, the presence of the house coupled with the contemplative tone and mood of this scene – achieved through the subtle use of sound and slow-motion – indicates the recalling of a memory (often from childhood). A Deleuzian sense of depth within this shot establishes the house as a womb of stored memories, a “sheet of past.” Moreover, Tarkovsky employs a long-take aesthetic to create a continuity of duration in which the presence of the adult Gorchakov (at the beginning of

the shot) is combined with a shift in depth that allows images of the past and present to co-exist in a single shot. The camera movement prevents Gorchakov (who is in the foreground) and the house (which is in the background) from coming into visual contact with each other. Instead, Gorchakov and the house are linked through the uninterrupted duration of the longtake, which transforms the Russian countryside and the house into a “sheet of past” of stored memories.

This sequence is followed by a scene in the lobby of a hotel (the location is actually not revealed until the end of the scene), where Gorchakov and Eugenia are having a conversation about the uselessness of translated poetry and the need to abolish state boundaries. Without an establishing shot, the scene opens with a close-up of Gorchakov’s back to the camera (this shot directly follows the previously described black-and-white longtake in the Russian countryside), while Eugenia’s voice can be heard on the soundtrack. The second shot, a 90-second close-up of Eugenia, is followed by another shot of Gorchakov that is composed in the same manner as the opening image of the scene. Although both characters glance off screen, Tarkovsky avoids the conventional eyeline match cuts used in the movement-image cinema. By prolonging the establishing shot and avoiding the use of eye-line match cuts, Tarkovsky challenges the viewer’s understanding of the spatial orientation of the characters. Near the end of the third shot, Gorchakov looks over his shoulder and the sound of running water and a dog barking are heard on the soundtrack. Then, there is a cut to Gorchakov’s wife (in black-and-white), who is seen from behind as she stands outdoors wiping a wine glass.

This shot only lasts about two seconds before it is interrupted by an abrupt cut to Eugenia (in colour) flipping her long mane of curly hair (this shot also runs approximately two seconds). This shot of Eugenia functions to retroactively suggest that Eugenia’s movement evoked a sensation from Gorchakov’s involuntary memory, and in turn, triggered the brief memory-image of his spouse on the image track. For a short moment, therefore, the virtual image (memory) of his wife absorbed the actual image (present) of Eugenia. Essentially, this cut between the two women is an excellent example of how the time-image can sometimes use techniques of the movement-image (*i.e.* a cut on movement) to underscore temporal and ontological uncertainty.

What is more, these two brief shots are then followed by a medium-shot of a woman walking her dog through

a corridor in the hotel. It then becomes clear that it was her dog that the viewer previously heard barking on the soundtrack, thus further mixing elements from Gorchakov's memory with those of the present. Without a cut, the camera then dollies back from the woman and her dog to a long-shot that finally reveals Gorchakov and Eugenia sitting in the hotel lobby with their backs to each other. The camera remains static for the remainder of this shot, which runs for two-minutes and fifty seconds, and is composed in depth with the foreground shrouded in darkness, both characters seated in the mid-ground, and a long narrow corridor leading into a brightly-lit room visible in the background. Visual depth is then used once again to evoke memory and a sense of Deleuzian "sheets of past," when Gorchakov rises from his chair and walks into the foreground carrying his luggage. Once in the foreground, he stops and stares directly into the camera, at which point a slow zoom-in flattens the image and lets the background go out of focus. This change in depth signals another shift in connection with the character's memory and his state of mind. The offscreen sounds of running water and a dog barking return onto the soundtrack, along with the voices of Eugenia and another woman talking in the background. There is a sudden cut to a medium close-up of Gorchakov's wife (in black-and-white and slow-motion) standing in a position similar to her husband during the first memory-image. She smiles into the camera – as if acknowledging Gorchakov's glance from the previous shot – and turns to look over her shoulder, where the background comes into focus as the camera slowly tracks right, leaving her offscreen to reveal a house (the same one seen earlier) in the distance. The camera movement continues as a young boy and a dog run from the house towards a large puddle of water in the foreground.

