

A Holy Dullness: Tarkovsky, Suture, and the Numinous

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Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that the films of Andrei Tarkovsky are particularly suitable for inducing feelings of the numinous. This suitability is a formal rather than semantic feature of his films, and is tied indelibly to what film scholars call 'suture'.

I begin this chapter with a summary of what film theorists mean by 'suture', before providing a principled defence of the Merleau-Pontian suture theory outlined by George Butte. Second, I will demonstrate that, in spite of the strength of Butte's formulation, the numinousness of Tarkovsky's films pose an analytical challenge to his suture theory. Finally, I will then provide my own extension of Butte's suture theory, arguing that, by virtue of the formal properties they possess, we encounter Tarkovsky's films more like religious objects than ordinary films. The tenor of these encounters is why Tarkovsky's films are appropriate loci for feelings of the numinous.

Leisurely Materiality

To begin, an anecdote: I am half-heartedly learning Dutch. This is not due to personal preference—I have no particular affinity for the language—but as I currently live in the Netherlands, it seems like the right thing to do. To that end, I have biweekly Dutch conversation classes with a friend of mine: no textbook, no exercises, simply reading and talking about different topics: films, books, politics, whatever. In one of those classes, my Dutch teacher said that her favourite films were by the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. "Echt?! Nee!" I spluttered, indignant. I was taken aback, even appalled. Tarkovsky is a wonderful director—maybe even the greatest director that the Soviet Union produced (sorry, Eisenstein fans)—but it struck me as profoundly wrong to like his work. One does not simply *like* a Tarkovsky film. Admire, certainly, but like? Inconceivable.

Understandably, my teacher challenged me: why don't I like his films? I paused for a time, struggling to organise my thoughts. Finally, I answered: "Ik vind dat de werken van Tarkovsky een *heilige saaiheid* hebben." That is: "I find that Tarkovsky's works have a *holy dullness*". Then I sat back, surprised at myself. Not only was the sentence more accomplished and ludic than the rather workmanlike utterances I normally produce, but I felt as if I had seized on something important about Tarkovsky's films. In being forced to articulate my intuitions with the rather piecemeal toolset at my disposal, I found myself able to recognise that Tarkovsky's films are not merely *boring*, but are boring in a very important and interesting way. Moreover, that dullness is not due to the contents of those films being particularly tedious or anodyne. His narratives are thoughtful and rich: powerful ruminations on memory and loss. The acting under his direction is understated, yet compelling. Many of his films employ tropes plucked from genre fiction: a sentient ocean resurrects people from out of the memories of the living; desperate travellers wander through an apocalyptic wasteland; a man bargains with God to halt a nuclear holocaust. And yet, a holy dullness pervades throughout.¹

¹ After writing this passage I showed it to my Dutch teacher. She laughed, but made two comments. First, she would like to clarify that she never said that Tarkovsky was her favourite,

I find Tarkovsky's films dull for one reason in particular. Namely, Tarkovsky's works have famously long takes—and they get longer throughout his career. In films such as *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979), many shots last longer than two minutes, and some reach nearly seven minutes in length. Tarkovsky's longest shot is to be found in *The Sacrifice* (1986), lasting nine minutes and 26 seconds. Indeed, three of Tarkovsky's seven films—*Stalker*, *Nostalghia* (1983), and *The Sacrifice*, have average shot times in excess of a minute in length (Johnson and Petrie 1994: 194–95). Furthermore, these long shots tend to be visually static: you will not find here the pageantry of Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), nor the neurotic derangement of Alejandro Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014). Instead, he passively captures monologues, conversations, landscapes: unblinking and unrelenting. His film syntax is his own.

This unearthly slowness is not an accident. Time, for Tarkovsky, is nothing less than the organisational medium in which human beings make meaning: the matrix through which we move, endowing our actions with causal significance. Nonetheless, and in a cinematic reimagining of Marxist eschatology, it is an organisational medium that can be conquered. Although escaping the implacable machine of history is no mean feat, doing so would prove powerfully, fundamentally liberating. He writes in his diaries: "Time is just a means of communication. We are swaddled in it, cocooned, and there is nothing to stop us tearing off the wadding of centuries that envelops us so that all our awareness should be common, one, simultaneous" (Tarkovsky 1991: 217). These comments about time offer a sense of what Tarkovsky finds so powerful about the movies. Contrary to the attitudes of that other great Russian master of cinema, Sergei Eisenstein—who argued that that cinema is "first and foremost" constituted by montage (Eisenstein 1957 [1929], 28)—Tarkovsky claimed that cinema is constituted by its ability to imprint time (1986: 62). It is for this reason that Tarkovsky argues that cinema is precisely the correct medium to explore questions of temporality, writing in his book *Sculpting in Time*: "Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations: such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art" (1986: 63).

