The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine:
Stalking the Zone of Cinema

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In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben (2004) refers to the ongoing cultural construction of 'the human' in contradistinction to 'the animal' as the 'anthropological' or 'anthropogenic' 'machine.' This 'optical machine,' he writes, is 'constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image already deformed in the features of an ape. *Homo* is a constitutively "anthropomorphous" animal (that is, "resembling man" [. . .]), who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to become human' (26-27). In what follows, I will present a model of cinema that expands on Agamben's notion of the 'anthropological machine.' It does this by drawing on Martin Heidegger's description of the human (*Dasein*) as a world-bearing being and of language, poetry, and art as 'world-disclosing,' and on a Whiteheadian and Deleuzian understanding of the universe as a lively and eventful place in which subjects and objects are persistently coming into being, jointly constituted in the process of their becoming. According to this model, cinema is a machine that produces or discloses worlds. This machine is, at once, *anthropomorphic* in that it produces a cinematic version of or resemblance to the human, thereby generating an apparent social or 'subject-world'; *geomorphic* in its production of a spatially organized or territorialized material 'object-world,' an apparent geography distinguished by hereness, thereness, and distances and relations between the 'pieces of world' displayed; and *biomorphic* (or animamorphic) in its production of an apparent world of animate, life-like and interperceptive forms, which are shown to see and be seen, hear and be heard, at the same time as we, the viewers, see and hear them and, in effect, learn *how* to see and hear them.

Cinema thus discloses a world of subjects, objects, and things in between. These three registers map onto 'three ecologies,' in Felix Guattari's (2000) terms, that make up the relational ontology of the world: the social,

the material, and the mental or perceptual. Each of these three registers variously reflects, refracts, comments on, and reverberates within the world outside the film, such that films add a diffractive overlay of meanings onto the world that pre-exist them and, in the process, set up an interactive oscillation between the two. The relationship between the cinematic world and the extra-cinematic world is the relationship most amenable to a form of analysis that, following a related movement in literary and cultural studies, can be called 'ecocritical.' Various forms of film theory interrogate aspects of this set of relations: phenomenology its perceptual and embodied dimensions, psychoanalysis its intrapsychic dimensions, cognitivism its neuropsychological correlates, Marxist and feminist analysis its class and gender politics, and so on. Ecocritical film theory, I argue, can place all of these within the broadest frame of our relationship to the world, or earth, at large. Through an ecocritical, 'world-disclosing' analysis of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), I will suggest that cinema 'stalks' the real world, and that our appreciation of its potentials should similarly involve a kind of 'stalking' of its effects in the material, social, and perceptual dimensions of the world from which cinema emerges and to which it returns.

Ecocriticism and the three ecologies of cinema

Ecocriticism has been defined as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Glotfelty 1996, xviii) and the evaluation 'of texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis' (Kerridge 1998, 5). While use of the term dates back less than two decades, thinkers such as Leo Marx (1964), Raymond Williams (1985), and Martin Heidegger have been described as ecocritics *avant la lettre*. Over the last ten years, ecologically oriented film critics have taken a variety of approaches to the study of film (Ivakhiv 2008a). Some have examined the realism or ecopolitical usefulness of film portrayals of ecological issues and themes (Mitman 1999, Bousé 2000, Ingram 2004, Murray and Heumann 2009), while others have analyzed film in terms of phenomenological, psychoanalytical, or art-historical categories such as the ecological sublime (Hitt 1999), ecological uncanny (Hageman's 2007), psychological or corporeal identification (Alaimo 2001), eco-utopian and dystopian imaginaries (Brereton 2005), and film's capacity to expand our perception of the natural and material world (MacDonald 2001). In *EcoMedia*, Sean Cubitt (2005) proposes that film be seen as mediating between a communicative humanity and a world that is also communicative and signifying. 'To be a world,' he proposes, 'is to effervesce with an excess of signification' (118), and human communication is thus 'only comprehensible in relation to the universe of communication that enfolds,

contains and speaks with it' (145). Picking up this ecosemiotic thread (Wheeler 2006; Ivakhiv 2008b) and combining it with a 'cultural circulation' model taken from the field of cultural studies (Ivakhiv 2008a), this article proposes that film's relationship with the extra-filmic world can best be understood through an 'ecosystemic' mode of analysis which examines the circulation of film forms and meanings within three interactive, dynamic, and systemic contexts, or 'three ecologies' (Guattari 2000): the material, the social, and the mental or perceptual.[1]

On one level, cinema has its *material ecologies*, which span the entire production cycle from ecosystems and factories where minerals, plastics, silicone chips, and other resources are extracted, processed, and manufactured, to locations and sets where narrative ideas and shooting scripts are crafted into cinematic works, designed, shot, edited, assembled, and distributed, to their delivery on stage and screen, and ultimately to the disposal of waste products associated with film production. On a second level, cinema has its *social ecologies*, which include the social relations by which films and their meanings are made, the representations of social life which they carry, and the social and cultural uptake and transformation of those meanings in contexts ranging from film festivals and cineplexes to living rooms, blogs, bodies (gestures, expressions, T-shirts, and so on), and interpersonal relationships.

