

"A trip of a lifetime": Anatoliy Solonitsyn (as the Writer) and Aleksandr Kaydanovskiy (the titular Stalker) journey through the 'Zone' in Tarkovsky's 1979 sci-fi epic.

THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest films of all time, one film at a time

Stalker

IN 1979, JUST before Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* was about to be released, the director, whose name was by then a byword for unapologetically intimidating cinema, received a letter from the State Committee For Cinematography, the contents of which would, ironically, be familiar to almost any director in Hollywood. The film, the committee said, was unbearably slow. Would he consider making a few snips, turning down the talk, picking up the pace?

For Tarkovsky, the uninvited criticism might well have been the last straw. Shooting *Stalker* had been a nightmare, the director's own *Apocalypse Now*. A full half the film had had to be reshot after development errors at the lab ruined all the costly location footage; two directors of photography, not to mention furious actress-spouses, had been fired; the locations, a pair of wrecked hydro-electric power stations near Tallinn in Estonia, had been some of the most hostile and unforgiving the director had ever worked in. Later, it would emerge, shooting in this poisoned hellhole might actually have contributed to his early death.

He was, suffice it to say, in no mood for notes. "In reality, the film needs to be *slower* and *duller*," Tarkovsky barked at the committee, "so that viewers who have wandered into the wrong theatre have time to leave." When the hapless apparatchik replied that he was only trying to represent the audience, Tarkovsky's irritation boiled over. "There are only two people whose views I am interested in," he snapped. "One is called Bresson, the other is called Bergman."

And so, when *Stalker* arrived in cinemas, it arrived in the shape that the director had intended: a (polite word) languid, near-three-hour epic — the first hour of which consists almost entirely of three men talking against a murky cityscape, the second two of three men talking against a post-apocalyptic countryside. In today's landscape of shattered attention spans and cinema-brains trained by films that commence with the dial at 11 and only head skywards, watching *Stalker*, giving it the time and attention it demands, before finally surrendering and abandoning yourself to it, is even more of a challenge. But for those who are willing to engage with the film on its own terms, the reward is the trip of a lifetime: an unforgettable journey into an enveloping, enduring mystery.

Very loosely adapted from the novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Stalker*'s premise is deceptively simple. In the near future a catastrophe of some kind — maybe an asteroid collision — has rendered a large portion of the countryside uninhabitable. It is a place of unspecified dangers, one which seems to reconfigure itself constantly, and from where people rarely return. The 'Zone', as it has become known, has been sealed off by the authorities, but illegal guides, the 'Stalkers' of the title, will, for a price, take visitors there. The point of the trip: to make it to the 'Room' where, it is said, one's truest desires will be made real.

We join one such unnamed guide (played with affecting, nervy desperation by Aleksandr Kaydanovskiy) as he takes a writer (Anatoliy Solonitsyn) and a professor (Nikolay Grinko) out of the dismal cityscape where they live, and which Tarkovsky shoots in a washed-out, colour-drained sepia, into the Zone itself. Here greenery is everywhere: moss and plant-life surges out of the abandoned cars and wrecked military hardware; water gushes and trickles; birdsong punctuates the air (though birds are never seen and, as one character remarks, the flowers are, mysteriously, without scent). The three slowly make their way through the Zone, which the Stalker insists is potentially deadly, talking and squabbling about, among other topics, their motives for being there, and what a true desire might even be.

To say much more about the plot is not so much unhelpful as impossible. The three talk, talk, and talk some more as they make their way through the strange landscape. The writer is a cynical critic, unconvinced by the value of the Zone or the Room and contemptuous of human aspirations and achievement, including his own. He mocks the professor (who has his own motives for the trip, which only become clear in the film's final act) and what he sees as his worthless scientific worldview. The Stalker is a kind of holy fool, convinced of the power of the Zone to improve humanity, to release its potential, to relieve our endless suffering.

