New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory

ONLINE ISSN 2347-2073 **Vol. XIII, Issue IV, Oct. 2024**

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Dream-Makers: The Dream Aesthetics of Tarkovsky and Fellini

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Abstract

This paper explores cinema as a medium akin to dreams, examining how filmmakers like Tarkovsky and Fellini, delve into realms beyond conventional realism to explore subconscious, oneiric experiences. Tarkovsky's work reveals an intense interplay between inner consciousness and external reality, employing "time-pressure" to evoke psycho-emotional depth and utilizing memory, nature, and camera movement to mirror the dreamlike flow of life. Fellini, influenced by Jungian archetypes, employs a surrealist language, creating films that embody his personal myths and subconscious anxieties. His shift from Italian neorealism toward introspective, fantastical narratives allows a self-reflective cinematic language that blurs the line between reality and fantasy. Together, the two filmmakers illustrate the unique capacity of cinema to embody the non-linear, symbolic, and enigmatic qualities of dreams.

Keywords: Tarkovsky, Fellini, film, dream, surrealism, subconscious

> Just as we experience thousands of dreams in this life of ours, so is this life one of thousands of such lives which we enter into from the more real, actual, true life from which we come when we enter this life, and to which we return when we die. Our life is one of the dreams of that truer life. But even that truer life is only one of the dreams of another even truer life and so on to infinity.... (Tolstoy qtd. in McKeogh 90)

It is a fairly reckless undertaking to try to compress the subject of 'cinema as dream' into an article of this size, which possibly explains why I have chosen specific filmmakers to serve my purpose. Cinema, as a sovereign field of representation, involves its capacity to embody the

complex, dreamlike experience. Filmmakers all over the world have long been interested in the secret chamber of dreams. But in the hands of a very few directors, cinema itself becomes "an involuntary imitation of a dream" (Bunuel 138). Ingmar Bergman once said, "When film is not a document, it is dream" (73). He considered Tarkovsky as the greatest of all artists, one who "moves with such naturalness in the room of dreams. He doesn't explain. What should he explain anyhow? He is a spectator, capable of staging his visions in the most unwieldy but, in a way, the most willing of media....Fellini, Kurosawa and Bunuel move in the same fields as Tarkovsky" (73).

For Andrei Arsenyevich Tarkovsky (1932-1986), cinema is the only art form that comes closest to carrying one's interior world. It serves as a mediator between the realms of dream and reality. His films are capable of capturing the flow of the internal world. Sean Martin explains:

> Experience for Tarkovsky broadly falls into two categories, the outer world of historical events and the timeless inner world. It is to this latter world that dreams belong. They often illuminate the characters' states of mind: Ivan's visions of the childhood he never had, Kelvin's attempts to make things up with his mother, Gorchakov's longing for home. It could even be argued that the real dramas of Tarkovsky's films are internal, with their concerns being the way in which the internal world affects the external world (42-43).

A defining aspect of Tarkovsky's dream aesthetics lies in the intricate interplay between inner consciousness and external reality. The "real" dramas unfold internally. Unresolved conflicts and longings shape the world around his characters. Tarkovsky positions subjective interiority not as escapism but as a significant force that shapes and disrupts the objective world. He ultimately posits the inner life as a site of profound existential inquiry. His camera movement creates a sense of estrangement around the objects depicted. His mise-en-scène, as Donato Totaro notes, disrupts conventional perspectives by placing the viewer in seemingly impossible vantage points. In scenes like the dream-flight in *Stalker* (1979), this technique conveys a metaphysical, out-of-body experience, while transforming ordinary objects into symbols rich with alienated or otherworldly qualities (26). The film unfolds through unspoken reflections, shadows, moods, and undercurrents, cultivating an aesthetic of restraint. As a result, the film serves as a blank subconscious canvas.