Focusing on the material and the social alone, however, leaves us firmly in the grip of what Latour (1993) calls the 'modern constitution,' with its nature-culture dualism according to which social relations are taken to be

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[1] There are points of connection between these approaches, especially Cubitt's (2005) and my own, and the 'ecological' film theory of Anderson and Anderson (1996, 2007), but the latter is grounded in a more restrictive understanding of perception and cognition than Cubitt's and mine. Based in J. J. Gibson's theory of 'direct perception,' the Andersons' work is oriented toward identifying ways in which film viewing is undergirded by the reciprocal relationship between a perceiver and her immediate environment. The experience of film viewing, however, is both densely cultural and highly artificial, and a more thoroughly ecological interpretation of film should recognize the many layers of relationship between viewers, the film medium (as it has historically developed), the culture within which film objects exist as viewable objects, and the many 'realities' being referred to in the worlds portrayed by film. To date, 'ecological' film theory has not contributed much to the understanding of *specific* film experiences – which is the main goal of the model I am presenting in this article. This, then, could be considered complementary to some of their work on the ecology and neurophysiology of film perception, but my intended scope is broader. Part of this difference can be accounted for by the more restricted ontological premises of much cognitive work today. My approach bears closest resemblance to the 'enactive' cognitivism of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1992), according to which 'worlds' are brought forth by the interaction or 'structural coupling' of agents and their environments; but even this view can be opened up to a more flexible account of agency and of interaction (as suggested, e.g., by Whitehead, 1979; Harman, 2009; and Shaviro, 2009).

the exclusively human realm of the polis, while material 'facts' are relegated to the sciences that ostensibly speak on their behalf. To disrupt this binary, we need a third, intermediary element that would make evident that the material and the social are interacting and dynamically related. This third register is that of *perceptual* or *mental ecologies,* terms which suggest that humans are embodied agents and interpreters of a world that is there to be perceived, but is also perceptive and communicative in its nature. Perception or 'mind,' understood not as the possession of an individual entity but as the sense- or world-making capacity intrinsic to all experience (Bateson 1980), is the interactive dimension through which a world comes into being for world-bearing beings. It can be culturally shaped, through the aesthetic and sensory modes extant in a society, but it in turn shapes the interactions of social groups with their environments. Because an environment is itself made up of perceptive and communicative relations, perceptual ecologies are the interactive milieu within which the material or 'objective' becomes the social and 'subjective,' and vice versa, and in which sensations and sensory organs, bodies and desires, social groups and media formations, all become connected in specific ways. Perceptual ecologies can be thought of as the interrelations that make up what Merleau-Ponty (1968) described as the fleshy, interpenetrating *chiasmus* of self and world. At the same time, following the kind of processual ontology suggested by Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze, among others, if the universe is taken to be fundamentally active and communicative – experience all the way down – then it is precisely this 'mental ecology' that is central to things, and it is through perceptual experience that subjects and objects, and thus a subject-world and an object-world, are possible at all. Before examining the relationship of film to these three ecologies further, we will need to articulate a definition of cinema that is capable of taking on such a task.

Cinema as world-making

A working definition of cinema that recognizes the medium's richness and efficacy in material, social, and perceptual ecologies, is this: *cinema is a cultural instrument for producing worlds through the sequential presentation of moving sound-images*. Cinema is not unique in producing worlds; all art forms, and arguably all cultural forms, take part in world-production. This idea resonates with Frampton's (2006) notion of the 'film-world' and Yacavone's (2008) recent writing on 'film worlds,' but it is also intended to evoke Martin Heidegger's definition of the human as a world-bearing being,

a being (*Dasein,* or 'there-being') 'rich in world.'[2] According to Heidegger (1971), language, poetry, and art reveal or disclose the world in specific ways; they 'open' and 'unconceal' a world from out of a larger self-subsistent milieu that Heidegger calls 'earth,' which makes beings possible but ever recedes from their grasp into concealedness. 'To be a work,' he writes, 'means to set up a world' (44).

Conceived in this way, we can speak of the world that is revealed or produced by a *specific* work of cinema, and the world that is revealed or produced by cinema *in general*. Heidegger's interest, particularly in later works such as 'The Question Concerning Technology' and 'The Age of the World Picture' (1977), was in the larger onto-epistemic relations that define an epoch, such as the way in which modern technology 'enframes' the world and reveals it to us 'as picture,' revealing nature in turn as 'standing reserve' for instrumental uses. In contrast to this approach, I will assume that it is only through understanding specific film worlds that we can arrive at an understanding of cinema's 'worlding' in general. Furthermore, it is not clear to me that there is such a thing as 'cinema in general,' let alone modern technology in general, since technological developments continue to change the nature of cinema, all the more so in today's digital era. My view follows in the line of thinking encapsulated by Mullarkey (2009), for whom both film and the reality it ostensibly captures are 'always in motion,' because both are mutable, relational, multilayered, processual, and divergent: 'film's power is always based on a missed encounter, a convergence with divergence. *Moving pictures move us because movement is what is Real.* [. . .] Movies have an *élan* rather than an essence – a divergent form of movement that participates in (rather than 'captures') processual reality in myriad ways' (xv; italics added). As (arguably) the most synthetic of the arts, cinema brings us closest to this dynamism of the world outside cinema. At the same time, cinema shapes the way we experience that world such that *both* take on a greater dynamism, resulting in what Heidegger, had he lived to our time, might have called 'the age of the world *motion* picture.' But once the 'world picture' has been set into motion – something that occurs all the more in the digital era, with 'us' also set into motion with it – that 'world picture' may be less singular than Heidegger had assumed.

