

16:9 in English: On Reflection: *Mirror* and Me

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***Mirror* is among the very few films to successfully describe memory as a process of constant, present-moment creation as opposed to the retrieval of fragments of past which can be checked true or false against it. For this reason, it brings the acts of remembering and filmmaking closer together than any other film.**

When the editors of *16:9* proposed that I write something about my reasons for selecting *Mirror* (1974) over all Tarkovsky's other films for inclusion on my list of ten favourite movies, it should have been immediately obvious to me that there was a sort of short circuit inherent in any response I could come up with. I suspect they had something in the nature of a comparative study of the filmmaker's work in mind. But, in wording the question thus, they could not have been aware of the extent to which my life, my work and this particular film of Tarkovsky's fold in on each other. I'm not sure that I was fully aware of the extent of this either. Andrzej Zulawski once intriguingly remarked that one should never see again the films that one cannot tame. I had seen *Mirror* countless times, even though it had always seemed the most untameable of films. Watching it recently, for the first time in about eight years, it emerged as something perhaps more interesting- the most uncontainable.

One Long Breath

Watching *Mirror* again, it became necessary to first negotiate the question of its not inconsiderable existence within my own memory, not only as a film in itself, but the time and environment of my initial screenings of it. Last summer I finished a film called *One Long Breath* (2005). Its creation was protracted and tortuous. In inception, it was a naturalistic feature script penned in my twentieth year that used a simple, self-consciously non-dramatic relationship story to explore notions I had regarding the passage of time. The bulk of what was to be a ninety-minute feature was shot eighteen months later, in 2001, by which time I felt already distanced from the film's theme. The shooting took a couple more years to finish, grabbing a scene here, a scene there, the work of guiding this budgetless monster into something resembling its script becoming increasingly frustrating.

Even as I tried to collate this morass of video, it began unravelling. I became unsatisfied with it as drama and generally bored with its form. In between intermittent bursts of activity on it, I was making many short films of various types, all more or less experimental. The research I was doing in other films I was making included severe fragmentation and the reworking of footage from my first, clumsy attempts at filmmaking as a teenager. These involved treating the images from these older films as fragments of memory, trying somehow to incorporate the snowball of resonances that they acquired with the passage of time allusively, without becoming tediously specific through obvious self-referentiality.



What *One Long Breath* finally emerged as was the last- or, at least, latest- stage in an exploration of film as memory. It stands as testament to its original idea, a film that was never quite made, the remembrance of a moment that never quite came it being. The materiality of video plays a significant part in this schema. Not only was much of the picture reshot from TV monitors, but a number of scenes play out as a medium shot of a TV on the floor of a dark, empty room. These scenes are further bracketed by shots of empty city streets late at night. The film is already, in a way, given an existence in the world, sounds and images lost in darkness, addressing an unresponsive night. Fragments cut adrift from chronology by time's passage re-forming under a tentative regime of hazy associations for sheer survival.

Mirror as a point of origin

Mirror was, some thirteen years previously, in all probability responsible for first planting the fruitful equation of film and memory in my mind. Even if this wasn't the case, it has retrospectively adopted that significance. The relationship a significant portion of my own work has with *Mirror* goes beyond suggestion or influence. *Mirror* is more than a constant, if sometimes vague, point of reference. As I have described above, my film's treating of memory have a strange, cumulative process of coming into being, often forming over several years and including footage shot years before the final cut is completed. This process is, of course, one of thought and aesthetic investigation and *Mirror* is its point of origin, the hard rock at the centre of the ever-growing snowball. Not that I ever set out to imitate Tarkovsky- at least not since I was fifteen years old!- or feel any anxiety of influence. The rock in the snowball is utterly concealed by now. As with much art which has a notably powerful impact at a certain point in one's life and is not revisited for a number of years, one's relationship with it becomes a little complacent. *Mirror* became more of a cosy superstition than an active influence as the years went by. Nevertheless, when this magazine invited me to write about it, it became obvious that I would have to extricate it from the ultimately divergent creative trajectories it largely engendered before approaching it afresh.

