

MEMORY AND EXILE: TIME AND PLACE
IN TARKOVSKY'S *MIRROR*

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MIRROR

Abstract

What if the place that we are in the midst of is different from the physical space that we currently inhabit? What if the things we yearn for are located elsewhere, in another place or in a remembered past, and all we now carry within us is an image of this place. We may remember only elements or impressions of it: there may be certain objects, smells, a smile or expression, particular acts or occasions, a word, all of which come out in a manner that we cannot control or understand. Yet any of these elements or impressions makes us feel 'at home' in a way that we cannot find in the physical space where we are now stuck. This is the problem of exile, of being displaced and yet capable of remembering the particularity of place: it is the state of being dislocated yet able to discern what it is that locates us. We have a great yearning, but we cannot fulfil it with anything but memory. We can see this process of the internalisation of the ordinary in the work of the Russian film director, Andrei Tarkovsky, in particular in his work, *Mirror*, which explores the loss of a childhood place and the attempt to recreate it.

This paper explores the memory of place we are exiled from through an extended critique of this film. The basis of this critique is Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the *chronotope*: the singular linkage of time and place – how place is *always* a place in time – and how this creates the significance of memories of a particular place. The paper suggests that particular places can be seen as stores of memories, as archives of the particular instances that help to determine us as singular selves.

Keywords: Chronotope; dwelling; exile; memory; *Mirror*; Tarkovsky

Introduction

Paul Oliver in his book, *Dwellings* (2003), discusses the distinctive architecture of the village of Akyazi in the Black Sea region of Turkey. He suggests that whilst there is a considerable variety amongst the dwellings of the village, they are all different from the vernacular architecture of the region. Instead of the typical style of a timber frame with adobe infill, the houses in Akyazi are constructed on massive posts driven into the ground. They also feature a deep veranda structure, which is again untypical of other villages in the region. But what Oliver sees as being particularly significant about this village, featuring in a chapter of his book called 'Settling Down', is:

The residents' pride in their Georgian ancestry, their defence of their culture and reluctance to relinquish the roots of their past, and the slow, century-old process of adjustment, which includes the adoption of the Turkish language. (2003, p. 55)

Akyazi is a village of Muslims of Georgian descent who originally settled in Turkey in the 1880s following the Russian defeat of the Ottomans and the reinstating of Christianity in Georgia. Akyazi is therefore the result of migration, but can now be seen as an act of remembrance, as a form of staying still in an unfamiliar environment:

Its houses remain Georgian in design, construction and use, and though four or five generations have passed since its birth, its present builders cling tenaciously to their traditions, while erecting dwellings that are still varied within its norms. (2003, p. 55)

Despite over a hundred years of living in Turkey and the passage of generations, the villagers of Akyazi cling to their Georgian roots, even as they live and thrive within their adopted region.

When we consider the vernacular we normally see it as the use local resources by local people for their own benefit, making the best of what is available and, in so doing, adapting to the

environment. Yet what the example of Akyazi shows is that we need to feel we belong, and that there are occasions when we find it hard; that because we are displaced we have lost those resources we are accustomed to, and must remake our place anew in an environment that may be hostile and uncongenial. We must still use the resources available to us, and now we call on one in particular. What can assist here is *memory*. We can aid the process of belonging, not merely through integration or assimilation, but through acts of remembrance where we insert the cues for memories into our environment. We maintain ourselves, like the people of Akyazi, by creating a new sense of place out of the old.

The village of Akyazi is a physical act of remembrance. Of course, for most exiles this physicality is absent and all they have to rely on is something more ephemeral and hard to grasp. Instead of being able to touch the memories, in terms of physical objects in space, what the exile has to rely on is the feeling, the pure remembrance as an internal object of consciousness.

In this paper I wish to explore this idea of remembrance, of how we seek to remember and memorialise a place to which we can no longer return. One of the twentieth century's greatest artists to deal with exile and memory was the Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky. He explicitly dealt with exile in his penultimate film, *Nostalghia* (1983), which details the last days of a Russian poet longing for his dwelling and family in Russia. Of course, by this time Tarkovsky was an exile himself, unwilling to return to the USSR and prevented from seeing his family as a result. But the film I wish to dwell on in this paper, *Mirror* (1974), deals with exile across time, of being displaced from the treasured houses and faces of one's childhood. The film then is about loss and the attempt through memory to regain what is lost. But it is also the attempt of an artist to recreate the deeply felt personal sensations and feeling of a particular time and space which, for him, appears to be significant in determining the pattern of his life.

