



HAL
open science

The Crisis of Anthropocentric Space. Thinking the Politics of the Zone with Andrey Tarkovsky's Stalker

Jeanne Etelain

► **To cite this version:**

Jeanne Etelain. The Crisis of Anthropocentric Space. Thinking the Politics of the Zone with Andrey Tarkovsky's Stalker. Peter Lang. Thinking Space in Cinema and Literature, pp.75-91, 2022. hal-04363023

HAL Id: hal-04363023

<https://hal.parisnanterre.fr/hal-04363023>

Submitted on 6 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Crisis of Anthropocentric Space:
Thinking the Politics of the Zone with Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*.

Abstract

Tarkovsky famously rejected the hyper-interpretation to which the Zone in his 1979 film *Stalker* has been routinely subject by critics. Taking this as an invitation to approach the Zone as just a portion of space, I find that it confronts us with a space in motion that acts as an operator of change rather than its measure. I show that this breaks away from the modern construction of space as an inert and external container in which nature is set. As the Zone reconfigures our way of thinking about space— ontologically, epistemologically, and politically— I hope to join current efforts to rethink the key concepts of western modernity in light of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: space, matter, nature, motion, Anthropocene, classical physics, modernity, Tarkovsky, zone

“People have often asked me what the Zone is, and what it symbolizes, and have put forward wild conjectures on the subject. I'm reduced to a state of fury and despair by such questions. The Zone doesn't symbolize anything, [...]: the zone is the zone”

— Andrei Tarkovsky (200)

Why Space Matters for a Critique of Modernity

Serving as the principal setting and primary subject of the 1979 unconventional science-fiction film directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, the Zone has been the focus of much the critical discussion of *Stalker*. Attempts to address it have largely investigated its meaning: critics have respectively interpreted it as a political symbol of Stalin’s gulags (Adair), a forbidden desired territory akin to West Berlin (Dubroux), the Secret that any social order requires to maintain its authority (Kovacs & Szilàgyi), the sign of a coming techno-ecological catastrophe foreshadowing the Chernobyl disaster (Dyer), a metaphysical allegory of declining spirituality (De Baecque), the Lacanian void which sustains desire (Zizek), or even the metaphor of the cinematic space per se (Foster). Yet Tarkovsky was famously hostile to any allegorical, symbolic, or metaphorical approach that considers the Zone as standing for something other than what we see or referring to something other than to itself. I thus would like to follow Tarkovsky’s invitation to take the Zone literally, that is as a mere portion of space, but I contend that this does not leave our way of thinking about space unchanged. I argue that the Zone in *Stalker* reconfigures what one means by space by presenting us with a space set into motion, and I suggest that this

alternative spatiality might prove helpful for theorizing the world—our world—in the age of the Anthropocene.

Indeed, I situate my analysis within the current effort of contemporary critique to rethink the key metaphysical concepts of western modernity in light of the challenges posed by the ecological crisis, also known as the age of the Anthropocene. Anthropologists and philosophers have addressed the ecological crisis as forcing us to overcome the self-evident distinction that Moderns would make between nature and culture—an amplified version of the Cartesian divorce of the subject from the object (Colebrook 169)—which incidentally presides over the disciplinary separation of knowledge production between STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and HASS (humanities, arts, and social sciences).¹ To this end, some theorists such as Jane Bennett have focused on the abilities of the non-humans, and of matter in general, to manifest capacities (e.g. subjective, symbolic, agential) hitherto reserved to the political and social sphere of humans. Others like Dipesh Chakrabarty have drawn attention to the disruption of our sense of time conceived as a continuous line, which grounds our conception of history and separates human actions from natural processes. To pursue this deconstruction of the modern concept of nature, which has thus been mostly carried with respect to the notions of matter and time, the investigation should be extended to that of space—matter, time, and space being the three notional components that together make up our concept of Nature (Whitehead 17).

At issue here is the uncritical acceptance of space as being that within which nature is set, that is as a fixed container external to human activities and material objects of which it is nonetheless the necessary location. This is the unquestioned presupposition that pervades a whole range of terms we use, sometimes indifferently, across various academic fields, such as “setting”, “context”, “environment”, “background”, “surroundings”, “framework”, or “circumstance”.² All of these terms, sometimes in their etymology itself, activate the idea of something that stands still, outside, and around what takes place within. By examining how the Zone in *Stalker*, a mysterious place that escapes the laws of classical physics, challenges this conception and puts forward an alternative spatiality, I wish to draw the contours of a new operative concept for rethinking space, namely that of the zone. Interrogating the category of space ultimately confronts our understanding of what it means to “occupy” a place, to inhabit a space, to be in the world. In other words, the issues at stake are as metaphysical and epistemological as they are ethical and political.

