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Film temporality — a new form of experience? Reflections on Tarkovsky's assertions on time

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Abstract

In Andrei Tarkovsky's opinion, the birth of cinema was not merely the beginning of a new form of artistic expression, but it also brought the invention of a new aesthetic principle. In fact, for the first time in human history, time could be kept and preserved inside a "metal box", it could be dealt with and contemplated as though it did not vanish. Time had become a "material" substance; it had acquired physical traits; it had assumed "the form of fact". Cinema establishes a very specific and intimate relationship with reality. Panofsky stressed that [1] the medium of movies is "physical reality as such" and Bazin stated [2] that "cinema is committed to communicate only by way of what is real". Following an identical line of thought, Pasolini underlined that cinema expresses reality through reality itself, and in this sense, it is not a language, it is the language of reality, reality being in itself temporal and dynamic. For Tarkovsky, cinema allows a direct, emotional, sensuous perception of the work of the artist (contrarily to literature, which can only be received through symbols and concepts, thus depending always on the reader's selection and laws of his own imagination). Tarkovsky maintained that "cinema uses the materials given by nature itself, by the passage of time, manifested within space, that we observe about us and in which we live", but in his opinion time is above all a state, the "condition for the existence of our 'I'", "the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul". In this essay I intend to address the question of temporality in movies by contrasting Tarkovsky's notions with the thinking of St. Augustine and other authors. Whilst placing an emphasis on three basic dimensions of the cinema: the presentness, the narrativity and the iconicity of film, I will draw upon examples which will hopefully throw some light on the cultural implications of this phenomenon. One of my principal aims will be to discuss whether film actually responds with particular competence to a specific need of modern man, afflicted by what the Russian filmmaker calls modern man's "time deficiency".

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

(T.S. Elliot, "Four Quartets")

In his seminal book, *The World Viewed* [3], Stanley Cavell starts by comparing the importance of art forms such as music, painting, sculpting or poetry —which he says are not generally important, in terms of the "average man", except primarily to the men and women devoting to creating them— with the importance of movies: "rich and poor, those who care about no (other) art and those who live on the promise of art, those whose pride is education and those whose pride is power or practicality all care about movies, await them, respond to them, are grateful for some of them". And he adds that "its highest and its most ordinary instances attract (more or less) the same audience", whereas "people who attend to serious music do not attend to light dinner music, say, or movie music". Developing his idea about the puzzling phenomenon of popularity in films, Cavell points out: "there are, of course, in literature a few instances of very great artists who are at the same time popular. But my claim is that in the case of films, it is generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like typical ones".

What is there, then, I ask, that makes film so distinctive in this particular sense? Many say, as Cavell recalls, that "film is the modern art, the one to which modern man naturally responds". But even this acknowledgement must lead us to one of two conclusions: either film responds to a need or a desire that previous forms of art have not been able to do, or some specific social and anthropological characteristics of modernity find in movies a particularly pertinent "answer". In either case we cannot avoid asking ourselves what kind of "thing" or form of art film is, if it has such an impact in present day society.

In his equally famous work,*Sculpting in Time* [4] Andrei Tarkovsky states, in referring to the very first movies by the Lumire brothers that "a new aesthetic principle was born". I should like to point out in passing that the English, Portuguese, Italian and French translations of the Russian filmmaker's book Sculpting in Time — *"Esculpir o tempo", "Scolpire il tempo", "Le temps scellé"*— do not do proper justice to the original work's title. During his trip to Lisbon in 2011, Tarkovsky's son Andrei explained that although his father had used that image he had not meant to establish a direct analogy with the art of sculpture stricto sensu, but that he merely wished to emphasize film's ability to "capture" time, to "imprint it" by giving it a precise, fixed shape, and in this sense the French version is perhaps somehow closer to his central idea. To quote Tarkovsky, the filmmaker [4]

> *For the first time in the history of the arts, in the history of culture, man found the means to take an impression of time. And simultaneously the possibilities of reproducing that time on screen as often as he wanted, to repeat it and go back to it. He acquired a matrix for actual time. Once seen and recorded, time could now be preserved in metal boxes over a long period (theoretically for ever).*

