

**THE WORD OF THE FATHER / THE BODY OF THE
MOTHER: DIMENSIONS OF GENDER IN
TARKOVSKY'S *MIRROR***

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By Alice Gavin
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*Supposed to occur between the ages of six and eighteen months – but at the same time seen as seeping into the ongoing identity formation of the subject – Lacan's theory of the 'Mirror Stage' involves the successful identification of one's body as one's own. Yet the wholeness of the body with which the infant identifies is a mirage; experienced as an exterior image, its unity does not correspond with the infant's as yet underdeveloped physical co-ordination. Further, the moment of self-identification is, simultaneously, the moment in which the subject is irreducibly split, since the sense of a singular, self-contained self can only be produced by its doubling in some reflective object: the 'I' is thus established as dependent on an 'other'. This article explores Tarkovsky's *Mirror* – as a film overtly concerned with the idea of a problematic sense of self – in light of Lacan's theory. Mixing childhood memories of the director's mother with the poetry of his father, Arsenii Tarkovsky, the film presents the attempts of a middle-aged, apparently ill man – the film's narrator – to come to terms with his past. In particular, it is interested in the part played by the mother in that past. Though the father is himself largely absent, his word, in the form of his poetry, still appears to structure the son's sense of self; the narrator's relation to his mother, on the other hand, is more 'visible', but nonetheless troublesome. Moreover, her significance as the son's 'other' – an essential yet repressed figure in the formation of his identity – is underscored in the film by the association of her image with the motif of mirrors.*

The main body of the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's fourth full-length feature film, *Mirror* (1974), is instigated by the exclamatory speech of a stammerer: an introductory sequence, set up by the director between a female therapist and a subject struggling with an acute stutter, ends with the male patient's accomplished uttering of the words 'I can speak'. He does not, however, speak alone: supporting his voice is that of the therapist; she allows him the how and what of talking, but though she tells him what to say, the words seem wholly his. Unlike her patient, she is not the subject of her speech, since the 'I' she utters is that of an other. Moreover, it is the male figure that fills the frame at this moment, and upon which the camera focuses; the female therapist is cornered – into the corner of the screen and, simultaneously, into the role of nurturer and support. For this 'session' is structured by a series of physical gestures that aim at

hypnotizing the patient into the belief he can speak: the therapist's body provides a site for the physical representation of the translation of the patient's language from a fragmentary to an assertive – or total and complete – form. At the same time, the form of this totality is fantastical, since the young man's exclamatory sentence – a sentence which seems an incontestable statement when spoken, supposing in its uttering an absolute unity between subject and word – is nevertheless split. It is doubly spoken; at least two speak.

Appropriately, then, for a film in which anxieties of speech and identity abound, predominantly on the part of a male narrator whose body remains off-screen – invisible and im-material but not at all without import – until one of the film's final scenes, this initiating sequence is itself a depiction of an initiation into speech. In a Lacanian sense, it can be seen – and visually experienced on the part of the viewer – as an entry into the Symbolic order, the realm of the paternal and the proper positioning of the subject in language. But whilst the father is here absent – both here and absent in that his spectre is, perhaps, implicitly present as the microphone that intrudes into the top left hand corner of the frame, expecting as opposed to encouraging speech and seen only as a shadow – it is the female therapist who figures as a mother, who nurtures the subject and who, in leading the patient in a séance, is the medium of his being (in language). What is more, the finality of the subject's statement of speech – the completeness of the meaning of his declaration, 'I can speak' – is imposed: its correspondence with the completion of the scene and the beginning of the film proper disavows the possibility of the incompleteness of his ability to speak, the possibility that his next sentence might be punctuated by a stutter. Indeed, the correspondence of this particular sentence with the positioning of the cut is such as to make it seem that the words 'I can speak' actually deliver completion: filmic space seems sentenced to the mastery of the male subject's speech.