This article thus considers that literature and cinema, just like natural and social sciences, have something to teach us about space—or even have the power to change our very perception and conception thereof. In other words, this article does not so much offer to think

¹ See among others Philippe Descola, Donna Haraway, Eduardo Kohn, Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Anna L. Tsing, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

² The term “environment” is more complex as it derives from the verb “virer”, to turn, and encompasses a sense of movement, even of deviation, while the other terms rather suggest stillness (e.g. “circumstance” derives from the verb “to stand”).

space *in* literature and cinema, that is to study the function of space in the production of stories (narratology), to compare the representations of actual geographical locations in different works (geocriticism), or to analyze the own spaces of cinema such as the frame (formalism). Instead, it intends to think space *with* cinema, granting to the arts the power to develop unprecedented ways of construing perceptual experiences so as to make a different conception of the world thinkable.³ This approach is unquestionably Deleuzian: rather than treating artistic works as sensitive forms that represent intelligible meanings open to interpretation, it considers artistic practices as thoughts in action that create alternative possibilities with which we can experiment (Sauvagnargues). There is a historical antecedent that has become paradigmatic of this capacity of the arts to transform our world views through its construction of space, namely the invention of linear perspective in the Renaissance and the passage from the closed Aristotelian world to the infinite universe of Western modernity—at least this is Erwin Panofsky’s famous thesis. Our question thus is not ‘what is the Zone?’, and even less ‘what does it mean?’, but simply ‘what does it do?’ (i.e. what are its theoretical operations?).

I begin with considering a significant scene in the movie as the characters finally enter the much-awaited Zone after a series of delays. This scene presents us with the perspective, the movement, and the agency of something that *is* yet that is none of the characters. Contending it is that of the Zone, I first see this scene as challenging the concept of setting, or of *circonstant*, used in narrative studies and as moving us toward that of *actant*, which has been central to the scholarship related to the Anthropocene. Yet I suggest that when it comes to space, unlike matter, the question is more one of motion than of action. I indeed argue that the most disturbing in this scene is the image of a space that moves for and by itself, since modern western thought has usually conceived of space as the external and inert framework from which to measure movement and, by extension, study nature. As this certainly implies a better understanding of this tradition of thought, I unpack a decisive line pronounced at the beginning of the movie that embodies such a conception and serves at the same time as a yardstick with which to understand the Zone. I then return to the Zone, which is by contrast described to us as a system in motion, and to its respectively opposite properties: it manifests (a) a heterogeneous and manifold structure proper to Riemannian geometry, (b) a causal indeterminacy of its physical phenomena in constant variation, and (c) a material intensity rich in potentialities. This ontological reversal is not without epistemological and political consequences since it is a space that can only be apprehended empirically and intuitively while its function shifts from measuring change to making it possible. Ultimately, the Zone in *Stalker* gives us the perceptual experience of an alternative, non-modern conception of space that reminds us of the enigmatic and capricious Gaïa, a new figure of planet Earth in the age of the Anthropocene. It further provides a concept—the zone—to address such problems so that its operativity should be explored in other theoretical fields.

The Experience of the Zone: A Space that Moves

³ See Maniglier, especially chapter 1 “Penser avec les arts,” for an insightful theorization of this method. More generally, this article owes a great deal to this book in terms of its method, the problems it raises, and the themes addressed.

A verdant meadow is scattered here and there with industrial debris. In the middle lies a rusted burned-out vehicle with human remains inside. The wind blows slowly and shakes the long blades of grass. The wind’s quiet howling is only interrupted with what sounds like footsteps that make wood twigs crunch and metal plates ring. The camera tracks low to the ground toward the vehicle with a straight-on, frontal angle. As it moves closer, a section of grass bends down and we hear birds flying away. Through the vehicle’s window, from the left side, a man appears. He walks and then stops in front of the grassland, his back turned. Another man follows immediately after and joins him, although not without quickly glancing back in the vehicle’s direction. The camera continues to move closer, the frame of the window doubling the frame of the shot. The two men linger, gazing at the landscape. After a few seconds, a third man steps forward from where the two others came. This time, the third man fixes his gaze toward the vehicle and exclaims: “Lord! Where’s – Did they remain here, the people?” To which, the first man answers without even looking: “Nobody knows. I only recall them leaving from our station to come here to the Zone. I was still a kid then. Everyone thought someone wanted to conquer us.” Then, the first man throws a steel nut tied to a piece of white cloth ahead and far from him. “Go on, Professor” he tells the second man. The latter proceeds while the third man continues to stare back, frightened. “Now you, Writer” the first man commands. So, he moves forward, followed shortly by the first man. The three men disappear, leaving us with an anonymous point of view on a lush greenery filled with half-rotten military tanks. As the camera continues to slowly zoom in, the wind blows louder.⁴

