

THE 'ZONE' AS HETEROTOPIA IN ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S *STALKER*

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Abstract: *In this article, I approach Tarkovsky's depiction of the 'Zone', from the film 'Stalker'. I argue that the 'Zone' is a heterotopia. Firstly, I review the perspectives developed by Foucault, Deleuze and Tarkovsky which are relevant for my argument. Next, I emphasize the connections that could be ascertained between Foucault's 'heterotopology' and Tarkovsky's portrayal of the 'Zone', using Deleuze's 'cinematic philosophy'. Afterwards, I compare the 'Zone's' characteristics with the features attributed to heterotopias by Foucault in his 'heterotopology'. I conclude that the 'Zone', just like the ship, could be considered a heterotopia par excellence.*

Key words: *heterotopia, heterotopology, cinematic philosophy, time-image, Tarkovsky's Zone.*

1. Introduction

In this article, I approach Andrei Tarkovsky's portrayal of the 'Zone', in his film *Stalker* (1979). While the topic of whether the 'Zone' is a heterotopia was previously suggested in a few papers, I attempt to approach this topic from an anthropological and semiotic perspective. Drawing upon the innovative lecture of Michel Foucault entitled "Des Espace Autres" (i.e. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias") and on Gilles Deleuze's book *Cinéma 2, L' Image-temps* (i.e. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*), I argue that the 'Zone' is a heterotopia. Thus, I agree Léopold Lambert's assertion that the 'Zone' matches what Foucault calls a 'heterotopia of crisis' in the first principle of his 'heterotopology' [5], [8]. However, I also assert that to describe it solely as a 'heterotopia of crisis' would mean to ignore many of the characteristics of the

'Zone' which were richly represented in the movie. Thus, I claim that the 'Zone' also has certain characteristics that could be described using the other 'principles' devised by Foucault in his attempt to imagine a systematic description of heterotopias.

My approach requires several additional remarks regarding Foucault's original concept. Delivered as a lecture on 14th of March 1967 at the *Cercle d'études architecturales* in Paris, Foucault's attempt to envisage a new type of spatial analytics, which he called 'heterotopology' (i.e. fr. 'hétérotopologie'), quickly gained notoriety among architects and social scientists. Between 1960 and 1970, the circle was directed by Ionel Schein and Jean Dubuisson. Foucault held his lecture at Schein's invitation, after the latter heard the former's discourse on "France Culture" from 7th of December 1966, entitled "Les Hétérotopies". Foucault's wrote his lecture

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during a stay in Sidi-Bou-Saïd, Tunisia [4], [6]. Foucault chose to leave for Sidi-Bou-Saïd in order to escape the commotion stirred by the publication of *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (i.e. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*). Moreover, his lecture was based on a discussion regarding utopias and heterotopias from *Les mots et les choses*.

Foucault's conceptual innovations must undoubtedly be put into context. The mid '60's represented a period in which architects developed a new awareness regarding the composition of contemporary cities. According to Christine Boyer, the architects "wanted to inject social science into architectural studies" [1]. This was paralleled by cultural anthropologists' newfound interest in cities, seen both as places of habitation and spaces of (post)-modernist interaction and the subsequent emergence of urban anthropology. Also, in the same period, the anthropologist Edward T. Hall created a new discipline, entitled 'proxemics'. This discipline approached space and place from an anthropological and semiotic standpoint.

The film *Stalker* was based on Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's novel entitled *Roadside picnic* [10]. Some film critics considered *Stalker* one of the best science fiction movies. However, Tarkovsky described it as a moral-philosophical parable. Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie state that Tarkovsky emphasized *Stalker*'s humanistic themes. Also, when he compared *Stalker* with *Solaris*, another of his much acclaimed films, Tarkovsky stressed "its stylistic innovations and the differences between the original story, the various scripts, and the final film" [7]. Remarkably, in the last three decades, the articles dedicated to interpreting this film are predominantly oriented towards its spiritual and religious themes. Moreover, *Stalker* gained cult status after calamities

