

What is the Zone and Are We in It?
Visions of the Anthropocene in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*

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The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.

- Ben Lerner, 10:04

I.

Late in Andrei Tarkovsky's science fiction epic *Stalker* (1979), the character Writer (Anatoly Solonitsyn) becomes trapped in chamber called the Meat Grinder. According to Stalker (Alexander Kaidanovsky), the film's title character, the Meat Grinder is one of the deadliest, most terrifying tests in the Zone, the mysterious and forbidden wasteland in which the majority of post-apocalyptic quest narrative takes place, and through which the primary characters – Stalker, Writer, and Professor (Nikolai Grinko) – are slowly traveling in order to reach the wish-granting Room. The provenance of the Zone and all of its obstacles is obscure. A title card following the film's credits reads:

"What was it? A meteorite? A visit of inhabitants of the cosmic abyss? One way or another, our small country has seen the birth of a miracle - the Zone. We immediately sent troops there. They haven't come back. Then we surrounded the Zone with police cordons... Perhaps, that was the right thing to do. Though, I don't know..."

From an interview with Nobel Prize winner, Professor Wallace.

From the outset, Tarkovsky's film refuses to explain the origins or nature of the Zone, choosing instead to treat the "miracle" as a matter of faith. What we see as we follow the three men through the area is a landscape at once bucolic and toxic. The Zone is a verdant countryside littered with rusting vehicles and sagging telephone lines, artifacts of past human habitation being reclaimed or covered over by nature. It is immediately recognizable as a space of entanglement between the human and natural world, a post-industrial, post-natural ruin, at once attractive and disturbing. It

is also, according to Stalker (and most of our knowledge about the Zone comes through the speeches of this potentially unreliable guide), very dangerous, inhospitable to those who trespass its various boundaries. As Stalker tells Writer and Professor, who he guides through the new wilderness: “The Zone is a complex maze of traps. All of them death traps. I don’t know what it’s like when there is no one here, but as soon as humans appear everything begins to move.”

The Meat Grinder is a strange place, but it gives no outward signs of being a trap. Like everywhere in the Zone, it a hybrid space where the “human world” and the “natural world” are literally merging, slowly sinking into or growing over one another. An empty chamber with high ceilings supported by columns and a floor covered in low dunes or hillocks of sandy dirt, its industrial or semi-industrial origins mark a departure from the exterior spaces that have so far dominated the characters’ journey, and its rather sudden appearance carries an alien charge. Like the greener space of the Zone, however, the Meat Grinder also appears to be a ruined space, it seems emptied of human life, invaded by sand and shaped by the wind. A still image from this scene is frequently used in promotional material in order to signify that *Stalker* is indeed a science fiction film, and yet the space is not entirely especially fantastic: it reminds one of a moonscape (at one point Tarkovsky’s camera lingers over a footprint) but it also resembles an arid landscape seen from flight, or the picturesque sand-filled houses of Kolmanskopp in Namibia, a ghost-town that was once home to a colonial German diamond mining operation now given over to the desert and featured in Ron Fricke’s *Samasara* (2011).



(l-r, the Meat Grinder from *Stalker*; Kolmanskopp, Namibia from *Samasara*)

Like the despoiled construction site in Passaic, New Jersey which Robert Smithson described as a “ruins in reverse,” the spaces in the Zone are like “memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures,” landscapes and chambers coming into a new state of being and new levels of entanglement.¹ As a ruined space, the Meat Grinder has a gothic air, but it also contains the unsettling sense of futurity described by Smithson and this temporal slippage. Writer moves through the strange space like a sleepwalker: walking about very slowly, shoulders drawn against some unseen pressure, he winces as if gripped by a headache or an invasive consciousness. The room itself seems to press on him as if its atmosphere has thickened. Is he being attacked, we wonder? Is the Zone *acting*, like *Stalker* has warned? Whatever is happening, we seem to be on the verge of something truly outré. And then, in what is indeed a strange use of cinematic space and time, Writer turns to the camera as if emerging from the psychic trial and delivers a soliloquy. The speech rehearses much of the film’s human and intellectual drama, concerns that appear throughout Tarkovsky’s films – the importance of art at the end of the world, the potential for personal and artistic redemption, the imbalance between human scientific knowledge and spiritual maturity – but it culminates in interesting temporal lament: “Before the future was just a repetition of the present, with any differences looming up well beyond the horizon. Life had a different rhythm! Now, future and present have merged. Whatever we do finds its echo in the future! Are they ready for that? They don’t want to know anything! All they do is devour.”² The “they” in Writer’s speech refers to the public in the abstract sense of a “readership,” but given the strange chronological claim that “the future and the present have merged,” isn’t Writer speaking to us, the devourers of the present moment, as well as to the devourers who will succeed us, and to those who succeed them, and so forth and so on? And what of this “horizon,” which, according to Writer, once seemed to be the very definition of the future but now appears in the present?

¹ Robert Smithson and Jack D. Flam, *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings* (University of

² Andrei Tarkovsky, *Collected Screenplays* (Faber, 1999), 404.