This definition of cinema opens a number of options for an analyst. We can, as mentioned, speak of the world that is revealed in *a* film and the world that is revealed in cinema *in general;* we can speak of the *world* which is disclosed or produced in a work of cinema and of the *way* it is produced;

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[2] While Yacavone (2008) draws on other theoretical underpinnings, his definition of film worlds as 'complex object-experiences with both symbolic/cognitive and affective dimensions' (83) and as transformative and immersive is fully consistent with the model I develop here.

and we can speak of the relationship between the world(s) so produced and the world(s) *outside* the cinema. I will focus on specific aspects of cinema's 'worlding' in order to illuminate the ways in which cinematic worlds can be related to the extra-cinematic or 'real' world. This will not result in a theory of cinema in general, but merely an approach to the relationship between cinema and non-cinema, that is, the cinematic and the 'real.' Both the cinematic and the real are inherently plural, processual, and divergent, and each is perceived differently by differently situated observers (though each is also potentially *convergent* within limits set by circumstances).[3] Since film today is a significant part of the world that is represented in film – one could even say that there is no longer any extra-cinematic world which cinema has a relationship to, because once such a relationship has been established, as for instance when the ocean bottom is first 'captured' on film, that world becomes part of the world that is now affected by cinema – the relationship between the cinematic and the extra-cinematic world will be dynamic and impossible to pin down.

Let us consider, then, how it is that cinematic worlds are presented as worlds for us, their viewers. Cinema, as mentioned, does this through the sequential presentation of moving sound-images. A film presents a finite series of fluidly and sequentially organized visual-auditory moments or events of various kinds. Films are finite in that they have clear beginnings and endings, and between these the world of the film unfolds in temporal, if not necessarily linear or chronological, sequence. Viewers of a film 'enter' and 'follow along' into the world of the film in ways that are specific to their expectations, motivations, and unconscious predilections, and their engagement is always a negotiated one. But when a film works on an audience, that audience is 'taken places' within the world opened up by the film. Because cinema is a visual medium, it takes us places through what it shows us; and because it is an auditory medium, it takes us places through what it sounds and speaks to us, auditorially, musically, and textually (and the inclusion of language opens up a much more extensive and layered worlding than would otherwise be possible). Within these parameters, there is an almost infinite set of possibilities for how cinema can combine its visual and auditory elements into narrative and spectacle, arrange its temporal and spatial coordinates and the complexity of relations between them, and otherwise build its filmic world. Put simply, moving images *move* us: they project our imagination across the territory of the world they produce; they

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[3] For instance, the world of a ninth century Mayan aristocrat and a ninth century Chinese farmer was potentially convergent only to the extent that they shared certain earthly circumstances and to the extent they might meet, the possibility of which was virtually nil. In contrast, the world shared today by a Chinese and a Mayan is potentially much more convergent.

draw viewers into their movement, engaging us in the movement of the storyline, the actions and reactions unfolding in and through and around the places and characters portrayed; they immerse us in the flow of sensation felt or imagined in the viewing, the flow of movement, sound, words, and bodily gestures as these are perceived and interpreted by us from the experienced sound-images.

But what does it mean for something to be a world? At the very least, a world must have some sort of structural dimensions holding it in place or, as it were, in motion. We customarily think of the physical world as having three spatial dimensions. Phenomenologically speaking, our lived worlds are made up of the dimensions of our experience, those by which we are engaged, cognitively and affectively, within our world. Film worlds, like any worlds, are structured by a set of dimensions or parameters of meaning and affect, along which viewers' cognitive and affective capacities are engaged and set into motion. Structuralist and poststructuralist theorists have typically analyzed cultural as well as fictional worlds in terms of binary oppositions that provide the frameworks by which cultural groups or viewers make sense of a given world. Fictional worlds are simplified versions of actual cultural worlds. Classic Hollywood westerns, for instance, typically feature a dimension or axis of virtue, with 'good guys' pitted against 'bad guys'; an axis of stability, as in the search for order, community, and the settled cultivation of land, versus change or disruption, chaos and wilderness; and other binaries pitting East against West, cowboys against Indians, men as distinct from women, and so on. These binaries do little on their own; it is what the film *does* with them – how it sets them into motion, combining and overlaying them with and against each other in novel and engaging ways – that makes it possible for the film's narrative to generate the tensions and resolutions that structure a satisfying film experience for its viewers.

Where structuralists have focused on describing a cultural object's narrative in terms of its dependence on such structuring oppositions, other approaches, including psychoanalytic, cognitive, and Deleuzian analyses, have delved into the affective dynamics drawing viewers into the film experience. In effect, viewers are drawn into the filmic world's structuring dimensions or relational axes. A viewer's movement along the axis of virtue, for instance, might follow that viewer identifying or empathizing with an apparently virtuous character (played, say, by John Wayne or Sean Penn) only to experience tension or discomfort as that character crosses a line between virtue and disvirtue. In the narrative's negotiation of such tensions, as when a gangster movie's lead character struggles to balance familial obligations against the expectations of mob leaders, such a structural dimension may become affectively charged in a positive, negative, or ambivalent way. Boundary lines become charged in a way that draws

viewers' emotional and affective investments into the world of the film, and when these intersect in novel ways, viewers experience the distinct forms of pleasure that films so effectively generate.