The voices of Eugenia and the woman are heard on the soundtrack, creating a simultaneous temporality in which present and past co-exist, as the virtual (past, memory) absorbs the image track and the actual (present) exists on the soundtrack.

The recurrent surfacing of these involuntary memories from Gorchakov's past has an unsettling effect upon him that seemingly alienates him from his exterior environment in the present. In effect, Italy acts as a doorway from the present through which Gorchakov can recall his past. At times his memory-images of the past are experienced through dreams, while others surface without warning as involuntary memories that emerge from his subconscious. Traditionally, independent recollections in cinema are represented through the use

of conventional devices such as flashbacks. However, as my analysis reveals, Gorchakov's memories are not presented as mere recollections or flashbacks; instead, they take on an oneiric quality that is closer to hallucinations or dreams. They are not memories of specific events from his past, but the visualization of fragments and sensations from dreams and memories that exist within his psyche. Tarkovsky describes his cinematic approach to dreams as follows:

We need to know the actual, material facts of the dream: to see all the elements of reality which were refracted in that layer of the consciousness which kept vigil through the night (or with which a person functions when he sees some picture in his imagination). And we need to convey all of that on screen precisely, not misting it over and not using elaborate devices. ^[16]

The viewer can see this approach in *Nostalghia* when the physical world (present, Italy) and mental world (memories, Russia) of Gorchakov begin to merge. At times it is difficult to know whether a scene did in fact occur or not. The links between the images sometimes appear unmotivated and very often there are immeasurable temporal gaps between shots. In the first half of the film, sequences relating to the protagonist's past and memories are characterized through black-and-white photography and slow-motion, giving them a lyrical quality that helps the viewer differentiate them from the sequences in Italy. Yet, the line between past and present is continually blurred throughout the film, as characters from the present eventually begin to appear in sequences depicting Gorchakov's memory and past. As the film progresses, it is also evident that black-and-white photography is not limited to images of the past or colour photography to the present, thus creating a level of temporal complexity in which past and present merge. For example, in the scene in which Gorchakov visits the home of Domenico (Erland Josephson), Tarkovsky inserts a high-angle colour shot of Domenico's son (the young age of the boy suggests that it is an image from the past) looking up into the camera (presumably Domenico's point-of-view) and asking, "Dad, is this the end of the world?" The temporal placement of this shot is further complicated by the fact that it follows several memory-images from Domenico's past, which are all rendered through slow-motion and black-and-white photography.

Another Deleuzian concept that is central to the representation of involuntary memory in *Nostalghia* is the crystal-image. According to Donato Totaro, "[t]he cornerstone of Deleuze's time-image is the crystal-

image, an indivisible unity of the virtual image and the actual image. The virtual image is subjective, in the past, and recollected... [t]he actual image is objective, in the present, and perceived.”^[17] The crystal-image is directly connected to the manner in which an exchange between past and present is required in our perception of the world. Deleuze understood that “time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past.”^[18] The present is continually changing and splitting into two directions: one moving towards the future and the other back into the past. In the crystal-image, the past becomes the mirror image of the present. Deleuze writes: “[t]he past does not follow the present that it is no longer, it co-exists with the present it was. The present is the actual image, and its contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror.”^[19]

There is a three-minute long-take in *Nostalghia* that provides an excellent visualization of the concept of the crystal-image. It occurs during a scene in Domenico’s house that is one of the most temporally and spatially disorienting scenes in the entire film. In one long-take, Tarkovsky manages to denote Domenico’s confused state of mind and Gorchakov’s complex inner experience. The long-take begins with Domenico urging his guest to “come forward.” The camera remains static as Gorchakov carefully walks into frame and enters a room in Domenico’s home. The camera then dollies back slightly and Gorchakov exits frame left as a musical piece by Beethoven comes onto the soundtrack. The camera is static for a couple of seconds, until it slowly tracks left across the room, revealing a ladder and an open window with curtains ballooning in the wind. Gorchakov is then seen standing near a corner, looking at his reflection in a mirror that hangs on a wall in front of him. The camera slowly dollies in to a medium close-up of him as he leans on the wall and stares pensively at the ground, while part of his reflection is still visible in the mirror to his left.