This scene takes place approximately a third of the way through the movie, right after the three characters have entered the so-called Zone, a forbidden and mysterious area around which the story evolves. It is a pivotal moment because it finally introduces us to the Zone after a series of announcements that has deferred its entrance even though it was the key topic of conversation. Indeed, the film opens with a crawling title that explains in the words of fictional Nobel Prize winner Professor Wallace the appearance in an unnamed country of an area from which people have disappeared because of supernatural phenomena. While its origin remains unknown—was it formed by a falling meteorite or alien visitation?—, the government has sealed the area off with barbed wire and prohibited any travel into it. Yet, Stalkers are guides that lead illegal expeditions into the Zone, at the center of which lies a room which allegedly has the power to grant its visitors’ deepest wishes. We follow one of them and his two clients, known only as Professor and Writer. The movie begins with Stalker getting ready and leaving his miserable apartment over his wife’s objections. He goes to meet his travel companions at a gloomy, worn-down bar. There, Writer explains that the reason for his trip is to recover lost inspiration while Professor pretends that his motivation is purely scientific curiosity. The trio leaves the bar, but a laborious road awaits them before they can enter the Zone. They drive through a desolate urban landscape of broken-down buildings, carefully avoiding police patrols and their bullets. They sneak behind a train and exchange their automobile for a railway flatbed car that they ride silently for a long time. Once they arrive at the top of a slope, they take a break: they have finally made it into the Zone. The landscape looks different: the grey, sordid

⁴ All film quotes are taken from the subtitles of The Criterion Collection Edition.

industrial setting gives way to a lush greenery scattered with debris. A sudden switch of film rolls from sepia to color accentuates this change of scenery. Here unfolds our scene. It corresponds, strictly, to the beginning of the trio’s expedition into the Zone. Just as the camera moves forward, we have the feeling of finally embarking on the promised journey.

Yet rather than providing relief after a lengthy expository sequence, the scene causes a lot of discomfort. The fluid movement of the camera, the straight-on frontal angle, the various sound effects, the grass being pushed away, the actors’ glancing performance, and the sur-frame of the window: all suggest that the shot embodies the perspective and the motion of something. Through the vehicle’s window, however, Stalker, Professor and Writer slowly appear one after the other— the only three persons that have made it there, excluding thus the possibility of a character subjective camera. This hypothesis is further rejected when characters repeat in this very scene that the Zone is a deserted land. How then do we explain the physical presence on the screen we see and hear? Perhaps it corresponds to the camera itself; to an objective, anonymous, and impersonal point of view that does not present the event through the eyes of a specific character within the scene, but the perspective of an ideal, passive, and neutral observer watching from a distance. The objective camera angle is a convention akin to the fourth wall in theater by which the entire cinematographic apparatus—including, among others, the camera, the staff, and the audience—does not belong to, and therefore intervene in, the world depicted on the screen. Yet, the perspective and movement considered here takes part fully in the scene’s action: it produces effects on the surroundings (bending grass, birds flying away) and interacts with the characters (the eye contact). For this reason, we are prone to believe that the camera takes on the point of view of the Zone itself.⁵ This hypothesis would be consistent with Stalker’s anthropomorphizing claims throughout their journey which suggest that it is an entity endowed with agency and subjectivity: “it may seem capricious,” “it demands respect,” “it punishes,” “it warns,” “it lets pass.”