Memories transcend physical boundaries. They reshape spatial and temporal perceptions. Tarkovsky links duration to natural elements. Natural settings become a canvas for memories, connecting personal time to nature's tempo. Personal time aligns with the fluid and inseparable rhythm of memory and consciousness. Nature, time, and memory get intertwined in Tarkovsky's vision. It reflects the continuous flux of consciousness. He employs camera as a 'temporal mind'. For him, rhythm—the foundational force in cinema—emerges from the inherent "time-pressure" within each shot, which depends on the vitality of life processes contained within it. He captures the material world not for ideological purposes but to heighten the time-pressure which "reaches perfection through the tonal harmony and the merging of dream-time and real-time" (Totaro 27). Thus, reality gains an impossible intensity, becoming a vessel through which his dream worlds are vividly expressed. Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1975) stands as a quintessential example of his memory-based dream aesthetics. He uses "the moving camera as a visual expression of dreams and memories in flux" (Totaro 26). The use of nonlinear storytelling allows Tarkovsky to underline the timeless quality of memories and dreams. His dreams are, in fact, experiences suspended in time. As a result, viewers perceive time as an emotional, rather than linear construct.

Tarkovsky constructs dreams as spiritual and psychological landscapes. In *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979), his characters enter surreal, dreamlike realms that reveal spiritual truths and confront existential questions. In *Stalker*, the "Zone" is a physical location imbued with mystical qualities, yet it functions as a dreamscape where characters confront their deepest fears and desires. In *Solaris*, the protagonist encounters manifestations of his subconscious desires on an alien space. Tarkovsky's dreamscapes are not just spaces of fantasy; they are realms of contemplation.

Tarkovsky uses long takes, deliberate pacing, and elemental imagery (water, fire, and earth). In *Stalker*, slow, contemplative scenes follow the characters. The camera lingers on seemingly mundane objects as if each holds a secret meaning. The characters move through a dreamlike zone where reality and fantasy converge. His imagery frequently involves water, reflections, and the interplay of light and shadow, creating a sense of immersion. Tarkovsky's dream aesthetics are deeply tied to themes of nostalgia, loss, and the search for transcendence.

His films often explore the melancholy of lost time and the yearning for the past. In *Mirror*, the protagonist reflects a deep nostalgia for childhood, family, and a lost era.

In "The Cinema of Poetry" Pier Paolo Pasolini introduces the concept of "dreamlikeness," which obscures the fact that when one makes a film, they have much more control over the images used than when writing. The idea of saying that something is dreamlike is to stress the lack of control in the process. For Pasolini "an image is more dreamlike than a word" (Pasolini, qtd. in Cardull 75). They are intrinsically cinematographic, not literary. A sound-image, for example, thunder in a cloudy sky, he explains "is somehow infinitely more mysterious than even the most poetic description a writer could give of it. A writer has to find oneiricity through a highly refined linguistic operation," while in the cinema "[a]ll it needs is to produce a clouded sky with thunder and straight away you are close to the mystery and ambiguity of reality" (Pasolini, qtd. in Cardull 75). That is why Federico Fellini's (1920- 1993) dream sequences aren't like dreams at all. Pasolini explains:

> That is simply because the cinema is already a dream. Fellini's films are particularly dreamlike, deliberately; everything is seen as a kind of dream, a kind of dreamlike or surrealistic deformation, so, naturally, it is rather difficult to insert a dream into a movie that already has the characteristics of a dream. But take Bergman, who is much less dreamlike, perhaps more mysterious but less obviously dreamlike; as a result, the dream in *Wild Strawberries* is remarkable, and it comes very close to what dreams are really like (Pasolini qtd. in Cardull 75).

Although Fellini's early films begin in the shadow of Neorealism, they often refuse to become a thesis film on social injustice. A neorealist director might highlight the economic forces compelling Gelsomina's mother to sell both Gelsomina and her older sister Rosa *La strada* (1954). Fellini instead transcends ideological rhetoric in favour of poetic expression (Bondanella 48-49). Fellini started developing his interest in psychoanalysis during the shooting of *La strada.* After the release of *La dolce vita* (1960), Peter Bondanella writes, "Fellini's cinema turns inward toward an overriding concern with memory, dreams, a meditation on the nature of cinematic artistry, and the director's fantasies. In short, Fellini's mature career has no trajectory in the same

sense that we have identified a single direction in his early works. After *La dolce vita*, only the artist's creative imagination provides the limits to his activity" (29).