In its setting up of a relationship between a nurturing mother-figure and stuttering male, this episode in one sense mirrors the subject-matter of *Mirror* itself: the film itself is driven by the issue of there being 'something the matter with' the son as subject – an issue of identity explored in relation to his memories of his mother. In another sense it is nothing *but* a setup, since the narrator remains, at the end of the film, in an inconclusive and unspecified illness, one which began as a sore throat – a dis-ease of speech – but which is identified by a doctor as being split from its beginnings, as having nothing to do with that initial affliction. In a further sense, however, the scene can be seen to set up an

interpretative structure organised in terms of a psychoanalytical encounter; staged by Tarkovsky using a real stammerer, the scene performs a sort of preliminary meeting – a term used by Lacan for the opening sessions between a practicing analyst and analysand – between the audience and the film, and, perhaps, between the film and itself.¹ At the same time, its being embedded in the body of the film by an anticipatory scene in which the narrator's son, Ignat, switches on the television in his father's apartment, in turn embeds the audience's gaze in Ignat's: we, with the son, see through the father's screen; the father, then, screens the film as whole – surveys its territory and insists on the completeness of its significations.² But this completeness is, in *Mirror*, continually frustrated: as Elizabeth Grosz has commented in relation to Lacan's discussion of the mirror stage, the ego – the I – 'forms itself round the fantasy of a totalized and mastered body'³; in *Mirror*, the fantasy of mastery flails. More accurately, it is exactly that flailing which founds the film, and which, in the assembling of a self in terms of fragments and footage not always reducible to the narrator's narrative, is documented and dramatised.⁴ The stutterer's transformation into a speaking subject fails to complete the film; the (un)rest of *Mirror* is, in a sense, both a reminder and remainder of this instant. Moreover, the film's obsessive observance of the narrator's memories of his mother – and its emphasis on her relation to the words of his poet father – invites a reading of its text in terms of the dimensions of gender in relation to that failure. Devices such as slow motion, voice-offs⁵, and the motif of mirrors are applied by Tarkovsky in such a way as to unsettle the familiarity of the human figure as it is situated in time and space and to render uncanny our understanding of

the (proper) place of gender. The role of the therapist in the opening sequence recurs throughout: repeatedly in this film, the body of the mother is the scene of the father's word and the site of the son's st-uttered becoming.

In *Mirror*, the remainder – left-over or over-looked – that makes sense of both the father and the son's sentences can be – is – seen as the body of the narrator's mother, a body that does not, however, straightforwardly belong to the mother. For Grosz, the philosophical concept of *chora* – invoked by Plato as an essential bridge between the intelligible and the sensible which does not of itself partake of form and which leaves no imprint on the things which pass through it, is omitted from the things it gives birth to – is associated with the feminine: certainly in *Mirror* the mother's body can be seen as a receptacle for the father's word.⁶ Early on in the film, Tarkovsky's father – the poet Arsenii Tarkovsky, whose work was well received in Russia when a collection of his poetry was published in 1962 – recites a poem entitled 'First Meetings'. As he speaks, the camera tracks from the narrator's mother; having entered the wooden house, she is seen in corner of a room before being shown sitting at the window with pages of what we presume to be the absent father's poetry. The mother is silent: speech is impossible, since she is – as the subject-matter of his poem – already apparently spoken for by the father. At the same time, however, it is she who supplies visual form to his voice, the setting of his words in space.

For Alexandra Smith, whose essay on Andrei Tarkovsky as a reader of Arsenii Tarkovsky's poetry sets up a Lacanian interpretation of *Mirror* (but one in which the dimension of gender is, for the most part, left out), 'First Meetings' 'hints at the mystery of the narrator's origin as a creative individual' and since the poem 'is interwoven in Andrei Tarkovsky's own autobiographical narrative, the allusion to first meetings might be seen as the narrator's meetings with the language of self-representation'.⁷ (That this should be so is doubly appropriate, given the proximity of 'First Meetings' to Lacan's idea of preliminary meetings between an analyst and analysand, a series of sessions which for Fink involve the beginnings of a demand on the part of the analysand for self-analysis.) More explicitly, it is the mother's supportive structure that the son

¹ Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 12. As Fink points out, 'entretiens préliminaires' could also be translated as 'preliminary interviews'.

² In a Saussurian sense, signification is understood as the process combining the signifier (that which carries meaning, for example the word) and the signified (the concept or idea to which the signifier refers) to produce the sign.

³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 86.

⁴ 'Not always reducible to' in that the film we see is not the exact equivalent of the narrator's narrative of self. The inclusion of newsreel footage cannot, for instance, be comfortably assimilated to the film's central 'story'.