We know that Tarkovsky was not the first one to establish the theoretical relationship between temporality and film, or, to put it more rigorously, to underline film's specific ability to deal with the inexorable passage of time, which is to say, man's inner desire to fight against death. It is enough to recall the beginning of Andr Bazin's book, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* [2], in

which the critic refers to film as the "mummy of change", (*"la momie du changement"*) — recalling its photographic source and comparing it to early Egyptian religion, which was a sort of rebellious system against death, thus responding to a "human psychological fundamental need to defend itself against time" — a notion born together with the first reflections upon the ontology of photographic and filmic imagery. It is a fundamental aspect, previously referred to, directly or by implication, by other important film critics and filmmakers, including Eisenstein, Griffith and Kracauer. And it is no coincidence that in his *The World Viewed*, Cavell indicates right from the start that his way of studying movies is essentially based on the way he remembers them, thus establishing a parallel between our memory —the instrument of recall, bringing back to life things past— and the experience of watching a film as a way of having access to a world brought from death to life, to movement and action.

It is important to understand that in Tarkovsky this notion about the specific value of film art, which he so well summarized in the famous expression "time in the form of fact", is taken to the level of a very acute and profound understanding. He is not speaking of time in terms of sequentiality or linear causality; he is not merely addressing the question of duration either, the *durée* that André Bazin was very much interested in, both in a chronological sense and as historical value. For the Russian filmmaker, history and evolution are not strictly speaking temporal elements, they are the natural consequence of this phenomenon we call "time". Time is not for him an objective datum, neither has it a merely psychological dimension: its nature is essentially spiritual, and consequently, in this sense —only as a consequence— is it personal and subjective. The precious potential of cinema is, for Andrei Tarkovsky, the possibility of printing that phenomenon on celluloid, in a very specific and "literal", "effective" way: "In what form does cinema print time? Let us define it as factual. [...] Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations: such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art".

Pasolini used to say that cinema expresses reality through reality itself, through its exterior aspect, its visible and perceptible "marks". In this sense, it is not a language, it is the language of reality, reality being in itself temporal and dynamic. Gilles Deleuze [5], when explaining the concept of "movement-image" —which is the kind of image characterizing classical and realist cinema, where time is an indirect consequence caused by montage and not implied in the image itself, as happens in modern film "time-image"—, also says that "movement-image is matter itself, as Bergson has showed. It is a semiotical and non-linguistically formed matter, constituting the first dimension of semiotics". As Pasolini explains in an interview with Giuseppe Cardillo [6], referring to his 1967 essay *Osservazioni sul piano-sequenza* [7], "the semiology of the cinema corresponds to the semiology of reality", since reality can be seen as

> *an infinite sequence-shot. From the moment we are born to the moment we die there passes in front of us an infinite sequence-shot. Cinema is nothing more than an ideal camera put before this sequence-shot, this continuous development of events which passes before our eyes from birth to death. Therefore, cinema is, actually, a hypothetical, impossible,*

> *infinite sequence-shot, as infinite as the reality passing before our eyes.*

In this sense, Pasolini adds, montage may be compared to death, since it is the final stop we artificially add to a continuous flux of time, the reduction of this infinite line to a limited segment. Sokurov's experiment in *The Russian Ark* (2002), a film made of a single 96-minute sequence-shot, pays homage to this idea.

Film is a deeply iconical medium, rendering the physical aspects of reality in a "direct" way, thus capturing the mutable nature of things as we can perceive them in real life, with the advantage of being able to offer that vision repeatedly, as if those portions of past time could come to life over and over again. Panofsky also said that "the medium of movies is physical reality as such" and Bazin stated that "cinema is committed to communicate only by way of what is real [...] the cinema (is) of its essence a dramaturgy of nature".

Neither of these critics is radically denying the representational dimension of cinema or confusing the artistic medium and its creative meaning with reality itself; they are above all stressing what is simultaneously cinema's strength and its weakness, its poverty, namely that it cannot escape the appearance of things, the images of reality, since "its medium is photographic and its subject reality". As Stanley Cavell puts it, film is "a succession of automatic world projections", the nature of which is inescapably temporal. Many filmmakers have tried to stress this specific potential of the Seventh Art by showing that, as St Augustine demonstrated, time cannot be defined by movement. Zviagintsev's *Elena* (2011), a disturbing movie about life and death and about social tension in a society where money has come to be the fundamental distinguishing factor, displays a signifying shot of a bird resting still on a tree while time passes from dawn to morning and morning to full day.