But first I need to offer a word of warning. Tarkovsky is not dealing in his film with housing conditions or the plight of exiled peoples as such. His vision is a personal and private one. He is

concerned with how an individual relates to their home: his is a concern for meaning. This may lead some to suggest that his vision is an elitist one – a regular criticism from the critics and the cinema bureaucracy that so hampered him before he left the Soviet Union (*Mirror* went through 22 different versions before the final edit was allowed to be released) – but also to the accusation that a study of his films does not relate directly to the everyday concerns of policy makers and researchers eager to improve housing conditions and opportunities for those on low incomes. I believe we should answer this full on, and state that indeed this was not Tarkovsky's concern in this film. But what his film does show is why dwelling and our notion of home, and where we should connect to a place, is so important to us, and, moreover, that this is a universal condition. What *Mirror* shows, perhaps in a rather oblique manner, is the deep significance that housing has for all us, and this holds regardless of income, age or whatever. We get no particular policy prescriptions from this, but rather a deeper understanding of the ontological, emotional and indeed spiritual meaning of the place we choose to call 'home'.

The chronotope

What is remarkable about Tarkovsky's *Mirror*, and also why it can seem so perplexing on first viewing, is that there is no linear narrative: the film tells no conventional story. This may make the film more difficult to understand, but it also gives it the quality of appearing to the viewer as a personal experience in itself. In *Sculpting in Time* (1986), Tarkovsky discusses the reaction to the film from ordinary Russian cinema-goers. He quotes from a woman who writes to tell him that 'My childhood was like that ... Only how did you know about it?' (p. 10). This is not because Tarkovsky deals in archetypes, but rather because he deals with a childhood in the manner that we tend to remember it. We cannot recollect our lives in a linear manner from birth to the present, but instead our memories are of singular events, which often spring to the foreground of our minds without any conscious effort and for reasons we cannot readily fathom. This is how

Mirror operates, as a series of slightly surreal vignettes intended to be seen as memories, visions or dreams.

The crucial elements in Tarkovsky's impressionistic method are time and space. The impressions he creates are very specific: they are both time-bound, yet they also connect to a particular space or place; they are located to the specific. What we remember are specific spaces at a particular given time. It is this quality in the film that means Tarkovsky is able to be both extremely personal – they are his memories and dreams – and also universal to the extent that people see their own lives registered within it too.

This notion of time and space has been enunciated by the Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, in the concept of the *chronotope*. He defines this concept (which literally means 'time-space') as 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). The artist aims to connect time and space into one, and where it works well, 'Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (p. 84). What this meant for Bakhtin was that questions of the self could only be dealt with when seen as questions of specific location (Synessios, 2001). Our sense of self, or our history, is also our sense of time and place, and this is always specific.

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope need not, of course, be restricted to literature. As Natasha Synessios (2001) has suggested, this concept was influential on Tarkovsky's thinking for this particular film. Speaking generally, we might suggest that film is particularly suitable for this fusing of space and time, with its attempt, as Tarkovsky himself saw it, to stop time (Tarkovsky, 1986). Film is an artistic medium specifically intended to hold up time and to create impressions using time and space.

If we wish to understand the motivations of a person, we need to locate them to a specific place, and this person cannot be fully comprehended until we appreciate their linkage with a place. This is to suggest that time is stopped and put into a particular place. It is this which film is capable of achieving, and hence artists like Tarkovsky have used Bakhtin's chronotope to assist them in their linking of memories and places. We can see *Mirror* as Tarkovsky's chronotopical signature, as his attempt to link his own self to those places he was found in. These are the places of childhood, when he had an innocent directness to the people and things around him.

Film has a further quality that is important for those of us wishing to enhance our understanding of dwelling. It has the ability to use place to interiorise. It can be used to show emotions and to link them to a particular context. Places can, as it were, act as a mirror to our feelings: they can set the mood by indicating feelings such as fear (for example, *Panic Room*, see King, 2004a) and loss (*Three Colours: Blue*, see King, 2004b). We can connect this again to Bakhtin who suggested that time could be 'full', and that an artist could make use of the pregnant possibilities offered by linking time and place. What this means is that time, when linked to a specific place, connects the past and future with the present. The space does not merely contain the here and now, but resonates with our past and offers us some prospect for the future. Synessios (2001) suggests that Tarkovsky captured this sense of the fullness of time in *Mirror*, where he uses recollection and memory, dreams and visions along with contemporary dialogue. He uses time to the full, so that it includes all potentialities and maximises the emotional and spiritual symbolism for the viewer.