Produced in the Soviet Union during the late 1970s, the specter of nuclear catastrophe and mutually assured destruction haunts *Stalker*, from its emptied landscapes to the nuclear plant cooling towers that appear on occasion in the background, but it is especially present here in this speech. In the years following its release, the film was read, perhaps unsurprisingly, as an overt criticism of the USSR. Tarkovsky was widely regarded as the greatest Soviet director since Eisenstein but was constantly embroiled in public, now mythic struggles with his country's rigid studio system. In the West, he was regularly described as a dissident filmmaker oppressed by the system, and despite his repeated statements to the contrary his films, *Stalker* in particular, were often read in a highly reductive Cold War schema, with the Zone symbolizing "physical and spiritual imprisonment within the Soviet Union and across the Eastern Bloc," for example.³

Reading the film today, one can't help but feel that distance from its Cold War context makes *Stalker* more curious and perhaps more pressing. Whether or not the horizon of Writer's speech is a nuclear horizon christened by the bomb seems immaterial. What remains arresting is the apocalyptic sense that the horizon of human history is now in sight and that we have brought it here through misbehavior. For an audience watching Writer's speech when the film was released, that horizon that came to mind was undoubtedly nuclear, but for today's devourers, living in a post-Cold War world that has so far avoided the nuclear apocalypse feared by preceding generations, Writer's words describe another apocalyptic end: global climate catastrophe. The words that stick in the mind today are those directed at us, the devourers that were once to come: "Whatever we do finds its echo in the future! Are they ready for that?" Writer's behavior in the Meat Grinder, both his movements and his speech, endow the empty chamber with a special prophetic significance, its space has somehow occasioned or given rise to one of the film's most effective apocalyptic laments. In many ways, the room turns out to be,

³ Jutta Weldes, *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links Between Science Fiction and World Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 126.

contra Stalker's warnings, not a trap but a temple whose strange spatial and temporal behaviors push Writer toward some important realization, however dour and depressing it may be.

What I suggest in this paper is that the strange time and space that characterize the Zone in *Stalker* is also the time and space of "the Anthropocene." This term, coined by Nobel Prize winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen in the early 1980s and formally introduced in a paper published with Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000, seeks to name our new geological age whose primary characteristic is its domination by human activity. Ironically, this domination via consumption and emissions has made us newly vulnerable, as the Earth responds with rising temperatures, severe weather events, and the species extinction. The Anthropocene, then, names both our recently earned geologic power, and our new, desacralized apocalyptic horizon. Drawing on work by Srinivas Aravamudan, whose essay "The Catachronism of Climate Change" examines the invaluable relationship between nuclear criticism and climate change criticism, I will argue that this particular future on screen comes to us today in the fashion of "the event [which] may...come from 'behind,'" to use Derrida's phrase; it returns to the present from our past with a nuclear frisson, bringing into view two sets of ecological, eschatological, and political concerns: one contemporary to the Cold War, MAD, and nuclear criticism, the other to the 21st century, global warming, and climate change criticism.⁴ Operating in both prophetic and anachronistic space, *Stalker* anticipates our current climatological concerns, but, by its refusal to invest in the eschatology of the nuclear spectacle, carries with it a set of correctives that help us question the very politics of visibility in relation to global climate change.

As the scientific consensus regarding the large-scale environmental impact of human life on the planet and its systems grows stronger, and predictions of extinction events and species loss more dire, so too grows the imperative to properly represent the coming catastrophe. This is evident in debates that touch on everything from the reliability of climate modeling to the financial reality of city-encircling seawalls, but it is increasingly present as a conceptual problem

⁴ Srinivas Aravamudan, "The Catachronism of Climate Change," *Diacritics* 41, no. 3 (2013): 24.

in the humanities. As Bruno Latour writes of the Anthropocene, “The problem becomes for all of us in philosophy, science or literature, how do we tell such a story.”⁵ As I will explain in the following section, the question, “how do we tell the story of the Anthropocene?” is two-fold. On the one hand, it is a question of possibility, of *by what means* – the Anthropocene presents a new set of theoretical and ontological challenges to agency, subjectivity, history, and their representation. On the other, we can think of it in terms of choice and our own narrative agency – in what affective register will we tell the story? With what degree of certainty and at what pace? This latter point might appear insignificant in the face of something like global warming and extinction events, but the way we tell the story of the coming catastrophe may indeed prove to be a rare site of human agency.

II.

Despite its three hour running length and sustained aura of mystery, very little happens in *Stalker*. Despite this fact, it is a difficult film to summarize. It follows the titular character and his two companions as they make their clandestine entry into the heavily guarded Zone and then pursue a lengthy and circuitous route ever deeper into its heart in search of the Room and its rumored powers of revelation, but three men spend the majority of the journey is carefully avoiding invisible traps and bickering with one another. When they finally reach their destination and stand on the threshold of the fabled chamber, each man balks; not one of the three enters the Room, and Writer refuses outright: “I don’t want to pour the rubbish I’ve accumulated on other people’s heads,” he snarls, afraid of what might be granted. The difficulty in offering a proper summary of the film lies in the fact that so much of its texture involves what it cannot represent. The Zone is supposed to be a miraculous place, but the film asks us to take this on faith – no miracles occur within its bounds and all of the special rules we learn about the area are eventually broken or

⁵ Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 45, no. 1 (2014): 3.

disproved. In fact the most striking feature of *The Zone* in Tarkovsky's film seems to be its *lack* or miracles. It is a film that constantly undermines the laws it develops but still holds our focus, promising to fulfill our wishes.

Its source material, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's popular Russian science fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* (1972), is action packed by comparison. In their version, the Zone is the result of an alien encounter, a sort of cosmic midden heap left behind by the visitors when they moved on from our planet. The area seems miraculous to the people and governments of Earth, but as one character states, this is all a matter of perspective: "humanity has been left to deal with the debris of a roadside picnic on some cosmic road." Their novel follows a tough-guy "stalker" named Red who, like other stalkers, makes his living sneaking into the Zone and smuggling out the strange, magical litter left behind by the initial visitation. But trash or not, in *Roadside Picnic*, the Zone and its artifacts have alarming powers: a dangerous jelly turns one character's legs to jelly, another is born covered in fur, and the protagonist's father returns to his home from the dead.

