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## INTRODUCTION

*Journeys into the Zone of Cinema*



From *Stalker* (1979 USSR). Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. Credit: Media Transactions/Photofest. Shown: Aleksandr Kajdanovsky (as the Stalker).

The cinema was a machine that, exploring the world, preserved it and made it available [...], but also a machine that has revealed how the world is becoming ever more indistinct [...] a device that offered us images so that they might perpetuate the presence of the real; yet one that, reducing the world to its images, also revealed how it was by then a tender or cruel illusion.

Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*<sup>1</sup>

Evocation, invocation: the two functions of the moving image can be complementary. On the one hand, mechanical evocation of events that have already taken place or that will take place, that belong to other worlds even if these other worlds themselves are films, gods already dead or waiting to be born. On the other, invocation of eternal events (cf. Whitehead): perpetual recreation in a state of constant regeneration or decay. In this commerce with the beyond, the film invites us on a voyage along a subterranean river; from our boat we glimpse figures bodied forth from the other world, deformed figures that would be invisible without the darkness. Illuminated figures whose epiphany dwells in the shadows, in shadowy forms whose origin is in forms darker still; shadows bearing the seeds of all forms.

Raúl Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema 1: Miscellanies*<sup>2</sup>

If you could only see what I've seen with your eyes.

Replicant Roy Baty, in *Blade Runner* (1982)

WE LIVE IN A VISUAL WORLD, a world dominated by technologies that have given us the clearest, starker, and most seemingly objective picture of the universe ever known to earthly life. To an extent never before encountered, we know what things look like. We are surrounded by images and representations, and our imaging capacity extends farther than ever before: outward to the stars, inward to our constituent cells and atoms, across and at a distance toward those we share this planet with, and into our very selves, from so many angles of vision.

At the same time, our inundation and even saturation by images has made it difficult for us to make meaningful sense of the “image-worlds” that, as one commentator has put it, “cover the planet like a sheath.” These image-worlds make up a “bath of sounds and pictures”—one that simultaneously connects us to others around the world and distances us from those close by, that communicates more information than humans have ever amassed in one place even as it renders us dependent on experts to interpret that information for us.<sup>3</sup> Information is never purely visual, but visual and *televisual* media are at the core of information’s spread. Films and cable television, video and computer games, webcams and streaming video, global satellite imagery, technologies enabling the visualization of atoms, cells, internal bodily organs, and galaxies—all of these stream together in a *televisual* sea of images and sounds.

Historians and philosophers have long associated the predominance of visuality, our contemporary “ocularcentrism,” with the emergence of the modern world. Humans have always told stories, and visual representations have often been used to project those stories across the vast universe—the stars and planets,

the mysteries of the earth and the depths of the sea. But most societies have, of necessity, lived in close relation with their physical surroundings. Where social hierarchies and empires have arisen, spreading systems of rule over large distances, these have required techniques for mastering space. This is what the development of linear-perspectival representation in fifteenth-century Europe gave that continent's rising maritime powers. Linear perspective made it possible to accurately represent landscapes as they were seen by stationary observers. This facilitated the development of navigation and mapping techniques that led to the conquest of space and the colonization of new lands—lands that were in turn represented as empty spaces to be mapped, measured, and carved up according to the distributive logic of colonization. It also contributed to the development of a scientific gaze, which shifted the European cosmos into a much more distinctly visual or optical register. Perspective acted, in effect, as midwife to the birth of modernity—a modernity that, philosopher Martin Heidegger argued, has given us “the world as picture.”

As a result of this shift in sensory orientation, the world we live in is no longer structured according to the meanings and values ascribed to its constituents—in the way, for instance, that God was granted topmost place in Medieval religious iconography, with angels and archangels congregated below him and with humble humans somewhere lower but still above the animals and underworld beasts. It is structured, rather, as it is seen—measured and parcelled out according to a geometrical grid: it is a world viewed with a detached and external, seemingly objective eye. Vision, according to this model of the neutral observer, distances and objectifies: it turns things into objects and renders them passive, inert, manageable, and controllable. What colonial cartography did to territory, it has been argued, the “magisterial gaze” of nineteenth-century landscape art did to the American West, and pornography and the “masculine gaze” does to women today.<sup>4</sup>

This view of visuality as objective, or objectivizing, and at the same time as controlling, as an exercise of power masquerading as knowledge, is rivalled by a second view that has re-emerged forcefully in recent visual and cultural theory. According to this alternative view, while visuality *can* stabilize the world and render it a manageable and inert object, it *can also* destabilize, dissemble, and jostle. It can set off oscillations in the viewer and the viewed, flood the subject with emotion, and set off ripples around the object and between the object viewed and the viewing subject. Vision, in other words, can move its beholders in ways that leave nothing stable and inert. Visual images provoke, stir, invoke, incite, inflame, and move to tears. They manufacture desire, possess us and claim us—one only need think of the passions generated by national flags, team colours, or global brands. They give rise to “iconoclashes.”

They are alive, and we are caught in their grip. At its extreme, this second view leans toward suggesting that images may even be primary and that we, individual subjects, are their ghostly effects: we swim in a sea of images—visual representations providing “subject positions” for us to insert ourselves into, spatial configurations, habituated bodily comportments and cognitive schemata that shape the ways we think, move, look, and act. **Images and pictures set us into motion, channel our emotions, and evoke and redistribute our desires, fears, and affects like so much viscous putty**<sup>5</sup>

Both of these perspectives offer valuable insights to a student of visual media, and they are not mutually incompatible. If, as theorists such as Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and Jonathan Beller have suggested, we live in a postmodern world characterized by an increasing circulation of images, spectacles, and simulacra—copies that no longer bear a clear relationship to any original—the possibility for a just and viable politics is all the more difficult, or at the very least, those politics must take on completely new forms.<sup>6</sup> **If image technologies can be used to control what is imaged, this control is gained at the expense of acknowledging the actual dynamic by which one term in the relationship (the seer) escapes being seen and denies its connection with the other term (the seen).** Seeing is always a relationship, and even if the audience receiving the camera’s view is not seen by those subjected to the camera’s gaze, the world today, with its global circulation of images, is leaving fewer and fewer places for either to remain hidden from the other. We see our television networks’ versions of what *they* are doing over *there* (in Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, or China); then someone “over there” finds out what we are seeing and saying and speaks back to us; then someone “here” returns their call. The circulation between here and there creates a ripple of energy that is affective—emotionally impacting and generative of action—and that flows in both or several directions at once. We are in danger of drowning in a sea of images, spectacles, and simulacra; yet at the same time, our audiovisual media are opening up new possibilities for patching together cognitive life rafts, as well as providing new materials for stitching together, on an ever more global scale, creative and affective alliances.