Of the many possible dimensions or 'axes' that could be studied, there are at least three, each with its respective forms of boundary-making and - negotiating, that are particularly salient to the ecocritical study of film worlds. Each of these is an important component of the extra-cinematic world and, at the same time, a central element of the world produced uniquely by cinema. These, in turn, can be related to the three ecologies identified earlier.

Firstly, because film offers a 'window' or 'opening' onto what appears to be a world of its own, it is *geomorphic*: it produces a set of geographic or territorial relations and meanings among objects and objectscapes laid out in a certain way enfolding the action. Cinema produces territory, hereness and thereness, homeness and awayness, 'ourness' and foreignness, public and private space, and the many relations between these. These relations both reproduce and transform the pre-cinematic world. But cinema only reproduces fragments of that world, features or elements of it disconnected from their original embodied-perceptual milieu and reconnected into a new, cinematic one. If the cinematic experience is a form of journeying, the world produced through cinema is one in which there is a *here*, a starting point, and a *there*, which can be an ending point, or a place journeyed to and returned from, or some mixture of the two. In *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933), for instance, New York is 'here' to the 'there' of Skull Island, but this relationship is overlaid onto the 'here' of the audience and the 'there' of New York/Broadway/the Empire State Building. The extra-cinematic world already has uneven textures of meaning and value – centers and peripheries, places of power and marginal hinterlands and backwoods (e.g., New York versus the South Pacific or Indian Ocean). In displaying and beckoning us into cinematic worlds that refer to places in the 'real' world, films further charge these uneven geographies with 'aura,' amplifying differences or minimizing them, deepening stereotypes or challenging them.[4]

Secondly, because film, with its 'illusion' of movement among objects and images, shows us things that see, sense, and interact, and that therefore appear animate, it is *biomorphic*. It produces the sensuous texture of what appears to be life, that is, an interperceptive relationality of things, which span a continuum from the barely alive to the recognizably social. With their speaking animals and monstrous hybrids, the animation and horror genres,

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[4] Cinema's production of 'territorialized' worlds in relation to '*the* world' has been assessed by students of media geography and of the cultural production of identity, nationalism, empire, and globalization (e.g. Shohat and Stam 1994, Aitken and Zonn 1994, Martin-Jones 2006, Conley 2007).

in divergent ways, specialize at a kind of 'animamorphism' which blurs boundaries between humans and living or life-like nonhumans. Insofar as film is primarily visual, it is specifically the *optical* axis, made up of the relationship between seer and seen, subject and object of the act of seeing, that is central to film's meaning and impact. Film is seen by its viewers, so in an obvious way we are its unseen subjects; our existence is factored into film by scriptwriters, producers, and distributors, but when we watch, we remain unwatched. However, this subjectivity is far from straightforward. At its most elemental, film is the result of the camera's seeing of the world. Filmmakers from Dziga Vertov to *cinema verité* documentarists and experimental filmmakers have striven to turn the camera into an instrument of pure vision, a *Kino-Eye*, or into a notetaking pen or *camera-stylo* that would document the struggles of real people and raise these into public consciousness. But the camera is never free to explore on its own; it is always an instrument of an individual filmmaker or, more commonly, a diverse and fractal production collective. Film also shows us people (and sometimes other beings) seeing a world. More than a static photograph or painting, which may include eyes that are looking somewhere or at something, film shows us eyes, and then it shows us what those eyes are seeing. If those eyes are seeing another pair of eyes, the back-and-forth movement between the two sets becomes a visual or optical circulation which, interrupted or augmented by the (invisible) cinematic apparatus, sets up a series of lines of sight in temporal and spatial relationship with each other and with us, its viewers. At its most basic, this becomes the 'shot/reverse shot' combination that is the standard building block of classic Hollywood cinema, which cognitivists have argued is as close to a cinematic universal as anything (Bordwell 1986, 110; Bordwell 1996). In effect, film becomes a tool *for* seeing and for learning *how* to see a moving-image world.

And thirdly, because film shows us human or human-like subjects, beings we understand to be thrown into a world of circumstance and possibility like us, it is *anthropomorphic*; it produces subjects more 'like us' and those less 'like us,' characters and character types we relate to in varying degrees. This third register is that in which the human and recognizably 'social' is distinguished from the non-, in-, sub-, or other-than-human, and, related to that, between the 'cultural' or 'civilized' and the natural, wild, savage, alien, barbarian, monstrous, or otherwise alter-social. It is this production of an understood boundary between humans and the nonhuman that Agamben (2004) calls 'the anthropological machine' because it continually churns out a category of 'the human,' even as this category changes in relation to the technologies and practices that inform it, challenge and threaten it, and disperse its benefits unevenly across the social world. Further distinctions between different groupings of humanity are always

being drawn and redrawn to populate the terrain between the polar terms, with, for instance, women, non-whites, or indigenous peoples being posited as closer to nature than white European males. By calling this productivity 'anthropomorphic,' I mean not that it extends human characteristics to nonhuman entities, but that it posits certain qualities as normatively human, and thereby creates the human, the *anthropos*, as distinct from the rest of the animate and inanimate world within which it continually emerges.