To say that Tarkovsky's film is subdued by comparison would be an understatement. His Stalker (referred to only by his vocation, like Writer and Professor) is portrayed as something of an abject, religious devotee of the Zone whose job is not to pilfer artifacts from behind its walls but rather to lead miserable souls to its center on a salvific quest. His Zone is an abandoned countryside, dotted with some industrial ruins and human debris, but entirely absent of any evidence of a meteorite or alien visitation. This is the first crucial point to be made about the structure of *Stalker*: It is a post-apocalyptic film whose catastrophe is entirely obscure. The miracle (or catastrophe) that created the Zone only appears in the text of the title card, and even there it is thoroughly indecisive: "What was it? A meteorite? A visit of inhabitants of the cosmic abyss? One way or another, our small country has seen the birth of a miracle - the Zone." We know the Zone has come into existence in the wake of some event – this much we can see during the journey – but the specific nature of that event remains hidden, an article of faith, something we can only hope to reconstruct through observing its effects. To make things stranger still, we

must read the film in the light of its second absent miracle (or catastrophe), this one promised by the Room. Over the course of the film, the Room holds out the possibility of redemption or explication for both the characters and the viewer. If it is reached, and if it grants a wish, that would justify many claims made about the Zone (most of these come from Stalker and his ritual navigation of the area). In the end, however, no one crosses its threshold.

This is an odd take on the disaster film whose generic rules tend to stipulate money shots of cities being trampled underfoot and world wonders getting vaporized by laser beams.

According to Natasha Synessios, *Stalker's* first shooting script, dating from 1976, featured precisely this type of mayhem before Tarkovsky demanded it cut. Written by the Strugatsky's:

[The script] opens with an announcer's voice describing the strange visitation from outer space, accompanied by scenes of panic and catastrophe: long rows of cars fleeing, wounded and scorched people being tended to by nurses, smoking ruins, burnt trees, huge metal constructions being destroyed, ambulances, soldiers. Another scene has scientists and heads of institutes discussing the Zone – its peculiarities and the objects found there. The Soviet Union is mentioned as the first place to turn the Zone into a place of international research and to put a stop to the cosmic poaching and plundering of treasures which is the stalker's vocation. A discussion follows on stalkers and their actions, as well as an expose on greed and the evils of private research. There is mention of the Golden Ball, and the fact that the Zone and its treasures belong to the whole of mankind. The entire voice-over is illustrated by appropriate scenes.⁶

By the time shooting began, this elaborate series of scenes, which once accounted for a fifth of the entire script, was replaced by inconclusive title card, a decision which annoyed officials at Goskino, who felt they were paying for something spectacular, but gave *Stalker* its odd organization. The film is structured by a bifurcated sense of mystery – in the past we have the excised disaster that begins the film and in the future we have an anticipated miracle that fails to appear, and it is here that we catch our first glimpse of *Stalker* as a film of the Anthropocene. Like the miracle that gave birth to the Zone, the inaugurating event of climate change remains obscure: was it in 1945, with the first nuclear tests and post-war spike in industrial emissions, or 1874, when James Watt invented the steam engine? And like the miracle that we wait for to

⁶ Tarkovsky, *Collected Screenplays*, 377.

appear via the Room, the truth bearing future event of the Anthropocene, whether it is the geological strata proves its existence or that extinction event that seals our fate, refuses to reveal itself. In the film, the characters wander through the Zone toward an end they hope will clarify the beginning, but only encounter indeterminacy. This is the curious situation of the Anthropocene, the sense of being all at once too late to stop whatever has been set in motion and too early to understand it with any sense of satisfaction or comfort.

Scholarship on literature and the Anthropocene issues from this uneasy space, always keeping one eye on the past and the other on the future. Recently, much of it has framed the question of global warming as a conceptual problem: can art and philosophy effectively describe a catastrophe that is both dire and largely formless, present but not immediately apparent? Can it, or is it willing to engage with the “slow violence” of environmental pollution, disinvestment and neglect, to use Rob Nixon’s language?⁷ If it can, how might our understanding be brought to bear on the physical realities of climate change? In Timothy Morton’s book *Hyperobjects* he attributes the difficulty of representing climate change to the fact that it is “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” – “it” covers the planet, saturates every level of the atmosphere, and operates on an inhuman time scale that frustrates political action as well as our sense of culpability.⁸ In Morton’s reading, climate change is simply too large to represent directly and can only be glimpsed in the fragments of local manifestations. Dipesh Chakrabarty makes a similar argument in his seminal essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” where he writes that the Anthropocene names the era of human history in which human beings, as a species, both begun to wield a geological force and at the same time lose the ability to comprehend the scope of our actions: “[w]e humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually

⁷ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁸ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such.”⁹ How, then, can we grasp the crisis without betraying its ungraspable nature?

Reading *Stalker*, a film made squarely in the grips of the nuclear arms race, as a film about the Anthropocene might appear counterintuitive but the connection is anything but incidental. In fact, the film serves as a point of connection between the two periods and their discourses and allows us to examine how catastrophic thought has evolved in the intervening decades. Nowhere is this clearer than in two important issues of journal *diacritics*, which published a seminal issue on nuclear criticism in 1984 and a sequel issue on climate change criticism in 2013. The nuclear criticism issue was born out of a sense of professional responsibility on the part of scholars in the humanities, particularly literary and cultural studies. As Richard Klein states in the introduction to the issue, “[t]he proposal arises on the one hand, out of reading a certain amount of recent criticism and critical theory and feeling without exception it recounts an allegory of nuclear survival; and, on the other, out of the sense that critical theory ought to be making a more important contribution to the public discussion of nuclear issues.”¹⁰ The fear of nuclear war loomed, but so too did the threat of an apocalyptic nuclear logic. Perhaps more than anything else, nuclear criticism wanted to apply “literary critical procedures to the logic and rhetoric of nuclear war,” to examine its ideologies and the modes of eschatological thinking they produced. The climate change criticism issue of *Diacritics* pursues a similar project. Like the issue on nuclear criticism, this issue suggests its topic (global climate change) as “a nodal point around which criticism might revolve,” but it also sought to situate these two catastrophic criticisms in relation to one another and consider how the legacy of this earlier school of thought might inform more current discussions.¹¹

⁹ By Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 220, doi:10.1086/596640.