If paintings, pictures, and photographic images move us, then *moving* images, from Thomas Edison’s Kinetoscope to silent and sound films to YouTube videos replicating at near light-speed across computer terminals around the planet, move us further, projecting our imagination more extensively across the territory of the world. They draw viewers into their movement and engage us in the storyline—in the actions and reactions unfolding in and through and around the places and characters portrayed. They immerse us in the flow of sensations felt or imagined in the viewing—in the flow of sounds, words,

bodily movements, and performative gestures as these are received by us from the images viewed on movie screens, televisions, computer terminals, and portable media players.

And if moving images move us, those movements unfold in a series of contexts—that is, in relational ecologies that connect us all the way back to the places from which their raw materials were sourced and where they were crafted into manufactured works. And all of this takes place through a process that moves from minerals to photographic chemicals, plastics, and silicon chips, to shooting locations and sets, to editing suites and film distributors, who deliver images to screen and desktop, where they resonate within us so that we subsequently insinuate them into conversations, symbolic narratives, figures of speech, and bodily gestures modelled on screen heroes and heroines. These ecologies entail the material production and consumption of those produced images; the social or intersubjective relations of people whose efforts shape and inform those images; the people and things portrayed or represented by them; those delivering, receiving, interpreting, and being moved by them; and the cognitive, affective, and perceptual relations connecting bodies, sensations, desires, sensory organs, and media formations.

While each of these categories overlaps and interacts with the others, distinguishing among these three sets of ecologies—the material, the social, and the perceptual—will keep us from losing the distinctiveness of each of these layers of the world around us. Calling them “ecologies” is intended not only as an echo of the science of relations between organisms and their environments interacting somewhere out “in nature,” but also as a reminder that the nature “out there” is always “in here” as well.<sup>7</sup> To produce a film or video is always to take and shape materials that set off wide arcs of impact in their production and in the trails they leave behind, from the waste products stuffed into landfills around the planet to the trails of desire and movement they may elicit toward the places portrayed—say, in the scenery of a western, a national epic, a landscape documentary, or an advertisement for a place in the sun or a vehicle to drive us there. Nature *as an idea* is always with us in each portrayal of people onscreen where there is any suggestion of how things should be or once were, of how the world has changed (moving us, the story often goes, away from what’s natural and good), and of how some of us—men, women, children, whites, blacks, natives, suburbanites, blue-skinned aliens, or talking cats—live or ought to live in relations of greater or lesser proximity with “the natural” than others. There is, finally, the nature of perception itself: the making sense of images, the systemic networks of imagery in circulation, perception in motion, emotion in excitation, and the cognitive and bodily fields that connect individuals and communities as much as they divide them internally and externally.

## Cinema as World-Making

This book presents an account of cinematic experience based in its relationship to these three co-implicated layers of the world.<sup>8</sup> The model I present and develop is grounded in **the experience of viewing a movie**, which in its essence is an organized sequence of moving images. To its viewers, a film presents a finite series of sequentially organized visual and auditory moments or events—a continuous series of moving sound-images, things that happen before us as we watch. These, in turn, are composed of more basic elements, such as (depending on how we parse them) shots and sequences, signs and signifiers, the flicker of light or pixelation of data on a screen, and so on. And they are organized into generalizable braids or threads. These are, minimally, a title reflecting and evoking some organizing idea, but **typically they include a set of characters and events, scenes or episodes, an overarching narrative**, and a set of connections—which bring with them a set of expectations—to broader contexts such as **generic conventions, recognizable authors and actors, geographic places and historical events, and viewing conditions past and present**. A film itself is finite in that it has a beginning and an ending, even if the beginning is missed or if sleep obscures the ending. And between these two boundaries the world of the film unfolds in temporal sequence, if not necessarily a linear or chronological one. Viewers of a film enter and follow along into the world of the film in ways that are specific to their own 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 to places within the world opened up by the film.

Because cinema is a *visual* temporal-sequential medium, it takes us places through what it shows us. Because it is an *auditory* temporal-sequential medium, it takes us places through what it sounds and speaks to us, auditorially, musically, and linguistically. Within these parameters there is an almost infinite set of possibilities for how cinema can combine its visual and auditory elements into spectacle and narrative, arrange its temporal and spatial coordinates and the complexities of relations between them, and otherwise build its filmic world. Each such world is structured by a set of dimensions or parameters of meaning and affect—dimensions along which viewers' cognitive and affective responses, our thoughts and our feelings, are engaged and set in motion.

**Cinema, then, is a form of world-production or, as Heidegger called it, of *poiesis*, the bringing-forth of a world. It is *cosmomorphic*:** it makes, or takes the shape of, a world, a cosmos of subjects and objects, actors and situations, figures moving and the grounds they move upon. For something to be such a world, it must have structural dimensions holding it in place or, better, keeping

it in motion. The physical world has its three dimensions of space (up-down, left-right, forward-back) and a fourth dimension of time. Similarly, **cultural worlds, those made up of meanings, values, and practices, are held together through structural oppositions.** These oppositions are typically the sorts of binary pairs or categorical sets that have been identified by structural analysts and their post-structural heirs in countless studies of cultural texts and narratives. Fictional worlds are simplified yet intensified versions of actual cultural worlds. Classical Hollywood westerns, for instance, commonly feature a dimension or axis of virtue, with “good guys” pitted against “bad guys”; an axis of stability, as seen in the search for order, community, and the settled cultivation of land, versus disruption, chaos, and wilderness; and others pitting East against West, cowboys against Indians, men as distinct from women, and so on. These sets of polarities 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 an enjoyable film experience for its viewers.

Structuralists have focused on describing a cultural object’s narrative in terms of its dependence on such structuring oppositions; other approaches to film—including psychoanalytic, cognitive, and Deleuzian analyses (those inspired by philosopher and cineaste Gilles Deleuze)—have delved into the affective dynamics that draw viewers into the cinematic experience. **In effect, viewers are drawn into the filmic world’s structural and relational dimensions or “axes.” A viewer’s movement along the axis of virtue might follow that viewer identifying or empathizing with an apparently virtuous character (played by, say, John Wayne or Sean Penn) only to experience tension or discomfort as that character is seen to cross a line between virtue and vice.** In the narrative’s negotiation of such tensions—as for instance when a gangster movie’s lead character struggles to balance familial obligations against the expectations of mob leaders—any such structural dimension may become affectively charged in a positive, negative, or morally 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 tension and pleasure that films are so effective at generating.