This manifests itself in a couple of ways. First is that Tarkovsky films are famously hard to parse completely on first viewing; it can be very discern between what is actually *present* in the world of the film and what is not. Past and future, memory and actuality, denotation and connotation all become tangled and contingent. This is because, for Tarkovsky, time and memory are indelibly linked: "Time and memory merge into each other; they are like the two sides of a medal [...] without Time, memory cannot exist either" (1986: 57). This feature is most obvious in his 1975 film *Mirror*—a

merely that he is *among* her favourites. I mean, sure, fine, but I'm keeping the anecdote this way; it reads better. Second (and more substantively), she claimed that the mere fact of Tarkovsky being boring does not preclude one from liking him. To that I must disagree. When people say they 'like' something using ordinary language, they are indicating that they find it pleasing. It is what Kant would have called a 'judgement of the agreeable' (see Kant 2007: secs. 1–5). Judgements of the agreeable are premised upon interest, in that something must be interesting in order to be found pleasing. The contrapositive also obtains: uninteresting things (which is to say, boring things) cannot be found pleasing. Consequently, and assuming that a) you accept my gloss of 'liking' within ordinary language, and b) accept that Tarkovsky's films are boring, then Tarkovsky's films are necessarily inappropriate objects for liking. *Quod erat demonstrandum*—or, if you prefer the Dutch, *wat moest bewezen worden*.

semi-autobiographical and non-linear film structured around the impressionistic memories of a dying poet—but is present in all of his films (with the notable exception of *Ivan's Childhood* [1962]). As a consequence, any serious reflection upon the nature of time is also, necessarily, a rumination upon the nature of memory.

Second, Tarkovsky films possess a quality that he calls “time-pressure”. While exceedingly difficult to define with any precision, time-pressure denotes a rhythmic temporality that is grounded not upon conventions of cinematic editing, but rather upon the spontaneous and inexorable rhythms of the natural world: “The distinctive time running through the shots makes the rhythm [...] rhythm is not determined by the length of the edited pieces, but by the pressure of the time that runs through them” (1986: 117). Consider, for instance, the shot in *Andrei Rublev* (1969) where “a left to right camera movement follows the incidental background action of a stranded canoe floating downstream while the central action occurs in the foreground” (Totaro 1992: 23). This particular shot privileges the mute rhythms of the world, rather than the demands of narrative or story. Nor is this shot unique; nearly all of Tarkovsky’s shots, whether dream or reality, are constructed in order to exhibit some kind of time-pressure. This means that even his most oneiric images are grounded in a kind of leisurely materiality.

This interplay between dream imagery and materiality is why Donato Totaro argues that Tarkovsky’s programme instantiates a Bergsonian distinction about the nature of time: that is, the difference between “spatialised” versus “real” time. Whereas spatialised time is the conceptualised, rationalised, and divisible time of clocks or montage, real time—which is to say, ‘duration’ or *durée*—is lived time: elastic, flowing, heterogeneous, indivisible, and inflected with the past. As Totaro writes, “[...] duration can be expressed through both long take and editing. Duration is the operative aesthetic because the demarcation line between the realms of reality are, as in consciousness, in a state of flux” (1992: 26). Tarkovsky, in welding time-pressure with memory-time—that is, by welding together inner with outer reality—is trying to make films that capture real time rather than spatialised time. This is, in part at least, an explanation for his long, demanding, and beautiful shots. Tarkovsky seeks to forge a unity of time, space, action, and memory: a unity that captures what he takes to be the texture of conscious experience.

Ah, but the texture of *whose* conscious experience? Or even, the conscious experience of *what*? Totaro clearly thinks that Tarkovskian *durée* is a means by which Tarkovsky is able to model the subjective experience of being a human being. I think, however, that there is something else going on; that the consciousness that Tarkovsky captures is entirely different to, and entirely more numinous than, human consciousness. Let me explain, beginning first in the verdant fens of suture theory.

A Suture of Absence

Although formulations differ, in general we can say that ‘suture’ describes not only the elaborate process by which a series of camera shots is edited into a coherent perceptual whole, but also the process by which the cinematic viewer is itself integrated—stitched; sutured—into that whole. Suture theory also captures something of the otherness and autonomy of the image: although the viewer is a part of the apparatus, the image moves of its own volition.