Together, these three 'morphisms' produce a world which is material at one end, social at another, and interperceptual in the middle; a world of subjects, objects, and things in between. One could say that film, like other forms of world-making, is 'subject/object-omorphic': it produces a world for us that is at once subjective and objective, made up of both 'subjectivating' and 'objectified' entities, a world suspended between the poles of agency and conditionality, becoming and being, openness and givenness, featuring a range of potential interactive entanglements (or machinic connections, in Deleuzo-Guattarian language) on the continuum stretched out between these two poles. In process-relational terms, as in the metaphysics of Whitehead (1933) or the Deleuzian morphogenetic theory of DeLanda (1997), cinematic experience can be taken to be a variation of experience in general (which, in Whitehead's panexperientialist ontology, is the essential nature of reality) in that it consists of moments in which subjectivity and objectivity – or subjectivation and objectivation, the one associated with interiority and the other with exteriority – arise in mutual dependence, 'neither primary nor originary,' out of the interactive relationality of the world (Halewood 2005, 75). What is distinctive about cinema is the way in which subjectivation and objectivation occur within it, the subjects and objects it tends to produce, and the relationship between these and extra-cinematic reality. The next part of this article reads a single film, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, through reference to these dimensions of filmic world-production. I have selected this film because of the insights it suggests for our understanding of film's ability to 'shadow' or 'stalk' reality, that is, on the 'refractiveness' (Mullarkey 2009) of cinema in relation to the extra-cinematic world in each of the three ecological registers – the material, the social, and the perceptual.

The *Stalker* effect: stalking the cinema, tracking the psyche

In *The Solaris Effect: Art and Artifice in Contemporary American Film,* Steven Dillon (2006) argues that Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), along with Steven Soderbergh's 2002 remake of it, present a model of 'the archetypal relationship of audience and screen at the cinema.' The film portrays a space station circling around a planet that seems to materialize the contents of its human visitors' dreams and nightmares. In the relationship

between the astronaut Kris and his dead (by suicide) but seemingly rematerialized wife, Dillon writes, 'There is photographic reality, sensual and emotional immersion, but also a concurrent knowledge that the reality is all along an artifice, a constructed hallucination' (8). Film, in Dillon's reading, is both real and a 'copy, a reproduction, an alien, a ghost' (10). Where *Solaris* is about the relationship between its human characters and their deepest fantasies and traumas set into motion through the medium of an alien planet – the planet Cinema, one might say – Tarkovsky's later film *Stalker* (1979) more directly reflects on the material engagements of the medium. *Stalker* is loosely based on Arkadii and Boris Strugatskiis' science-fiction novel *Roadside Picnic*. The novel's title refers to the debris left behind by an extraterrestrial visit, which creates a 'Zone' where people are known to have disappeared, and which contains unusual artifacts and phenomena that defy science. The Zone is cordoned off behind an army-patrolled border and travel into it is prohibited, but over time guides known as 'stalkers' begin to lead risky expeditions into the Zone's interior, at the center of which is an artifact – in the film, it is a room – that allegedly has the power of granting its visitors' deepest wishes.

Eschewing the novel's science-fictional elements, Tarkovsky turns the tale into a metaphysical inquiry. The main character, a stalker, leads two men, known only as Writer (an author) and Professor (a scientist), into the Zone and to the Room at its center. The journey takes on a circuitous character, with the Stalker leading the men through military patrols, tunnels, passageways, and other lengthy detours as they work their way toward the center of the Zone. The Stalker explains to the men that in the Zone nothing is as it appears: 'I don't know what it's like when there is no one here,' he says,

> but as soon as humans appear everything begins to move. Former traps disappear, new ones appear. Safe places become impassable, and the way becomes now easy, now confused beyond words. [...] Some people have had to turn back empty-handed after going half-way. Some perished at the threshold of The Room. Whatever happens here, depends not on the Zone, but on us.

By the time the men reach the Room, the Professor unveils his plan to detonate a bomb in order to destroy it so as to prevent malicious men from gaining the means to carry out evil deeds. In any case, he reasons, if the Room does not actually make dreams come true, it serves little purpose. The Stalker and Professor struggle and eventually the latter relents. The exhausted men, seated at the boundary of the Room, watch as a gentle rain begins to fall through the apparently dilapidated ceiling (not visible to us). We, the audience, see only the edge of the room; the camera, it seems, has

moved into the Room itself, but all it reveals to us is the men seated in the adjacent room's opening, and drops of rain, lit by sunlight filtering into the Room, in the space between the (unseen) camera and the men. While the Stalker had repeatedly warned the men of various dangers, no harm has come to them, and little evidence has been presented that the Zone in fact defies nature or that the Room contains miraculous powers. The secret, or lack thereof, has seemingly concealed itself. The process of rendering a secret, however – a metaphysical Zone created through prohibition, through narrative, or through cinema – sets up a dynamic between a 'here' and a 'there', an outside world (which we can imagine ourselves more or less sharing) in which these men may have attained respectability but not happiness, and a Zone which remains, in the end, a sort of *tabula rasa*, a kind of empty screen onto which the men's, and our own, hopes and fears can be projected.