Three particular dimensions—spaces making possible certain vectors of movement—along with the respective forms of boundary making and negotiating they entail, are the focus of this study. The first of these I call the **geomorphic dimension** of cinematic experience, because it **deals with cinema’s production of territoriality**, of hereness and thereness, homeness

and awayness, public and private spaces, alluring destinations and sites of repulsive abjection—the objectscapes that make up the world and the ways these frame, envelop, highlight, and mark the action of a film narrative. If films produce worlds, this productivity is rooted to some degree in a reproduction of the existing pre-cinematic or “profilmic” world. But cinema only reproduces fragments of that world, features or elements of it disconnected from their original milieu and reconnected to form 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 complex mixture of the two. The world outside the film already has its many uneven textures of meaning and value—centres and peripheries, places of power and marginal hinterlands and backwoods—but films, in displaying and beckoning us into cinematic worlds that refer to places in the “real” world, charge these uneven geographies with film’s conjuring magic, amplifying differences or minimizing them, strengthening stereotypes or challenging them. Cinema’s powerful production of worlds in relation to *the world* has been assessed, here and there, by students of media geography and of cultural productions of identity, nationalism, empire, and globalization, but rarely have these assessments been brought into the centre of film theory. This is something I will endeavour to do here, particularly in Chapter 3.

Second, 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* or *animamorphic*. It produces the sensuous texture of what appears to be life—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, in divergent ways, specialize in a kind of “animamorphism” that blurs boundaries between humans and living or lifelike non-humans. Insofar as film is primarily visual, it is specifically the *optical axis*, comprising the relationship between seer and seen, subjects and objects 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. This subjectivity, however, 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 strived to turn the camera into an instrument of pure vision, a *Kino-Eye*, or into a note-taking pen or *caméra-stylo* capable of documenting the struggles of real people and of raising 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 that, 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 as anything to being a cinematic universal.<sup>9</sup> In effect, film becomes a tool for seeing and for learning how to see a moving-image world. Examining these visual and interperceptual dynamics in films as diverse as ethnographies, self-reflexive documentaries, and experimental films, will take us well beyond any simplistic understanding of “the gaze” (or, for that matter, the trained ear) and allow us to consider the different ways in which film shapes our seeing and sensing of the worlds it produces and, in turn, of the world we live in. This biomorphic dimension of film will be the focus of Chapter 5, but articulating film’s biomorphic dynamism is a central task of the book as a whole.

Third, 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 in which the “cultural” or “civilized” is distinguished from the natural, wild, savage, alien, barbaric, or monstrous. It is this production of an understood boundary between humans and the non-human that philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called “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.<sup>10</sup> Those deemed human benefit from the designation, while those deemed less than human, be they animal and beastly, or savage, mad, or criminal (with their humanity suspended as a penalty for deviant behaviour), do not. Furthermore, 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, and indigenous peoples being posited as closer to nature than white European

males. By calling this productivity “anthropomorphic,” I do not mean that it extends human characteristics to non-human entities, but rather that it **possesses 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.** Chapter 4 in particular will look into this production of a set of relations defining *our* humanity, *others’* humanity, and the relations between both and the non-human nature that is understood to precede and delimit them.

Describing film’s dimensions in this way sounds more “social constructivist” and representationalist than I intend. That is, it suggests that what matters is whether and how certain objects are assigned to one category and others to another, as if the production of these three categories were equivalent to cinema’s production of a world, with that world being simply another representation of how things are. But this is not exactly my goal. Rather, the **crucial difference between the geomorphic and the anthropomorphic** is that the first pertains to the way in which a world is presented *as given*, while the second pertains to the way in which a world is presented *as open to action and change*. Put more forcefully, **the first presents the world as givenness, while the second presents the world as agency** or capacity for action and creativity. The object-world, in other words, is the way it is; it is the world that we take to be objectively present, capable of being transformed or acted upon, but not itself capable of acting intentionally. The subject-world, on the other hand, is open to the actions of a subject; it is *about* this very capacity to act and bring about change, about both the experience of agency and the negotiated distribution of that experience within the world. These, together, are two ends of a continuum, between which spreads a field of possibilities within which action and reaction, perception and response, take place. In this sense, the geomorphic, biomorphic, and anthropomorphic are not distinct layers of the world. Rather, the geomorphic, or *objectomorphic*, and the anthropomorphic, or *subjectomorphic*, are **two ends of a stretched continuum that is itself made up of interperceptivity and interactivity. It is here, in the middle, where the action of world-making takes place**—which is why the term *animamorphic* is perhaps more resonant than *biomorphic*, since it suggests an animacy, an interactivity, the to-ing and fro-ing of open encounter, that the latter does not necessary entail. This space within which the subject-object continuum opens up is, finally, one that takes place in every image, every moment of cinematic world-making. It is, therefore, **one that can be remade in every instant. Alternatively, it is one that can be fixed and strengthened over the course of a film** and, subsequently, **over the course of countless films, genres, and traditions of moviemaking and viewing.**

Much of what follows will examine the ways these three dimensional axes or dynamics interact in the cinematic experience. Though these are not the only dimensions along which cinema works, each of them is central to what cinema is and does. Because cinema *shows us things*, it works in the registers of opticality, audiality, and interperceptivity. It produces a world that we see and hear; it sets up a series of relations of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard, feeling and being felt. **In the process it tells us what seeing, hearing, and feeling are.** Because cinema shows us *places* or *objectscapes* (in specific kinds of sequences), it sets up a “background geography” of relations between the places it shows and the movements and distances between them. And because it shows us *subjects* and *subjectscapes*—beings we understand to be experiencers of the world and actors within it, like us to a greater or lesser extent—it is “subjectomorphic,” which means that it takes on or provides the elements of subjectivity, recognized by us as the capacity to act and to *become*. In humans this latter quality tends toward “anthropomorphism,” just as, for dogs, subjectivity is really a kind of “canomorphism,” for dolphins it is “delphimorphism,” and for birds, “avimorphism.” The point is that it involves a recognition of one’s own and others’ capacities to act toward the actualization of potentials.