such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Despite Tarkovsky's attempt to minimize *Stalker*'s science fiction aspects inherited from the novel, the film actually has many shared features with Strugatsky's *Roadside picnic*. The novel's plot takes place in the near future. Except for a succinct written explanation at the beginning of the movie, Tarkovsky does not delve in the origins of the 'Zone'. Moreover, he reduces the physical descriptions of the dangers that lie in the 'Zone'. Tarkovsky changed almost beyond recognition the characters and the events from the plot. He also altered the philosophic implications of the plot in more affable directions. On the other hand, *Roadside Picnic* approaches topics that are more related with gaining knowledge and understanding: what was the reason behind the alien visitation that resulted in the emergence of the six 'Zones'? What is the purpose of the debris from the 'Zones'? These aspects are more or less ignored by Tarkovsky. Nevertheless, there are many details present both in the novel and in the film, such as: (a) the 'Plague Quarter' of abandoned houses at the border of the 'Zone'; (b) the way the borders of the 'Zone' are represented; (c) the leitmotif of railways, train wagons and the trolley; (d) the practice of throwing metallic nuts tied to strips of cloth to test the trail; (e) the assertion that it is faster to take detours than to go in a straight line; (f) one of the characters brings a gun into the 'Zone'; (g) the assertion that there is no time in the 'Zone'; (h) the presence of a 'Room' in the film or of an object (i.e. the 'Golden Ball' in the novel), which grants only one's deepest wishes; (i) the main protagonist's hope for a miracle and his incapacity to express his own wish after experiencing great adversities [7], [10], [12]. Therefore, while Tarkovsky altered considerably the story, he certainly adopted more than a rough sketch from the Strugatskys' novel.

Cinema is approached by Deleuze as a

different form of thought. For him, cinema and philosophy are in an 'aparallel evolution'. An idea could be expressed either using a cinematographic image or a philosophical concept [2], [9]. Hence, philosophy and cinema should be put into contact rather than use the former in order to write about the latter. While Deleuze does not offer a clear definition of what is the 'time-image', he does offer a plethora of examples and descriptions of its constitutive aspects. But interpreting the potential combination of these aspects is left to each owns' devices. However, Deleuze admits the fact that producing the 'time-image' in a consistent manner is an endeavour few film directors ever achieved. Remarkably, Deleuze names Tarkovsky as one of the film directors that demonstrated a degree of artistry in achieving the 'time-image'. As examples, Deleuze gives three of Tarkovsky's films: *Solaris*, *Stalker*, and *Mirror*. More importantly, Deleuze remarks Tarkovsky's return "to the opacity of an indeterminate zone" [2]. Thus, Deleuze emphasizes a characteristic of heterotopias: they are to a certain extent indeterminate. After all, just as John Marks has argued, "the mutual influence of Deleuze and Michel Foucault is clear to anybody acquainted to their work" [9]. One could easily identify multiple connections that exist between their writings. This is due partly to their overlapping fields of interest. Cinema, as one of the newest major art-forms, is a focal point for both. I develop this topic in the third part of this article.

2. Objectives

Heterotopias are places where space and time are relative. Interestingly, two sciences approached the relativity of space and time, drawing their inspiration from philosophy. These two sciences are anthropology and physics. From an

anthropological standpoint, heterotopias are places of alterity. Therefore, they "are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect" [6]. When Foucault is stating that heterotopias are simultaneously representing, contesting and inverting "all the other real sites that can be found within a culture", he is hinting that heterotopias are necessary for describing the above-mentioned 'real sites' [6]. Throughout this article, I am making considerations concerning the functions of heterotopias.

In this article, I argue that the 'Zone' from Tarkovsky's *Stalker* is a heterotopia. With this aim in mind, in the introduction I have formulated a series of preliminary remarks concerning Foucault, Tarkovsky and Deleuze's works relevant for my topic. In the third part of this article I indicate the main types of heterotopias described by Foucault. Subsequently, I have two objectives. First, to review the connections that could be ascertained between the 'heterotopology' developed by Foucault and Tarkovsky's 'Zone', via Deleuze's 'cinematic philosophy', with an emphasis on the concept of 'time-image' [2], [6], [11]. Next, I aim to compare the various characteristics of the 'Zone', as they are represented by Tarkovsky, with the features attributed to heterotopias by Foucault in his 'heterotopology'. Finally, I conclude that the 'Zone', just like the ship, could be considered a *heterotopia par excellence*.

3. Connections Reviewed: From Foucault to Tarkovsky via Deleuze

While often being considered opaque and confuse, Foucault's lecture outlines six defining principles of heterotopias. He uses the principles from his 'heterotopology' in order to systematically describe them. Foucault distinguishes two main types: (1) crisis heterotopias (i.e. "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for

individuals who are, in relation to ‘society’ and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis”); (2) heterotopias of deviation (i.e. “those in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed”) [6]. Notably, when Foucault formulates his fourth principle, he emphasizes the connection between heterotopias and ‘slices in time’ (i.e. ‘heterochronies’). In addition, he classifies heterotopias in two categories in relation to time: (a) heterotopias of time that accumulates indefinitely (i.e. “heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit”, like museums and libraries); (b) heterotopia of the festival (i.e. ephemeral places, where time is “in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect”) [6]. Also, Foucault emphasizes the quintessential aspect of heterotopias: they are all contestations of all other spaces.

