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COMM 130

29 April 2024

Stalker: An Incredibly Disturbing Comfort Film

The Russian film *Stalker* (1979), directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, follows a Stalker, writer, and professor on their trek to “The Room,” a place where any person’s deepest desire will come true. To reach this fantastical place, they must travel through a labyrinthian area that consistently changes features, also known as “The Zone.” This dystopian, science fiction film perfectly and depressingly represents selfishness within humanity. Each character has their own pursuit when they reach “The Room,” but those ideologies all change throughout their journey.

Tarkovsky’s cinematography and color grading are truly astonishing. The introduction to the film is “cast in sepia,” an ugly, yellow tone meant to represent the human perspective of the bleak, normal world (McMahon). The three main characters are incredibly bored with their lives, seeking something more that only The Room can give them. When they reach The Zone, the colors pop and lure the men into its unknown depths. Simultaneously with the reveal of The Zone, we are also presented with “the soundscape of the Zone – which can now be heard, for the first time, beyond its bounds” (McMahon). The soundscape is incredibly lively, but ever so slightly, hiding something.

The layers of sound that Tarvosky integrates into this film open up the possibilities for so much symbolism and interpretation. While dated, the foley sound effects paired with the sometimes eerie, sometimes gorgeous synth score are deceptively welcoming, but at its core off-putting. For example, in the final scene of the film, the Stalker’s daughter is moving different

glass cups with her mind. As we watch this, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" ensues simultaneously with the aggressive rumbling and shaking of the train. Tobias Pontara, a well-known music theorist, explains this scene as "arresting and perplexing, but... merely mentioned without further consideration" (Pontara 303). The mixture of the train and Beethoven presents a nuanced opposing tone that, while sometimes recognized, still sits right below the grasp of the audience, adding an extra layer of "weirdness." No sound is placed without purpose. As the Stalker states within the film, referring to music and art, "For everything in the final reckoning has a meaning. A meaning and a reason..." (*Stalker* 01:31:30).

One specific scene that especially grasped my attention holds the previous dialogue, taking place from 01:28:28 to 01:31:58. The scene opens with the three men lying on the ground in The Zone, slowly coming to consciousness. The Stalker wakes up first, dreaming of a dog in The Zone. He sits up, making his feet splash in the water they have been resting in unknowingly. He looks disturbed and begins to recite a quote from the Bible, I assume. Once both the professor and writer are awake, the sounds of many different birds are slowly introduced into the world; it feels as though The Zone is waking up with these three men, only coming to life to hide its emptiness from these men. When the Stalker realizes the writer and professor are also awake, he looks back out into the lake while the sounds of the water dripping in the tunnel they passed through are heard. This sound effect does not fit the setting; the dripping with heavy reverb seems to represent the Stalker's mind wandering, focusing on their past journey. When the Stalker begins a mini-monologue about art, a calm, synth chord is bestowed. The synth does not fit in naturally to the setting, similarly, but evokes the mood and feeling of The Zone perfectly. The Stalker himself says music is "connected least of all with reality" (*Stalker* 01:30:29).

All of these features within this scene perfectly exude a deceiving dystopian world hiding as a utopia. The Zone lures people in with its vivid colors and natural sounds, but truly behind it is a false reality, which is amplified by the synthesized, disconnected score.

Figure 1: Spot List (01:28:28 - 01:31:58)

Timestamp	Type of Sound	Description	How?
01:28:29	Dialogue	Breathing	Automated Dialogue Replacement
01:28:29	Ambient	Wind hitting grass/general outside ambience	Wild
01:28:41	Dialogue	Breathing	Automated Dialogue Replacement
01:28:50	SFX	Clothing shifting in grass	Foley
01:28:50	SFX	Water trickling	Foley
01:29:00	SFX	Bug buzzing around	Foley or wild
01:29:02	Dialogue	Light whispering	Automated Dialogue Replacement
01:29:47	SFX	Bird "hooing" repeatedly	Wild
01:29:48	SFX	Birds "chirping" repeatedly	Wild
01:29:55	SFX	Bird "squawking" repeatedly	Wild
01:30:00	Dialogue	Snore/breathing	Automated Dialogue Replacement
01:30:03	SFX	Water dripping in a cave -- high reverberation	Foley
01:30:11	Score	Light electronic sounding chords	Synthesis
01:30:30	SFX	Gentle flutter of wings	Foley
01:30:38	SFX	Bird "hooding" repeatedly	Wild

01:30:38	SFX	Bird "chirping" repeatedly	Wild
01:30:47	SFX	Bird "squawking" repeatedly	Wild

Works Cited

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