Tarkovsky and me

Yet I was already aware of a short-circuit between my finishing *One Long Breath* and first seeing *Mirror* that only clarified itself when I lately returned to Tarkovsky's film. The pseudo-installation effect of the monitor in the dark room reminded me of seeing *Mirror* for the first time. In recalling films, I seldom automatically remember the circumstances of viewing them but *Mirror* is an exception. I see it playing on a monitor in a small house in the country, an upstairs room, the bedroom of my fourteenth year. It is evening, summer, and the windows are open. The experience of this scene is the exact opposite of the images' isolation I tried to convey with *One Long Breath's* lonely monitor. The vivid evocation of nature in *Mirror* extends from the black box into the dusky countryside around it, Tarkovsky's sounds and images blending seamlessly with the evening landscape and birdsong.

This 'pseudo-installation' is, rather obviously, the first term of *Mirror's* 'uncontainability' that I became aware of. But its intoxicating aura spread beyond the event of its screening. To the film-fevered mind of this self-isolating boy, Tarkovsky's vision of nature had taken hold of the lanes and hills that I wandered, contaminating them with a poetic sensibility I was desperately trying to live. The experience of rural spaces still largely unmarked by human construction became the stake in a losing battle between the virtual image I had of them and the encroaching realities of real lives unfolding in their vicinity. Tarkovsky's childhood memories became emblematic of this final stage of my childhood.

Scenes from the darkness of the mind

Another aspect of *Mirror* had an influence that considerably outlived the quaint exigencies of peurile psychosis. This is fragmentation which, as previously mentioned, is a strategy central to my own work. *Mirror* was almost certainly the film that brought me the revelation of non-linear construction, of scenes linked by poetic resonance rather than unfolding sequentiality. It also demonstrated the possibilities of mixing black and white with colour. Looking at *Mirror* recently, what struck me most was the uniqueness of Tarkovsky's use of fragmentation and how very different it is from the fragmentation found in my own films, even though both are concerned with the articulation of subjectivity.

My arrangement of shots into a coherent whole is often accomplished



with a view of each fragment as a heterogeneous artifact assembled in a collage. In other words, I often find myself treating individual shots like fragments of a lost, broken whole that need to be displayed in a new temporal context, like pieces of broken pottery arranged for exhibition. This is how some of my films, and *One Long Breath* in particular, approach memory: the original sequential context of the images is known to the consciousness whose workings the film's structure mimics. Therefore, scenes and images are approached directly, with little or no narrative contextualisation, as if they were emerging more or less unbidden from the darkness of the mind, attendant emotional baggage in tow. In effect, I open up the workings of a memory at surface level for the viewers' inspection.

If I bring fragments to the surface, creating an interface with the world, the mysteriousness of what emerges is due to what is in effect a starkly objective and therefore ambiguous model of subjectivity. Tarkovsky, on the other hand, plunges deep into the mind of his 'narrator'. The 'fragmentation' of *Mirror* that I so prized revealed itself not really to be fragmentation at all, but a continuum of subjectivity endlessly reconfiguring a set of spatial and thematic givens. Tarkovsky was often disparaging in his remarks concerning *Solaris* (1972), the film he made immediately before *Mirror*, regarding it as perhaps his least personal film. But in one respect *Mirror* seems to me a very direct follow up to its predecessor. *Solaris* proposed a planet the matter of which could read the minds and souls of humans and create from them living figures that typically embody their bad conscience. *Mirror* bypasses this exteriorising conceit to treat cinema itself as a sort of Planet Solaris, generating people, landscapes and situations directly from a character's inner life, and again under the sign of bad conscience.

Mirror's negation of the body

For a film as richly sensuous as *Mirror*, it is perhaps surprising to note how rigorously it holds to an idea of disincarnation. The occasion of the hero's soul-searching is a possibly fatal illness. When asked if he saw any similarities between his film and *8 1/2* (1963), Tarkovsky made the distinction that Fellini showed his hero whereas *Mirror's* narrator remained off screen. This might seem a bafflingly obvious observation unless account is taken of the negation of the body in *Mirror*. In fact, the only time the 'narrator's' body is visible, it is lying on a doctor's table- its head remains invisible and the world-weary voice begs to be left alone. Fellini's great film moves in the opposite direction, describing the frustrated process of a man trying to reify his subconscious in the most public way possible, through the unwieldy apparatus of a large scale film. The reality of *Mirror*, on the other hand, is vanishing or has vanished from the world, become a reflection.