The hypothesis that the Zone is a space that acts challenges the received idea of setting as what stands still and outside the action while providing a necessary framework for it. It is common in narrative studies to consider that the setting *influences* the storyline through the ways in which the geographical, historical, or social context shapes characters’ personalities and behaviors. The difference, however, is that it is conceived in terms of indirect actions that take their meaning only with respect to human conduct: the environment explains why people are as they are and why events happens as they do. On the contrary, in *Stalker*, the so-called setting appears as an autonomous entity independent from human existence. The idea that the Zone has the power to operate by and for itself is further supported by the immediately following scene. Right after the trio sets off, as soon as they arrive in view of the Room, their final destination, Writer proceeds straight on toward it. But a voice commanding him to stop interrupts him. Stalker and Professor both swear that they have not spoken a word. Here again, the movement of the camera, which tracks backward from within the building, suggests that

⁵ David Foster has shown the affinity between the Zone in *Stalker* and the very nature of the cinematic medium, especially in terms of impersonal subjectivity, using elements of framing, camera movement, color and editing.

the voice comes from there. In other words, it seems that the Zone has the power to act—even to speak—on its behalf. We should therefore speak of the Zone, following the terminology used in narrative studies, not as a *circonstant*, that is as providing additional information that nonetheless does not affect the essential nature of the action, but as an *actant*, that is whatever (a thing, a person, or a concept) *impacts* the course of events, showing the ability to have an effectivity of its own.⁶

That the categories of *circonstant* and *actant* eventually merge into one another underlines that we can no longer conceive space as that within which action takes place. This agency of space itself takes the form of a space that moves independently of the movements that are made within it. This emphasizes that motion is at the heart of the modern conception of nature when it comes to space. Indeed, nature is traditionally conceived as what springs, grows, fades – that which is permeated by movements. To study the laws of nature, the project of modern scientific rationality, it is therefore necessary to study motion. But to do so, one requires something within which things are located and in relation to which their movements are defined. This is how classical physics constructs the notion of space as an external and immovable three-dimensional container involving the identification of physical space to that of Euclidean geometry combined with the Cartesian coordinate system. This history has been well documented, in particular in Alexander Koyré’s classic book on the seventeenth-century scientific revolution and by more recent historians such as Françoise Balibar. Constructing space in terms of fixed containment is also coextensive with the much-decried modern separation of the subject from the object as the third term that makes such separation possible. On one hand, it objectifies matter by assimilating it to some sort of geometric points (i.e. impenetrable individual masses) and by distinguishing one material thing from another according to the assumption that if two things occupy different locations, then we can affirm that they are two different things. It follows that space is the inverted mirror of matter: it must have none of its properties and, at the same time, accommodate them. Incidentally, this confirms that a reassessment of the modern concept of matter toward its active powers cannot avoid fundamental questions on the nature of space. On the other, it assumes the position of a subject located outside of the world it claims to know from afar and lays the foundations for the modern idea of a transcendental subjectivity.

The Zone as a Challenge to a Certain Narrative of Scientific Rationality

It so happens that it is that conception of space as a static receptacle that the existence of the Zone explicitly challenges. This is particularly manifest in the following decisive line pronounced by Writer at the beginning of the film in which he hints at the main characteristics of the modern conception of space making it the yardstick against which to understand the Zone: space is continuous, homogeneous and isotropic; uniform and governed everywhere by

⁶ The term *actant* has gained special resonance within contemporary debates on the capacities of the nonhuman world to manifest active powers because it allows to eschew ontological binaries of subject/object, human/nonhuman, life/matter, and other variants of the nature/culture divide seen as key to modern Western thinking. See for example Latour and Bennett.

identical laws; devoid of quality, and therefore neutral to what happens there; it is a static reservoir of positions and trajectories that can be used as a reference for the study of nature.

WRITER – My dear, the world is so unutterably boring. There’s no telepathy, no ghosts, no flying saucers. They can’t exist. The world is ruled by cast-iron laws. These laws are not broken. They just can’t be broken. Don’t hope for flying saucers. That would be too interesting. LADY – But what about the Bermuda Triangle? You’re not going to contradict... WRITER – Yes, I am. There is no Bermuda Triangle. There’s Triangle ABC, which equals Triangle A prime, B prime, C prime. It’s all so tedious, so very tedious.

Here, Writer denies the possibility that supernatural phenomena, such as those which are supposed to occur in the Zone, exist in the name of some “cast-iron”, unbreakable, rules that govern the physical world. These rules correspond to the idea of the laws of nature which designate a causal determinism governing natural phenomena, explaining their occurrence into an invariant order (“same effect, same cause”), and that could be the object of scientific knowledge. Causal determinism lies at the heart of the doctrine of mechanism on which classical sciences are based: nature is like a complex machine in which everything that happens or exists is caused by an unbroken chain of bits of matter colliding with each other. It is important to keep in mind that deterministic mechanisms assume that all causality results from physical contacts that requires local interactions. In this sense, deterministic mechanisms rely on local causation – hence all the polemics around the idea of an action at a distance such as Newtonian gravitation and the need to postulate the ether as an invisible material that mediates the propagation of an action through space. It is clear that Writer endorses a necessitarian point of view: laws of nature are some inviolable edits that impose an order on the physical world and these laws are universal insofar as they are true for every time and place in the world.