Yet St Augustine also spoke about the difficulty, or maybe even impossibility, of defining time:

> *For what is time? Who can readily and briefly explain this? Who can even in thought comprehend it, so as to utter a word about it? But what in discourse do we mention more familiarly and knowingly, than time? And, we understand, when we speak of it; we understand also, when we hear it spoken of by another. What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asked, I know not.*

Time is both a mystery and an everyday concept, referred to and implied in every aspect of our life. We cannot fully grasp it but neither can we avoid its permanent presence and its obvious consequences.

In his *Interviews* [8] Tarkovsky says:

> *I am convinced that time is no objective category since time cannot exist without man. Certain scientific discoveries tend to reach the same conclusion. We do not live in the*

> *'now'. The 'now' has not space, it is so short, so close to zero without being zero, that we have no way of perceiving it. The moment we call 'now' immediately becomes past, and what we call future becomes present and then at once it becomes past.*

This mysterious "place", so difficult to define, Tarkovsky calls an abyss, or —as he does in *Stalker* (1979)— the "zone", this "impossible" point of existence we all share: life. He saw time as a state, the "condition for the existence of our 'I'" [4]:

> *Time is necessary to man, so that, made flesh, he may be able to realize himself as a personality. But I am not thinking of linear time, meaning the possibility of getting something done, performing some action. The action is a result, and what I am considering is the cause which makes man incarnate in a moral sense. History is still not Time; nor is evolution. They are both consequences. Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul.*

For the filmmaker, the goal of all art is to help man understand what he lives for, what the meaning of his own existence might be, and cinema contributes to that aim by somehow mastering time, thus "winning" over its natural irreversibility and offering man a renewed experience of his own existential situation. Art therefore accomplishes a generous gift to mankind: the gift of awakening in man his most intimate and spiritual need, the need to grow in the knowledge of truth.

This brings us to the question raised at the beginning: what is it that makes film so important for the modern man? If we consider that only the present has enough power to confront man with his own existence, since the present is where the dynamics of life takes place, in the form of events, then the potential of film can be seen in a different light.

Let us observe three different aspects:

1. The presentness of film

St Augustine considered the three basic dimensions of time —present, past, future— in order to discover whether and how we can measure them. The most complex, mysterious and hard to define of the three is obviously the notion of present. But it is also, paradoxically, the one most vital to us, and St Augustine takes its existence as the only possible basis upon which he can define each temporal dimension. It is worth recalling his famous reasoning in the Book XI of his"Confessions" [1],

> *Nor is it properly said, 'there be three times, past, present, and to come': yet perhaps it might be properly said, 'there be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.' For these three do exist in some sort, in the soul, but other where do I not see them; present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation.*

Nothing therefore can be said to exist unless it is present, unless its presence is somehow reachable, acknowledged, now.

Contrary to photography (which, as Bazin said, "embalms time" and the reality of which, as Cavell put it, "is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present is a world past") and as distinct from literature (the narrative procedure of which is based on the value of the past, the principle of "once upon a time"), film transforms its past content into a contemporaneous event, its duration moving according to the same laws as our own temporality. Film cannot escape a temporal logic —chronology— even if it can strongly subvert its order and manipulate its duration. In the case of drama, apart from several important aspects connected with the "direct" (and not "mediated") relationship between actors and audience (whose decisive implications cannot be dealt with now), its nuclear strength lies in dramatic collision, concentrating our attention in each scene, instead of relying essentially in sequential action, in the creation of a "possible world", a world in permanent change.

Once the image is projected on the screen, we spectators are led to participate in its temporal flux, thus re-living those past facts in an isochronic way. In this sense, film allows a very specific kind of experience, one closer to that of "communion" than to that of mere "communication". The same kind of phenomenon can be said to occur with music, but whereas in music the material dimension of life is reduced to the limit of its complete dissolution, in cinema the concrete details of physical reality are offered to the viewer in their temporal dimension. This gives film a very particular sort of persuasiveness, one intimately connected with the phenomenon of dreams, since in both cases we viewers are, as Mara Zambrano [9] puts it, "victims" of time: "underneath dreams, underneath time, man does not dispose of himself. He therefore suffers his own reality". That is why dreams are always experienced with some kind of anxiety, even happy dreams, says Zambrano: "Hence the anxiety subjacent to dreams, even happy ones. Because dreams ask for reality". Suffering time in a condition of impossibility of choice —which is both the case of dreams and, up to a certain point, the case of cinematographic experience— is, paradoxically, a powerful means of awakening in us the urge to reality, the need to make sense of time, the absolute necessity of consciousness and freedom. When watching a film we suffer the influence and weight of time, not having the possibility of interfering in its course through the use of freedom. Yet, differently from the experience of dreaming, watching a movie allows us (in different degrees, depending on the characteristics of the movie and on our qualities as spectators) the possibility of judgment, which can liberate us from film's eventual "tyranny" (a tyranny too often used by commercial filmmakers, well conscious of cinema's strong capacity to create passive response and alienation).