'Suture' entered the vocabulary of English-language film theory in 1974, with the publication of Daniel Dayan's "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema". A dense and unforgiving piece of work, "Tutor-Code" is both a summary and an exegesis of Jean-Pierre Oudart's equally dense and unforgiving "La suture", published in *Cahiers du cinéma* in (1969). Building upon the psychoanalytic scaffolding assembled by Jacques-Alain Miller in (1966—translated into English in 1977), both Dayan and Oudart want to make clear the 'system of enunciation' upon which cinema depends: that is to say, 'suture'. Oudart and Dayan argue, via Miller and ultimately Lacan (2006), that the power of cinema lies in its ability to take advantage of the psychic wounds we develop on the way to becoming fully-fledged subjects. Films, they say, 'suture' themselves into our experience because of how they are structured and ordered. This means that suture is not a semantic property of films. Instead, suture is a formal property of cinematic objects.

Oudart and Dayan argue that suture is an outcome of the 'continuity editing' that typifies Hollywood films—and particularly the convention known as 'shot reverse shot'. Shot reverse shot—also known as shot/countershot—has a long tradition within the history of film, with the first recorded instance in 1912 or 1913 (Spadoni 1999: 320–21). It is also, as David Bordwell observes, an extremely powerful tool: flexible, versatile, and emotionally and conceptually expressive (Bordwell 1996). Indeed, the shot reverse shot is so plastic and so efficacious that the technique is virtually ubiquitous. Most people who watch film or television are probably not even aware when it is happening; it is so fundamental to the grammar of film-making as to be invisible, in much the same way that conjunctions such as 'and', 'but', and 'if' are invisible to a competent speaker of English. The technique is also straightforward to employ. Using two cameras, each on the same side of an imaginary axis of the two characters being filmed (the '180-degree rule'), a cinematographer will film each character in turn: the first speaking whilst facing in one direction off-screen, and the second replying whilst facing in the other direction off-screen, back towards the first character. In this manner, the cinematographer can capture both sides of a conversation without both characters having to be in frame. It is a non-invasive and extremely effective means of capturing dialogue.

Oudart and Dayan introduce a Lacanian dimension to this convention. The initial shot of the shot reverse shot, they claim, functions as an 'image' in the Lacanian sense: it is an 'other' like the Ideal-I; an external locus of desire for the ego. Moreover, like the first time the child sees itself in the mirror, encountering this image for the first time offers a sense of "vertiginous delight," as Oudart writes. "[The viewer] is fluid, elastic, and expanding: he is at the cinema" (1977: 41). However, this delight is soon replaced with consternation. The viewer realises that the image is framed: that someone else has decided the conditions under which the image can be encountered. "Suddenly, he senses the space he cannot see, hidden by the camera, and wonders, in retrospect, why such a framing was used. That question, although unanswered, will radically transform the spectator's mode of participation" (1977: 41).

The viewer, looking at the initial shot of the short reverse shot, wonders as to the identity of the mysterious—and missing—figure who is making these decisions: "'Who is viewing this?' and 'Who is ordering these images?' and 'For what purpose are they

doing so?" (Dayan 1974: 28). Oudart and Dayan call this missing figure 'the absent one'. However, the pointed questions raised by the absent one are soon resolved by the introduction of the reverse shot. When the second person comes into frame speaking to the first, the viewer relaxes again, gormless and complacent. His or her fears are misguided: there is no absent one behind the camera. Instead, the first shot is simply what the second person sees: "The reverse shot represents the fictional owner of the glance corresponding to shot one" (Dayan 1974: 29).

In effect, the first shot opens a hole or lacuna in the viewer's imaginary relationship with the film. The second shot then closes this hole: the hole is 'sutured' shut, permitting the viewer to resume watching the film in an uncomplicated way. The second shot "constitutes" the meaning of the first shot; the meaning of the first shot is only clear in reference to the second shot (Rothman 1975: 45). This second shot, meanwhile, opens its own hole or lacuna, necessitating the existence of a third shot to close that lacuna. And so Oudart and Dayan conceive of film and television as a chain of alternating signifieds and signifiers, sutured together along with the lacunae experienced by the viewer (Heath 1977: 58). It is via this process that the cinematic subject—that is to say, the spectator—is created: "suture represents the closure of the cinematic *énoncé* [enunciation] in conformity with the relationship sustained with it by its subject [...] recognized and set in its place, the spectator" (Oudart 1977: 35). In this manner, suture scratches a Lacanian itch: it creates a passive and satisfied subject where there was not one before.