¹⁰ “Proposal for a Diacritics Colloquium on Nuclear Criticism,” *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (July 1, 1984): 2.

¹¹ Karen Pinkus, “From The Editor: Climate Change Criticism,” *Diacritics* 41, no. 3 (2013): 3.

Not surprisingly, one of these points of conversation is the nuclear criticism issue's most famous, and influential essay, Jacques Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)." Derrida's essay, whose name and structure wink at the seven seals that secure the scroll John of Patmos witnessed in the book of Revelation, attempted to push against eschatological modes of thinking that came to dominate the era of mutually assured destruction. In it, he argues that global nuclear war is essentially "fabulously textual" – having never occurred outside of discourse it is a potentiality that can only be talked or written about.¹² Nevertheless, it is a fable which has a very real set of material and geopolitical effects. "'Reality,' let's say the encompassing institution of the nuclear age, is constructed by the fable, on the basis of an event that has never happened (except in fantasy, and that is not nothing at all), an event of which one can only speak, an event whose advent remains an invention by men," writes Derrida.¹³ For him, what distinguishes a nuclear war from earlier wars – and to this martial category I think we can add climate change, for reasons that will be made clear – is that it takes the shape of an instantaneous, remainderless catastrophe. In the event of a nuclear apocalypse, the human species would be erased, but so too would the archive, which Derrida understands not only as a physical or mental repository of culture, law, history and so forth, but "as a sort of indwelling transmissibility and continuity inseparable from what we can recognizably call 'life.'"¹⁴ Nuclear war, then, is remainderless in the sense that it not only destroys life, but the potential for discourse, the symbolic material on which speech and writing rely.¹⁵

Climate change is a different sort of catastrophe that nevertheless shares much with its nuclear forbear. Like Derrida says, it too is totalizing: "no single instant, no atom of our life is

¹² Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (July 1, 1984): 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

¹⁴ Paul K. Saint-Amour, "Bombing and the Symptom: Traumatic Earliness and the Nuclear Uncanny," *Diacritics* 30, no. 4 (December 1, 2000): 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

not marked” by its effects.¹⁶ It also forces us into a similar set of philosophical inquiries as Chakrabarty and Morton point out, troubling our relationship to things like speed, history, and time. But as Srinivas Aravamudan argues in his essay “The Catachronism of Climate Change” which opens the 2013 *Diacritics* issue, the Anthropocene is defined not by an absolute nuclear instant but by a messy and protracted unraveling; if Derrida’s first aphorism of the nuclear age was “*At the beginning there will have been speed,*” writes Aravamudan, “It would only be symmetrical to suggest that...the end, if there is ever an end, would be excruciating and awfully slow.”¹⁷ Like Derrida, then, Aravamudan is concerned with the claim that the future event makes on the present, the way it structures our discourse and defines our sense of futurity, but his primary concern is to define the particular demands the slow and inexorable catastrophe makes on the present. Aravamudan describes this relationship through his concept of “catachronism”: “similar to anachronism that reimagines the past in terms of the present, catachronism re-characterizes the past and present in terms of a future proclaimed as determinate but that is of course not yet fully realized.”¹⁸

Catachronism names an understanding of futurity in which an anticipated vision of what is to come bends back on the present and even the past. It describes a way of being in the present that is beholden to and defined by a set of expectations that become self-fulfilling. Perhaps even more than nuclearism, then, climate change has the real potential to motivate a type of catastrophic thinking: [t]he shadow of tomorrow’s impending ecological disaster leaps over today and reunites with abandoned conceptions of human finitude from a past rich with apocalyptic nightmares that the Enlightenment had temporarily vanquished.”¹⁹ The science is in, after all, and the best we can hope for at this point is a long series of mitigations. This is catachronistic despair voiced by *Writer in the Meat Grinder*, the fear that the “future and the present have merged,” but

¹⁶ Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*; Aravamudan, “The Catachronism of Climate Change,” 25.

¹⁸ Aravamudan, “The Catachronism of Climate Change,” 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

as Aravamudan suggests, like Derrida did before him, perhaps there is a more appropriate mode of waiting, a way to “await without awaiting” and by doing this to very consciously maintain a conditional rather than determinate stance toward the future. For, as Aravamudan implores, “[the] Anthropocene is never simply what you predict it will be; otherwise the future would just be an extension of the present. The future still holds some secrets from us; otherwise it would not be future except in a trivial sense.”²⁰

This, of course, should not be read as an endorsement of naiveté, or even of optimism with regard to the future effects of anthropogenic warming and consumption, but it does avoid a certain religious fatalism smuggled through philosophies for centuries and present in much of the nuclear criticism of the 80s and the climate criticism of the present. What this logic suggests is that a proper picture of catastrophe can save us or shock us into action. That if we finally understand the extent of the threat we face we will have but no choice to act. *Stalker* cuts through a loopy chronology to stand at the intersection of the concerns presented by nuclear criticism and climate change criticism to offers a non-revelatory vision of the catastrophe.