But in reality, the screen has been far from empty. Slavoj Zizek (2000) refers to Tarkovsky's 'cinematic materialism,' an attempt, 'perhaps unique in the history of cinema,' to develop a 'materialist theology' in which the texture and 'heavy gravity of Earth' exerts 'pressure on time itself.' In a sepia-tone, dream-like sequence, as the three characters have laid down for a temporary rest, the camera pans slowly across the murky, algae-tinged surface of water, showing us objects decaying and rusting on the tiled floor beneath it: a syringe, coins, a mirror, a revolver, an icon of John the Baptist, torn pages from a calendar, mechanical parts. While this earthy materiality could be taken as mere aestheticism or symbolism, I would like to suggest – and Tarkovsky has insisted on this point himself – that what we see is what we get: the rain is rain, the rust is rust, the mold is mold. They are not mere stand-ins for something other than what we see, but are images and sounds intended to resonate and insinuate themselves into the affect-laden, layered perception of viewers. Tarkovsky's famous long takes depict a landscape of time and decay in which the vestiges of human activities are being reclaimed by nature. As Quandt (n.d.) describes it: 'Swathed in fog and aquatic with spas, needled with drizzle, sluicing, streaming, coursing and dripping with rain and snow, indoors and out, Tarkovsky's terrain is terrarium. The mottled forest flora of mold, ferns, lichens, and toadstools traversed by his slow camera are lushly entropic. The crumble and rust, detritus and dilapidation of his watery ruins [...] signal both the remnants of past cultures and ecological calamity.'

The film's world-productivity, then, registers in each of the dimensions I have discussed. It is geomorphic in its production of a geography structured around a journey between an outside world, the world of everyday life from which the Writer and Professor set out, and the enclosed, yet now partially open (to us) world of the Zone. In the precarious, pilgrimage-like movement

between the two, the Zone becomes a kind of toxic, abject, and sacred landscape all at once, a liminal space that nevertheless presents itself as matter, seen (but not fully revealed), sounded (albeit ambiguously), perambulated, but never quite mastered. It is biomorphic in that the film is about the dynamics of seeing and of animacy. Tarkovsky's use of black-and-white for most of the scenes outside the Zone and color for most of the scenes within the Zone (with exceptions indicating dreams and a certain convertibility between the two worlds) sets up a parallel between the geographic here/there and the respective 'seeing' involved in each. Yet what is seen and heard is not always clear, and what we see through the eyes of the camera is often different from what we are told, leaving us uncertain amid divergent interpretations.⁵ The bodily movement of the characters across the landscape, first in passing through the military barricades and later in their encounters with the rather amphibious and somehow mysteriously 'inhabited' landscape of the Zone, suggest a certain kind of animatedness of the space in which they move. In the Zone, what at first appears as simple 'nature,' we are told (by the Stalker), is not at all simple, and appears to be 'alive' in some sense. The film's *anthro*pomorphism (or subjectomorphism) lies both in this suggestion of a sentience or will in the nonhuman world and in the relationship between the three men, as well as the more peripheral characters. The dialogue between the men invites us to entertain variable positions on the Zone/outside world duality: What is of value in worldly affairs? What would *my* deepest wish be if I could access the Room? What should be the role of desire – which is what drives the men on this quasi-spiritual quest – in one's negotiation with the world? Zizek and others have pointed out that Tarkovsky's ethic is one of *Gelassenheit,* a 'letting-be' that relinquishes control over the world, and the Stalker has often been taken to be Tarkovsky's own stand-in as a socially misplaced figure who sacrifices himself to lead others to faith in the midst of a faithless world. But even he is driven, tormented, and hardly a perfect emissary for an ethic of letting-be. His wife, who is only seen in the film's opening and closing scenes, offers another position regarding the Zone: namely, that it is a distraction from the simple bonds of human love. If the journey into the Zone is the journey into cinematic art, then Tarkovsky seems to be suggesting that ultimately art may be irrelevant; and, at the same time, not so. Her role and that of their mute child, an apparent mutant who demonstrates what appear to be telekinetic abilities; the black German shepherd met on the journey and brought back to the stalker's home; and the nature of the Zone itself to the extent that it seems to have a 'mind of its own' – all these play a role in the film's production of a subject-world.

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⁵ For instance, on the way the soundtrack in *Stalker* renders 'reality' ambiguous, see Smith (2007).

It is in the relationship between the film world and the extra-cinematic world, however, and particularly in the material conditions and political-ecological resonances surrounding the film during its production and for years following its release, that the more specific significance of the film becomes evident. Produced in the late Brezhnev era of the Soviet Union, its theme resonated on several levels with its Soviet audiences. In a perceptive account of these meanings, Zizek notes several analogies to the Zone: the Gulag, a territory set aside for political prisoners (which was in fact sometimes referred to as 'the zone'); the possibility of technological catastrophe, as emblematized by the 1957 nuclear accident at Chelyabinsk in eastern Russia; the walled off West, and in particular West Berlin, access to which was prohibited for most East Germans and Soviet citizens; the secluded domain of the Communist Party *nomenklatura*; and a territory, such as Tunguska in Siberia, that had been struck by a random 'act of God,' in this case a meteorite. Kovács and Szilágyi interpret the Zone as the 'Secret,' a taboo area of memory that any social order requires in order to maintain its authority (cited in Johnson and Petri 1994, 142-3), while Bird adds to this list of parallels the Battle of Stalingrad, 'where soldiers stalked through ruins, crawling over the dust of bombed-out buildings, only to be confronted by incongruous reminders of the civilization that reigned there so recently' (2008, 168). After the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident, the film took on even greater resonance: the evacuated thirty-kilometer 'exclusion zone' around the reactor was popularly called 'the Zone,' and unofficial tour guides to the evacuated area referred to themselves as 'stalkers.'

