The Colour of Miracles

A Comparative Analysis of Stalker and The Wizard of Oz

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Abstract

The similarities between Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) are, as of now, under-discussed. Both films use colour as a method of communicating the difference between the ordinary world and another, more fantastical world, and both films use this contrast to make an argument about the nature of fantasy and reality: the known and the unknowable. Because of the similarities in theme and execution between the films, and, more importantly, the differences in how they operate, I argue that *Stalker* takes *The Wizard of Oz* as a thematic and ideological base and subverts it to make a counterargument. Using comparative shot-by-shot charts, I analyze specific moments in both films and compare their use of framing, mise-en-scène, sound, and duration to ground my analysis of colour. I use colour in both films as a grounding point for my argument that *The Wizard of Oz* positions fantasy as unsustainable and ultimately undesirable, while Stalker makes a claim for the dreamlike as a force that permeates the presumably logical world.

Keywords

Film, Film Theory, Film Analysis, *Stalker, Wizard of Oz*

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Introduction

Andrei Tarkovsky's *Сталкер* (*Stalker;* USSR, 1979; henceforth *Stalker*) presents a treacherous pathway to a miracle created through incomprehensible natural means, accessible only to those who can navigate the unpredictability of its landscape. The pathway is through the Zone, an uninhabited area created by a meteoric impact which caused the destruction of a settlement and left all manmade structures in ruin. Deep within the Zone is the miracle: the Room, which grants people's deepest wishes if they go inside – with the caveat that the wish reflects one's truest, deepest nature, therefore possibly exposing the essential evil of the wish-maker. Scenes taking place within the Zone are in colour (excepting some dreamlike sequences shot in sepia), while the beginning and ending brackets of the film are shot in black and white. This creates a visual distinction between the Zone and the ordinary world, but the specifics of the transitions between colour and monochrome present a greater thesis on the nature of the inexplicable and the miraculous.

To this end, I assert that *Stalker* heavily references Victor Fleming's The *Wizard of Oz* (USA, 1939) to a degree that *The Wizard of Oz* serves as a philosophical and stylistic base which *Stalker* directly challenges, not only ideologically but through form and style, especially with its treatment of colour. *Stalker* is not a commercial film and thus does not adhere to the rigid stylistic rules of conventional Hollywood cinema (nor is it an American film, thus having no reason to conform to specifically American conventions), but beyond the obvious distinctions of art film vs. golden age Hollywood movie musical, the stylistic choices used in *Stalker* create deliberate and specific contrasts and callbacks to moments, motifs, themes, and images used in *The Wizard of Oz* to contradict its argument that the natural and the dreamlike must remain separated. Both films associate mechanical reproduction of colour with the unnatural, but their respective treatments of the role of the unnatural, miraculous, and dreamlike differ in how liberally they allow it to exist within the ordinary.

Beginning with *Андрей Рублёв* (*Andrei Rublev;* USSR, 1966; henceforth *Andrei Rublev*), Tarkovsky would go on to use both colour and monochrome film stock in all of his films. *Andrei Rublev* contains the most striking and iconic example of this when at the end of the film, which up to that point is entirely in black & white, a montage of Rublev's works is shown in full colour. On his own view of colour in film, Tarkovsky stated that "On the screen colour imposes itself on

you, whereas in real life that only happens at odd moments, so it's not right for the audience to be constantly aware of colour" (*To The Screen*, 1966, as cited in Tarkovsky, 1989). The "odd moments" point is salient here because, in the case of *Stalker*, colour is used to highlight the odd and dreamlike nature of the Zone, especially as the characters need to be hyper-aware of their surroundings within it.

In the late 1930s, when *The Wizard of Oz* was being produced, Technicolor was a new, expensive, and complicated technology. Bordwell and Thompson summarize Technicolor's development in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, stating that the process "could increase a picture's budget by $100,000 to $300,000 […] A Technicolor film consumed more production time, required more electrical power, and could not draw upon the studio library of stock footage" (1988, p. 594). The technology's novelty had not yet justified its widespread use (1988, p. 594). On the process of shooting a film using Technicolor, they write:

> To make a Technicolor film, a producer had to rent the cameras, hire a Technicolor cameraman (eventually to be called a 'camera optical engineer'), use Technicolor make-up, and have the film processed and printed by Technicolor. The producer would also have to accept a 'color consultant' who would advise what color schemes to use on sets, costumes, and make-up. (1988, p. 594)

One such colour consultant was Natalie Kalmus, wife of Technicolor founder Herbert Kalmus. She also served as colour consultant for *The Wizard of Oz*, a film that helped cement colour's place in cinema (Bordwell and Thompson, 1988, p. 595). Bordwell and Thompson make specific note here that "*The Wizard of Oz* used Technicolor only for the central Oz fantasy, not for a rendering of Dorothy's everyday life in Kansas. Like certain kinds of music or lighting, the presence of color was governed by genre conventions" (1988, p. 595). In 1935, Kalmus published *Color Consciousness* in *The Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*. *Color Consciousness* was a set of guidelines for using Technicolor within Hollywood genre conventions, detailing the psychological functions and proper uses of colours across the spectrum (1935, pp. 142 – 145) and advising how proper balance may be struck between them by "[applying] the laws of art properly in relation to color" (1935, p. 140). This article provides explanations for the colour choices made in *The Wizard of Oz* so as to compare their reasonings and uses with those of colour as used in *Stalker*. While colour reproduction technology differed

significantly between the two films, the function of colour in general can still be compared and contrasted.