When Foucault attempts a systematic description of heterotopias, he hints a ‘double logic’ by which they operate. This double logic was later suggested by James D. Faubion and emphasized by Boyer: heterotopias entail imaginations and illusions that “sustain the normality of everyday space and yet, they negate these illusions, replacing them with other imaginary, but more static places” [1], [4]. Thus, it could be argued that heterotopias might allow the members of any given culture to see that which is not. Suggestive in this sense are Foucault’s ‘reflections’ regarding mirrors [6]. This generalization is not an artificial one. As Foucault anticipated, in the last century anthropologists have discovered places that could be described as ‘heterotopias’ in almost all the studied cultures. Thus, from an anthropological standpoint, it could be claimed that by theorizing heterotopias Foucault speculated the existence of a ‘cultural universal’. More importantly, just

like all the other ‘universals’, it could be argued that heterotopias are based on basic human needs.

Heterotopias are the places of the ‘Other’ as hypostases of alterity. Indeed, alterity is inextricably linked with heterotopias. Thus it is no surprise that the ship is for Foucault the ‘heterotopia par excellence’. The ship is a place floating in space. On the other hand, the ‘Zone’ from the *Stalker* is floating in time and space: the spatial and the temporal dimensions are entwined in the ‘Zone’ just like in a Möbius band. Both the ship and the ‘Zone’ are places that contest “all the other real sites” [6]. Heterotopias are, from an individual’s standpoint, beyond all the other places. However, their location can be viewed in reality, just like in the case of mirrors, or of the mirrored places, like those represented in movies.

The concept of ‘time-image’ is in many ways representative for the ‘cinematic philosophy’ described by Gilles Deleuze in the book *Cinéma 2, L’ Image-temps* [2]. Deleuze’s ‘cinematic philosophy’ requires new methods of viewing the surrounding world. An essential aspect pertaining to Deleuze’s concept is the role of the ‘observer’ within the film, which differs significantly from the role of the ‘actor’. Remarkably, there is a connection between Deleuze’s theses and Foucault’s. Deleuze resembles his conception of history, which entails “new types of speech-act and new structurations of space”, with Foucault’s ‘archaeological’ conception [2].

There are also connections between Tarkovsky’s reflections regarding ‘the film image’ in the book *Sculpting in Time* and Deleuze’s ‘cinematic philosophy’ [2], [11]. These connections were revealed by John Marks and Donato Totaro [9], [13]. Both Tarkovsky and Deleuze are interested in merging concepts concerning cinema and film theory into a ‘cinematic philosophy’. This philosophy regards the ways in which

the viewers might attain new and original means of interpreting the images that are presented before them. Deleuze asserts that the “‘time-image’ puts thought into contact with the unthought, the unsummonable, the inexplicable, the undecidable, the incommensurable” [2]. Marks identifies another connection between Deleuze and Tarkovsky, when he asserts that “just as Deleuze feels that a linguistic framework for film analysis is an insufficiently flexible tool for the potential richness of cinema’s system of signs, so Tarkovsky claims that a real picture has a plural sense of time which flows beyond the frame” [9]. There is a direct link between this perspective and the perspective expressed by Tarkovsky in *Sculpting in Time*. More specifically, he states that “in cinema it is all the more the case that observation is the first principle of the image [...] Naturalistically recorded facts are in themselves utterly inadequate to the creation of the cinematic image. The image in cinema is based on the ability to present as an observation one’s own perception of an object” [11].

The existence of cinema as a unique ‘space’ is a notion shared by Tarkovsky and Deleuze. In this ‘space’, imagination and reality are converging into a place that may very well reveal itself as a different ‘reality’. Deleuze asserts that cinema is a composition of pre-signifying signs and pre-linguistic images. Together, they create a “pre-verbal intelligible content” [2]. Far from being an universal language, the cinema of the ‘time-image’ consists of images and signs which precede language.

A careful examination of Tarkovsky’s notion of ‘film image’, Deleuze’s ‘cinematic philosophy’ and Foucault’s ‘heterotopology’ reveals a plethora of similitudes emphasized by Deleuze, when he asserts: “The time-image fuels thought and pushes it to the limit where new concepts take shape, and new forms of

subjectivity and ways of being in the world arise” [2]. The heterotopias described by Foucault allow individuals to experience a place free of the “syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’” [5]. In a similar manner, the role of ‘the seer’ in the cinema of the ‘time-image’ allows the film director to imagine and represent images to the viewers free from the limitations of the mundane world they understand and symbolize.