The making of the film contributed to this layering of political and environmental overtones. Filmed twice, both times under challenging conditions, the first version of the film was destroyed during processing. Rumors circulated that it was destroyed by Soviet censors,[6] and it took several months for Tarkovsky to convince Mosfilm, the central filmmaking industry, to fund and allow a refilming. Both productions took place in and around an abandoned Estonian power plant and downstream from a chemical plant that, unbeknownst to the crew, released toxic pollution into the environment in which they spent months filming. The film shows, at one point, inexplicable foam floating on the river and, at another, snow, reportedly a form of chemical fallout, falling in summertime. The penultimate scene of the Stalker and his wife and child walking home shows, in the background, a power plant that, in retrospect, eerily prefigures the Chernobyl nuclear plant, or that in any case represents the Soviet industrial sublime at its most uncanny. The presence of toxins in the water and air left its effects on the bodies of the film crew: several crew members reported

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[6] Bird (2008, 149), among others, suggests that Tarkovsky may have invented the problem as a pretext for correcting what he thought were its defects.

allergic reactions during the filming, and a number, including the actor Anatolii Solonitsyn, eventually died premature deaths from cancer and related illnesses. Tarkovsky himself died of cancer of the right bronchial tube in December of 1986, the same year as the Chernobyl accident, at the age of 56. His wife died of the same cause some years later.

Like the ocean that covers the surface of Solaris, Tarkovsky's Zone appears to trigger an encounter with conscience, or with an Other that is made up of the ethical and material relations and emotional entanglements that confront individuals and force them to face their pasts and account for their lives, loves, failures, and misgivings. Both films suggest that nature is an active and perhaps sentient agent, one that precedes us but also one that follows us and covers us over, as earth covers earth in its sedimentation of memories, meanings, and elemental cycles. The meaning of the Zone is ultimately an open one: it may be extraterrestrial in origin, supernatural, or simply natural. It may represent the archetype-laden depths at the center of the psyche, in a Jungian interpretation, or the unrepresentable and ungraspable void at its core, in a Lacanian one. It may represent the sheer contingency at the heart of life, a contingency that haunts and reminds us (in a Buddhist interpretation) that our grasp on our very selves is illusory, fleeting, and ultimately empty of self-sufficient existence, that is, the kind of existence we can hang on to and keep separate from the ever-passing flux and flow of experience. Or it may be taken, in more conventionally Christian terms (which, in its Eastern Orthodox form, is the tradition closest to Tarkovsky), as the call of conscience in the midst of material grasping and social pretense. To the extent that *Stalker* gestures towards a transcendent zone that is outside of the grasping ego, or outside the all-too-human world of civilizational rises and falls, it does this by means of the world itself – by displaying the world in the sheer facticity of its ongoing becoming, florescence and deliquescence. Cinema works by representation, so to the extent that it can show us the world at the same time as it gestures toward its disappearance, film can make it possible to *think* the interaction between the representable and the unrepresentable.

The journey that takes us, as viewers, into the zone of cinema is much like this, and we are free to make of it what we will (though it may never be entirely a matter of our rational choosing). At its best, cinema exercises a compelling tug on the imagination; it charges or magnetizes the psyche in ways that may not be fully evident to our conscious awareness. What we get out of films depends, to a large extent, on our dreams, fears, and desires. As in *Stalker*, however, what cinema shows us is real objects, artifacts from the material world: landscapes and places, mortal bodies and organisms, caught in the grip of the cycle of living, dying, and decomposition. These *shown* worlds – not the fictional worlds portrayed by them, though the two are

necessarily related – are part of film's essential materiality. Cinema is neither a mirror nor a window; it is not purely reflecting nor perfectly translucent. As *Stalker's* cinematic surface suggests, it mixes opacity with a certain semi-transparency and mirror-like diffraction of the world outside. It captures images and sounds from the material world, but then rearranges them, assembling them into new configurations to produce new or different meanings. In the digital era, even the 'originals' are not always originals, yet they are based on something original, and built out of elements – glimpses, ideas, gestures, movements of the wrist on a computer mouse, electrons, silicon chips, and visual data bits – as real as any other bits of an ultimately ungraspable 'earth' that provides for the disclosure of worlds, but ever eludes those worlds into self-concealment.

