



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Stalker

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Stalker was freely adapted from the 1971 novel *Roadside Picnic* by the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, a dark satire which had been heavily censored by the Soviet authorities. The book takes place in a fictionalised western country around one of six special Zones left behind after extraterrestrials briefly visited Earth en route to another galaxy. Inside the Zones, potentially deadly disruptions in the normal cosmic rules occur, confronting brave visitors with their true selves and granting their deepest wishes. There is a great disturbance in the Force.

Working with the Strugatskys, Tarkovsky penned his first screenplay for *Stalker* in 1976. Stripping away many of the sci-fi elements, he replaced the alien backstory with a more opaque astronomical explanation for the paranormal Zones. The plot revolves around a single journey led by a professional Zone infiltrator – the stalker of the title – and his two soul-weary companions, Writer and Professor. Tarkovsky cast the angular, intense Aleksandr Kaidanovsky as Stalker, and *Solaris* veterans Anatoli Solonitsyn and Nikolai Grinko as his fellow travellers.

Stalker would become the most tortuous and troubled production of Tarkovsky's career, with some claiming it even led directly to his early death. Initial locations were scouted in Tajikistan, but a powerful earthquake made that shoot impossible. Further searches in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine and Crimea proved fruitless. Tarkovsky eventually found new locations in the Baltic state of Estonia: a dilapidated ship repair yard, a crumbling hydroelectric station, an abandoned oil processing plant and other post-industrial ruins around the capital, Tallinn.

Shooting exteriors in Estonia during the spring and summer of 1977, Tarkovsky and his cinematographer Georgy Rerberg used a new Kodak 5247 stock supplied by producer Sergio Gambarov. But on return to Moscow, they found the processed footage was an unwatchable shade of dark green. Months of work had been ruined by technical error or, as the director suspected, sabotage.

'Tarkovsky was certain the film was swapped,' the film's sound designer, Vladimir Sharun, later told Moscow newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. 'This newer Kodak which Gambarov sent specifically for *Stalker* was stolen and in some way or another ended up in the hands of a certain very well-known Soviet film director who was Tarkovsky's adversary. And they gave Andrei a regular Kodak except that nobody knew about this and that's why they processed it differently. Tarkovsky considered it a result of scheming by his enemies. But I think it was just the usual Russian sloppiness.'

This disaster was the final straw for Rerberg, who walked off the film, never to return. With his state-funded budget in jeopardy, a devastated Tarkovsky was initially reluctant to continue. A minor heart attack in April 1978 reinforced his fears that the project was cursed. But he eventually came up with a solution, persuading the film board to finance a new, longer, two-part version of the script. *Stalker* evolved from dystopian road movie to sombre spiritual quest.

Filming resumed in Tallinn in June 1978, with Aleksandr Knyazhinsky behind the camera. But there was further on-set friction when a freak summer snowfall delayed the shoot. According to Sharun, cast and crew filled the long, empty days in their run-down suburban hotel with epic binge-drinking sessions. Some even got wasted on cheap cologne mixed with sugar. A furious Tarkovsky ended up sacking several crew members, branding them 'drunks', 'cretins' and 'childish degenerates'. He even fired his art director Shavkat Abdusalamov for the glorious crime of 'behaving like a bastard'.

Finally completed in 1979, *Stalker* stands up today as one of Tarkovsky's most beloved, enigmatic and endlessly absorbing films. It is still a strikingly beautiful viewing experience, containing some of the director's most experimental innovations. The soundtrack is more avant-garde 'musique concrète' than music, with clanking mechanical ambient noises woven into Eduard Artemiev's minimalist electronic score. The blighted landscape outside the Zone is mostly filmed in gorgeous sepia-tinted monochrome, while inside bursts with lush greens and warm brown earth tones. Nobody makes dank, rusty, post-industrial ruins look quite as pornographically seductive.

Stalker is layered with echoes that spoke directly to Cold War audiences, and still resonate today. Kaidnovsky's gaunt, shaven-headed Stalker instantly suggests the emaciated inmates of the Gulag prison camps. Indeed, the character is an ex-convict who embodies the bitter irony that real freedom lies behind the barbed wire of the Zone, not within his country's rule-bound borders: 'For me, it's prison everywhere,' he says.

Anybody living behind the Iron Curtain would have felt that biting subtext. But Tarkovsky always resisted the 'wild conjectures' of viewers looking for metaphorical meaning in *Stalker*. 'People often ask me what the Zone is, and what it symbolises,' the director wrote in *Sculpting in Time*.