But the beguiling power of *Stalker* has its source not in the talk, nor in what little action there is. It is in its overwhelming sense of environment and place, in its textures, sounds and enveloping moods. *Stalker* is usually described as a science-fiction film, probably because of the source material. But in truth, if it hews to any genre at all, it's closer to a kind of existential horror movie. The landscape is ominous, as well as strangely beautiful: a waterfall thunders, terrifyingly, through the rotting industrial wreckage of a power plant; Tarkovsky's camera drifts across the glistening surface of pools of water, revealing the storied detritus of the place pre-catastrophe — a rusting syringe, a gun. The electronic sound design delivers amplified crashes and unidentifiable squeals which are halfway between sound effects and atonal music. Slowly it becomes evident that *Stalker* is a film not to be watched so much as experienced. You are invited to join these three, to be with them in this strange space.

Stalker's central ambiguity is the wellspring of its longevity. Like the Zone, it is endlessly fertile and constantly reconfiguring itself, giving its cinematic visitors what they want, or need, to take away from it. In the days after Chernobyl and then Fukushima, environmental concerns were pushed to the forefront. Was *Stalker* a doomy prediction of a world rendered desolately beautiful by human technological folly? The critic Geoff Dyer has suggested that the film is an analogy for the thankless role of art itself, the Stalker being the visionary leading the people to wisdom, but having it thrown back in his face. (More recently another intriguing interpretation has emerged from documentarian Adam Curtis who, having no doubt found that the clips were available, proposed in *HyperNormalisation* (2016) an idea of the Zone prophesying a world where facts are up for endless negotiation, where "reality changes minute-by-minute". Sound familiar?)

But all this chatter might miss the point. It's difficult not to read the voluminous interpretations of *Stalker* and not think of its central characters, bickering and arguing, and to conclude the critics are about as much help as these chatterboxes in finally 'understanding' it. Whatever its hidden truths, if any, *Stalker* is an experience to be had, and then re-had. It entrances, seduces, snares the imagination and refuses to let it go. Boring films really don't come much more fascinating. **ADAM SMITH**

STALKER IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL





Left, top to bottom: A dog encounters an exhausted Stalker in the 'Zone'; The men make their way towards the 'Room', where one's deepest desires supposedly come true.

Shutterstock

THE TARKOVSKY FILES

YOUR NEED TO KNOW ON THE GREAT RUSSIAN DIRECTOR



4/4/32

born in Zavrazhye, Russia

HE WAS JUST 54 WHEN HE DIED FROM LUNG CANCER

HIS LAST DIARY ENTRY WAS, *"BUT NOW I HAVE NO STRENGTH LEFT — THAT IS THE PROBLEM"*

HE WAS NEVER NOMINATED FOR AN **OSCAR**

HIS LAST FILM, *THE SACRIFICE*, WON THE **BAFTA** FOR BEST FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILM IN 1988

IVAN'S CHILDHOOD WON HIM **THE GOLDEN LION AT THE VENICE FILM FESTIVAL**

HE MADE HIS FIRST FIVE MOVIES

IVAN'S CHILDHOOD (1962), ANDREI RUBLEV (1966), SOLARIS (1972), MIRROR (1975), STALKER (1979)

IN THE SOVIET UNION, ALTHOUGH *ANDREI RUBLEV* WAS BANNED THERE UNTIL 1971.

HIS FINAL TWO MOVIES

NOSTALGHIA (1983), THE SACRIFICE (1986)

WERE MADE IN ITALY AND SWEDEN AFTER HE LEFT THE SOVIET UNION IN 1982.

STEVEN SODERBERGH REMADE *SOLARIS* IN 2002 THIRTY YEARS AFTER THE ORIGINAL

A CLIP FROM *STALKER* PLAYS IN A KEY SCENE IN DAVID LEITCH'S *ATOMIC BLONDE* (2017)

HAD A MINOR PLANET **3345 TARKOVSKIJ** NAMED AFTER HIM IN 1982