⁵ Following Doane, a 'voice-off' is understood here as differing from a 'voice-over': whereas a voice-over is usually spoken by a character not actually present in the scene in question (or by a character temporally distanced from himself as he appears in the scene), a voice-off is spoken by a character who is obviously present and participating in the scene, but who is not actually shown.

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, p. 113.

⁷ Alexandra Smith, 'Andrei Tarkovsky as Reader of Arsenii Tarkovsky's Poetry in the Film *Mirror*', *Russian Studies in Literature*, 40 (2004), 46–63 (p. 50).

desires, and which drives him to appropriate his father's discourse through inserting it into the story of his own self's unfolding, thus, in turn, inserting his own self into the poem. The fragility of the artifice of masculine creativity – a fragility sturdily disavowed in a later poem wherein the speaker states his ability to 'call up any century' and 'enter it and build a house in it' – is, however, glimpsed in a shot towards the beginning of the poem. Making her way towards the wooden house, the mother momentarily turns round to face the camera; in the second before she does so, a piece of paper drifts from the window in the top right-hand corner of the frame: divorced from her look, the father's word thus comes undone in space; but at the same time the father's voice is unperturbed. The recital bears on in spite of this slip. Moreover, in the shot immediately following this one, we see the narrator as a child, positioned so as to suggest it is his gaze that has somehow distracted the attention of his mother. In the midst of a poem dealing with the desire of the father for the mother and the transformative capacity of her love, the gaze of the son attempts an interruption.

Crucially, however, the camera cannot here manage – can neither wholly grasp nor adequately sustain – a complete identity between the look of the mother and that of the son: the most it can do is depict the two separately, in quick succession; their unison is thus an illusion, fantasised by the camera. It is, moreover, an un-sustained rupture; the mother's body is again presented as the substance of the father's word. As Bruce Fink has put it, an 'unmediated relation between mother and child [...] gives way before the signifier', is 'cancelled out by the operation of the paternal function'.⁸ As the dream scene featuring the white slip thrown quickly – simultaneously vividly and almost imperceptibly – across the room as the son approaches also suggests, the mother's desire 'almost always goes beyond the child: there is something about her desire which escapes the child, which is beyond its control. A strict identity between the child's desire and hers cannot be maintained.'⁹ That which remains of this rift in the 'hypothetical mother-child unity' can be identified as Lacan's object *a*¹⁰: by 'cleaving to that rem(a)inder, the split subject, though expelled from

the Other, can sustain the illusion of wholeness'.¹¹ In this particular segment of Tarkovsky's film, then, the mother's look – the focusing of her form – is torn: she supports the totality of the father's word by giving visibility to his image of her and by bearing its burden – giving birth, as her tears at the poem's end suggest, to the poem's emotive resonance. At the same time, however, the poem produces the moment at which the mother turns away from, having turned towards, the son: it introduces the possibility of an ulterior meaning to her gaze, one which is not necessarily directed at the son; more accurately, perhaps, it enforces the possibility of meaning itself, a relation between signified and signifier that disrupts the 'strict identity' – the absolute unity – between the child's desire and the mother's. But embedded in the text of *Mirror* – a film in which actions that take place when the narrator is a young boy are memories assembled from both reality and dream – such unity is, to borrow Fink's formulation, already a rem(a)inder, issued in the form of fantasy. Nevertheless, it is exactly this maternal left-over – or over-looking – which figures as the film's 'meaning'. In the script, the initial proposal for the film, Tarkovsky concludes with a description of the narrator observing another mother wash her son's hair: under the narrator's gaze, the mother becomes the universal 'MOTHER': 'And then suddenly I felt calm, calm, and I clearly understood that MOTHER is immortal'. A mother becomes the site of the son's concept of totality; she suits his description as such.

As hinted at above, however, *Mirror* witnesses the failing of this totality: the puncturing of the whole – the hole hidden within it, in a sense, produces it. The father's absence from the domestic space is keenly felt in the film, and just as the father has imprinted his presence on the family by leaving it (in 1935, as we learn in the ensuing telephone conversation between the grown narrator and his mother), so too do his words both vacate the home and penetrate it. During the reciting of 'First Meetings' the paper flees the windowsill in the breeze, but the father's voice still infiltrates the domestic space; in the ongoing articulation of his poem, his voice persists as the primary describer – the privileged signifier¹² – of relations within the home. Furthermore, the father's voice-over provides what can be described as the film's 'depth', as opposed to the surface visibility the figure of the

⁸ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 60.