Deleuze [5] argues that we should not conclude that the film image is necessarily present, since the "movement-image" engenders an image of time (through montage) which distinguishes

itself from the present as empirical course. "Time as unity or totality is dependent upon montage, which relates it to movement or to the succession of shots". But he also admits that a specific kind of optical image is possible: "time-image", typical of modern cinema, one where time is "seen" inside the shot, through the way its distinct, autonomous features relate themselves, not depending exclusively upon the indirect temporality caused by montage.

What cinema has achieved is something very specific —something Baudelaire had referred to and explicitly longed for— simultaneity of presence and absence. The events are not happening now, but our own experience of them is present: it is as if they were taking place precisely at the same moment we are seeing them. This, we may say, is as close to the experience of private, personal, real life as any other kind of expression could be. A world is taking place before us, a past world, and we have the chance not only of contemplating it, but also of experiencing it by sharing the same duration, by accompanying the process of transformation that time is operating (has operated) in that world, as it is operating in ourselves.

Cinema is therefore a potent vehicle for transforming memories into visible, concrete facts, thus somehow changing those past events into present experiences. In his work on time and narrative, *Temps et Récit* [10] Paul Ricoeur states that "remembering is having an image of the past", and in this way the French philosopher clearly connects memory with vision, as St Augustine does. St Augustine claims that the possibility we have of measuring things past is due to the fact that those things have left some kind of "trace", a sort of vestige or mark within us, and it is that trace, that sort of "image" that can be looked at through memory [11]

> *when past facts are related, there are drawn out of the memory, not the things themselves which are past, but words which, conceived by the images of the things, they, in passing, have through the senses left as traces in the mind. Thus my childhood, which now is not, is in time past, which now is not: but now when I recall its image, and tell of it, I behold it in the present, because it is still in my memory.*

Memory is therefore a way of beholding *now* something that has happened *before*.Tarkovsky [4] underlines the fact that, by its own nature, the present always escapes us: it runs away and "slips through our fingers like sand, it has no material weight unless through memory". For the Russian filmmaker, the value of the traces retained by memory is, as has been said, of a moral nature for the part they play in how a human being judges himself and becomes aware of what he is and what he wishes to be: "The time in which a person lives gives him the opportunity of knowing himself as a moral being, engaged in the search for the truth [. . .]". In this sense, human consciousness needs this kind of temporality, this "present of things past": the possibility, offered by the trace of events imprinted in memory, of acquiring new knowledge, thus deepening one's awareness of oneself. Loss of memory is always dramatic, since it might carry with it the loss of the possibility for self awareness. The objective value of the person is not at risk, but its subjective identity may eventually be lost and with it one

also loses the possibility of distinguishing reality from fiction and becomes incapable of using one's own freedom.

This should indeed be, for Andrei Tarkovsky [4], the function of every form of art: "all artistic work relies on memory, and is a means of crystallizing it": a means of putting us in front of what has happened by "artificially" creating the necessary "distance" which allows us to judge, both emotionally and critically. Cinema not onyl crystallizes memory, it also offers us its dynamism, its temporal quality, thus helping us (by *literally giving us time*) to participate in its essence and thus to acquire a deeper and more vital knowledge of ourselves.

2. The narrativity of film

Cinema is, precisely due to its temporal nature, a narrative form of art. It presents us with a series of situations in a successive, sequential form, by placing them in a space-time frame and ordering them in some kind of chronology. As the narratologist Seymour Chatman explains [12]

> *what makes Narrative unique [. . .] is its 'chrono-logic', its doubly temporal logic. Narrative entails movement not only 'externally' (the duration of the presentation of the novel, film, play) but also 'internally' (the duration of the sequence of events that constitute the plot). The first operates in that dimension of narrative called Discourse (or récit or syuzhet), the second in that called Story (histoire or fabula).*