Together, these three morphisms, these related morphogenetic, or form-generating, registers, produce a world that is seemingly objective and material at one end, subjective and experiential 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/objectomorphic*: 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 on the continuum stretched out between these poles. Put another way, there are things that interact with us and that in so doing model the possibilities for our own actions; and there are things that are simply there for us to act upon. The first are the subjects, the second are the objects; both, however, are “there for us” in particular shapes and formations. **But then there are the things we are not sure of, which at the outset**—say, at the hypothetical zero point before an infant learns to distinguish between them—**include everything.** If *life* is a process of taming the open wildness of the “blooming, buzzing confusion” (in William James’s words) that greets us as we enter the world (this world, a world, any world), the perspective I develop here is one that insists **there is value in finding that untamed openness not only at the outset of things but in their very middle, in each and every moment that makes up the process of**

living and becoming. This insistence will sound mystical to some, and indeed it is shared with certain mystical traditions of the world, but it is consistent with traditions of philosophy and of science that are well established, if not widely known as such.<sup>11</sup>

Thinking of the world as made up of processes of subject- and object-making, processes that are dynamic, temporal, and relational, is a form of ontological thinking: it involves reflection on the structure of the world, on its fundamental constituents and how they interact. To understand the moving image as genuinely *moving*, and as doing so within a world of relations laid out at multiple levels and scales, from the molecular to the organismic to the social and ecological, will require that we expend a little effort establishing the philosophical and ontological underpinnings of the model applied in this book. That model is one that I call *process-relational*: it is a model that understands the world, and cinema, to be made up not primarily of objects, substances, structures, or representations, but rather of relational processes, encounters, or events. As we watch a movie, we are drawn into a certain experience, a relational experience involving us with the world of the film. In turn, the film-viewing experience changes, however slightly, our own experience of the world outside the film. Both of these unfold over time and in the midst of other, broader sets of relational processes, which I will describe in terms of “three ecologies”: the material, the social, and the perceptual.

The process-relational model I develop in this book takes its inspiration from a broad range of thinkers, but most especially from Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Gilles Deleuze. The intent of this book, however, is not primarily to develop a philosophy of the cinema, but to apply it in ways that reveal film’s potentials for articulating interesting and innovative socio-ecological meanings and capacities. Films, I will argue, can move us toward a perception of the world in which sociality (or the anthropomorphic), materiality (or the geomorphic), and the interperceptual realm from which the two emerge are richer, in our perception, than when we started. This goes against the claims of those who have argued that technological mediation is more a part of the world’s ecological problem than of its solution.

It will be the task of Chapter 2 to delineate the place of cinema within the “three ecologies” and to develop the process-relational model of the film experience that underpins the book. For now, it is enough to point out that a process-relational model takes a film to be not just what comes out of the studio or what is visible on a screen. Rather, a film is what a film does. And what it does is not just what occurs as one watches it. It is also what transpires as viewers mull it over afterwards and as the film reverberates across the space between the film world and the real world, seeping into conversations and

dreams, tinting the world and making it vibrate in particular ways, injecting thought-images, sensations, motivations, heightened attunements to one thing or another, into the larger social and ecological fields within which the film's signs, meanings, and affects resound. To understand the socio-ecological potentials of a film—its capacity to speak to, shape, and challenge the sets of relations organizing the fields of materiality, sociality, and perception, the three ecologies making up the world—we need to be able to conceive of these as being connected, open-ended, and dynamically in process, with ourselves implicated in the processes by which they are formed. This is the goal of the process-relational, socio-ecological approach presented in this book.

To understand the cinematic experience, it is also hardly enough for an analyst to watch films and analyze them as if such understanding were an objective science. It is important also to study the reception of films by audiences, including the different reactions and interpretations of different audiences, the ways in which these reactions change over time, and the various ways in which they infiltrate and affect thinking, sentiment, and action long after a film has been viewed. The later chapters in this book, with their close readings of specific films and genres, will delve into audience responses as well as critical analyses, though the audience research underlying this book is necessarily limited. My hope is that the concepts will prove useful and inspiring for others to do precisely that kind of work. Before further developing the theoretical underpinnings of this approach, which is the task of the next chapter, it would benefit us to examine a film that can serve as an inspirational paradigm for the model I will develop.

## The *Stalker* Effect: Stalking the Cinema, Tracking the Psyche

In *The Solaris Effect: Art and Artifice in Contemporary American Film*, Steven Dillon reads recent American cinema through a prism modelled after the relationship between film and fantasy presented in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film *Solaris*.<sup>12</sup> Tarkovsky's film, like Steven Soderbergh's 2002 remake of it, portrays a space station circling around a planet that seems to materialize the contents of its human visitors' dreams and nightmares. Dillon sees "the archetypal relationship of audience and screen at the cinema" exemplified in the relationship between the astronaut Kris and his dead (by suicide) but seemingly rematerialized wife: "There is photographic reality, sensual and emotional immersion, but also a concurrent knowledge that the reality is all along an artifice, a constructed hallucination." Film, in Dillon's reading, is both real and a "copy, a reproduction, an alien, a ghost." Tarkovsky's self-conscious

framing of nature—the rustic setting that is Kris's home on Earth, and the more general parallelism by which the two planets, Earth and Solaris, are set against each other, with the latter effecting a ghostly, nostalgically permeated duplicate of the former—provides, for Dillon, a paradigmatic commentary on the relationship between nature and art. The cinematic representations of nature and home are “built out of desire,” and it is this desire, according to Dillon, that is self-reflexively mobilized in the work of filmmakers as diverse as David Lynch, Steven Soderbergh, Todd Haynes, Stanley Kubrick, and (at times) Steven Spielberg.<sup>13</sup>

Dillon's desire to weave a path between nature and simulacrum parallels some of my own thinking in this book. *Solaris*, in particular, provides a useful model for a meditation on nature in a globalized and telecommunications-rich world, a world seeded by Apollo, Sputnik, and the Whole Earth visions (such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey*) that are the collective legacy of those missions into space. The apparently telepathic communication between the planet Solaris and the minds or consciences of its human visitors provides a kind of endorsement of a strong form of Gaia theory, biochemist James Lovelock's and bacteriologist Lynn Margulis's suggestive hypothesis that the biogeochemical makeup of the Earth acts as a single organism. In its more spiritualistic interpretations, Gaia theory suggests that humans may be part of the Earth's nervous system and that the planet may be something like our conscience, so that when we do not abide by our stewardly obligations, our ecological conscience nags at us and haunts our dreams and nightmares.

Where *Solaris* is about the relationship between its human characters and their deepest fantasies and traumas, which are set into motion through the medium of an alien planet—following Dillon, we might call it Planet Cinema—Tarkovsky's later film *Stalker* (1979) reflects more directly on the material engagements of the medium. *Stalker* is loosely based on the novel *Roadside Picnic* by the Russian science fiction writerly duo of Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii. 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 centre of the Zone is an artifact that is said to have the power to grant its visitors' deepest wishes. (In Tarkovsky's film version, it is a Room at the centre of the Zone that has this reputed power.) What had been random, forgettable remains for the extraterrestrial visitors, ironically, become sources of wonder and mystery that enthrall their human seekers, in part, no doubt, because of the Zone's very prohibition.