III.

As was noted in the introduction, *Stalker* has typically been read as a metaphor for the various prisons, boundaries, and limitations – both physical and psychic – that defined Cold War: Iron Curtains, Berlin walls, the barbed wire of the prison camp. In Slavoj Žižek’s reading of the film, he notes, and then argues against, this seductive, if pat, tendency:

For a citizen of the defunct Soviet Union, the notion of a forbidden Zone gives rise to (at least) five associations: Zone is (1) Gulag, i.e. a separated prison territory; (2) a territory poisoned or otherwise rendered uninhabitable by some technological (biochemical, nuclear...) catastrophe, like Chernobyl; (3) the secluded domain in which the nomenklatura lives; (4) foreign territory to which access is prohibited (like the enclosed West Berlin in the midst of the GDR); (5) a territory where a meteorite struck (like Tunguska in Siberia). The point, of course, is that the question "So which is the true

²⁰ Ibid., 24.

meaning of the Zone?" is false and misleading: the very indeterminacy of what lies beyond the Limit is primary, and different positive contents fill in this preceding gap.²¹

Žižek argues that what these readings do is identify and attempt to name various manifestations of “the Limit,” but that the “true meaning” of the Zone is “the very indeterminacy” that the limit creates. What I would like to suggest is that the Zone is a catachronistic space in the sense that Aravamudan describes. To put a finer point on it, the Zone is presented by Tarkovsky as a spatialization of the catachronistic impulse that is constantly undermining and undoing itself. It does not represent anything so much as it allows those who enter it and those who view it to experience pressure exuded by certain boundaries. One of these limits is the future, another is past. But it is also concerned with another group of boundaries crucial to discussions of the Anthropocene, those that measure the agency of the natural, or non-human world.

As was mentioned earlier, *Stalker* begins outside of the Zone in village where Stalker lives. This gray, polluted world is untouched by whatever brought the Zone into existence and so is in that sense “normal” despite looking decidedly post-apocalyptic and devoid of anything we might identify with nature. As if to emphasize this multi-dimensional poverty, Tarkovsky shoots this portion of the film in a murky sepia-tone makes that one wonder if the film stock absorbed the chemical effluvia like the filter of a cigarette. All of this changes, however, when the three men make their clandestine entry into the Zone. Having avoided the ominous military force that patrols its borders and slipped through the cordons and fences that mark its bounds, Stalker, Writer, and Professor find a small rail car and begin, in a series of hypnotic tracking shots, to ride it deeper into the liminal space.

At this point in the film, despite have crossed a series of boundaries, we are still not sure whether we are “in” the Zone. The camera tracks alongside the men as they stare into the distance, looking in different directions as if trying to detect a change. All the while, a hypnotic electronic score swells in the background, incorporating the clink of the track and magnifying the

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, “The Thing From Inner Space,” <http://www.lacan.com/zizekthing.htm>.

sense of dislocation. Where are we now? How would we know? Heretofore, we have received no description of the area or its properties, but through some discursive combination of the title card's description of the "miracle" and Stalker's intensity we expect *something* to happen. And then, quite suddenly and for no discernible reason, the film transitions to color via a straight cut to an abandoned hillside.



The transition is also signaled by the electronic soundtrack dropping out and the sudden presence of the diegetic sound of the natural world. We don't need Stalker's ecstatic squeal to tell us that we have entered the Zone, thanks to Tarkovsky's visual and auditory shifts we recognize at once the object of our anticipation. It appears to be a post-catastrophic or post-human landscape, much like the Meat Grinder, which the group will encounter later in film, but this space is verdant, almost beautiful in an eerie way.²² It is a scene of abandonment as well as entanglement: a wrecked car sits idle atop the hill, canted telephone poles with slack lines carry no signals. Ceasing to function as human technologies, these objects are slowly being broken down and gathered into their surrounding environment: the wind blows wild grasses, a river runs quietly in the background, fog settles in the middle-distance.

²² One of the ironies of the film is that Romantic concepts such as "beauty" or "nature" are entirely relative. If the landscape of the Zone, filled with trash and human detritus, can signal as beautiful, or natural, it can only do so relative to the entirely degraded industrial slum which surrounds it.

Crucially, the transition to color that accompanies the characters' arrival in the Zone and remains as they strike deeper into its heart, is non-diegetic. Professor, Writer, and Stalker are not seeing the world differently as far as we can tell – but Tarkovsky's camera is and so are we. This shift immediately recalls the famous final scene of Tarkovsky's early masterwork *Andre Rublëv* (1966), where the great Russian painter's icons appear photographed in color at the very end of a film otherwise shot in black and white. In *Rublëv*, the appearance of color comes after the title character returns, after a long struggle with his own artistic brilliance and its place in a violent world, to the practice of painting, and it allows Tarkovsky to communicate artistic ability and spiritual intensity by merely showing us the icons as they are; it is an effect of relief and one of the director's favorite techniques. In *Stalker*, the transition serves a similar function, it draws a non-discursive distinction between the Zone and the outside world – the color change shows us, absent any description of its meaning, that there is a difference between the two spaces. But tied as it is to the characters' entry into the Zone, it also suggests some sort of a qualitative shift in reality, one perceptible to us but imperceptible to the film's characters, that is occasioned by the act of transgressing a border. To push the meaning of the shift one step further, it is important to note that the boundary crossed is invisible, though it exists it is distinct from those created by humans and their governments (fences, police lines, borders, and the like).