Chatman proceeds to distinguish narrative from other kinds of non-temporal texts (arguments and descriptions), implying what Paul Ricoeur[10] so well discussed: narrativity and temporality are deeply linked and can be looked at from opposite, complementary perspectives — not only is human experience unable to escape temporal contingency (therefore all forms of artistic expression representing temporality and change are inherently narrative) but narrative expression is also only efficiently recognized by man in so far as it reproduces that aspect of reality which is subject to the inevitability of time. The French philosopher underlines the narrative dimension of human experience of temporality, maintaining that if human experience of time were not, in some way, pre-narrative, we wouldn't be able to understand any form of narrative whatsoever. In his opinion, "time becomes human in so far as it is articulated in a narrative manner; the narrative is significant in so far as it depicts the aspects of temporal experience". And he repeatedly explains: "To tell and to follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them in successive wholes". Through montage film creates a sequential continuum, thus manifesting the permanent interaction between each particular action and the world around it (before and after it), in this way attesting the importance of Hegel's concept of "totality of objects" for its definition. Film indeed suggests a "possible world", a "world in action", whereas drama is defined by what Hegel calls "total movement": its totality is concentrated round a firm center, round the dramatic collision. Context is therefore a fundamental dimension in film (as in every form of narrative art) and wishfully a dispensable element in drama, the power of which is

to evidence that struggle is the condition of human existence. As Bazin maintained, it is as if the main force working in narrative forms were of centrifugal nature (with an outward direction) whereas in drama it is essentially a centripetal action, concentrating everything in the scene itself.

Walter Benjamin spoke about the loss of narration as being the consequence of the loss of experience, characteristic of modernity. Modern societys deficiency of experience is reflected in some filmmakers' refusal to admit film's intrinsic narrativity, since to accept it also means to acknowledge the significant and meaningful potential of temporality, instead of ideologically defending its senseless development. Refuting cinema narrativity seems precisely to be a sign of present day difficulty in dealing with meaning itself — an evident proof of today's critical moment, in need of urgent reflection about the value of temporality. In Zambrano's words [9], "Time is a path not only to be walked upon but also to acquire knowledge in it, to acquire self-knowledge in it. Key time".

As Irena Zlawinska well demonstrated in her work, *Le théâtre dans la pensée contemporaine* [13], the absence of meaning implies the absence of time and vice-versa, as Hochkeppel's formula synthetically expresses: *"Sinnlosigkeit ist Zeitlosigkeit"* ("the loss of meaning is the loss of time"). Cinema wishes to recapture time, to fix it, so that its meaning can be fully grasped. Far from being a mere strategy, narrative is a cognitive "tool": it manifests a specific apprehension of reality, and is therefore the sign of a particular way of knowledge (according to its Sanskrit root, gn). Quoting Edward Branigan, Monika Fludernik —who emphasises the experiential dimension of narrative— underlines [14]

> *Narrative organizes spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events that embodies a judgement about the nature of events as well as demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events. It therefore represents and explains experience.*

Narrative basic structure is dependent on "events" — they are the fundamental mechanism in any kind of story, represented either verbally, visually or audio-visually. This is what allows us to avert the intrinsically concrete nature of narrative. As Flannery O'Connor [15] so clearly put it when referring to literature: "fiction is so very much an incarnational art", since each story is "an experience, not an abstraction", it is the 'carnal' representation of human experience. The fact that in any kind of story something "has to happen" and the fact that any kind of event is, up to a certain degree, a surprise, something not fully prepared or manipulated by us (Bötius used the expression *"inopinatum eventum"*) tells us about the inner nature of narrative: the visibility of transformation through the unexpectedness and surprise of concrete events.

For the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut "we are condemned to events", because "the unexpected is our law": things happen, even if we don't plan or foresee them and there is nothing we can do to stop or control it; we can only take part in that reality. This is precisely

what film does in a more "literal" way than any other form of art — it makes us participate in the tissue of temporality, in that mysterious and unstoppable flux of chronological events of which life is made. As spectators we await precisely what we need and cannot do without — the possibility of being surprised and therefore moved, transformed by facts that somehow shock us and therefore also change us.

Robert Bresson was very much aware of cinema's artistic potential, of its intrinsic narrative nature. In his famous, *Notes sur le Cinématographe* [16], he advised filmmakers on the value of waiting, and added his suggestion: "to create expectation is the better way to fully satisfy it". Narrative (either fiction or film) works by constantly creating anticipation, its mechanism depends upon surprise and expectation, upon hope. In this sense, it relies on the permanent creation of a "present of things future".