Fellini explores a deeper, often surreal realm, rooted in his subconscious reservoir of symbolic imagery. These primordial images manifest in artistic expressions of dreams. *The Temptations of Doctor Antonio* (1962) from the anthology *Boccaccio '70*, taps into this archetypal layer. The film visualizes not only the psychosexual conflicts lurking within the protagonist but also his encounter with the archetypal 'Anima'—the feminine image in male psyche. This archetypal confrontation unveils a landscape dominated by forbidden urges and moral rigidity. For Fellini this "sight of unknown landscapes" was "the discovery of a new way of looking at life" (Fellini 147).

81/2 (1963) and *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965) present complementary perspectives on the Jungian concepts of the anima and animus. In *8½*, the psychological exploration unfolds within the subjective world of a film director. Roger Ebert writes, "The film weaves in and out of reality and fantasy... as Guido escapes from the uncomfortable present into the accommodating world of his dreams." His autobiographical parallels with Fellini suggest an intimate connection between the character and the director himself. *Juliet of the Spirits* demonstrates Fellini's persistent effort to probe into the depths of the female psyche (Bondanella 27-28). Fellini's dream deals with the struggles of an artist's own anxieties. For him, the process of making a film is itself an act of self discovery. The opening of *8½* shows a man trapped in a car blocked in a gigantic traffic jam. He is being suffocated. Strange individuals are all around him. He sees his mistress being sexually aroused by an old man. Guido tries to escape from this situation and then succeeds by flying up into the sky until he is pulled down to earth by a man. Guido suddenly awakens only to find himself in his hotel room. Fellini likes to think himself as a guest in his own invented dream world:

> Today I still need this feeling of being a guest in my invented dream world, a welcome guest in this dimension which I myself am able to program. What I need to maintain, however, is a feeling of curious surprise, a feeling of being a visitor, after all, an outsider, even when I am, at the same time, the mayor, the chief of police, and the alien registration office of this whole invented world, of this city that I have been led to by the shiny reflection in the faraway window and which I know so well in all its details that I can finally believe that I am in my own dream! After all, it's the

> dreamer who has made the dream. Nothing is so intrinsically true and corresponds so deeply to the psychic reality of the dreamer as the dream itself. Nothing is more honest than a dream (Bachmann 7).

In *City of Women* (1981) when Snàporaz, an unmistakable stand-in for Fellini himself, tries to seduce a woman in a mysterious train journey, she sentences him to an imaginary odyssey. It takes us into Fellini's secret chamber of a bizarre and fantastical feminist world filled with exaggerated characters and surreal settings. This dreamscape becomes a symbolic "city" where women reign, confronting Snàporaz with his own misogynistic tendencies, fantasies, and insecurities. The world is built on surrealist dream logic. It blurs the lines between reality and Snàporaz's dream. He navigates through a series of absurd encounters with women representing different facets of femininity. The film critiques both male chauvinism and the absurdities of stereotypical gender dynamics. Snàporaz's journey is less a narrative progression than a series of vivid, loosely connected episodes that reveal his subconscious fears and desires.

Fellini's films are personal quests. Their way of functioning is, to quote Luis Bunuel "most reminiscent of the work of the mind during sleep" (138). For him cinema is dream, the language of the subconscious which tells us more about ourselves than our reality. It is an expression of freedom that can bring out baser aspects of our 'being'. It's a descent into oneself. *Octavio Paz said*: "But that a *man* in chains should *shut* his *eyes, the world would explode.'' And we could add, quoting Bunuel, "But that the white eyelid of the screen reflect its proper light the universe would go up in flames. But for the moment we can sleep in peace. The light of the cinema is conveniently dosified and shackled" (*227*).*

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