It is telling that Writer illustrates the necessity of the laws of nature with an example ($ABC = A'B'C'$) taken from Euclidean geometry, conflating the space of physicists with that of mathematicians. The equality that he states between triangles ABC and A'B'C' refers to an operation of translation—the equivalent in geometry of a physical uniform rectilinear movement—which consists in changing the positions of every point (A, B, C) of a figure by the same distance in a given direction Δ according to the formula $(A, B, C) \rightarrow (A + \Delta, B + \Delta, C + \Delta)$ where the magnitude of change is the same for all points. In other words, translation corresponds to the change in location of a figure along a straight line without it undergoing any substantial change. This is possible because it is assumed that the space in which the figure moves is isotropic and homogeneous: directions and locations are identical to each other, they present the same properties, so that they are indistinguishable from one another. The undifferentiated space of Euclidean geometry is therefore an indifferent space: devoid of any material properties that could affect the shapes, locations, or movements of figures, it has no effect on what takes place there and remains fully unchanged the whole time. It is on this condition that it can be used as a reference for the study of natural phenomena. In other

words, it is an entirely quantifiable space devoid of qualities. It is thus mathematically definable: positions, distances, and directions can be measured using three numbers (the coordinates of length, breadth, and depth). Identifying physical space with geometrical space presents at least two advantages. First, it grounds the assumption that the physical world is uniform—nature acts the same everywhere: the movement of a falling apple to the ground and that of the moon circling around the earth obey the same universal principles—within the united system of mathematics. Second, it allows us to render natural phenomena into mathematical equations so they can be subject to predictions.

What is particularly striking in Writer's choice to illustrate the necessity of the laws of nature via an example of geometric translation is the important role that motion as a rectilinear uniform movement and place as an exclusive location play in this conception of space. It is, indeed, the study of motion that leads Newton to adopt the inert space of Euclidean geometry. He needs to postulate a space deprived of the movement that he wants to study with respect to which he can measure trajectories. But his conception of motion overdetermines his adoption of such a space. He apprehends it as the transport of a mobile from one place to another along a straight line, that is as a rectilinear uniform movement. This assumes that the various locations traversed by the mobile must be equal with one another. It logically endows space with a homogeneous and continuous structure according to which it is divisible into infinite positions identical to each other. Yet this understanding is not self-evident. It amounts to conceiving motion as a succession of positions in space, making it difficult to understand how one 'jumps' from one position to another. This is Zeno's famous paradox and Bergson's later critique: how is it possible to think of motion, which is essentially one, that is both continuous and indivisible, with the help of the discontinuous? Besides, it rests on a discontinuous view of matter according to which bodies are impenetrable individual masses akin to geometric points (again, this view is now disputed by contemporary science and quantum mechanics in particular). The spatial implications are twofold: first, bodies are locatable in space (they occupy exact positions) and, second, two of them cannot simultaneously occupy the same position. This is known as the principle of exclusive location, which implies that space is divided into distinct parts external to each other (and therefore fully actualized), ready to be the locus of bodies.

The Concept of the Zone: Three Features and Their Stakes

STALKER – The Zone is ... a very complex maze of traps. All of them are death traps. I don't know what happens here when humans aren't around. But as soon as humans appear, everything begins to change. Former traps disappear, new ones appear. Safe ways become impassable. The way becomes now easy, now confused beyond words. This is the Zone.

This is the very and only definition of the Zone in the film. Stalker claims there that the Zone is a very complicated system in which everything is set into motion and can change at any moment. This definition clearly emphasizes movement, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the film tells the story of a journey and uses long, slow tracking shots in doing so. In any event,

we understand better now how the image of a space that moves disrupts the received idea defended by Writer of an inert space that serves to measure movement, creating more than a little discomfort for spectators. Indeed, the Zone is cinematically and narratively constructed in stark contrast to the remaining diegetic space that corresponds to the world described by Writer. From the film stock to the scenery to the soundtrack, the two oppose in every respect: the vivid colors of the Zone contrast with the sepia of the city; the green, luxuriant nature with the urban, industrial setting; the damp foggy weather with the shabby concrete buildings; the sounds of the river and birds with the city’s roaring trains; the psychedelic music with the blaring classical symphonies. While characters describe the daily world as a prison governed by unbreakable rules, the Zone is presented as the place where everything becomes possible and all wishes come true. But beyond these discursive and aesthetic considerations, I suggest that it is at the level of their respective physical properties that these two spaces are different. The spatial arrangement of the Zone reconfigures itself constantly so that it never looks like what it used to be. In this sense, we cannot speak of a homogeneous space that would be the same everywhere and all the time. It would be impossible to draw its map and the relations between its various locations (e.g. the Room, the Dry Tunnel, the Meat Grinder) are totally obscured via the use of sudden cuts. Even within the same spatiotemporal unit, spatial relations are confusing and change arbitrarily from one shot to the next (Johnson and Petrie, 152).