3. The iconicity of film

Paul Ricoeur speaks of the "iconical increase of reality" produced by such forms of art as painting or writing in so far as they can reveal the essence of reality, "a more real reality than everyday reality". These forms of representation do not simply replicate reality, they rather produce an aesthetical metamorphosis which shows the nature of reality. To write is, in this sense, to re-write reality in an aesthetical way, which reveals its essence. Both the verbal sign and the film image have this iconical value, although they work in different degrees, implying different types of reception. The narratologist Brian McFarlane explains [14] that the difference is not to be found in the distinction between the concrete nature of film image and the abstract dimension of the verbal sign but rather in the opposition between conceptual and perceptual dimensions:

> *The verbal sign, with its low iconicity and high symbolic function, works conceptually, whereas the cinematic sign, with its high iconicity and uncertain symbolic function, works directly, sensuously, perceptually.*

This high iconicity gives film a very particular kind of impact by displaying to the spectator the concreteness and factual dimensions of real life. Thus film, a very specific form of "vision", brings us close —maybe closer and more intimately than any other form of art— to the experience of "sight", the chance of contemplating the "present of things present".

If we accept that what cinema does is to capture what is happening by recording it and imprinting precisely the process of transformation itself, thus giving visibility to change, to the visible consequences of the passage of time in a highly iconical way, then we must admit that cinema has brought to the history of mankind, for the first time, the possibility of achieving the "impossible", which is to keep and faithfully reenact someone's memory or imagination as a specific physical trace of events, thus favoring the conscious way the spectator may freely deal with them.

Film responds with particular competence to a specific need of modern man. Walter Benjamin spoke about the loss of the capacity to narrate; for Tarkovsky that loss is intimately connected with what he calls modern man's "time deficiency". In his opinion [4],

> *[. . .] as he buys his ticket, it's as if the cinema-goer were seeking to make up for the gaps in his own experience, throwing himself into a search for 'lost time'. In other words, he seeks to fill that spiritual vacuum which has formed as a result of the specific conditions of his modern existence: constant activity, curtailment of human contact, and the materialist bend of modern education.*

And he adds,

> *people go to the movies in search of a life experience, because the cinematographer, like no other form of art, enlarges, enriches and concentrates the effective experience of man, and thus not only increases it but also renders it, so to say, decisively longer. Here lies the effective strength of cinema. Not in 'stars', in stereotyped individuals or in entertainment.*

Film has a special ability to put us into a permanent state of waiting and longing. It can either be a major form of illusion and alienation or a great possibility of self-knowledge. The greatest filmmakers are those who count upon people as persons, not mere "audiences", and they generally do it by offering people time and space and by expecting a free and an active response from them. Perhaps some examples might be of use before concluding.

We cannot fail to notice that characters in a movie are not, strictly speaking, real flesh and blood people, although they are "human" — "neither flesh nor fleshless", Eliot would say. That is why Manoel de Oliveira calls them "ghosts": they are the recorded images, the moving images of real persons, separated from us by the sort of barrier that the screen is. They move on the other side of the mirror, reflecting their image on us, the spectators, who see reality "as through a mirror, not yet face to face", in St Paul's words.

It is precisely this idea that Tarkovsky wished to convey when he made his famous film *Mirror*, from 1975. His movie is an allegory of film itself: it portrays the way cinema frames and keeps time, thus offering us the renewed possibility of watching events from a new, privileged perspective, allowing the spectator to widen and deepen his own consciousness by recovering memory and dreams gone by, as does a mirror in reflecting his own image, offering him the possibility of contemplating himself from a different angle (both spatial and temporal) and therefore of being able to see what is usually concealed from him: his own eyes, his ears, the effect of his movements The whole movie has to do with this new possibility of having access to a past experience, kept in memory and dreams, and reflected on the screen. In this particular case it is the memory of someone who recalls his own life with some bitterness and wishes to pay a debt of love. Tarkovsky wants to use cinema as a very special kind of mirror: the nostalgic and magical mirror which reflects the irretrievable time of childhood and youth from different perspectives, multiplying these memories and thus offering others a new vision of their own lives, contributing in this way to the attainment of a moral judgment

about oneself and our place on earth.

