



Mirror (Zerkalo)

Olivier Assayas on 'Mirror'

What interests me in cinema is *not* cinema in itself, but what cinema, as an exploratory tool, catches in its nets. So for me *Mirror* is not a film, it is something that goes *beyond* cinema – to delve into issues of memory and remembrance, and the relationship between memory and perception. *Mirror* is a first-person narration about a man who recounts sensations he once experienced and is attempting to 'reconstruct' them, as Proust would say. And he does so not as a filmmaker, but as a poet: he uses cinema to create correspondences between materials, odours, colours, faces. The way poetry, by putting words together, allows us to reconstruct a particular feeling: *Mirror* is a sort of dreamlike *cinéma vérité*, based on this idea which is crucial in Tarkovsky's work – that the object of cinema is not to film the real, but to film *perception*.

Can't we say it unravels associative structures that demand the presence of a spectator – for without a spectator, the world thus created wouldn't exist?

Indeed. What moves me in *Mirror* is that it sends me back to my own childhood, to similar feelings I have experienced: this is why I see it as *beyond* the dramatic or syntactic structure of cinema. Yet it comprises purely cinematic devices that are extraordinarily virtuosic and intelligent. It uses the whole gamut of cinematic resources, richness, even tricks – but it does so to end up speaking in the first person, to outline a detour through the territory of autobiography. Tarkovsky's goal is not to tell a story – not rationally to transmit a message – but to delve into his past, into the memories of his own childhood. By confronting these memories with archival documents, but also by reconstructing (beyond the mundane, abstract situations) the abstract, imaginary world the child then lived in, he inserts the invisible into the world of the sensuous experience. And, in *Mirror*, this is expressed through the absence of the father. When I first saw it, I thought the sequence just after the credits was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen in the movies. I think of the mother, sitting on the fence, of that man who walks away, and suddenly of this gust of wind flattening the corn ... It is a miraculous moment and this puff of wind indicates the presence of the invisible – possibly the presence of the father.

Yet by constructing its imaginary world around the absent father, it uses purely cinematic devices to express the existence of an empty centre.

In *Mirror*, the presence of the father is manifested through his poetry, read by the invisible narrator of the film, who is none other than the filmmaker himself. These poems are magnificent, and I am moved by Tarkovsky's decision to give the meaning of the film to poetry, to beauty, to the art created by this absent father. The father is seen only twice, and one of these moments is quite magical – he appears after the slaughter of the cock at the house of the healer, as if this sacrifice was producing him, as a young man, with a stellar beauty, as he was at the moment of conception of the filmmaker. What is important for me is that the poetry-reading voice echoes that of the stuttering teenage boy who, in the pre-credit sequence, finally manages to speak. The film can start after he has articulated his first sentence – literally, it starts with the voice. The film's goal is to reconstruct the word, to construct the adult man so the words he utters may give birth to the world again.

Childhood entails a more sensuous relationship to a territory, and this is a theme that runs throughout Tarkovsky's cinema, but never had it been more powerfully explored than in *Mirror*. There are moments that convey that truth can only be expressed through sensations, for example the perception of the rotting wood you can almost smell – it leads to the sensuous presence of the land, the greatness of the territory.

Mirror is based on the idea that the truth lies in the duration of things. It is not driven by montage, but by the juxtaposition of units. And these units draw a certain legitimacy and truth from the Bazinian elements they contain: respect for the passing of time, respect for the real, respect for the spectator – it allows you to feel the pulse of the world. And while it is the jostling together of dialectically disparate elements that gives birth to an additional idea, the very strength of that idea is supported by the truth internal to the scenes. Similarly, the sudden appearance of the father's face depends on the length of the ritual that brings him forth. This is a theme that fascinates me a lot right now – cinema as a ritual of invocation. And watching the film again with you, I became very aware of the imprints earlier viewings had left in me – for example, the tracking shot following, then losing, the mother behind the railings when she's on her way to work – I realised that it is a shot I have used a lot in my own films, and here I recognised its unconscious origin.

In the first post-credit sequence we have three characters – the man, the mother, the child – and the question is, every time there is a change of camera angle, of field of vision, of camera position, who is the bearer of the gaze, the bearer of the discourse?

This sequence never fails to move me. We see a man who appears, but not the man who was expected, a man who is here by mistake – so there is a missing man, but it's not that one; but before disappearing quickly from the diegesis, he says one thing, that words betray thought, that images and sensations are much more powerful – while, in the pre-credit sequence that came before, a young man had just regained the power of speech. And when this man is leaving the wind starts blowing, and he turns back in the direction of the woman...

When he finally decides to leave, understanding he won't get anywhere with that woman, he gazes back at her – not so much with desire as with regret – and, immediately after we hear the first poem, a love poem.

Yes, because the voice of the father is the only one entitled to recount the past – simply because the past was the present of that voice...

*At the beginning of *Mirror*, like at the beginning of *Irma Yep*, fiction is gradually generated: it is supported by a first character, then by another, and yet another.*

That's quite true. Things are progressively revealed – and what interests me, and can be found in my movies, is that the real is kaleidoscopic, or rather, cubist. I am convinced that, to be able to approach the real world, you have to show all the different facets of the same situation. And this is the way things are, but also a way of approaching this 'empty centre' we were discussing earlier: the invisible that is born out of the conjunction of all the points of view – the object of cinema, that strange thing that lies in the middle of collective perception.

Olivier Assayas in conversation with Bérénice Reynaud, *Sight and Sound*, January 1997

MIRROR (ZERKALO)

Director: Andrei Tarkovsky
Production Company: Mosfilm
Producer: E. Waisberg
Production Manager: Y. Kushnerev
Assistant Directors: Larissa Tarkovskaya, V. Karchenko, M. Chugunova
Screenplay: Aleksandr Misharin, Andrei Tarkovsky
Director of Photography: Georgi Rerberg
Lighting: V. Gusev
Camera Operators: A. Nikolaev, I. Shtanko
Special Effects: Y. Potapov
Editor: Lyudmila Feiginova
Art Director: Nikolai Dvigubsky
Sets: A. Merkunov
Costumes: Nelli Fomina
Make-up: V. Rudina
Music: Eduard Artemiev, Johann Sebastian Bach, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Henry Purcell
Sound: Semyon Litvinov
English Subtitles: Peter Seward

Cast:

Margarita Terekhova (*Alexei's mother/Natalia*)
Ignat Daniltsev (*Ignat/Alexei, aged 12*)
Maria Tarkovskaya (*Alexei's mother, as an old woman*)
Alla Demidova (*Lisa*)
Fillip Yankovsky (*Alexei, aged 5*)
Oleg Yankovsky (*father*)
Nikolai Grinko (*man at printing shop*)
Yuri Nazarov (*military instructor*)
Anatoli Solonitsyn (*passer-by*)
Innokenti Smoktunovsky (*voice of Alexei, the narrator*)
Tamara Ogorodnikova
Y. Sventikov
T. Reshetnikova
E. Del Bosque
L. Correcher
A. Gutierrez
D. Garcia
T. Pames
Teresa Del Bosque
Tatiana Del Bosque
Larissa Tarkovskaya (*rich doctor's wife*)

USSR 1974

107 mins

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Rear Window Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

Stalker Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

Casablanca Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

Psycho Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

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Wanda Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

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Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

Ordet (The Word) Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

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Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

Barry Lyndon Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

Some Like It Hot Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

The Third Man Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

Killer of Sheep Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

Mirror (Zerkalo) Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

Pather Panchali Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

The Apartment Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

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