In his adaptation of the novel, Tarkovsky pays little attention to the science-fictional elements, just as he paid only nominal attention to those elements in his adaptation of Stanislav Lem's *Solaris*. Instead, he 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 that is at its centre. The journey becomes a circuitous perambulation, with the Stalker explaining to the men that in the Zone nothing is as it appears and everything can change from moment to moment. "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.... You might think it's capricious but at each moment it's just what we've made it by our state of mind. 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.

The Stalker leads the men through tunnels, passageways, and other detours, and these become opportunities for Tarkovsky to visually indulge us in his famous long takes, which are filled with an exquisite attention to the material detail of the landscape where the shooting takes place—in this case, the vicinity of an abandoned power plant outside Tallinn, Estonia. As the Writer and Professor bicker, challenging each other on their relative sincerity, speculating on each other's worldly fortunes and misfortunes and what they hope to gain from the Room, the camera depicts a landscape of time and decay, where vestiges of human activities are slowly being reclaimed by nature. The Stalker recounts the story of his mentor and predecessor, known as Porcupine, who, upon reaching the Room on one visit, wished unsuccessfully that his brother's life be saved, but after his return to the outside world, found himself getting wealthier and even winning a lottery. Realizing, guiltily, that the Zone had read his deeper wish of personal wealth, he committed suicide.

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”—that is, between 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 that remains, in the end, a *tabula rasa*, a kind of empty screen onto which the men's, and our, hopes and fears can be projected.

In reality, however, the screen is far from empty. Describing this as Tarkovsky's greatest contribution to cinema, Slavoj Žižek refers to the Russian director'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 Tarkovsky's universe, he writes, “the subject enters the domain of dreams not when he loses contact with the sensual material reality around him, but, on the contrary, when he abandons the hold of his intellect and engages in an intense relationship with material reality.”<sup>14</sup> The landscape of the Zone is a landscape in which the remains of human history are in the process of being reclaimed by nature in decomposition. As James Quandt describes it, Tarkovsky deploys

the four elements like no other director before or since. 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.<sup>15</sup>

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 presence of the earthy and material in Tarkovsky's films could be taken as mere aestheticism or symbolism,

as something added by the filmmaker to embellish the story that is its core, my argument—and Tarkovsky has insisted on this point himself—is that what we see is what we get: the rain is rain, the rust is rust, the mould is mould. They are not mere stand-ins for something other than what we see, but are images and sounds intended to insinuate themselves into our consciousness, resonating on multiple levels that are irreducible to a single interpretation. The Zone, then, can be taken to refer to the meeting ground of images and sounds, as they are organized for us by cinema, with the dense texture of perceptual response, bodily affect, and the multiple layers of memory, desire, and the interpretive capacity that we bring to viewing a film or artwork.

The film echoes, in several registers, the themes I have laid out so far. It represents a journey from the everyday world into a Zone that may be the zone of cinema, or of dreams, of hope and imagination, or of an affective connection with the Earth that subtends both cinema and dreams. The film's world-productivity registers in each of the three dimensions I have discussed. It is *geomorphic* in its production of an imagined geography that relates in several ways to the actual world. This geography is structured around a journey between an outside world, the world of everyday life from which 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 (if ambiguously), perambulated, but never quite mastered.

It is *biomorphic* in that the film is about the dynamics of seeing and of animate interperceptivity. The bodily movement of the characters across the landscape, first as they pass through the military barricades and later as they encounter the rather amphibious and somehow mysteriously inhabited landscape of the Zone, suggests 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. Tarkovsky’s use of black-and-white for most of the scenes outside the Zone and of colour 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. For the Stalker, it would seem, and for us who are encouraged to see the world through his eyes, the world only comes into colour upon entry into the Zone. 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 amidst divergent interpretations. When the Stalker and Writer emerge from the Dry Tunnel, so named as an ironic comment on the violent watery currents

that sometimes engulf it, and discover Professor, whom they had taken for lost, sitting safely enjoying a quiet snack, the Stalker, as Robert Bird puts it, “treats this fold in space as a ‘trap’ and their survival as proof of the Professor’s benevolence, but it is difficult to rid oneself of the suspicion that he [the Stalker] was actually leading the Writer, so to speak, up the garden path. The Stalker’s strictures,” in this interpretation, “are improvised, not to protect his visitors from unknown dangers, but solely to stamp his authority on their quest.”<sup>16</sup> When the men finally arrive at the Room, the prize of their difficult journey, it becomes clear that the prize is no prize at all; we, the viewers, do not even see the Room, and the men refuse to enter it or simply lose their motivation to do so. Yet Tarkovsky draws our attention to material reality—the raindrops and sunlight, the clouds of dust spreading in the water from the pieces of the dismantled bomb the Scientist discards into the pool at the entrance to the Room—so that if we are not sure whether what we see is real, what we do see clearly matters.<sup>17</sup>

The film’s *anthropomorphism*, or *subjectomorphism*, lies both in this suggestion of a sentience or will in the non-human world and in the relations among the three men and the film’s more peripheral characters. Regarding the three main characters, the film represents them as seekers of something, though it is not entirely clear to us, or indeed to them, what that something is. The Stalker has apparently found enough to make him choose to guide others to the Zone. The film is, in this sense, about the capacity to seek what one believes will grant happiness or satisfaction, and therefore about the power of hope. Insofar as one of the men plans to blow up the Room, it is also about the capacity to foreclose others’ capacities for hope. The dialogue among the men invites us to entertain variable positions on the Zone and on the outside world: What is of value in worldly affairs? What would *my* deepest wish be if I was in their position? What is the appropriate role of desire—which is what drives the men on this quasi-spiritual quest—in one’s negotiation with the world? Žižek and others have pointed out that Tarkovsky’s ethic is the one that Martin Heidegger had described as *Gelassenheit*, a “letting-be” that relinquishes control over the world. The Stalker is often taken to be Tarkovsky’s own stand-in as a socially misplaced figure—“the last of the Mohicans” as Tarkovsky described him—who sacrifices himself to lead others to faith in the midst of a faithless world. But even he is driven and tormented, 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 may be suggesting that art may ultimately be irrelevant; and, at the same time, not so. Her role; 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 of these play a role in the film's production of a subject-world.