A Suture of Presence

The fortunes of suture theory have faded in recent decades. And for good reason! As William Rothman correctly argues, Oudart/Dayan's thesis is straightforwardly wrong: a misrepresentation of how shot reverse shot scenes are constructed. That is, rather than the short reverse shot being a 'view/viewer' structure, it is far more conventional that point-of-view shots are initiated or 'cued' by a shot of a character attending to something beyond the cinematic frame (viz., 'viewer/view/viewer'). Consequently, no god-like absent one or "ghostly sovereign" is required to make sense of what is occurring (1975: 47–48). It is no accident that David Bordwell described suture as riddled with "conceptual weaknesses and empirical shortcomings" (2007: 135).

And yet, there is *something* to the fundamental assumptions of suture theory. While we may not be sutured into the cinematic image in the way that Oudart and Dayan suppose, the underlying observation—that movies capture us, take us hostage, make us part of them—certainly rings true. Consider the following passage from Noël Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*:

Whatever his level of critical awareness, a viewer sitting in the dark alone and suddenly face to face with the screen is completely at the mercy of the film-maker, who may do violence to him at any moment and through any means. Should the viewer be forced beyond the pain threshold, his defense mechanisms may well be called forth and he may remind himself that "it's only a movie" [...] but it will always be too late [...] the harm will already have been done; intense discomfort, and perhaps even terror, will already have crept across the threshold (Burch 1981: 124–25).

Events in cinematic objects *happen to* the spectator, irrespective of his or her wishes; they are inflicted upon the spectator. To look away from the image is to realise—too late!—that something horrifying has happened. When Luis Buñuel slices open Simone Mareuil's eye with a razor in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), the horror that one feels happens in the watching of it. Having watched it, the damage to the spectator has been done. By virtue of having your attention, a film sutures you in.

In light of both the obvious limitations of traditional suture theory and the aptness of the intuition that informs suture theory, George Butte develops a charitable reconstruction. Rather than grounding his suture theory in abstruse readings of already-abstruse Lacanian psychoanalysis, Butte builds a suture theory premised upon Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. So, whereas Oudart and Dayan conceive of suture as a play of *absence*—a quirky and malevolent game of now you see me, now you don't—Butte makes the Marxian move of turning Oudart and Dayan on their heads, arguing that suture is a play of *presence*. He does this in two ways.

First, and contra Oudart and Dayan's Lacanian story about the distinction between the real body and the coherent yet imaginary image, Butte argues that subjectivity is not composed of an endless and fragmented chain of signifiers and signifieds. Instead, Butte claims that the cinematic image is better understood as an 'ensemble' of images and sounds that emulates Merleau-Ponty's picture of how consciousness operates (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 56). In this way, consciousness is relevantly similar to the structure of cinematic objects made under the aegis of continuity editing: a montage of discrete images that, together, form the appearance of a continuous whole.² Second, Butte also argues that Lacanian subjectivity is mistaken; what we think of as 'subjectivity' is better understood as a deep and radical kind of embodied *intersubjectivity*. Rather than the Lacanian subject being fully constituted by being plunged into the chilly and abstract symbolic order, Merleau-Ponty's subject is 'chiastic' (from the X-shaped Greek letter *chi*): a process of braiding and interlacing wherein consciousness are both mutually constituted and differentiated from one another in a shared 'interworld' (Butte 2008: 293). For Butte, it is the presence of others that constitutes the subject, not the absence of others. As Merleau-Ponty writes: "There is said to be a wall between us, but it is a wall we build together, each putting a stone in the niche left by the other" (1964a, 19).

These two arguments, taken in concert, shape Butte's reconstruction of suture theory. Given both the cinematic nature of consciousness and the chiastic intersubjectivity upon which consciousness is premised, Butte argues that cinematic objects suture us to them because they both articulate the chiastic interworld, and represent other consciousnesses, in a way that other art forms cannot: "a chiasmus that is implicit in

² And indeed, Merleau-Ponty's intuitions about consciousness seem, broadly speaking, correct. It was first reported in the 1870s that the human eye moves in rapid, discrete, largely pre-intentional movements rather than steady, continuous and intentional movements (Javal 1878). These movements—or 'saccades' as they are called in the scientific literature—serve an important function, in that they are integral to helping us form the picture of the world as it appears to consciousness. Although we *experience* consciousness as a smooth unspooling of attention and apperception, our experience in this case is misleading. Instead, what we experience as consciousness is actually a series of short, snap-shot images, smoothed into coherence by a brain that is, as Alain Berthoz claims, a "machine for predicting" (2000: 181).

film's narrative practices and to which classical suture theory was blinded by its absorption in the Lacanian drama of absence. [...] [Suture is] about threading subjects, not about triumphant emptiness" (Butte 2008: 294). The cinematic object is the location of this interworld; the cinematic object is where chiasmus takes place. For Butte, cinematic objects suture because they are the vector spaces in which we encounter the seemings of other consciousnesses—other 'others', if you like. The subjectivity of the spectator is constituted in concert with the subjectivities represented on-screen: subjectivities that, thanks to the formal properties of cinematic objects (like continuity editing techniques such as shot reverse shot) are structurally isomorphic to the composition of lived experience.