He then looks to his right (screen left) and the camera follows his gaze, tracking across a shelf cluttered with various objects (a clock, a picture frame, herbs, etc.). As the camera reaches the end of the shelf, his shoulder enters frame left and the camera continues tracking to reveal him standing with his back to the camera .

giving the impression that he is in two separate spaces at once. He turns his head to the left and stares out into a dark area of the frame as the camera track remains uninterrupted. The music on the soundtrack comes to an abrupt halt and Gorchakov turns his head in response, then he walks out frame left. The camera

lingers for while, until it begins a slow dolly in on a painting that hangs in a darkened area of the frame. The lighting changes subtly and renders the painting increasingly visible (it looks like the image of a baby or a fetus) as the camera moves in closer and finally ends with a straight cut. In this sequence, the protagonist’s reflection in the mirror can be read as a visualization of the crystal-image, which conveys the virtual as a mirror image of the actual to represent the continual split of time into two directions: future and past. Effectively, Gorchakov’s initial position near the mirror suggests time’s split into the past, while his later position with his back to the camera expresses a split into the future. The impression that he is in two separate spaces at once occurs within the duration of an uninterrupted long-take to express the simultaneity of past, present, and future.^[20] This concept is further elaborated upon in a later scene, in which Domenico pours two drops of olive oil into the palm of his hand and explains, “One drop plus one drop makes a bigger drop, not two.” His comment reflects the Bergsonian idea that the past, present, and future are indivisible, for they must co-exist in order for each to exist at all. Duration changes constantly because it is comprised of instances that build on each other, and like a drop of olive oil, duration cannot be divided into fragments or instances.

The final shot of *Nostalghia* consists of a long-take, shot in depth and in black-and-white, with a very slow crane movement backwards that shows Gorchakov and his dog seated in the Russian countryside. As the camera cranes back the viewer also sees that the Russian countryside is miraculously contained within an old Italian cathedral, visually suggesting the melding of virtual and actual space, past (Russia) and present (Italy).

There is practically no movement within the frame, except for the appearance of snow in the foreground and background that adds to the emotion and atmosphere of the image. The shot achieves a sense of contemplative stillness that can be equated with what critic/filmmaker Paul Schrader terms “stasis,” or the achievement of a “sparse means.” As Schrader notes, “[c]omplete stasis, or frozen motion, is the trademark of a second religious art in culture. It establishes an image of a second reality which can stand beside the ordinary reality; it represents the Wholly Other.”^[21] The last shot in *Nostalghia* is not the expression of a spiritual reality in the religious or sacred sense, but one that is part of time and memory. Tarkovsky describes time and memory as spiritual states:

Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul [...] It is obvious enough that without Time, memory cannot exist either. But, memory is something so complex that no list of all its attributes could define the totality of the impressions through which it affects us. Memory is a spiritual concept! ^[22]

Schrader explains that transcendental style in film must contain three steps (Everyday, Disparity, and Stasis) in order to complete the journey from the “abundant means” to the “sparse means.” Although *Nostalghia* does not contain all three of these steps, its last shot does appear to achieve a level of sparseness and a moment of “stasis.” This shot represents Gorchakov’s transcendent inner reality and it elevates his experiences of death (physical and emotional) and memory to a sacred level. In describing this closing image of *Nostalghia*, Tarkovsky writes, “I trust that it is free of vulgar symbolism; the conclusion seems to me fairly complex in form and meaning, and to be a figurative expression of what is happening to the hero, not a symbol of something outside him which has to be deciphered.” ^[23] Within this closing image, time and memory dissolve into each other to create a moment of pure transcendence, ^[24] whereby the protagonist passes from a practical reality (abundant) to one less encumbered by matter (sparse). Tarkovsky attempts to convey a sense of spiritual reality that goes beyond the limits of religious experience. He uses cinema to express an experience of time and memory that is beyond complete human comprehension and knowledge.