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 during 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, Žižek has noted several analogies to the Zone: the Gulag, a carceral territory set aside for political prisoners (which was in fact sometimes referred to as “the zone”; the Stalker's shaved-head appearance is much like a *zek*'s, or prisoner's); the possibility of technological catastrophe, as emblematised by the 1957 nuclear accident at Chelyabinsk in the southern Urals; 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 its case a meteorite). Hungarian critics Kovács and Szilágyi interpret the Zone as “the Secret,” that is, as a taboo area of memory that any social order requires in order to maintain its authority, while Robert Bird adds to this list of suggestive 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.”<sup>18</sup> Following its Cannes premiere, the film was commonly perceived by Western critics as a barely veiled critique of the Soviet regime, though Tarkovsky judiciously denied any such intent.

After the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident, the film took on even greater resonance. The Chernobyl disaster led to the almost immediate death of several dozen people, the radioactive contamination of large parts of Ukraine, Belarus, and Eastern (and Western) Europe, the evacuation of tens of thousands of people from an area some 30 kilometres across, and a legacy of radioactivity-related diseases and illnesses affecting thousands. The evacuation area around Chernobyl was called “the Zone” (as was a later film by Ukrainian director Yuri Illienko, *Swan Lake—The Zone*, which riffed on both Chernobyl and the Gulag), and unofficial tour guides to the evacuated area referred to themselves as “stalkers.” Biblical resonances within the film emerged in interpretations of Chernobyl as “wormwood”—the literal meaning of “Chernobyl” and, according to Russian and Ukrainian interpretations of the Book of Revelation, the site

of the Apocalypse. A video game called *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, created by a Ukrainian design team and now with more than two million copies distributed worldwide and a few sequels, combines all of these themes and adds its own mutants, physical anomalies, radioactive wastes, and more.<sup>19</sup> The film, then, served as a source of imagery and as a template for the hopes and fears of Soviet citizens in the wake of an ecological catastrophe, a catastrophe that catalyzed an environmental movement that was to contribute powerfully to the demise of the Soviet Union itself.<sup>20</sup> In its often cited prescience, *Stalker*'s cinematic materialism can thus be taken as both a symptom and an affect-laden carrier of hopes and fears that would ultimately bring the Soviet Union to its end.

The making of the film contributed to this layering of political and environmental overtones. It was filmed twice, both times under challenging conditions, since Tarkovsky was considered somewhat of a dissident and was not always allowed to film what he wanted; yet the respect and international admiration for his work provided him a measure of protection. The first version of the film was destroyed during processing. Rumours circulated that it was destroyed by Soviet censors, though it seems likelier to have been a matter of ineptness and defective film stock.<sup>21</sup> It took several months for Tarkovsky to convince Mosfilm, the state filmmaking agency, to fund and allow a refilming, which they did on the principle that this was not the same film but a sequel to the (missing) original. Tarkovsky later conceded that this was fortunate, since the second version veered even further away from the science fiction themes into the metaphysical. Both productions took place in and around an abandoned Estonian power plant and downstream from a chemical plant that, unbeknownst to the crew, was releasing toxic pollution into the environment in which they would spend months filming. At one point, the film shows foam floating inexplicably on the river; and at another, it shows 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, and that 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 allergic reactions during the filming, and a number, including the actor Anatolii Solonitsyn, eventually died prematurely from cancer and related illnesses. Tarkovsky himself died of cancer of the right bronchial tube in December 1986, the same year as the Chernobyl accident, at the age of fifty-six. His wife died of the same cause twelve years later.<sup>22</sup>

The film is often compared to *Solaris*. The Zone is a space of nature, prohibited and thus set apart from “the world,” but it, or the Room at its centre,

exercises a magnetic or strongly ambivalent pull on the psyche. Similarly, the ocean that covers the surface of *Solaris* exercises a powerful effect on its human visitors, who remain locked in its orbit as if they are compelled by it to relive their deepest traumas. Both seem to trigger an encounter with conscience, a conscience that is shown to be inter-human (dealing with the ethics of how we relate to others) but that is also suggested to be ecological (the ethics of how we relate to nature and the cosmos). The Zone, and the zone within which the planet *Solaris* exercises its hold on its human visitors, in this sense may be taken to represent an Other within the individual or collective psyche, but an Other 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 also suggest that nature—though in *Solaris* it is the nature of another planet—may be an active and even sentient agent, one that precedes us and that in some sense gives rise to us, but also one that follows us and covers us over, as earth covers earth in its sedimentation of memories, meanings, and elemental cycles. In the case of *Stalker*, the long takes and camera movements portray a visceral gravitational pull toward the Earth, as Žižek describes it. In *Solaris*, this is represented both by the apparent pull toward the planet's surface (no longer resisted by Kelvin in the near-psychedelic climax of the film, and more so in Soderburgh's remake) and by Kelvin's seemingly real reminiscences of his rustic earthly home, which is revealed in the end to be floating on an island in the ocean of *Solaris*.

Ultimately, the meaning of the Zone, like that of *Solaris*, is left open. And it is this semiotic underdetermination, this openness to interpretation combined with a resonant use of imagery and cinema technique, that makes it a particularly good example of film's ability to produce multiple meanings and affects. The Zone may be extraterrestrial in origin, supernatural, or simply natural. It may represent the archetype-laden depths at the centre of the psyche, in a Jungian interpretation, or the unrepresentable and ungraspable void at its core, in a Lacanian one (the difference between the two will be discussed in Chapter 6). It may represent the sheer contingency at the heart of life, a contingency that haunts us and that 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 toward a transcendent zone that is outside 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 is never 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 awareness. What we get out of films depends, to a large extent, on our dreams 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, all 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 intimately involved in the essence of cinema. Cinema is neither a mirror nor a window; it is neither 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 and social worlds, but then it 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, neural explosions, 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.

An ecologically inspired ethic of cinema, such as I develop in this book, advocates for greater attention to be paid to the relationship between the worlds produced by cinema and the world(s) from and within which they are produced—worlds that are 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 that state's shadow side of suspicion, paranoia, and interest in the paranormal, all expressed in the film and in the meanings it has engendered. (In this sense, the film could be usefully compared to *The X-Files*, a television series I will discuss briefly in Chapter 6.) 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 by the Soviet state in its anxious quest to keep up with

its capitalist rivals. The Real, then, includes the Cold War system itself, with its race to the moon and its quest for the bomb, which ultimately delivered to us both Chernobyl and the downward, Earth-b(e)aring gaze from Sputnik and Apollo. And 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 breathed the heavy atmosphere of late Soviet industrial modernism. We, today, may be inhaling (if not hyperventilating) something distinctly less heavy—the lighter oxygen of transnational, digital, “fast capitalism.” Yet the material world featured in Tarkovsky’s long takes—in which signs of human history are 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 subtitled his influential 1960 treatise on film theory *The Redemption of Physical Reality* in part to indicate that cinema is uniquely qualified to record reality in a way that allows its viewers to experience that reality more fully. Cinema can do far more than record reality, and not all of Kracauer’s ideas have withstood the test of time, but the ethic of redeeming physical reality remains worth pursuing. While this book makes some dramatic departures from the realist aesthetic promoted by Kracauer, the ideas and interpretive strategies I develop are ultimately aimed at this project of redeeming the material reality of the world, a world that is shared by humans and non-humans, and shaped by both, at a time of precarious relations 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 in any ecologically minded filmmaking and theorizing today.