Remembering our Place

What if the place where we wish to be – the one that resonates with us most closely, the one that we would most likely see as *mine* – is different from the physical space that we currently inhabit? What if this place is located somewhere no longer accessible to us, or in a remembered past, and so now carry all we carry is an image of this place within us. We may remember only elements of

it: there may be certain objects, smells, a smile or expression, particular acts or occasions, or a word, all of which come out in a manner that we cannot control or understand. Yet any of these make us feel 'at home' in a way that we cannot find in the physical space where we are now stuck. This, I would suggest, is the problem of exile, of being displaced and yet capable of remembering place: of being dislocated yet able to discern what it is that locates us. We have a great yearning, but we cannot fulfil it with anything but memory.

We deal with this problem by returning – or attempting to return – to where we wish to be. Ideally this is a physical move, but where we are trapped and find no means of actual return, we must rely on memory. This may be no cure for exile, and it may not really ease the longing, but it is all we now have of the place. This feeling is one that may be largely dormant in those of us who are comfortable in our own places, but for those who are physically separated from their place all they have now to rely on is memory. This processing of returning through internalisation is a recurrent theme in the work of Andrei Tarkovsky. Films such as *Solaris* (1972), *Stalker* (1979) and *Nostalghia* (1983), as well as *Mirror*, are all concerned with the notion of returning: of the need to return, of the possibility of getting back to what we have lost, but also of the *impossibility* of any physical return. Instead, what these films tell us of is the fecundity of memory and how it is located in special places, which are detailed and frequently obscure in their particularity, yet nevertheless poignant and evocative. Moreover, Tarkovsky, through the lingering on tiny detail and the slow, drawn-out nature of his storytelling, is concerned with the consequences of return, of what could and would occur if we were able to go back to what we have lost.

For Tarkovsky, the notion of exile is a device for examining what is meaningful in our spiritual existence. It allows us to note what is significant in our normal taken-for-granted lives by putting us in a situation where we can no longer be so sanguine. We are forced to look at ourselves, as if we were standing before a mirror. Accordingly, in addition to the eponymous film, this is a very common image in Tarkovsky's films. According to Green (1993), it is used as 'the metaphorical looking-glass that provides man with a reflection of himself. In its surface, time is refracted; and

it is a transitional device through which one may pass to other worlds, other states of consciousness' (p. 80).

What is shown through the looking glass in Tarkovsky's *Mirror* is a particularly delicate portrayal of houses, with its attention to the small detail, of the rural dwelling, with its exploring kittens, billowing lace curtains, spilt milk, falling objects and childish tricks. All of these experiences are so particular in their details as to be pure memory: they are not stereotypes but singular memories. This is because they are autobiographical, but as Le Fanu (1987) has stated, *Mirror*, despite being personal, speaks somehow with the authority of third-person narrative art. Autobiography in the film is woven into history, lending it a grandeur and a classicism' (p. 69). The film, as I have mentioned, is episodic and has no distinct chronology, and Tarkovsky makes no attempt to tell his story directly. But it is precisely this impressionistic quality that is so evocative of memory. As Le Fanu (1987) has said, 'One of the central strengths of *Mirror* lies in its simple power of evocation: its ability to conjure up, in piercing epiphanies, that magical submerged world of wonder which forms the adult's later imaginative capital' (p. 78).

So *Mirror* is concerned with memories of childhood, of wishes unfulfilled and regrets. It shows the cyclical nature of the ordinary lives we lead. Synessios (2001) sees much that is autobiographical in the film, in particular the inability to act as father to one's children. She suggests that neither Tarkovsky nor his father could sustain family life. They both left their first wives and children. Synessios states that, 'The home of family was not the one where they felt most at home, though Tarkovsky carried within himself a life-long nostalgia for an idealised family and home' (p. 85-7). We might see that this idealisation derives from the double failure of father and son, and as a form of compensation for the loss and lack. Of particular interest in this regard is the use that Tarkovsky makes of his father's poems in the film. In one poem, *Life, Life*, we hear the phrase, 'Live in the house and it will not fall down'. The implication here is that if we believe in family and keep it strong, then we shall remain. This is a theme that features

throughout *Solaris*, shown particularly when Kelvin, the main character, shows fealty to his own father by kneeling before him at the end of the film.