It would be possible to characterize that space in motion typical of the spatiality of the Zone by three features: a heterogeneous and manifold structure characteristic of Riemannian geometry, a causal indeterminacy of its physical phenomena subject to constant variation, and an intensive materiality rich in potentialities. These three ontological characteristics lead to the adoption of a methodology, which can be said to be empirical or even intuitionist (epistemological stakes), and to reconsider the function of space, which is no longer a measure of movement but an operator of transformations (ethical and political stakes).

Concerning the first feature (the Riemannian nature of the Zone), Stalker insists that in the Zone the shortest path between two points is not a straight line and that it is impossible to take the same route twice. The trio experiences this during the scene of the Dry Tunnel. After a commanding voice has turned Writer away, who was trying to proceed straight on toward their final destination—the Room—, the trio cautiously continues on following Stalker’s instructions. Professor, however, having forgotten his knapsack, goes to fetch it despite his guide’s admonitions who reminds him that a traveler must never retrace its steps. The two other men continue on and arrive at the ironically named “Dry Tunnel”: a flooded passageway in which one must wade knee-deep. Although a long horizontal tracking shot underlines the continuous motion of their progression, the two men step outside the Dry Tunnel and meet a serene Professor drinking from his thermos by a fire, with his knapsack nearby, just where he had previously left it. As they exit the tunnel, Stalker notices a metal nut tied to a piece of cloth hanging above them and recognizes this as a trap. The trio realizes thus that the Zone has looped them while they thought they were following straight lines. Whereas both groups had proceeded straight ahead in opposite directions, they still have arrived at the same point: going straight and going backwards become identical. We may infer then that the characters move on a curved rather than planar surface, so that the geometry of the Zone would be Riemannian

instead of Euclidean. That is to say, it is a qualitative space with a heterogeneous and manifold structure.⁷

Regarding the second feature (causal indeterminacy within the Zone), necessary cause-effect relations do not determine physical phenomena in the Zone as is the case in classical mechanics. If everything can change at any moment, then the physical laws of the Zone are unlike Writer's “cast-iron rules” that govern nature. These laws are not fixed, but variable: at best regular, at worst random. Thus, in the movie, two events that we would ordinarily consider as correlated—circular waves formed on the water surface of a well and a stone thrown into the well—are disconnected from one another, thirty minutes of film separating them. More importantly, their assumed causal order is reversed: we first see water moving in a well and much later Writer throwing a stone in what seems to be the same well. This would mean then that the effect (the formation of waves) precedes its cause (the impact of the stone on the water surface). If the effect precedes its cause, then it would mean that we are dealing with an action at a distance and not with a push-pull mechanism requiring local contact. After dropping the stone, Writer thus concludes that scientific knowledge based on a hypothetico-deductive method is no longer operative: “Another experiment. Experiments, facts, or truth as a last resort. But there’s no such things as facts, especially here.” Indeed, establishing the laws of nature lies in the repetition of an experiment giving the same result, but in a world in continuous variation, events are no longer reproducible. The Zone thus resembles a world reduced to its purest empiricity.

As for the third feature (the intensive materiality of the Zone), the Zone is a space that bursts with sensitive qualities and material objects with which it is intimately associated. This impression is first marked by the discovery of a swarming nature and the switch to color film stock as the characters enter the Zone. Stalker’s first reactions are to stare at its beauty, listen at its quietness, and smell its flowers before he ultimately lies face down in the thick tall grass in a full sensory embrace. Throughout the film, as Antoine De Baecque notes, Tarkovsky’s camera emphasizes earthly materials such as oil, mud, or water, and gives a pronounced texture to the Zone (De Baecque, 25). It also regularly pans over various artefacts submerged underwater, whose narrative function has completely been obliterated, so that the place becomes inseparable from those objects that populate it.⁸ All of this contributes to the feeling that the Zone is characterized by a vividness that was not present in the dull and grey world—filmed in sepia—governed by cast-iron laws described at the beginning by Writer. This translates narratively into the fact that the Zone is a place rich in potentialities for it fulfills its visitors’

⁷ A Riemannian space can be locally, but only locally, related to a Euclidean space, i.e. described with a homogeneous and uniform structure of quantitative nature.