## The Argument and the Book

This study’s central premises, which I have begun to outline, can be summarized as follows.

(1) *Images move; they affect their viewers and “take us places.”* Cinematic moving images, through their melding of temporally sequenced visual display and sound, move us all the more forcefully. They take us on journeys—at least on metaphorical or metaphysical journeys—and through the movement they exhibit and elicit, they give shape to imagined or perceived worlds. Cinema is, in this sense, a form of world-production.<sup>23</sup> In the process of creating worlds,

films generate spaces of hereness and thereness, a certain range of projected, potential, or experienced movements into and across those spaces, a certain set of optical, sensorial, and interperceptual relations, and a certain set of agential powers that relate, in some way, to our own power to act in the world.

(2) Cinematic worlds are kept in motion through an interplay of constituent structural dimensions or parameters along which viewers are invited to cognitively and affectively situate themselves and “travel,” and along which the tensions and resolutions of cinematic experience unfold. Viewers are drawn, or lured, into cinematic worlds in a multitude of ways. In my analysis, which follows the phenomenological explorations of C.S. Peirce (described in Chapter 2), these can be said to have three main registers. The first of these is the immediate texture of the cinematic experience, the absorptive, spectacular “thingness” of the cinematic event. The second is the sequential thread of filmic narrative, the way in which one thing follows another, and how that thread engages us in making meaning out of how things follow each other. The third is the resonance and referentiality of cinematic elements—sounds, images, words, and combinations of each—in relation to the world that precedes the film while remaining outside it. As a film draws us in, employing each of these registers to variable effect, it opens a series of vectors, or potential movements, along the axes, parameters, or dimensions it supplies. Along these vectors, cinema also constructs boundary or “bifurcation points”—points of tension or intensification, such as the dividing line between humanity and prehistoric wilderness in *Tarzan*, *King Kong*, *Apocalypse Now*, or *Jurassic Park*—and “basins of gravitational attraction” for the movement between and around these boundaries. (These terms are taken from non-linear dynamical systems theory, which I will not develop in depth, but which will feature in my discussion of the human–animal boundary in Chapter 5.)

(3) As suggested in my reading of *Stalker*, films vary in terms of the multiplicity and potency of affective positions or movements that are made available—structurally or by invitation—for viewers to occupy and move through. A film is in principle more open or dialogical when it makes available a broader range of positions with respect to the main vectors of affective engagement it sets into motion. And while the range of variation depends on the type of film being made, this variation is generally a good thing. A film is also more resonant to the degree that the images, sentiments, affects, and narrative resources it makes available carry out their work along multiple and more widely distributed lines. The remainder of this book will show a bias toward specific films that accomplish more in these two respects: they have resonated with audiences and have left behind marks of their resonance in the world; or they have made available alternative readings that have resulted

in some interesting conflicts of interpretation; or, in some cases, they have done both.

(4) The worlds constituted through film relate in various ways to the world *outside* cinema. They mirror that world, refract and diffract its meanings, infuse (or diffuse) meaning and aura into (or out of) the people, objects, and places portrayed. They borrow from the non-cinematic world, selecting bits and pieces that are then assembled and fused into temporal sequences. The many and varied forms of cinematic figuration—lighting and shadowing, the expansion and constriction of time and of rhythm, the back-and-forth movement between faces and eyes in the “shot—reverse shot” sequence, the montage splicing one image to the next, the overlaying, underscoring, and propelling of images by sound and music, the use of voiceovers, and all the other features of cinematic world-building—all of these give rise to a world that is different from the pre-cinematic world because it has been articulated, highlighted, extended, compressed, refigured, transfigured, and reshaped.

If cinema produces worlds—or, as Heidegger would say, if cinema *worlds*—then this worlding also sets off resonances, diffractions, and rippling interactions with the world out of which it produces those worlds. Moving images now pervade our everyday lives. The world has become altered, othered from within, by cinema—that is, by the layered and mobile imagery that presents that world to itself, reflects it, diffracts and refracts it. As John Mullarkey argues in *Refractions of Reality*, “Moving pictures move us because movement is what is Real.”<sup>24</sup> The world has become a world of *the motion picture*. As the most synthetic of the arts, cinema may bring us closest to the dynamism of the world outside cinema even while it adds dynamism to it.

The relationship between cinema and the world outside cinema includes the ways in which film is a material medium with material effects. Both ends of the chain of cinematic production and consumption are ultimately grounded, and simultaneously resisted, by the self-subsistent and active materiality that Heidegger calls “earth”—a materiality that gives itself to us as territory, as land, as nature, as resource, and that simultaneously takes away from us as time, as death, and as mystery. The relationship between this earth and the filmic world is central to the ecocritical agenda of this book. While my focus will not be primarily on the material impacts of cinematic production, this is certainly one line of research that an ecocritical form of analysis can and should take.<sup>25</sup>

(5) Moving (sound-)images are moving increasingly in this era of digital technology, one that is reshaping, transforming, and absorbing the originals, then recirculating and distributing them through all manner of vectors, flows, channels, webs, and nets. This movement of images and affects is reshaping the ways viewers perceive themselves (as individuals and as groups), the world

(including its landscapes, places, nations, civilizations, and ecologies), the earth that subtends them, and the relationships connecting all of these. The forms taken by these relations among cinema (the film-world), affect (perceptual and bodily response), and nature (the pro-filmic and pre-cinematic material world) will be the focus of this study. As the analysis of *Stalker* suggests, cinema stalks the world, shadowing it, refracting it, and changing it in the process. It turns the world into a *stalked* world. This stalking is not necessarily a bad thing. As Tarkovsky's idiosyncratic use of the term indicates, it is also a "raising" of the world into art (as one might raise a building); in Heideggerian terms, it is a *raising of the earth into world*, such that culture dwellers like us may find a home in it. This book will explore some of the ways in which cinema stalks the world to co-create its worlds for us in the midst of an ultimately unknowable earth that provides support and foundation for those worlds.