⁹ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 59.

¹⁰ Lacan's 'object *a*' alludes to the cause of desire. The child desires the mother's desire (desires to be the sole object of the mother's desire), but the mother's desire goes beyond the child, causing a rift between them. 'Object *a*' is described by Fink in terms of the remainder produced when the hypothetical unity between mother and child breaks down. It is 'a last trace of that unity, a last reminder thereof' (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 59).

¹¹ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 59.

¹² In Lacanian theory, the phallus is the signifier of signifiers; it inaugurates the Symbolic. The Father, in his possession of the phallus, thus occupies a privileged position in language.

mother bequeaths his images. This, too, is something the son can be seen to attempt to appropriate: for the bulk of *Mirror* we do not see the body of the narrator, despite his participation in certain scenes. His is a 'voice-off', a device that has been described by Mary Anne Doane as a means of deepening the diegesis, giving it an extent which exceeds that of the image.¹³ In its own way', Doane suggests, 'it *accounts for* lost space': implicit in Doane's emphasis is a notion of the voice-off as actually mapping that space, and so, in a sense, producing the viewer's knowledge of it. Moreover, it is 'precisely because the voice is not localizable, because it cannot be yoked to a body, that it is capable of interpreting the image, producing its truth'.¹⁴ Whilst in *Mirror* the female figure largely dominates the screen, it is nevertheless a space known only in a masculine sense. This, indeed, would seem to agree with the argument adopted by Luce Irigaray: for Irigaray, time is a masculine concept, whilst space is feminine: woman is – provides – space for man, but, as Grosz glosses it, 'occupies none herself'.¹⁵ In scenes in which the narrator – as a grown man – talks with this wife, from whom he is separated but who in her exact resemblance to his young mother (played by the same actress) still in a sense belongs to him, it is impossible to pinpoint his location: when, in his apartment, the narrator discusses with Natalia the possibility of Ignat coming to live with him, Natalia does not directly address the camera when speaking to him, as she does elsewhere. Whilst it is tempting to associate the camera's eye with the narrator's voice – whilst the comprehensiveness of his identity in a singular space is desirable – it is not, in fact, the case. Simultaneously, however, it is exactly this resistance that spreads the narrator's identity: whilst the visibility of the female figure allows her to be cornered – as the narrator's mother is physically depicted at one point during 'First Meetings' – masculinity masters corners, presents itself as being able, like sound but unlike sight, to go round them.

Yet the narrator of *Mirror* is not necessarily content with this capability; he is not quite able to master this form of mastery. The nature of his off-screen voice is not an exact equivalent to the voice-over first uttered by the father: it does not preside over the filmic space but is, rather, a presence tarnished by its participation in that space. Unlike the transcendent time his father's recited poem supposes itself to

occupy, the present-day narrator is repeatedly caught up in a spatial identification in which his bodily presence is suspected – suspect to – the viewer. On the other hand, even in the scene in which the father returns, in military uniform, to the scene of his children's upbringing, his image is still preceded by a sort of internal voice-over: his children are shown to be summoned by his call, and the shot in which they cling to him is confidently characterised by a steady, straight-on gaze. Despite his prolonged absence, his identity is still "at home". The narrator, however, struggles properly to take up his body – to make its image his property, the terrain of his singular identity as opposed to a signal of its doubling. Indeed, the son in *Mirror* is, in a literal sense, a double: the young narrator and his son, Ignat, are played by the same actor: again, the idea of *chora* arises, since it is *chora's* traceless production which allows the product to speak directly of its creator; in *Mirror's* narrator, however, this ability – the ability to speak with (and replace, perhaps) the father's voice – is revealed as desire. Moreover, in the space he makes *his* home, mirrors multiply: there is, quite literally, no closure of the mirror stage in this place. Crucially, however, it is the body of his estranged wife who is framed in their reflections and who is thus, in a sense, made to reflect the narrator's fragmentary absence: in the scene in which they discuss their 'flunk' of a son, and the possibility of his living with his father, the wife moves from mirror to mirror as she speaks, at one point stopping to rock back and forth against one. The stability of the mirror image is confounded, reflecting, perhaps, a kind of 'legendary psychasthenia' – the state in which the psychotic is unable to properly locate himself in a spatial position – on the part of the narrator. Discussed by the French sociologist Roger Caillois in his study of the mimicry of insects, the influence of the implications of this state is evident in Lacan's conception of the mirror stage: for, as Grosz has put it, the 'anchoring of subjectivity in *its* body is the condition of coherent identity, and moreover, the condition under which the subject *has a perspective* on the world'.¹⁶ If the body comes to be thinkable as other to the subject's identity (as, for instance, occurs in localized form in the experience of pins-and-needles, when the afflicted limb can feel like a foreign body when it touches another) then that identity is itself de-formed. That his wife alternates between looking directly at the camera when talking to him and looking slightly askew is indicative of a slippage in the narrator's location, an inability, perhaps, to adopt a singular perspective.