Et Potentia, Et Gloria

At this point, let us return to the holy dullness of Tarkovsky. For Butte, under normal conditions the subjectivity of the spectator manifests in chiasmus with the consciousnesses represented on-screen: they are mutually constituted in the shared interworld of the cinema. However, and in spite of both its rigour and explanatory power, Butte's configuration of suture is incomplete. Tarkovsky's dreamlike imagery and sense of glacial *durée* demonstrates little of the dynamism and simultaneity that Butte identifies with human consciousness. It is for this reason that a sense of undeniable strangeness is inherent to Tarkovsky's films; they appear to us as objects both alien and numinous. As Christy Burns writes:

Tarkovsky's use of the extended, uninterrupted take opens the suture into a cinematic state, revealing implicitly the viewer's static, passive relation to the film. [...] In some cases, the viewer may be hypnotically drawn in. And yet in others, Tarkovsky's particularly slow tempo disrupts the ease of viewing. Rather than finding himself collected into the film and drawn toward cohesion, the viewer may feel exposed to the unstable influence of inner consciousness, continuing to feel aware of the ideological field that the film both hides and suggests. [...] The unusual arrangement of nature within enclosed spaces, in many of Tarkovsky's sets, allows us to see rain dripping inside, displaying near-monochromatic palettes that enhance the play of light and texture—all holding the viewer's gaze, even as the undermined agency of the nostalgic dreamer slows down the pacing, asking audiences to contemplate deeper emotional states and nonlinear forms of consciousness (2011: 122).

It is worth unpacking what I mean by the numinous. Making its appearance in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (first published in German in 1917 under the title *Das Heilige*), the 'numinous' is used to denote a particular class or quality of religious experiences. Specifically, Otto describes the numinous as denoting those experiences that are common to both the holy and the demonic (in that numinous experiences are neither essentially good nor evil). Stripped of explicit moral content, the numinous is a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self" (Otto 1968: 40)—often designated a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: a mystery both terrifying and fascinating.

Although initially appropriated by theologians as an "oblique way of talking about God", more recent scholarship has emphasised the phenomenological aspect of the concept (Merkur 2006: 206). Dan Merkur, for instance, positions the numinous as a particular

phenomenological category, akin to the 'beautiful'—or, perhaps more appropriately, the 'sublime'. Like the beautiful and the sublime, the numinous can only be understood in its own terms and is not exhausted by any particular description (2006: 206). To quote Otto: "a definitely 'numinous' state of mind [...] is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other" (1968: 7). Nonetheless, we should be careful not to assume that the numinous, like the beautiful or the sublime, is a strictly aesthetic category. Otto himself writes:

We are often prone to resort to this familiar feeling-content to fill out the negative concept 'transcendent', explaining frankly God's 'transcendence' by His 'sublimity'. As a figurative analogical description this is perfectly allowable, but it would be an error if we meant it literally and in earnest. Religious feelings are not the same as aesthetic feelings, and 'the sublime' is as definitely an aesthetic term as 'the beautiful', however widely different may be the facts denoted by the words (1968: 41).

Otto has good reasons for making this distinction. As I have argued elsewhere, the phenomenology of sublimity is one that exceeds conventional structures of intentionality (Wittingslow 2020). In phenomenology, consciousness is always consciousness-of something: there is always an object attached to the experience. In addition to adhering to an object of consciousness, that consciousness-of is further constrained by what we take to be the relevant features of that object: its ontology, function, behaviour, or qualities. Everything of which we believe the object capable is called the object's 'intentional horizon'. Meanwhile, sublime experiences, regardless of whether they are 'mathematically' or 'dynamically' sublime (Kant 2007: secs. 23–29), happen because they shatter those intentional horizons in our possession: the objects of consciousness either disappear or undergo radical and profound mutation. As a consequence, and absent a sensible object of consciousness, we are profoundly and necessarily *overwhelmed*. This means that sublime experiences are experiences of intentional surplus instigated by the absence of a clear and sensible object. Without sensible objects, we experience the sublime as a species of aesthetic trauma.