We can see *Mirror* as being concerned with hope, faith and redemption. It shows how we as adults look back to our childhood memories, with their sense of home and familial security. The film shows that 'Our past is our fortune. We exist as moral beings insofar as we possess, love and imitate ancestors' (Le Fanu, 1987, p. 73). The film goes through a series of scenes concerning the life of Andrei, whom we see as a small child before the Second World War and as a teenager during the war. The central figures of these scenes are the boy's mother and absent father. These scenes are interspersed with others set in the present day of Andrei's wife and teenage son, Ignat. In these scenes we hear Andrei, but never see him. The connection between the generations is made, and the circular sense of family heightened, by the use of the same actors for both teenage boy characters (Ignat Daniltsev) and the mother/wife figure (Margarita Terekhova). Some of the scenes are intended to represent actual happenings such as the burning down of a barn, whilst others are dreams and visions. The film, then, tells no particular story, but can be seen as a collection of memories and wishes, fulfilled and unfulfilled. It is about an adult, full of regrets, who can no longer experience the innocent sense of possibility that comes with childhood; of a person who is *dislocated*. Green (1993) suggests that:

the view Tarkovsky seeks is that of the child, with which we glimpse Utopia or paradise. The point in man's history where he takes the wrong path is where the child loses its innocence and begins to comprehend the world in documentary form. (p. 85)

We do not remember our lives in a linear manner, viewing one incident following another, but rather as a mix of the actual and the hoped-for, of promise and regret. Thus Green sees that *Mirror*:

marks an attempt to recover the vision of childhood as well, not just the memories, but the unexplained mysteries, with all their discontinuities and distortions of time; a child's-eye view of the world and history, which accounts in part for the elusive fascination and haunting quality of the film. (p. 85)

Memory can be a place of safety as well as yearning. We may have regrets and wish things were different. But whilst we might want the past to be changed, it can also be a source of comfort that things must remain as they are. We can enhance the past but it will always remain there for us. The virtue of memory is that it can be sealed up. In trauma or anxiety we can either dwell on the comforting or the regrettable. There are things we can cling on to which offer us security and then there are things which build the load.

The seminal scenes in *Mirror* take place within particular dwellings, in particular the rural idyll of the pre-war family, and the apartment of the grown Andrei. The dacha in the film was modelled on the place where Tarkovsky himself stayed as a young boy with his sister and mother. It offers a tremendous evocation of the warmth and simplicity of childhood. The scenes are full of detail, from spilt milk and tiny kittens, to flowers in jars on the window sill. These scenes are largely shown in warm colours which show the varnished wood and the intricacies of the lace curtains to the full. It is clear that these are memories of security and comfort. The child may feel the lack of his father even here, but this is balanced by the strength of maternal care and the fecundity of the natural world that surrounds the dacha. This is then a remembered idyll, the childhood paradise, in which there are few troubles and things need not be understood, only felt. Indeed, several commentators on the film have suggested that the film is best felt and not analysed: it is a film of impressions rather than arguments.

This childhood home can be contrasted with the apartment of the grown Andrei. We never see him, other than a fleeting glimpse of his arm on his death bed at the end of the film. However, we do see his apartment, in scenes with a group of Spanish émigrés, in dialogues between Andrei

and his ex-wife, and scenes involving Ignat. Just as the childhood dacha is cluttered and cosy, the apartment is large and well-lit. In one scene we see no inhabitants in the apartment at all. Instead the camera pans through the apartment as the unseen Andrei talks to his mother on the telephone. She reminds him of one of her work colleagues who has recently died. He struggles to remember the woman, and it becomes clear how mother and son have grown apart. As they talk, barely connecting with each other, we are shown his apartment, and we see it as in some way tarnished, as lived in, yet also sparse and empty. It is impersonal and anonymous and has also been somehow reclaimed by nature: the walls and woodwork are marked and worn. There is a history to this place, but there is still no real human trace. Rather there is a coldness, a sense that the dwelling is not fully occupied. Just as the film lacks the presence of the grown Andrei, so the apartment lacks any real human presence. This is not, we feel, where our protagonist wishes to be, and the fact that we are denied sight of him emphasises this greatly. Instead the most pressing sense here is one of neglect, of things left to decay whilst Andrei's mind drifts elsewhere. This can be seen as a metaphor for the state of the human relationships within this space. Through Andrei's dialogues with his wife it soon becomes clear that they are separated and that Andrei rarely sees his son. His only conversations with his son are on the phone and a brief question over whether Ignat wants to live with him rather than his mother. Ignat's response to this is one of alarm. So this place, whilst it is on occasions brightly lit, is somehow empty even when it is populated: there is a vacant space at the heart of the dwelling, just as there is a hole in the relationships between father and son, and husband and wife.

We thus see how a singular place can be used to evoke opposite sensations: on the one hand, we see a rural idyll built by memory; and, on the other, we sense a place in decline as the relationships fail. One is a place of possibility, whilst the other is one of regret, and they are linked in that the memory of childhood is necessary precisely because of the failure of the present. We need not see the memories as accurate as this need not be how the child's home actually was; memories are always partial. What matters is that we need something to cling to

when we are alienated. We need to believe that if ‘we can live in the house it will not fall down’, and if we can keep it filled with memories this will serve to do just that.