As in *Rublëv*, this color implies some sort of presence. What I would like to suggest is that it indicates the presence of an agential environment rather like the one we see today, the world implied in the name Anthropocene. This agitated environment has perhaps been best described by Bruno Latour in a recent essay entitled "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene." Latour begins the essay with a description of another border crossing:

How are we supposed to react when faced with a piece of news like this one from *Le Monde* on Tuesday, May 7, 2013: "At Mona Loa, on Friday May 3, the concentration of CO₂ in the air is the highest it has been for more than 2.5 million years – the threshold of 440 ppm of CO₂, the main agent of global warming, is going to be crossed this year."²³

²³ Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," 1.

For Latour in 2013, the threshold of 440 ppm was something to dread, but as he goes on to note, this apprehension was “made even more troubling by the subtitle in the same article, which quietly states: ‘The maximum CO₂ limit was crossed just before 1990.’”²⁴ Looking back we see a series of these climate thresholds, all of them crossed, all of them discovered, in a sense, too late. Latour is fascinated by the late nature of the Anthropocene and the heroic narratives it disables, with the notion that “the drama has been completed and...the main revolutionary event is behind us,” but what he wants the arts and sciences to recognize is that each of these planetary boundaries we cross changes our relationship to what we once innocently thought of as nature.

What Latour adds to the growing chorus of thinkers and writers taking up the subject of the Anthropocene and our species’ newfound geologic power, is his assertion that what we have done to the planet via our carbon behavior is endow it with a volatile nature that can only be understood as agential, and that as a result of this we have also invalidated the long-held Enlightenment belief that nature is the inert background in front of which human history proceeds. Instead, humans now share agency with a planet which has itself become an “agent of history.”²⁵ Latour insists that this revelation requires a fundamental revision of our sense of human agency as well as subjecthood more generally: “To be a subject,” as he puts it, “is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy.”²⁶ The entangled landscape of the Zone is one such example of this type of shared space – human ruins are being subsumed by natural forces, the steel car rusts in the presence of moisture and the telephone poles gnawed at by various decomposers. This type of active environment is familiar to us, non-spectacular, normal, and indeed part of Latour’s argument is that the environment and Earth has always been agential in precisely this fashion – it has never been inert and we have always been entangled.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

What climate change suggests, of course, is that this activity is undergoing a radical amplification that has the capacity to seriously endanger and perhaps end human life on the planet. In this way, Latour's argument that we recognize the agential reality of the natural world is a provisional step toward thinking the catastrophe – it involves recognizing the potential for the climate catastrophe to come within our contemporary moment. Thus we should say that the catachronistic space is an agential environment, and vice versa. To finally recognize that the Earth is an actor initiates “a surprising inversion of foreground and background, it is *human* history that has become frozen and *natural* history that is taking on a frenetic pace.”²⁷ In *Stalker*, our entry into the Zone is tied to an image of this inversion: the cars and telephone poles and material reminders of human life slowly being taken back into the earth of the Zone, reversing the Enlightenment view of the primacy of human action and reducing these symbols of modernity to their component material states. At the same time, due to our expectations regarding the Zone and the appearance of color, this scene of entanglement seems to point toward the area's miraculous nature. What's more, like the CO₂ threshold we passed in 2013 and the various thresholds passed before it, each of these transitions just described is detectable only after it is too late, after we breach the invisible barrier of the Zone. Instead of suggesting yet another metaphorical reading of the Zone (it is *really* about climate change, etc.) I suggest that this scene reflects the process of crossing the threshold into a catachronistic space whose secret future dominates its present, and the experience of being in an active environment that we subject to intense scrutiny for signs of that future.

IV.

What follows is a strange, halting, often circuitous march toward the Room. Stalker leads the group but does so in a state of constant anxiety. His mood seems to swerve between childlike joy at being back in the Zone and hopeless frustration as his companions threaten to break the area's

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

many rules. For their part, Writer and Professor tend to defer to Stalker, though Writer is at first rather mutinous. Both seem to regard him with the same mixture of suspicion and belief with which we regard the Zone. Is this space actually miraculous? Does it have rules? Am I in danger? And according to Stalker there are many, many rules. One must follow certain invisible paths to reach the Room and these are rarely straight. One cannot move backward in the Zone; what is left behind must remain there. Guns and weapons are off limits – the Zone will punish you! Over the course of the group's press into the abandoned world, Stalker insists on all of these things, but each claim is eventually disproven. Some paths are disregarded, while others doubled back on. Writer manages to smuggle a bomb up to the very threshold of the Room, and all without any visible consequence. As the film progresses, we come to realize that the unseen power of the Zone may well be in excess of Stalker's understanding and that the ritualistic stance he takes toward the space is actually a testament to its withdrawn immensity.

But while we never see any evidence of the dangerous will that Stalker seems to fear, strange things do happen. Early in the journey, Writer disregards an order and is forcefully corrected by an unidentifiable voice. Later, in the Meat Grinder, two birds materialize and then quickly disappear. At one point, Professor leaves the party to go back for his knapsack only to reencounter them further down their path. Like the Zone crossing, these scenes approach but stop short of the fantastic, they play on the faith invested in the space as miraculous.