Numinous experiences are not like this, in spite of their apparent similarities to sublime experiences. Indeed, the word itself offers a clue: *numen* is Latin for the spirit or deity that presides over a given thing or place.³ Unlike the sublime, where the object of consciousness is problematised, in the numinous that object is brought front and centre. However, not just any object will do. To experience the numinous is not simply to be conscious of some conceptual or physical thing: a teapot, Australia, the number seven. Instead, we need to encounter a particular kind of *other*: one of particular majesty and puissance. Otto writes, "[the numinous] may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures" (1968: 12–13). However, this feeling—upsetting though it might be—is not one of dread. The person experiencing the numinous does not fear the 'whom or what' that Otto

³ Despite apparent similarities, it is etymologically unrelated to the Kantian *noumenon*. The latter is derived from Greek, not Latin, and Kant uses it to refer to those entities or events that are beyond human perception or sense. In this respect, the *noumenon* is broadly synonymous with the *Ding an Sich*. Confusingly (and perhaps amusingly), this makes the numinous phenomenal rather than noumenal.

describes. Instead, they are *unsettled* by it. As writer and lay theologian C. S. Lewis writes, “the disturbance would be profound”. He continues, “You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking—a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it”. Indeed, he writes, it would be as if there were a “mighty spirit in the room” (2009: 6). These experiences—though ‘visitations’ may be more appropriate—have three complementary aspects: *mysterium*, *tremendum*, and *fascinans*.

By *mysterium*, Otto does not mean that which is merely mysterious. Instead, he is denoting that a numinous experience is “wholly other” (Otto 1968: 29): that is, something entirely and categorically beyond the bounds of everyday experience. In the words of Eckardt and Eckardt, it “presents itself as [...] wholly other, a condition absolutely *sui generis* and incomparable whereby the human being finds himself utterly abashed” (1980: 169). So, while the numinous object may be a ‘whom or what’, it is a ‘whom or what’ that is unlike any other kind of whom or what. If it is conscious, it is not and cannot be conscious in the same way that we are conscious. If it is minded, it is minded in a way that is inherently unapproachable.

Tremendum, meanwhile, refers to the feeling of awe. The aspect of the numinous that is closest to the sublime, it presents to us as a power that cows us into silence: “the soul is held speechless, trembles inwardly to the farthest fibre of its being” (Otto 1968: 17). We experience this power with a potent and pre-theoretic “astonishment” and “blank wonder”, buffaloes by the urgency and majesty of the numinous object (1968: 26). Consequently, when *mysterium* and *tremendum* are brought into union, we are confronted with an awful power that is wholly other. Consider Rainer Maria Rilke’s description of what can only be a numinous experience at the beginning of the first of *The Duino Elegies*: “For beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure, / and we are so awed because it serenely disdains / to annihilate us” (Rilke 2014: 3).

Finally, if *tremendum* denotes the fragile awe one feels in the presence of God, it is *fascinans* that denotes the weird delight we take in experiencing the numinous. Otto describes it as “a sign or a symbol of something”; a “living ‘something more’” (1968: 35). However, the *fascinans* is not a mere metaphor. If a metaphor is, as Nelson Goodman described, “an affair between a predicate with a past and an object that yields while protesting” (1968: 69), then a *fascinans* is an affair between a predicate with a past and an object that refuses to yield at all. It is clear that it means *something*, just not something that can be readily identified. It is because of this search for meaning that Dan Merkur identifies the numinous as a basically rational, if speculative and inconclusive, experience (2006: 210), even in spite of Otto’s claims to the contrary.⁴ This speculative element of *fascinans* is what calls to us, fascinates us. We are summoned to try and make sense of what we see, even if we know that the machinery of the *fascinans* is much too complex for the simplicity of human beings. In short, if *tremendum* is that which compels us to hide under the blankets before God, it is *fascinans* that causes us to peek out from beneath them. This tension between terror

⁴ Indeed, the sentiment is even present in the extremely unwieldy subtitle of *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*.

and attraction—the numinous—is the feeling at the heart of religious experience (1968: 26).

So, what about Tarkovsky's films? Certainly, they possess *mysterium*. They present to consciousness as minded, intentional things, even if they are nothing of the sort. Furthermore, they do not present as things like us. Per Merleau-Ponty, conscious experience is a flitting, fluttering, contingent thing; splintering and collapsing; coexisting and simultaneous. Tarkovsky films, meanwhile, do not exhibit this kind of consciousness: thanks to their unworldly *durée*, they hang and linger, funereal and alien. They seem 'wholly other': a 'whom or what'. His films also possess *tremendum*, though less obviously. While watching a Tarkovsky film is not quite the same as touching the face of God, to watch one of those films is to encounter a being that is indifferent to human attention. His films are not entities that yearn for a human viewer: they do not welcome us into an interworld and they do not need our participation. Instead, by virtue of being quasi-others, they look outwards, into *our* world, mute and inscrutable, both holy and dull: a mighty spirit in the room, serenely disdaining to annihilate us. Finally, his films clearly exhibit *fascinans*. They walk a fine line: by virtue of their long, lingering shots, they are both gravid with apparent meaning and yet unwilling to yield that meaning in a straightforwardly parseable way. As a consequence, they capture us: dull though the holiness might be, we are arrested by the inscrutability of what is presented, and we must obey the call to action. In short, because of the formal features of Tarkovsky's films, they are particularly suitable for inducing numinous experiences.