Conclusion

While this reading of *Stalker* is only an analysis of a single film and not of film in general, it demonstrates the capabilities of an analytical method attuned to the relationship between a 'film world' and the extra-cinematic world in the three registers of the social, the material, and the productive in-between that I have called the 'inter-perceptual' or 'mental.' An ecologically inspired ethic of cinema, I would suggest, advocates for a greater attention to be paid to the relationship between the worlds produced by cinema and the world/earth(s) *from* and *within* which they are produced, a relationship that is material and biophysical as well as social and epistemological. In the case of *Stalker,* the extra-cinematic 'real' includes the centrally managed cultural industry of the Soviet administrative state, under the auspices of which the film was produced, as well as its shadow side of suspicion, paranoia, and interest in the paranormal, all expressed in the film and in the meanings it engendered. It includes the world of industrial technology, represented in the film by the power plants both real and fictional, which, as Heidegger suggested, turn the world into 'standing reserve,' and which were developed to do this with maximal urgency in the Soviet state's anxious quest to keep up with its capitalist rivals. It thus includes the Cold War system itself, with its race to the moon and its quest for the bomb, ultimately delivering to us both Chernobyl and the downward, Earth-b(e)aring gaze from Sputnik and Apollo. It includes the perceptions of filmgoers, among them those who interpreted Chernobyl through reference to the film (and to the Bible), and the artistic and religious imaginary of late modernism, which could be taken as the encounter of Enlightenment rationalism with its own limits – an encounter into which seep all manner of spiritual and romantic longings.

Tarkovsky himself lived in and breathed the heavy atmosphere of industrial late Soviet modernism. We, today, may be inhaling, if not

hyperventilating, something distinctly less heavy and more 'fast' – an oxygen of a light-headed digital world. But the material world featured in Tarkovsky's long takes – the signs of human history covered over by the passing of and return to elemental time – is not all that different from our material world, the shadow side of which is also populated with toxic waste dumps, landfills, hypodermic needles, and disfigured icons of various kinds. Siegfried Kracauer (1997) subtitled his influential 1960 treatise on film theory 'the redemption of physical reality' in part to indicate that cinema was uniquely qualified to record reality in a way that allowed its viewers to experience that reality more fully. Cinema is qualified to do much more than record reality, and Kracauer's ideas have not all withstood the test of time, but the ethic of redeeming physical reality remains worthy of pursuit. An ecocritical study of film should in part be aimed at this goal of redeeming the material and interperceptual reality of the world, a world that is shared and shaped by humans and nonhumans at a time of precarious relationship between them. The virtue of films like *Stalker* is that they attempt to redeem the sidelined, forgotten, or 'shadow side' of material reality, and it is this side that must feature as central within an ecologically minded filmmaking and theorizing today.

The model of cinema I have presented here takes as its starting point the idea that images *move* – they affect their viewers and 'take us places' – and that cinematic moving images, through their melding of temporally sequenced visual display and sound, move us all the more forcefully. Metaphorically, they take us on journeys in imagined worlds encompassing spaces of hereness and thereness, a certain range of movements into and across those spaces, a certain set of optical and sensorial relations, and a certain set of characters that are like or unlike us, and that include humans and nonhumans. Cinematic worlds are held in motion through an interplay of constituent structural dimensions or parameters along which cognition (thinking) and affect (feeling) are invited and allowed to situate themselves and 'travel,' and along which the tensions and resolutions of cinematic experience unfold. Along such parameters or dimensions cinema also constructs 'boundary points' (such as the boundary between humanity and primal wilderness in *Tarzan of the Apes* [Sidney, 1918], *King Kong, Apocalypse Now* [Coppola, 1979], or *Jurassic Park* [Spielberg, 1993]) and 'basins of gravitational attraction' for the movement between them.

The worlds constituted through film relate in various ways to the extra-filmic world: they mirror that world, refract and diffract its meanings, and infuse or diffuse meaning and aura into (or out of) the people, objects, and places portrayed. This relationship is evident both in the film's representation of the world and in the constituent elements which are drawn into the making of film, its distribution and consumption, and its eventual

material, social, and perceptual after-effects. Both ends of the chain of cinematic production and consumption are ultimately grounded, and simultaneously resisted, by a self-subsistent and active materiality that gives itself to us as territory, as land, as nature, as resource, and that simultaneously takes away from us as death, as time, as mystery. The relationship between this earth, in Heidegger's sense of the word, and the filmic world is central to the ecocritical approach I have outlined.

In an era of digital technology that reshapes, transforms, and absorbs the 'originals,' and then recirculates and distributes them through all manner of vectors, flows, channels, webs, and nets, it could be said that moving sound-images move *increasingly* all around us. Together this movement of images and affects reshapes the ways viewers perceive themselves (as individuals and as groups) and the world (including the landscapes, places, nations, civilizations, and ecologies that make it up), the earth that subtends them, and the relationships connecting all of these. The nature and forms of this relationship between the cinematic and the extra-cinematic is central to the ecocritical model of film I have proposed here. As the analysis of *Stalker* suggests, cinema stalks the world, shadowing it, refracting it, but also changing it in the process; it makes of the world a *stalked* world. This 'stalking' is not necessarily to be taken negatively; in fact, as Tarkovsky's idiosyncratic use of the term indicates, it is also a 'raising' of the world into 'art,' or, in Heideggerian terms, of the 'earth' into 'world,' through the world-making capacity of cinema. It remains a task for ecocritical film analysts to explore the different ways in which cinema stalks and shadows the world, co-creating its own worlds for us in the midst of an ultimately unknowable earth that provides their support and foundation.

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