4. The ‘Zone’ as Heterotopia

When it is regarded as a building, the ‘cinema’ is a heterotopia because it allows the emergence and existence of multiple overlapping spaces. Foucault describes it as “a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space” [6]. Heterotopias in ‘cinema’ (i.e. when the term is used in its broadest sense), reveal multiple potentially intersecting spaces. Furthermore, in ‘cinema’, heterotopias question the reality of those intersecting spaces [8].

The ‘Zone’ is not represented by Tarkovsky as a flawless space of social harmony (i.e. utopia). Nor can it be considered a nightmarish social space (i.e. dystopia); even though some film critics treated it as such. Moreover, the ‘Plague Quarter’ of abandoned houses placed at its borders clearly differentiates the ‘Zone’ from the ordinary places of the mundane world. Instead, the ‘Zone’ is represented as an unusual and remote place that has a significant role in relation to ‘society’. The ‘Zone’ is a forbidden place. Just like in Foucault’s first principle, the ‘Zone’ is sought after by individuals (i.e. the stalker, the professor and the writer) who are in a state of crisis in relation both “to ‘society’ and to the human environment in which they live” [6]. For this reason, Lambert

argues that the 'Zone' is a 'heterotopia of crisis'. The 'Zone' determines the three protagonists to fundamentally alter their behaviour. Thus, the stalker initiates the professor and the writer into a behaviour that cannot be explained using "scientific rationality" [8].

While I do not deny that their behaviour does access a form of mysticism that is specific to heterotopias of crisis, I argue that the 'Zone' also entails features that are characteristic to heterotopias of deviation: the stalker, the professor and the writer are all deviants in their own way in relation to 'society'. While Foucault does not assert how the heterotopias of crisis are replaced by heterotopias of deviation, a possible explanation is that the latter have evolved from the former, for there are undeniable similarities between them.

In order to attain their wishes or to 'rediscover' themselves, the three protagonists escape from the rational system represented by 'society'. In this way, they attempt to escape from an institutionalized system by entering a 'Zone' that not only is not controlled by 'society', but is beyond it. The agents of 'society' bordered, blocked and attempted to isolate a place that is more than just juxtaposition of alternate spaces and times. The 'Zone' is also a hypostasis of an alternative to 'society', as a system based on logic principles. The 'Zone' is the proof that the rational system represented by 'society' is not unique. Accordingly, the 'Zone' appears to allow more freedom to those who come from a rational system. The 'Room's' potential for fulfilling deepest wishes represents the 'Zone's' imagination reserve.

The 'Zone' could be considered both a heterotopia of crisis and a heterotopia of deviation. The three protagonists are sketched by Tarkovsky as having behaviours that are deviant in relation to the norms ascribed by 'society'. Their

motives and habitus have driven them into the 'Zone': (a) the stalker claims that his motive is altruistic in nature, as he claims that he wants to aid the hopeless, even though he cannot enter the 'Room'; (b) the writer wants to recover his lost inspiration, even though he has lost his confidence in his writing; (c) the professor apparently hopes to win a Nobel Prize by researching the phenomena that occur in the 'Zone', even though this proves to be a deception. Each of the three protagonists could be considered a pariah in his own way. Evocative in this sense is the stalker's statement that he is a failure and that all those he has brought to the 'Room' are also failures, but he can still help them. His statement, uttered as an answer to the writer's accusations hints his assumed role. Also, by being represented as physically close and socially distant to the two men he guides through the 'Zone', the stalker could be considered a 'stranger' in Georg Simmel's terms. He is the intermediary, the guide that facilitates the other two protagonists' contact with the 'Zone'.