¹³ Mary Anne Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 363-375 (p. 379).

¹⁴ Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space', p. 379.

¹⁵ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, p. 100.

¹⁶ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, p.89.

As the multiplicity of mirrors in his apartment suggests, however, every single perspective is in fact in some sense insufficient: as Joan Copjec has argued, in the Lacanian understanding

invisibility [or nonknowledge] is not registered as the wavering and negotiations between two certainties, two meanings or positions, but as the undermining of every certainty, the incompleteness of every meaning and position.¹⁷

What is notable in *Mirror*, however, is the way in which this incompleteness is appropriated as an acutely masculine affliction, an illness that takes place in relation to the mother: as the script more explicitly describes, the narrator is racked with feelings of guilt for the way in which, in his eyes, his mother sacrificed her life for his. Remembering the reminder set up by the opening sequence, the association of incompleteness with illness is exactly what sets up the possibility of the healing of that illness. In the scene in which we see the narrator's sick torso, his hand eventually lets go of a bird into the air at the same time as he declares that everything will be fine: it is an emphatically *symbolic* action, easily associated with notions of the spirit transcending the body; more pertinently, it can here be seen as an assertion of the signifier, a sign of his desire to control signs.

In a sense this scene – in showing us the son's body at exactly the point at which its illness reaches its peak and he, simultaneously, seems to succeed in transcending it – is the scene in which the son at last learns the father's script. Anxieties of writing are, up to this point, everywhere in the film and, as suggested above, it is very often the female who figures as the receptacle or vessel of the masculine word. The sequence in the printing house, for instance, appears driven by the mother's fear that she has let slip a textual slippage, a terrible mistake for a proof-reader to make since the text in question is the collected works of Stalin, a personality repeatedly depicted as the ultimate father-figure in Soviet Russia.¹⁸ Moreover, in assiduously documenting the woman's trauma – prolonging it in slow motion – the sequence underlines the extent to which the instability of the word is depicted as her responsibility: it is a mistake *she* makes, whilst the meaning of the word – the 'truth' – insists upon itself as remaining someplace else, located in an ideal, infallible space. Moreover, this insistence mirrors

the assumption of an ideal space on the part of the body, supposed to take place in the formation of identity: as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has argued, the successful seeing though of the mirror stage must involve the gradual return of 'the specular image to the introspective body...An *ideal space* would be substituted for the space clinging to images [my emphasis]'.¹⁹ As the suspension scene in *Mirror* – the scene in which the mother is seen suspended above the bed – suggests, the body of the mother plays an important part in the child's understanding of space and its positioning in it. Moreover, in *making* space for the child, that body is not exactly in space, as reason conceives it, but rather acts as its place: as Aristotle's discussion of place, mirroring aspects of Plato's *chora*, announces, '...the place of a thing is neither a part nor a state of it, but separable from it. For place is supposed to be something like a vessel – the vessel being a transportable place'.²⁰ In *Mirror*, the mother is undeniably elevated; only, however, to the extent that she acts as the medium of the son's becoming.

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¹⁷ Joan Copjec, 'The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan', *October*, 49 (1989), 53-71 (p. 56).

¹⁸ Lynne Attwood, 'Rationality versus Romanticism: Representations of Women in the Stalinist Press' in *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, ed. by Linda Edmondson (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 158-76 (p. 162).

¹⁹ Quoted in Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, p. 91.

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