⁸ In the book from which the movie is adapted, these debris correspond to the remainders of an alien party who have stopped on earth as one would for a roadside picnic and are the reasons why stalkers venture into the Zone, the extra-terrestrial artefacts possessing high monetary value on the black market.

wishes, including those of which they may be unaware,⁹ and promises to change the current state of affairs in a supposedly fully determined world.

Now, how to move in a space that is itself in motion? This is the epistemological challenge raised by the spatiality of the Zone. Stalker's technique of travelling helps answer that question. He finds his way around via an intuitionist, empirical method that contrasts with the hypothetico-deductive model of scientific rationality disqualified by Writer in the well scene: Stalker every so often throws a steel nut tied to a piece of gauze before the group moves. This surprising method fulfills at least three purposes because of the specific spatiality of the Zone described above. By tossing a nut ahead of the group, Stalker tests the current rules that the Zone obeys at the very moment he throws the nut since these laws might change in the next moment, verifying for example how gravity works. At the same time, via the trajectory of the nut, he traces a line that did not pre-exist its execution inside a space with a non-linear geometry, creating a path to follow. Before he traced the path, there was no direction possible, or rather there were infinite possible directions. The nut throwing thus differentiates a direction among all the possible ones and actualizes a path that existed only virtually. Finally, in the absence of a subject position external to the world she is observing, the nut throwing makes it possible to map the space on its very surface, step by step, in an infinite succession of local connections.

Finally, we should consider the function of the Zone and therefore its ethical or political potential. Although we treated the world described by Writer and the Zone as opposed to one another for analytical purposes, we should consider how they are articulated together.¹⁰ Indeed, *Stalker* is foremost a movie about passage, hence the title which features the character who performs this function. The stakes of the film are precisely to go from the everyday world to the Zone and to return to it afterwards, otherwise the granting of wishes becomes useless. For that matter, the entry into the Zone gives rise to a subsequent seventeen-minute sequence that shows the trio avoiding police patrols, hiding in abandoned buildings, crossing gated barriers, and riding a railway flatcar. The circulation between the two spaces is further supported by formal indications: sepia shots and classical symphonies, characteristic of the aesthetics of the everyday world, contaminate the Zone such as in the swamp scene following the Dry Tunnel. Likewise, color shots and electronic music pieces worm their way outside the Zone: when Professor is waiting at the bar before the opening credits, when Stalker carries his daughter on his shoulders on his way home, and during the final scene in which Stalker's

⁹ This is the lesson that the characters learn from the story of Porcupine, the Stalker's mentor. Although Porcupine became rich overnight, he later committed suicide realizing that the Room had fulfilled his secret inner desire for wealth rather than his conscious motive of bringing back his brother from death.

¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari say no less about the smooth space and the striated space, the two constantly passing into each other (593). Our analysis of the Zone does ultimately reveal many similarities with the definition of the smooth space (see 471-58 and 592-625). But one may argue that it is less the respective descriptions of the smooth or the striated, in order to correctly attribute them, that count than their complementarity relationship. This is why we did not pursue that direction: at best the Zone in *Stalker* can help us better understand Deleuze's notion of smooth space but not the other way around.

daughter moves three glasses across the kitchen table with her telekinetic powers (which are genetic mutations caused by her father's many expeditions into the Zone). The challenge is therefore to understand how the Zone differs from and at the same time complements the world described by Writer in such a way that they need to be thought of together. Perhaps the existence of the Zone in the secret folds of the everyday world might actually serve to explain the becoming and eventfulness of a universe that is otherwise thoroughly determined. What emerges is that the Zone, because of its indeterminacy and richness, is less what allows us to observe nature and its changes than an operator for its very transformations. In other words, the Zone is what brings about change.