After a thriller-like first half, the film moves into more ruminative philosophical gear in its final hour. Deep inside the Zone, Stalker and his bickering fellow travellers suddenly get cold feet as they approach the mystical Room where our deepest wishes allegedly come true. While Writer agonises about his mediocre and shameful occupation, Professor contemplates destroying the miraculous Room with a nuclear bomb to prevent it falling into the wrong hands. Stalker merely berates his companions for their cowardice and uncertainty: 'You're not even capable of thinking in abstractions.'

This feels like Tarkovsky speaking – the artist as messianic seeker of truth, berating the so-called experts for their spiritual shortcomings. 'The Stalker seems to be weak, but essentially it is he who is invincible because of his faith and his will to serve others,' Tarkovsky explains in *Sculpting in Time*.

'Ultimately artists work at their professions not for the sake of telling someone about something, but as an assertion of their will to serve people.'

These religious undertones surface again during the closing scene, in which Stalker returns to his long-suffering family. His wife (Alisa Freindlikh) gives a resigned monologue direct to camera about how she has devoted herself to her single-minded husband, despite the pain and disappointment she knew it would bring. In the cryptic final shot, the couple's sickly daughter (Natasha Abramova) moves three glasses across the table using psychic powers. After Stalker's fruitless magical mystery tour inside the Zone, it seems the real miracle has been waiting at home all along.

This bewitching twist was sparked by Tarkovsky's interest in Ninel Sergeevna Kulagina, a superstar psychic famed in Soviet Russia for her

telekinetic powers. 'Tarkovsky believed in miracles, no question,' Vladimir Sharun told *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. 'He firmly believed in the existence of flying saucers and he even claimed he saw one near his home in Myasnoe, in the Ryazan province. Tarkovsky wouldn't allow any doubts in the existence of extraterrestrials. Incidentally, it all harmoniously combined with his faith in God. He knew the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke practically by heart and could quote whole paragraphs.'

Inevitably, *Stalker* caused tensions with Moscow's cinema Tsars. Goskino [the USSR State Committee for Cinematography] advised Tarkovsky to make the film faster and more dynamic. He replied that it should be 'slower and duller at the start so that the viewers who walked into the wrong theatre have time to leave before the main action starts.'

Winning the Ecumenical Jury Prize in Cannes, *Stalker* sold 4.3 million tickets in the Soviet Union and became an evergreen cult movie in the West, where critics hailed it as a stark political allegory and even a Russian cousin of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

Tarkovsky shot his final two features as an exile in the West. He left the Soviet Union behind, and never returned to science fiction. But he did express an unlikely admiration for James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), claiming 'its vision of the future and the relation between man and its destiny is pushing the frontier of cinema as an art.'

Stephen Dalton, bfi.org.uk, December 2014

STALKER

Director: Andrei Tarkovsky

Production Company: Mosfilm

Production Manager: Larissa Tarkovskaya

Production Supervisor: Aleksandra Demidova

Production Group: T. Aleksandrovskaya, V. Vdovina, V. Mosenkov

Production Assistant: A. Agaronyan

Assistant Directors: M. Chugunova, Evgeny Tsymbal

Screenplay/Original Story: Arkady Strugatsky, Boris Strugatsky

Director of Photography: Aleksandr Knyazhinsky

Lighting Supervisor: L. Kazmin

Assistant Lighting: T. Maslennikova

Camera Operators: N. Fudim, Sergey Naugolnikh

Assistant Camera Operators: G. Verkhovsky, Sergei Zaitsev

Editor: Lyudmila Feiginova

Assistant Editors: T. Alekseyeva, V. Lobkova

Production Designer: Andrei Tarkovsky

Sets: A. Merkulov

Artists: R. Safiullin, Vladimir Fabrikov

Costumes: N. Fominoi

Make-up: V. Lvova

Music: Eduard Artemiev

Music Director: Emin Khachaturian

Music Supervisor: Raisa Lukina

Sound: V. Sharun

Cast

Aleksandr Kaidanovsky (*Stalker*)

Anatoli Solonitsyn (*writer*)

Nikolai Grinko (*scientist*)

Alisa Freindlikh (*Stalker's wife*)

Natasha Abramova (*Stalker's daughter*)

F. Yurna

E. Kostin

R. Rendi

USSR 1979©

162 mins

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