Stranger Encounters

The fact that Butte's suture theory cannot easily take stock of Tarkovsky's films is no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The explanatory power of Butte's theory is not blunted by the presence of a confounding exception. Instead, this provides an invitation to extend Butte's theory further.

We can integrate the numinousness of Tarkovsky's films with Butte's theory of suture by appealing to a body of scholarship broadly captured under the umbrella of 'mediation theory'. In mediation theory—a 'postphenomenological' approach within philosophy of technology that emerges from the scholarship of Don Ihde—Tarkovskian encounters (and those encounters like them) are called 'alterity relations'. Alterity relations refer to one of the four kinds of technical relations in which we can encounter the objects that comprise the world, the others being 'embodied', 'hermeneutic', and 'background' relations. In alterity relations, human beings do not encounter technical objects as a means through which the world is made clear (embodied and hermeneutic relations), nor as objects that help to constitute our lifeworlds (background relations). Instead, they are encountered as autonomous things in their own right, in the same way that human beings and other animals are autonomous.⁵ They are what Ihde calls 'quasi-others'. He uses a spinning top as an example: "The top is an object of *fascination* [...]". He continues:

⁵ Those interested in learning more about postphenomenology and mediation theory should refer to Rosenberger and Verbeek (2015), widely considered the best primer on the topic outside of Ihde's original articulation.

What makes it fascinating is this property of quasi-animation, the life of its own. Also, of course, once 'automatic' in its motion, the top's movements may be entered into a whole series of possible contexts. I might enter a game of warring tops in which mine (suitably marked) represents me. If I-as-top am successful in knocking down the other tops, then this game of hermeneutics has the top winning for me. Similarly, if I take its quasi-autonomous motion to be a hermeneutic predictor, I may enter a divination context in which the path traced or the eventual point of a stoppage indicates some fortune. Or, entering the region of scientific instrumentation, I may transform the top into a gyroscope, using its constancy of direction within its now controlled confines as a better-than-magnetic compass. But in each of these cases, the top may become the focal center of attention as a quasi-other to which I may relate (Ihde 1990: 100).

The spinning top, like all quasi-others, looks to have some kind of form of life that is not contingent upon our interaction or continued intervention. Although the animation of quasi-others is superficial and the appearance of autonomy is a semblance, they demand our attention because they appear to be, in some important phenomenological respect, *like us*. They possess an otherness and a capacity for motion that is "stronger than mere objectness but weaker than the otherness found within the animal kingdom or the human one" (1990: 100). In this manner, cinematic objects can also host alterity relations in that they possess a similar automatism to the spinning top. While human action is the ultimate cause of their motion, the fact that they possess a life of their own positions them somewhere within the constellation of alterity relations.

However, Ihde is hesitant to unilaterally identify cinematic objects as quasi-others due to what he calls the "hermeneutic dimension" of film and television. In Ihdean mediation theory, technologies that extend our perceptual affordances in some way are described as being 'hermeneutic'. Infrared cameras, for instance, extend the visible light spectrum so that heat can be detected by human eyes. Telescopes afford us the ability to see extra-planetary bodies in far greater granularity than our natural assets offer. So too do microphones and speakers afford the capture, reproduction, and dissemination of sounds that would be otherwise impossible. These are hermeneutic affordances. Cinematic objects, claims Ihde, are objects of this type, in that they are *presentations*: the "focal terminus of a perceptual situation" (1990: 105). In the case of the cinematic object as described by Ihde, it is not the image qua image that is important—unlike in the case of, say, the spinning top. Instead, he claims that it is the image qua what is being *presented* that matters: that is, the facticity of that presentation. This, he believes, prevents cinematic objects from functioning as fully-blown quasi-others:

Yet the engagement with the film normally remains short of an *other*. Even in the anger that comes through in an outrage about civilian atrocities or the pathos experienced in seeing starvation epidemics in Africa, the emotions are not directed to the screen but, indirectly, through it, in more appropriate forms of political or charitable action. To this extent there is retained a hermeneutic reference elsewhere than at the technological instrument. Its quasi-alterity, which is also present, is not fully focal in the case of such media technologies (1990: 105).