The View from the Zone: Situating the Zone Within Other Contemporary Alternative Spatialities

The Zone in Andrei Tarkovsky's movie *Stalker* gives us the perceptual experience of an alternative conception of space explicitly constructed in stark opposition to the external and inert reference frame of classical physics, one cornerstone of the concept of nature for Western modernity. Whereas matter has been the focus of most of contemporary philosophical critique for overcoming the destructive ontological gulf that separates nature from humans, thanks to the innovative scholarship known as New Materialisms (Coole and Frost), we hope to have shown that space cannot, and must not, also come out of this critique profoundly untransformed because of their intertwined conceptual histories. The image of a space in motion, which is no stranger to the specificity of the cinematographic medium, literally corresponds to a loss of reference point, reminding us of the enigmatic and capricious Gaïa—the name given by some to our planet Earth in the age of the Anthropocene—whose ground slips away under our feet and brings our categories into crisis (Stengers, 63). The question arises, however, as to how this image differs from other spatial constructions that have emerged in the twentieth century, namely the lived space of phenomenology, the space-time of general relativity, and the produced space of critical geography. In the first case, there is indeed a critique of the indifferent space of Euclidean geometry, but it is in favor of a spatiality organized around the bodily anchoring of the perceiver, so that the cursor only moves from the objective to the subjective. In the second, space is certainly dynamic for it curves due to the presence of matter, displaying thus a Riemannian geometric structure, but it remains subject to the mechanistic determinism of the laws of nature. In the third, critical geography does move us towards a more materialist understanding of space by underscoring its socially constructed nature but remains indebted to modern thought for it does not conceive matter as possessing its own modes of self-transformation. Thus, the spatiality of the Zone in *Stalker* combines elements of each of these alternative spatialities, despite their differences or even incompatibilities, while not being reducible to them (its specificity seems to be a constant variation or indeterminacy). We should therefore conceive the Zone less as saying something about the genuine nature of space but more as a way of posing a problem related to space which transforms our perception and conception thereof. This is how I imagine the zone as the bearer of a conceptual potential whose operability should be tested in other theoretical fields. Like a stalker, I propose to throw the zone like a nut that would guide us through the history of Western thought, landing in various fields so as to survey them. Whether it be zonal maps in

medieval cosmology, erogenous zones in psychoanalysis, special economic zones or zones to be defended in political economy—each time it is as if the concept of zone intervenes as soon as our spatial imagination proves insufficient.

*

WORKS CITED

Adair, Gilbert. “Notes from the Underground: Stalker.” *Sight & Sound*, 1980-81, pp. 63-64.

Balibar, Françoise. *Einstein 1905: de l'éther aux quanta*. Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1992.

---. *Galilée, Newton lus par Einstein: espace et relativité*. Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2007.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.

Casey, Edward S. *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: four theses.” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197-222.

Colebrook, Claire. “Introduction. Anthropocene Feminisms: Rethinking the Unthinkable”. *philoSOPHIA* vol. 5, no. 2, 2015, pp. 167– 178.

Coole, Diana and Samantha Frost. “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, 1-43.

De Baecque, Antoine. *Andrei Tarkovski*. Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1989.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Mille Plateaux*. Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1980.

Descola, Philippe. *Par-delà nature et culture*. Paris, Gallimard, 2005.

Dubroux, Danièle. “Les limbes du temple.” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 330, 1981, pp. 40-42.

Dyer, Geoff. *Zona: A Book about a Film about a Journey to a Room*. Edinburg, Canongate Books, 2012.

Foster, David. “Where Flowers Bloom but Have No Scent: the Cinematic Space of the Zone in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*.” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2010, pp. 307-320.

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.

Johnson, Vida T., and Graham Petrie. *The films of Andrei Tarkovsky: a visual fugue*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994.

Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013.

Koyré, Alexandre. *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1957.

Kovács, Bálint András, and Akos Szilágyi. *Les Mondes d'Andrei Tarkovski*. Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, 1987.

Latour, Bruno. *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*. Paris, La Découverte, 1991.

---. *Face à Gaïa: huit conférences sur le Nouveau Régime Climatique*. Paris, La Découverte, 2015.

Maniglier, Patrice. *La Perspective du Diable. Figurations de l'espace et philosophie de la Renaissance à Rosemary's Baby*. Arles, Actes Sud, 2010.

Panofsky, Erwin. *La Perspective comme forme symbolique et autres essais*. Translated by Guy Ballangé, Paris, Minuit, 1975.

Sauvagnargues, Anne. *Deleuze et l'art*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2015.

Stengers, Isabelle. *Au temps des catastrophes. Résister à la barbarie qui vient*. Paris, La Découverte, 2009.

Tarkovsky, Andrey. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986.

Tsing, Anna L. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *Métaphysiques cannibales*. Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2009.

Whitehead, Alfred N. *The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1920.

Žižek, Slavoj. “The Thing from Inner Space: on Tarkovsky.” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1999, pp. 221-231.