Just as the 'visitors' in *Solaris* exist in a state of mutable instability, dying and returning at intervals, so the identities of the people close to *Mirror's* 'narrator' are fluid, although determined by familial continuities that preoccupy him- the image of mother and wife become interchangeable, as does his son and his childhood self. The universe of *Mirror* is at once completely closed in that it revolves around a defined set of autobiographical givens, and also utterly limitless due to the fecundity of these experiences once they are removed from linear time. *Mirror* is not fragmented as many apparently similar films are by jumping between past and present, dream and 'reality' and so on. Its uniqueness rests in its manner of raising all these states onto one plain outside time, an instant of selfhood isolated from the world even as it reflects it, capable of endlessly generating variations on its landscapes and events.

Therefore, in spite of its potentially limited scope, it is one of the very few films in cinema where the viewer really doesn't know what will happen next, where anything could happen. Because the images are at once comprehensible and utterly mysterious in that they obey a sometimes distorting logic that belongs only to the hero. In this way, for instance, a gust of wind can organically compliment a character's mood. It more than simply dramatically underlines it, but unites character and world in an immanent consciousness. *Mirror* is among the very few films to successfully describe memory as a process of constant, present-moment creation as opposed to the retrieval of fragments of past which can be checked true or false against it. For this reason, it brings the acts of remembering and filmmaking closer together than any other film I can think of. *Mirror* does not give account of a universe; its unfolding is indistinguishable from the creation of that inner universe because cinema becomes indistinguishable from memory.



The equivocal status of Tarkovsky's camera

Not that there is much that could be termed 'metacinematic' about *Mirror*, notwithstanding the inclusion of archive footage in which the preexisting image forms an eloquent metaphor for the simultaneous closeness and distance of historical events that effect us while occurring outside our immediate experience. The only scene that could properly be deemed 'metacinematic' is the opening scene of a young man with a speech impediment being cured. The narrator's son turns on the TV and Tarkovsky cuts to documentary footage of a stammerer undergoing treatment. What is curious is that the scene is not shown on a TV monitor, nor does it have the texture of a television picture. Also, a microphone shadow is clearly visible throughout, something that would not have got by the perfectionist Tarkovsky were it accidental. It is as if Tarkovsky's camera is present at the filming of the clip, equating the act of filming with the observation of a person discovering a voice. The equivocal status of Tarkovsky's camera, often apparently subjective but disembodied, hovering over the action, is here announced through the unusual strategy of comparing it not with a character's gaze, as elsewhere in the film, but with another presumed camera gaze.

The film's visual style is exploratory, the camera sometimes out of step with the action as if it knew what would transpire in advance and is more concerned with savouring the spaces it passes through or, perhaps, looking for something else there, something it had missed. The gaze of the camera can cut across time and space to meet other gazes, which it can then also sometimes occupy. Take a shot of the young mother (Margareta Terekhova) and the doctor (Anatoli Solonitsyn) early in the film. They are next to a fence, she perching on it, he standing in front of her. He looks over her head, almost directly at the camera and then looks away. She turns her head and gazes at the camera for a longer spell. There follows a reverse shot of what she was seeing, if not exactly from her viewpoint: her children asleep in a hammock. The camera more than records her look; given the directness of the angle and the time accorded to her gaze, it would be more accurate to say that the camera engages with and returns her look with a point of view intensity. Yet no one is looking back at her, just the sleeping children, one of whom will grow into the narrator. The viewpoint not of the child but that of the grown narrator, disembodied, omnipresent.


Why is *Mirror* on my list of favourite films? Perhaps above all because of these gazes that confront the viewer and break scenes open to the mysterious. These looks are directed near enough to the camera to emotionally engage the viewer in a way that ruptures his or her usual sense of being protected from the film's gaze. But their real source of power derives from their duration and lack of immediate answer from a reverse shot. This leads the spectator to wonder both about the characters' thoughts and what it is that they are gazing at. The spaces of *Mirror* into which they look are always pregnant, as, above all, the spatial unity across time expressed by the soaring final sequence makes clear. If I called *Mirror* the most 'uncontainable' of films, these looks are the signposts of that uncontainability, drawing the mind always beyond the present image, linking space and time, sketching the infinite dimensions of one human soul.




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