While I take Ihde's point, it is worth making a clarification. Of course, he is correct in claiming that there is a hermeneutic dimension to cinematic objects: they present images to us that would otherwise be beyond our capacity to access. However, I do not think that he gives nearly enough consideration to the extent to which the formal properties of cinematic objects participate in encouraging hermeneutic encounters. Indeed, as I have argued throughout this chapter, suture is nothing less than the system by which individual shots are manipulated into coherent narratives by aping the phenomenal structures of consciousness. Assuming that a given cinematic object possesses the right formal features, the hermeneutic participation that Ihde identifies is basically guaranteed.

Tarkovsky films, however, are different. They are, thanks to the formal features they possess (such as the length of the shots by which they are constituted), absent the syntax of continuity editing necessary to induce hermeneutic participation. When we watch those films, we are unconcerned by the facticity of the image; we are not moved into righteous action as we are by presentations of civilian atrocities or starvation epidemics. His films are a straightforward disavowal of the classical film syntax of editing and camera placement that is inherent to most mainstream cinema—that is, the system of phenomenological suture that Butte outlines in his paper. Indeed, they are structured in such a way as to be alien to the intersubjective montage of coexistence and simultaneity that Merleau-Ponty claims to be intrinsic to human cognition. This has two effects. First, contra Butte's claims, they do not and cannot function as vectors for other possible human consciousnesses. Second, contrary to Ihde's claims, they do not and cannot facilitate hermeneutic encounters of the kinds that he describes. They are, in short, quasi-others in their own right.

Ihde describes the quasi-otherness of religious relics thus: "The religious object (idol) does not simply 'represent' some absent power but is endowed with the sacred" (1990: 99). Similarly, the power of a Tarkovsky film is not tied up in what it represents, in much the same way that the potency of the crucifix is not tied up in its physical similarity to the events that lead to the death of an historical Jesus. Instead the film is endowed with otherness because it, like the religious idol, presents to us as something that appears to possess its own intrinsic, numinous power.

As a consequence of all of this, and in a return to Butte's phenomenological suture, there are two important features by which cinematic quasi-others, like the films of Tarkovsky, are distinct from more conventional cinematic objects. Firstly, Butte's suture posits that the cinematic object itself is the site or vector space in which the interworld manifests. However, by virtue of functioning as quasi-others, this formulation no longer obtains; the interworld wherein these sutured encounters takes place changes location. With the cinematic object itself the other, the interworld shifts into the venue where the image is encountered: the theatre or the living room, for example. It is here that we interface with the Tarkovskian cinematic object *qua* object, rather than using the cinematic object as a window through which to encounter the worlds and consciousnesses contained therein. Cinemas, living rooms, or otherwise: these are the vector spaces in which these quasi-others are encountered. Secondly, and as a consequence of the new locus of the interworld, these cinematic encounters possess an ineluctable phenomenological quality: the experience of the numinous.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued the following. First, per George Butte, suture is a formal and structural property of cinematic objects. Thanks to continuity editing—the systems of syntax and camera placement upon which we rely to sensibly order cinematic imagines—cinematic objects ‘suture’ together an interworld in which a polysemy of consciousnesses can become constituted and intertwine: a process that Merleau-Ponty called ‘chiasmus’. Second, and while I for the most part endorse Butte’s formulation, there are lacunae. In particular, his phenomenology coheres poorly with cinematic objects like the films of Andrei Tarkovsky: films that do not ape human consciousness via classical continuity systems of editing, but instead model other kinds of consciousness. It is for this reason that we should conceptualise Tarkovsky’s films, not as hermeneutic windows to the world, but as ‘quasi-others’. Third, the fact of being a quasi-other lends Tarkovsky films a specific phenomenological character. These films are not interworlds where consciousnesses meet and are mutually constituted. They do not offer us visions of the world, but are worlds that insist upon themselves in much the same way that another human being can insist upon their own perspective and commitments (cf. Cavell 1979: 24). Because of this, they impress upon us their phenomenological peculiarities. This mode of engagement is, I think, numinous in nature.

There is also a broader thesis to be made here. That is, by virtue of the fact that cinematic objects are a particularly fine tool by which to capture the phenomenology of consciousness, they are also a fine tool by which to show us visions of the world that are unlike our phenomenal experience of the world. They can show us *other* consciousness, *alien* consciousnesses—consciousnesses profoundly unlike our own that are nonetheless subject to their own syntax and their own organisational structures. It is an intersubjectivity of a very deep and powerful kind. This is one of the many opportunities that cinematic objects can offer us, assuming they possess the appropriate features: intersubjective and numinous engagement with things not entirely human.

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