In one of the film's scenes (the structure of which is discontinuous, non chronological and deeply emotional) we hear the commentary of an adult man, Alexei, remembering his past as a time of possibility and hope; a second shot shows us his son, waiting in a room while the mother (who is separated from her husband) talks to a woman neighbour. The child looks at his own image in the mirror — as if the father, through his son's thoughts, could see his own faults and retrieve lost memories (the dripping milk of his childhood, depicted in the image) in the process of his son's becoming adult.

A very different kind of example may be seen in the beautiful movie by Gabriel Axel, *Babette's Feast*, released in 1987 and based on the story by Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen) — the first Danish movie to win the Academy award for best foreign language film. In a very puritan and small community in 19th century Denmark, a French Chef de cuisine, Babette, a victim of the French revolution, is given refuge by two kind sisters, Martine and Philippa (whose father never allowed them to marry, although both had had eligible suitors). After fourteen years on the Danish island, working as housekeeper and living modestly, but never explaining what her former occupation was, Babette is shocked to learn that she has won a lottery. She decides to spend the prize by herself preparing a marvelous dinner for the small, puritan community. The beauty of the story lies in the impressive event which occurs when an unexpected guest, Lorens, a famous general and man of the world, former *Attaché* in Paris and once Martine's young lover, astonishingly praises the extraordinary quality of the meal to the austere group, who had promised not to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, but little by little yield to the irresistible pleasure of the delectable dishes. The longest part of the film lies precisely in the duration of this meal, during which a profound and very significant event takes place: the transformation of each of the guests and of their relationships with each another through the acceptance of the artistic beauty of the meal. This produces a sort of mystical redemption, both physical and spiritual. Little by little, their stiff silence is broken, they start recalling past events with joy, their pale cheeks gain colour and the pleasure of the meal becomes evident. The final scenes are crucial, because through the dialogue between Martine and Lorens the full meaning of what has just happened is caught: it is as if time has not passed, or as if its passage did not win over them — through this dinner and this renewed encounter, Martine and Lorens understand that their love had not been wasted, that it was alive and had been mysteriously fruitful and true during all those years. Thus the spectator is given the possibility of sharing and being able to reflect upon a situation during which a crucial, existential change takes place, by somehow isocronically participating in the duration of a synthetic, decisive event (through the contemplation of its exterior, iconical marks), which gives meaning to the entire life of the characters involved. He is given the possibility of seeing "time in the form of fact".

A third example might be given using Manoel de Oliveira's 2010 film entitled *O estranho caso de Angélica* (The strange case of Angelica). In this film the still active 105-year-old Portuguese filmmaker tells the story of a photographer, Isaac, who is called on to take the last photographs of a young bride who has suddenly died. While positioning the camera in front of the young and beautiful corpse, Isaac experiences a strange and terrifying phenomenon, which will haunt him for the rest of his life: the girl seems to come alive and smile at him — and therefore also at us. Isaac will consequently fall in love with the dead girl, Angélica. Through the photographic image made dynamic in the film, we all become witnesses of the miracle of "overcoming" death through cinema, or of the power of film to bestow on us, in a considerably persuasive way, the thing we most desire — life. Oliveira wanted to use the phenomenon of film viewing to demonstrate how close life and death are, how intimately physical reality and transcendental life touch themselves, in this sense approaching Tarkovsky's vision, who used to say he did not believe in death. But it might also be of use to recall Carl Dreyer's 1955 movie *The Word* (Ordet) —where a young mother is miraculously brought from death to life— to confirm how film art aims at offering the ultimate experience: the possibility not only of seeing the invisible but also of participating in its mysterious, dynamic presence. We "see" it in such a "literal" way and with such iconic simultaneity that these past, impossible things become possible and seem to be happening now: their absence becomes present to each one of us.

The "ghosts" behind the frame share our own experience: what has happened to them is re-enacted and becomes ours as well, by surprising us and persuading us, thus offering us the most precious gift: the iconicity of time, its pressure, its presentness, its sense. When watching a movie (especially if it's a good movie, one which is not meant to manipulate the audience) we are offered a piece of real time, the most valuable item in modern society: time to "see", time to "remember", time to "hope", to enter deeper in the most important quality of the "here and now", of time itself - surprise, awareness, the meaningful and valuable quality of events. "What might have been" has actually (and fictionally) taken place, a place that has become present and "points to one end". Therefore I close my paper with Robert Bresson's beautiful and profound advice to filmmakers [16]:

> *. . . to provoke the unexpected. To wait for it, (since) to film is to set up a meeting. Nothing unexpected that you have not been secretly waiting for.*

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