It is understandable that an essay of such brevity cannot do complete justice to all of the philosophical concepts to which I have referred. Also, it can sometimes be an exercise in futility to apply Deleuzian-Bergsonian theories in whole to filmic interpretation because Bergson and Deleuze mainly employed cinema to support their philosophical interests and not to elucidate or explicate film. Yet, the fact that several of their philosophical theories can be applied, at least in part, to an interpretation of *Nostalghia* demonstrates the complexity of Tarkovsky’s work and its resistance to any single ordered interpretation. The film embodies many of the qualities that are central to Tarkovsky’s vision of cinema as a form of high art infused with spiritual and philosophical richness. As the above analysis demonstrates, Tarkovsky’s aesthetics in *Nostalghia* challenge the viewer’s perceptions and elevate cinema to a level beyond the simple act of storytelling. Tarkovsky places the abstract elements of time, space, and memory at the center of his film, for they are the

basis of his belief that “the cinema image is essentially the observation of a phenomenon passing through time.” ^[25]

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Tarkovsky, Andrey. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. 1986. Trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998: 202.
- 2 Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. 1911. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George and Unwin Ltd., 1978: 87.
- 3 As an illustration of habitual memory, Bergson uses the example of studying a school lesson through repetition in order to commit it to memory and learn the material by heart. According to Bergson, this use of repetition creates a habitual memory composed of a “closed system of automatic movements,” whereby “to learn by heart is to create a cerebral mechanism, a habit of the body” (Ibid., 90).
- 4 Gross, David. “Bergson, Proust and the Revaluation of Memory.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 25.4, 1985: 370.
- 5 See Bergson, Henri. *Morality and Religion*. Trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton. London: Macmillan and Co., 1935: 9-12; and Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. New York: Modern Library, 1944: 140-141.
- 6 Gross, “Bergson, Proust and the Revaluation of Memory,” 377.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, 378.
- 9 For an in-depth theoretical discussion of Gilles Deleuze’s Bergsonian account of film history and theory, see Totaro, Donato. “Gilles Deleuze’s Bergsonian Film Project: Part 1: Cinema 1: The Movement-Image.” *Offscreen*. . Mar.31, 1999; and Totaro, Donato. “Gilles Deleuze’s Bergsonian Film Project: Part 2: Cinema 2: The Time- Image.” *Offscreen*. . Mar. 31, 1999.
- 10 Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. 1983. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001: 85.

- 11 *Ibid.*, 80-81.
- 12 Rodowick, D.N. *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997: 13.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Roberta Galeta. 1989. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001: 98-125.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 110.
- 16 Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 72.
- 17 Totaro, Donato. "The Puppetmaster: A Bergsonian Personal Journey into History." *Offscreen*. . Mar. 14, 1998.
- 18 Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 81.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 20 I wish to point out that my reading of this sequence is but one interpretation, and it does not preclude other possible readings. One being, for instance, that the visual character split can also be seen as an indication of Gorchakov's psychic split (*i.e.* physically in Italy, emotionally in Russia).
- 21 Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972. Da Capo Press, 1988: 49.
- 22 Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 57.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 216.
- 24 For an informative study on the "transcendental" philosophy of Bergson and Deleuze, see Boundas, Constantin V. "Deleuze-Bergson: An Ontology of the Virtual." *Deleuze: a Critical Reader*. Ed. Paul Patton. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996: 81-106.
- 25 Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 67.