My argument will fall somewhere partway between the idea that cinema has reshaped the world, altering our experience of territory (or geomorphy), sociality (anthropomorphy), and livingness (biomorphy), and the more specific idea that while a few great films have done this, most simply follow along or reproduce things without change. Cinema reshapes the world in many directions, and I wish to focus on films, or film capacities, that move things in the direction of a more fluid, more animate, more process-relational understanding of the world.

What follows, in the next five chapters and the mini-chapter that concludes the book, constitutes an exploratory journey toward understanding how cinema, affect, and nature relate to one another. I develop the theoretical foundations of the argument in Chapter 2. These foundations include an account of how and why it is useful to think in threes—with three ecologies (material, social, perceptual), three registers of the cinematic world (geomorphic, anthropomorphic, biomorphic), and three moments in the viewer's experience of cinema (spectacle, narrative, "signness" or "exoreferentiality"). And they include a brief but hopefully sufficient account of the process-relational metaphysics that underpin this onto-epistemological model.

Chapters 3 to 5 are in-depth analyses of the three dimensions of cinematic worlds: their geomorphism, anthropomorphism, and biomorphism. Each begins with an account of how these dimensions emerge in life and follows with explorations of their emergence in film. The first of this trio of chapters is the longest, as it lays out some primary groundwork, including a discussion of Western pictorial representations of nature and how they have helped shape cinematic depictions of landscape and territory. It covers a range of styles of cinematic landscape depiction, from westerns, road movies, and documentaries

celebrating or critiquing the “control of nature,” to the cinematic pantheism of Aleksandr Dovzhenko and Terrence Malick, to the deconstruction of the gaze in experimental and art films such as Peter Greenaway’s *Prospero’s Books*. Chapter 4 deepens the analysis of cinema’s production of “us” and “them” by probing the ethnographic impulse that can be found in all cinema, but especially that which contrasts cultural groups that are differently positioned with respect to nature. The cinema of “first contact,” which depicts the Western discovery of other people—“primitives,” “aliens,” and other “others”—represents this ethnographic impulse at its most pure. And while this cinema has traditionally been characterized by what E. Ann Kaplan has called an “imperial gaze,” there are alternatives to such stereotypical representations. Films discussed here run the gamut from proto-ethnographic films such as *Nanook of the North* to their commercial and more spectacular progeny (such as *King Kong*) through to more recent ethnographies, mockumentaries, postmodern and post-colonial revisionings of encounters between Europeans and Natives, and indigenous productions themselves. The ethnographic metaphor is extended, in Chapter 5, to the perceived boundary between humanity and the animal or wild, a boundary that can be rendered fixed and stable, or dynamic and malleable, and that can be imbued with positive, negative, or more ambiguous valences. The range of films examined here includes popular nature documentaries, fiction and animation features, and films focusing on boundary-crossing individuals such as Timothy Treadwell (*Grizzly Man*) and Mark Bittner (*Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*).

While separating these three registers of cinematic “worlding” may suggest that each is autonomous, a process-relational view insists that they are ultimately part of the same process. Carving them into three chapters can only be taken as provisional, since the goal of a process-relational ethic is to render the boundaries fluid and permeable. This means that, in a very real sense, there is no geomorphology and no anthropomorphology—except to the extent that living, relational beings take it as such in their relational, experiential encounters with others. It is these encounters, these moments of experience, that make up the universe. I am making a distinction here between the “world”—which is the perceptual and conceptual *Umwelt*, or life-world, of any given entity—and the “universe,” which is simply *what is*, along with the “earth,” which is its local variant. The world, in this sense, is the subjectively perceived life-world of meanings, habits, and taken-for-granted assumptions according to which action proceeds (for someone or other). It is a product of semiosis, or meaning-making. For humans, it is always to a large degree intersubjectively shared, though this sharing is never wholly and perfectly

rendered between any two individuals. In contrast, the universe (globally) and earth (more locally) make up the sets of relations that undergird and subtend the worldhood of any world.

There are times when relations between a cultural world and the earth that subtends it become fraught and troubled. Ours is such a time. Chapter 6 brings together threads from the previous chapters to focus on the psychodynamics of this fraughtness, or of what we can generically call the ecological crisis. This chapter examines films that deal with the perception or recognition of eco-trauma both directly (as in *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Children of Men*, and *Avatar*) and indirectly (as in films depicting social dislocation in the midst of environmental “strange weather,” such as *Short Cuts*, *The Ice Storm*, and *Magnolia*). Here I contend with theories of the sublime, Fredric Jameson’s notion of the geopolitical, and the “traumatic kernel” at the heart of ecological consciousness. The latter term is taken from Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian film critique, which brings me back to the cinematic materialism explored in the present chapter in relation to *Stalker*. I suggest that what psychoanalysis reads as the psyche, and Žižek as “the Real,” can also be read, through a process-relational detour, as “earth,” that is, as the set of material and bodily metabolisms and intercorporeal relationalities that underpin conscious experience and that serve as its material “undergrowth of enjoyment.” Returning here to the architectonic of C.S. Peirce, but with deep nods to the image-centred archetypal psychology of James Hillman and the metaphysics implicit in Tarkovsky’s Zone, I develop an aesthetics, ethics, and “ecologics” of the “image-event” that will help us think ecophilosophically about the task of viewing and living with moving images. This final chapter concludes with a reading of two recent films, Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*, as lucid examples of a cinema that can be rendered ecophilosophical when approached through the perspective this book develops.

Much of this book assumes a cinema in which, for all the activity within, the journey remains framed within a single arc (from beginning to end) and the visual frame remains singular. Occasionally, however, I refer to some of the ways in which television and digital media are blurring and dissembling such basic reference points. In the afterword, I deal with arguments that we are seeing the end of cinema, or at least the end of film, and that the digital is bringing an entirely new image sensibility upon us. The interconnectedness of the digital media world is creating a new geography; it is geomorphing a technologically mediated world, one that is layering itself onto the pre-cinematic world in a much more complete and complex way than cinema as a medium of single films ever did or could. But cinema is not going away; if anything, it is intensifying.

That intensification is making of our world an ever-moving world, but one in which the movement is not merely from here to there, or from a central place toward its peripheries and back. Cinema is motion; life is motion. And with the intensification of motion through the potentialities being unlocked within digital media, it is becoming clear that the universe *has been motion all along*. Where that takes us is up to us. I hope this book offers tools for moving it toward an appropriate *elsewhere* from where it is today.