

Director

Andrei Tarkovsky

Cast

Alisa Freindlich
Alexander Kaidanovsky
Anatoli Solonitsyn
Nikolai Grinko
Natasha Abramova

Screenplay

Arkady & Boris Strugatsky

Photography

Alexander Knyazhinsky

Production

Designer R Safiullin

Music

Eduard Artemiev

Produced by Mosfilm Studio

Run time: 162 Minutes

Certificate: PG

Russian with English subtitles

USSR 1974

Colour & Black and White

Aspect Ratio: 1.33:1

Tarkovsky.co.uk

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STALKER

Screening as part of Sculpting Time: Andrei Tarkovsky Nationwide Touring Programme



Stalker contains just under 17 minutes of music – a tiny fraction of the film’s 160-minute runtime – yet its otherworldly atmosphere and subtle science-fiction twist rest on Andrei Tarkovsky and composer Eduard Artemyev’s extraordinary handling of sound. Long, disorienting sections of near-silence, echoes of classical music in the clatter of passing trains, a locomotive rhythm dissolving into eerie electronic drones – nothing is quite what it seems when you enter the Zone.

Even at the end of his career, Tarkovsky had conflicting ideas about the purpose of music in cinema. In his book ‘Sculpting in Time’, published just before his death in 1986, he emphasised how “important and precious” music had been to his films, but admitted: “In my heart of hearts I don’t believe films need music at all.” In *Stalker*, he attempted to resolve this contradiction, showing how the barest use of sound could be even more expressive than an emotive musical score. He directed Artemyev not to write music but to use sound to create “states and conditions” establishing the Zone’s atmosphere of unreality. Watching the film, our suspicions are raised through subtle changes – a distant river suddenly becomes audible, beckoning our three travellers, or we hear a breeze but notice the grass isn’t swaying. The laws of physics do not seem to apply in this strange territory.

Artemyev, one of Russia’s pioneers of electronic music, used the British-made Synthi 100 synthesizer to build on this alien mood. *Stalker*’s short musical score, first heard in the opening titles, places the long, airy drones of the Synthi 100 under a flute and an Iranian stringed instrument called a tar. This suggestion of Eastern music (particularly Indian classical music, where a tanpura provides a continuous harmonic drone underneath a sitar’s melody) adds to the sense of dislocation – we’re a long way from the sepia-toned Russian town where we first encounter the Stalker.

Artemyev’s electronic scores (including those for *Solaris* and *The Mirror*) added to a wave of synthesizer-based soundtracks in the 1970s, particularly in sci-fi and horror, where their unfamiliar tones helped establish worlds where normal rules do not apply, as in *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Exorcist*, *Suspiria* and the sound design of *Alien*, released the same year as *Stalker*. Tarkovsky believed electronic music had huge potential for cinema, as it could remain indistinct and indefinable, working subtly at the edge of our awareness: “The moment we hear what it is, and realise that it’s being constructed, electronic music dies.”

In *Stalker* he further loosens our grasp on reality by hiding fragments of famous classical pieces (La Marseillaise, Bach’s Tannhäuser Overture, Ravel’s Bolero and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony) in the din of passing trains, like the everyday illusion of hearing a familiar song under the noise of a locomotive. Just as the experience of mishearing a melody shows that what we perceive as reality is always coloured by our perception, so we might suspect that, in their quest for the Room, the Stalker, Writer and Professor are really searching for themselves. On their long journey into the Zone, the rhythmic clanking of the motorised trolley dissolves into synthesised drones and metallic echoes. The camera ignores the moving wheels and much of the passing scenery, instead panning between the travellers’ faces; we seem to enter their very thoughts as they cross into the unknown. Their journey is not merely a physical effort, but a mental transformation. Tarkovsky and Artemyev’s achievement is to erase the distinction between the physical world and our inner lives.

By Chal Ravens, writer for FACT Magazine and The Wire