The most curious scene in the Zone doesn't involve apparitions or hallucinations, but very mundane things – broken objects and trash. The scene is a dream sequence, and occurs as the group takes a break to rest before entering the Meat Grinder. Exhausted, the three men decide to rest on a swampy patch of land next to a river, and as Stalker begins falling asleep, we cut to an overhead shot of the water. In what is one of the longest of the film's long takes, the camera peers straight down into the bed of the river from a height of just a few inches and tracks very slowly across its surface. First it moves over the sleeping face of Stalker, idling briefly before moving on and encountering a litter of broken objects. We see a syringe buried in the silty riverbed, then a

mirror or a bowl, then tangled wires and more syringes, a rusted gun, clock parts, calendar pages, a reproduction of John the Baptist from the Ghent Altarpiece, decayed things only describable as “metallic” or “ceramic,” then rock again, then Stalker’s hand. All the while, water ripples between the camera and the objects. In an a voiceover, Stalker’s wife reads from Revelation 6: 12-17, describing the wrath of God unleashed as the sixth seal is opened: the world is rocked by earthquakes, the stars fall from the sky, the sun becomes black as sackcloth and moon as red as blood. But then she stops, and begins to chuckle, which lends the scene a bathetic quality: is *this* the end of the world, this junk along the riverbed?

The shot appears to move vertically a along straight line, but when we return to Stalker’s hand at the end of the long take we realize that the camera has completed a loop. Like the scene where Professor leaves the group against to recover his knapsack, what felt like forward movement proves to be circular. The shot does several interesting things. First, it turns linear space into curved space. The camera makes a sort of geometric pun, looping the linear sense of the tracking shot and confounding its progress. Second, it overlays this strange movement with the concept of biblical Armageddon. Stalker’s wife reads from the book of Revelation and then makes light of it as if to mock the very thought of apocalypticism. Tarkovsky was a deeply religious, though unorthodox filmmaker, and his films are always inflected with an eccentric Christian mysticism, but this is the first moment in a very generally apocalyptic film where a specifically Christian eschatology is introduced – and then qualified: is this the way the world ends, not with a bang but with a chuckle? Both the creep of the camera movement and the bathetic treatment of textual apocalypse push against a belief in prophecy and cataclysm. This is not a vision of remainderless catastrophe, to return to Derrida, it is a slow, repetitive ending.

Most important is the scene’s focus on materiality. The objects that fill the riverbed, broken syringes, rusting machine guns, photographs and the like, are depicted in various states of suspension: temporal suspension in the manner described above; symbolic suspension in the sense that they are broken and removed from their original signifying context; and material

suspension by virtue of being gripped in the flow of the water. Taken together, they form an image of futurity. What we see in the river is an arrangement of broken human technologies – medical, martial, and aesthetic. Their current state reflects a past catastrophe just as it insinuates one to come, such is the catachrosnistic logic of the Zone. At the same time, they suggest that the this riverbed is itself the image of catastrophe – that there is no spectacular event that can be glimpsed or augured by reading the broken objects, but instead only the slow process of decay and sedimentation that the camera records.

In his essay on *Stalker*, Žižek cites this scene as evidence of Tarkovsky’s “cinematic materialism.” “What pervades Tarkovsky’s films,” he writes, “is the heavy gravity of Earth that seems to exert its pressure on time itself, generating an effect of temporal anamorphosis that extends time well beyond what we perceive as justified by the requirements of narrative movement.”²⁸ This shot extends time by offering a picture of erosion and sedimentation. We can look at these objects and imagine their futures, perhaps suspended like this forever, miraculously; perhaps as fossils, imprints in the mud; perhaps as one more contribution to the irradiated strata that will one day name the Anthropocene. Regardless of their particular future, though, the broken things, as Žižek indicates, radiate a sense of futurity based on their material state. Like so many human markers in the Zone, they are in the process of becoming dregs, tea leaves that refuse to give up any sort of future. If one were to try and name a dominant narrative strategy in *Stalker*, this would be it: the inculcation of an apprehensive or anticipatory state, the rumor of revelation and the miraculous, and then the arrival of the almost ordinary. Or, as Boris Strugatsky once wrote, “a permanent expectation of something supernatural, a maximum of suspense fueled by this expectation, and...nothing more. Green plants, wind, and water.”²⁹

The dream sequence is *Stalker*’s most explicit vision of history and its end, and like the Zone at large the image of catastrophe is non-spectacular. Unlike the final scenes the party shares

²⁸ Žižek, “The Thing From Inner Space.”

²⁹ Boris Strugatsky, “Working for Tarkovsky,” *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 3 (November 1, 2004): 420.

together, huddled on the threshold of the Room that they will not enter, this sequence offers a entirely material narrative of an end times dominated by excruciating slowness. It also reminds us of the film's tragic, extra-cinematic material history. Like most of Tarkovsky's films, *Stalker* was shot in a state of constant turmoil. The script underwent something on the order of thirteen drafts, and a problem with the film stock resulted in a year's worth of footage getting scrapped.

Arguments between Tarkovsky and his crew were common. An illustrative diary entry from the period (April 15, 1978) reads:

1. Faulty film three times running. 2700 metres. (Rerberg)
2. After the cameraman and the production manager were replaced Kalashnikov refused to go on working and walked out, having taken 250metres.
3. I sacked Boim for being drunk.
4. I sacked Abdusalimov for behaving like a bastard.
5. No money forthcoming for a two-part picture.
6. Shooting has to begin (or rather, carry on) in May—and on the 5th-6th I have a coronary...

Of course it is miraculous, but in a negative sense.³⁰

Over the film's protracted production, Rerberg, the director of photography was fired, production was delayed for months at a time, and Tarkovsky was plagued by health issues. But in the background another tragedy was unfolding.