In his second principle of his 'heterotopology', Foucault states that a 'society' can determine in time an existent heterotopia to "function in a very different fashion" [6]. The 'Zone's' initial function was that of 'society's' antithesis: a hypostasis of alterity in the absolute sense. However, as the marginal members of 'society' discover the potential and the freedom it entails, the 'Zone' becomes in Foucault's terms "the greatest reserve of imagination" for the 'society' [6]. The fact that the 'Zone' is a reserve of imagination is highlighted by Tarkovsky through the use of colour and different filming techniques. Thus, the mundane world is filmed in sepia tone. The images are shot with a crisp focus. On the other hand, the 'Zone' is filmed in a carefully chosen colour palette. According to John W. Fail, this palette "provides much of the impact

of the 'Zone's' first visualization in the film" [3]. The palette is predominantly composed out of hues of blue and green, with ample, albeit washed out settings. The ripple of the wind creates the illusion of fluid physical boundaries. This fluidity has also a temporal dimension, as the 'Zone' is represented by Tarkovsky in an analogous manner to that envisioned by Deleuze in his 'cinematic philosophy' of 'time-image'. More specifically, the images from the 'Zone', defined as systems of relationships between various elements, are much more richly represented than those from the mundane world. Also, the city outside the 'Zone' is mentioned by the stalker as a 'closed' environment (i.e. 'behind the barbed wire') in a skilfully imagined transposition of the surrounding barricaded borders, for he can feel truly free only in the 'Zone' [12].

The 'Zone' is juxtaposing in a real place multiple spaces. As I stated above, both senses of 'cinema' entail a juxtaposition of multiple spaces. Thus, the 'Zone' from the film *Stalker* represents a double levelled juxtaposition. The 'Zone' is in many ways akin to the garden from Foucault's third principle. Just like the garden, the 'Zone' has a manifest physicality. It has an abundant flora and the flowing water is a wide-spread leitmotif [12]. Similar to Foucault's depiction of the garden as a heterotopia, at the 'Zone's' centre lies the 'Room' as a sort of Foucauldian "navel of the world" [6]. In the 'Zone' it is faster to take detours than to go in a straight line, because the juxtaposed spaces inside it are to a certain extent incompatible. Tarkovsky represents the 'Zone' in such a way that the viewer can never fathom the spatial depth of the set. Also, the viewer cannot determine the orientation of the three protagonists, because in the 'Zone' space is never represented continuously.

This type of fragmentation of representation is achieved by making

perceptible what Deleuze considers to be "relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present" [2]. Thus, Tarkovsky masterfully creates the perception of multiple spaces within one place by challenging the distinction between montage and shot. Unlike the two dimensional movement of the camera used to capture the scenes from the mundane world, in the 'Zone' the camera is moved along three dimensional axes. Thus, Tarkovsky manages to create "a sense that the 'Zone' is continuously shifting, with Euclidian geometry upset by impossible physics at work" [3].

Tarkovsky's mastery of the 'time-image' allows him to represent the 'Zone' as being connected to multiple 'slices in time', or 'heterochronies' in accordance with Foucault's fourth principle. Tarkovsky intended to have no time lapse between the shots, "as if the whole film had been made in a single shot" [11], [12]. In this manner, he performs a form of concentration, managing to pile up 'time-images' about the 'Zone' in his film. This roughly corresponds to Foucault's heterotopia of time that accumulates indefinitely. The 'Zone' also represents a double levelled juxtaposition of time through the way it is represented and through the way it 'assimilates' various objects. Evocative in this sense are the multiple shots of foliage, water, rock, dilapidated buildings and destroyed machines. But probably the most suggestive scene unfolds at the middle of the film, depicting a collection of 'relics' lying still in the water and in time: a syringe, a bowl, a glass dish with a goldfish, rocks, a mirror, a metal box enclosing roman coins, a plunger, a part of Jan Van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece with coins lying on it, a coiled spring, a pistol, a torn calendar, paper, a clockwork mechanism etc. [12].

Heterotopias typically have clear

physical boundaries that separate them from the rest of the world. It is no surprise, then, that the 'Zone' has clearly represented physical borders. The 'Zone' entails a system of opening and closing which has a double function: it both isolates and/or makes the 'Zone' penetrable. Consistent with Foucault's fifth principle, the access to the 'Zone' is constrained. The depiction of the 'Plague Quarter' shows how Tarkovsky envisions the borders that isolate the 'Zone'. Yet, he also emphasizes the mechanisms that make the 'Zone' penetrable: evocative in this sense are the scenes of the gate.

4. Conclusion

All the features described hitherto outline the 'Zone's' function in relation to other real sites that can be found within a culture. By adapting Foucault's expression of the sixth principle, I consider the 'Zone' to be a space of illusion that reveals every real space as still more illusory [6]. This is hinted multiple times in stalker's statements and in the way the scenes depicting the 'Zone' are filmed. More importantly, however, the 'Zone' is a heterotopia within the heterotopia of Tarkovsky's cinematic representation [12]. It entails double levelled juxtapositions of multiple times and spaces. In this sense, the 'Zone' is similar to Foucault's depiction of the ship. Thus, both could be considered *heterotopias par excellence*.

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