Mirror, then, is a film about exile, about the effects of the distance between comfort and reality. It is concerned with what we have lost when we leave our childhood innocence behind and have to bear the complexities of the adult world. What it shows is that we do not just depend on where we are, but on what we have, and this includes memory. This allows us some ability to adjust: when we are alienated from our immediate environment, we can draw on our memories, and use these for our dreams and visions. *Mirror* can be seen as a study of how we can use our resources of memory to sustain and justify ourselves. We can see memory as a form of compensation, where we substitute a loss in the present with the stores we have built up over our life. This sense of compensation allows us to see the notion of home as located within and bearing on whom and what we have. When we look at notions of home we have to include our longings, dreams and memories, as well as the concrete physicality of place.

Back to the house

There are some ready links here with the manner in which we use and relate to our housing. Our dwelling is for us the most specific relation of time and place. We dwell in a particular place, which is shared with other people and things, full of all our memories and hopes, and where we are free to love, care and share without unwanted intervention and observation. In this place, where our intimacies are protected, space and time are intrinsically linked. This place is a store of memory, a refuge for all our hopes and dreams, and a place to avoid our fears. This is why I have suggested that the key to understanding the nature of private dwelling is the concept of *protected intimacy* (King, 2004b). Dwelling is where we can store up our memories and restore our relations with those wish to be close to.

Dwelling is something that is personal to us, even as we know it is a common and shared experience. Things that are so personal, and which frame our actions, are commonly experienced impressionistically. We gain only glimpses of their full significance: we may on occasions stop to reflect on where we are or on what we have done; in times of crisis or trauma we may be forced to bear down on important places and times in our lives; major shifts in our lives make us look back at ourselves. In all these situations we may recall places, faces and things that have been significant and which come out of the sheer commonality of our ordinary experience. But there is no consistent narrative, and no logical development: there are merely scenes, played before a consistent background.

And just as critics of Tarkovsky's film have suggested, some things are better felt rather than analysed. There are some things that are immune to critique and rational argument, but respond rather to more base and unconscious stimuli. Dwelling, as a private activity, is one such example. We do not tend to analyse how we live, whilst we are doing it. We do need even analyse our memories, but instead relive them. Places, so the speak, *just are*, and much of their meaning derives from this simple presence. What *Mirror* shows is that we can have this place regardless, or perhaps even because, of any rationality and any remaining concrete physical connection. Akyazi is as much a mental creation as a physical one and its significance is not from its distinctive architecture, but from what it holds within for those who live there.

Our dwelling is full of time. When dwelling works well it has a sense of permanency, of being there and always there (King, 2004b). Our dwelling has no start or end for us, but instead seems to form a seamless continuum of presents linked to the past and future. It holds our memories and our hopes and dreams for the future, all along with our present activities. It is a place where we can dream from, sit back and remember our past, as well as doing the ordinary activities that make up our domestic lives.

This is precisely what the residents of Akyazi are able to do. They have their daily lives to lead: doubtless they have the same issues to face, the disputes to settle, loves to make and break, just like all others. What helps them in this, what might even make it possible, is that they can link their present with their past. They are able to remember who they are and where they have come from and keep something of that past alive, even as they are prevented from returning. They have created a kind of living chronotope, a specific place and time where memory can be touched. We, like Tarkovsky's Andrei, may find we have to rely on memory. But this memory, because it is so linked to a specific place, is such that time can only add to it.

Our dwelling, we hope, is a source of comfort for us, and this operates at the physical, emotional and ontological levels, insofar as they can be ordinarily separated. Yet it is precisely when the ontological and the emotional becomes separated from the physical that we need this comfort the most. This is where the taken-for-granted nature of dwelling becomes difficult if not impossible to sustain. In this discussion of Tarkovsky's *Mirror* we have considered this decoupling of use and meaning, where the place we yearn for is not the place we are. Where dwelling works well meaning is derived from use and this created both the taken-for-grantedness of dwelling (King, 2004b), but also fills it. Meaning comes from the use of things over time, by the fact that our use is reiterative (Hegel, 1991). In this sense, our dwelling comes to us as ordinary, as that we are in the midst of (King, 2005). But this sense of the ordinary need not be connected with one place, but is rather created out of the store of meanings we have built up through dwelling. This store we can see as having developed chronotopically, through the linkage of time to a specific place. Thus we need not be in that place to connect with it. This offers some hope to the exile, for as long, at least, as they can remember.

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