The majority of *Stalker* was shot in and around an abandoned power plant in Tallinn, Estonia, and downstream from an active chemical plant that for months pumped toxic matter into the world the film crew worked. It seems that no one was aware of this at the time, but in the years that followed, several cast and crewmembers died of cancer now attributed to the contamination. Anatoly Solonitsyn died of cancer in 1982, as did Tarkovsky in 1986, and his wife Larisa, a few years later. Watching the film with this in mind, the film's chemical nature, its literal background, tells a tragic story. There are specific moments where one can see chemical fallout on screen, like when the seemingly miraculous snow flurry whisks through a summer landscape – reportedly chemical particulates blown in from the upriver plant, but these singular moments only attune us to the more general conditions of filmy water and stale air that seem to

³⁰ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time* (London; Boston: Andrei Tarkovsky, 2002), 154.

fill the physical space where the Zone was shot.³¹ Looking back, all of the foam that floats across the river and the muck that clings to the characters' faces feels insistent and dangerous, visible and invisible. The only indication of these toxic conditions in Tarkovsky's journal appears in a very brief note about the weather from May 16, 1978: "Snow in July."³² In this way, important parts of the story of *Stalker* continue to tell themselves well after the film ends, whether in the bodies of those who worked on the film, or as it takes on new resonances with each generation's environmental disasters and political partitions.

V.

The film itself ends outside of the Zone, back in the same village where it began. Here *Stalker* resumes its original monochromatic palette, which affirms the distinction between the two worlds and completes yet another loop until this most basic rule that defines the boundary of the Zone is suddenly broken by a new transition to color. This happens in two scenes at the end of the film, both featuring Stalker's daughter Monkey, a "child of the Zone" born with unspecified mutations as a result of her father's time in the area. The content of the first scene is unremarkable; in it Stalker carries Monkey on his shoulders and talks to his wife as the three walk home from the bar where they have left the uncharacteristically quiet Writer and Professor. But this return to color is disorienting. It implies some sort of manifestation of the Zone outside of itself and its bounds and seems to have something to do with Stalker's daughter in specific. The second though (which happens after a series of black and white shots where Monkey is off-screen and her parents discuss the meaning of the Zone once again) is much more exciting. For *Stalker* does contain a vision of a miracle, one we see with our own eyes that offers irrefutable proof of the power we have waited for all throughout the slow trek through the cordons and toward the Room. I have so

³¹ Adrian J. Ivakhiv, "The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema," *Film-Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (August 3, 2011): 131.

³² Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time*, 155.

far avoided discussing it because of the processual nature of the film. Its placement at the very end of *Stalker*, after a culmination of exhausted expectations and unfulfilled wishes is its meaning.

In the scene, the last of the film, Monkey sits alone at a table reading a book. In the distance we hear the sound of a train, perhaps the same train that woke Stalker as the film opened, and we listen as it gets closer and closer – suddenly, Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” bursts through the noise of the laboring engine as it rushes along the tracks and Monkey, as if awoken from some reverie, lowers her head toward to the table and begins to move a set of water glasses across its surface using her mind. The film ends with a glass falling over the table’s edge, fixed in Monkey’s gaze. If the color that appeared in the earlier scene of Stalker carrying Monkey suggested that the girl had a mysterious connection to the Zone, this final scene of telekinetic power confirms that suspicion. Monkey, it seems, experiences the same environmental entanglement outside of the Zone that her father and his charges experienced within it. Her mutation is a result of the Zone, but also brings her closer to it. In this last scene we are not only rewarded for our faith in the power of the Zone, we are presented with the film’s ultimate image of futurity.

Crucially, the long anticipated miracle happens outside of the Zone, after the men have made their unenlightened return, and out of sight of any of the adults. Fittingly, it seems to change everything and nothing. It provides some proof that the mysterious, agential nature of the Zone was not an illusion but does little to clarify the scope of that power or its origin. Furthermore it upsets the very notion that the Zone is a zone at all, as the only real manifestation of the power that is rumored to define it appears outside of its boundaries. One could read this final fulfillment of our wish to have the Zone explained as the ultimate act of remystification, but it does hold positive content. The scene suggests that while the anticipated mystery remains obscure to Writer, Professor, and even Stalker, intellectuals all pursuing truth through their various disciplines, it may finally be understood by, or even innate to those who follow them, the

children of the future. This is the lesson of the Anthropocene as well, that the future will never fully explain the present, nor the present the future; that from here on out, we will always be too early and too late.

In her 1965 essay “The Imagination of Disaster,” Susan Sontag writes that the science-fiction film is not about science, but about delivering us our fantasy of catastrophe: “Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror,” she writes.³³ During the Cold War, these two destinies may indeed have been separate, but today they coexist quite comfortably. The affective register of the Anthropocene could very well be described as the unremitting banality of inconceivable terror – life ending processes move at a geological pace, temperatures rise imperceptibly, very little appears within our control. The locatable horror of the nuclear event has undergone sublation and catastrophe is no longer an event but an atmosphere. *Stalker* anticipates a future that is slow and incomprehensible, even boring, where we unwittingly cross crucial thresholds like sleepwalkers as we search for something that finally appears in the wrong room – not in the ruined temple, or the moldering library, but in the everyday space of Stalker’s kitchen. But this of course is also true of the present. *Stalker* asks us not to read the future into the present, but the present into the future with all its banal indeterminacy. As Žižek writes, the slow pace Tarkovsky’s films brings about “a stance of Gelassenheit, of pacified disengagement that suspends the very urgency of any kind of Quest.”³⁴ This disengagement operates in an affective register related to but distinct from the nuclear eschatology and catachronism Derrida and Aravamudan warned us against, logics where fear and determinism move from the future through the present and cut their own channel forward. *Stalker* instead examines the very real prospect of catastrophe with an unheroic eye attentive to the slowness of the end that unfolds daily and the terrifying banality that touches every atom. Such a detachment

³³ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (Macmillan, 1966), 224.

³⁴ Žižek, “The Thing From Inner Space.”

and willingness to dwell in the slow and the boring provides us with a melancholic and entangled presentism that does not wait for the end but simply lives in it.

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