Some attention has been paid to treatment of colour in *Stalker*, but rarely with regards to its similarity to *The Wizard of Oz*. In his paper *Where flowers bloom but have no scent: the cinematic space of the Zone in Andrei Tarkovsky's Stalker*, David Foster briefly notes the connection, stating:

> The sepia and black-and- white images [belong] to the narrative sections that take place in the 'real' world, and the colour [appears] as the three men enter the fantastical Zone (as in The Wizard of Oz)" (Foster, 2010, pp. 311).

He goes on to refute Johnson and Petrie's claim that "the colour of the final sequence [suggests] some seepage of the powers of the Zone into the real world" (Johnson and Petrie, 1994, p. 190), citing their failure "to explain why early shots of the child in the first part of the film and others after the excursion into the Zone are in black-and-white" (2010, p. 312). Foster suggests instead that "one might see this 'seepage' as a breakdown of the distinction between the Zone and outside the Zone" (2010, p. 312). Both of these claims are not contradictory, however. The possibility for the Zone's powers to "seep" out of its borders does, in itself, represent a breakdown of its defined perimeter, and taking a closer look at the visual reference to *The Wizard of Oz* provides a contrast against which the ambiguity of *Stalker's* colour border can be made clearer.

Methodology

Using shot-by-shot charts to analyze and compare specific segments, I found direct parallels between the use of colour in *Stalker* and *The Wizard of Oz*, especially in conjunction with other parallel elements such as mise-en-scene, cinematography, and subject matter. By examining these parallels, I argue that *Stalker* makes deliberate reference to *The Wizard of Oz*, supporting my claim with descriptions of both texts.

Analysis

The most straightforward reference that *Stalker* makes to *The Wizard of Oz* is its bracketing of the colourful bulk of the film with colourless beginning and ending segments.

These sections set up the context for the characters' desires to leave their town and enter the Zone, presenting an ordinary world which is devoid of colour, swathed in drab tones and suffocating in its industrial surroundings. As the space of the Stalker's house is established, it is made to feel confined, the camera slowly moving through the slightly ajar double doors to show a room empty apart from a bed, a table, and a pair of crutches. All of the glass in the house is clouded and translucent; the front door is never visible; the Stalker claims that he is "jailed everywhere" (Tarkovsky, 1979, 11:52). When the Stalker's wife laments her own fate, she is swallowed up by her sparsely furnished house, falling to the floor as the camera looms closer over her writhing body, becoming more and more attached to a world that she despises and crying over the sound of a train which reminds us of the escape she so desperately desires. Immediately following the cut from the sobbing wife, the hopelessness of the opening segment is compounded by the nihilistic lecturing of The Writer, who tells a young woman about the unending logic and boredom of the natural world. Before we see the source of the voice, we see the Stalker walking toward it through a foggy trainyard which envelops any possible view of the horizon. The entrapment of the Stalker's house suggests escape when contrasted with the train's rumbling engine, but even this fantasy is shut down when we see that outside of the house the town bears down on its inhabitants, and even outside of that, even outside of the planet, the world is constrained by logic, science, and unending consistency.

These opening scenes derive their atmosphere from their texture and composition, with many indoor surfaces appearing damp, like the Stalker's floorboards, and the constant obscuring of space outside of the immediate area. White fog and clouded glass create a sensation of imposing cold, while the faulty kitchen light and grey sky reinforce the dark, drab nature of the Stalker's home. Colourlessness here draws particularly from the unnoticeable colour of day-to-day life: constant grey winter skies; fading wallpaper; the metallic, rusting colour schemes of industrial landscapes. The later colour inside the Zone is not as artificially vivid as colour inside Oz, but its vibrance comes from the contrast with the stark ugliness of the world from which it is an escape.

Comparing the opening segment of *Stalker* to the opening segment of *The Wizard of Oz* is not difficult. Dorothy's world is similarly inescapable, though much more open and visible. The first shot of the film shows Dorothy running down a road with no visible end, a road that

stretches on into an infinite field under a thick blanket of impenetrable cloud cover. In this ordinary world, Dorothy's childlike playfulness and innocence are constrained by the responsibilities of owning a farm and conforming to behavioural standards set by the adults around her, those being her Aunt Em, Uncle Henry, and neighbour Miss Gulch, who invokes an unseen force of law to take Dorothy's dog. Inside the borders of the farm, the sky and surrounding fields are relegated to the farthest plane as the property's walls and fences become the main features of the background. The sense of imprisonment is communicated similarly in both films.

Conversely, *Stalker's* ordinary world, however, is Kansas' potential for safety and comfort. While it is restrictive, it reflects both the tradition of monochrome film and the tradition of the American homestead. The farm is clean, dry, and organized; Dorothy manages to emerge neat and clean from falling into the pig pen. Kansas is set up as a place to which one would want to return, despite the social constraints put on Dorothy as an imaginative, adventurous young person, which draws the viewer's attention to its lack of colour only when compared to the bright Technicolor that will soon follow. The lack of colour in Kansas is reminiscent not of real life, but of the colourless film to which audiences of the time were most accustomed.

The colourlessness of both sets of brackets is a major communicative force in letting the audience know that the segments are set in the normal world, with Tarkovsky (1985\1989) himself saying that "[s]trangely enough, even though the world is coloured, the black and white image comes closer to the psychological, naturalistic truth of art, based as it is on special properties of seeing as well as of hearing" (p. 139). In this case, Tarkovsky's treatment of colour is an expressive strategy used in conjunction with monochrome, while Kalmus saw new colour technology as a method to "duplicate faithfully all the auditory and visual sensations" (1935, p. 140). Oz is real to Dorothy, although she necessarily must return from it to a world grounded in tradition and predictability – traditions like colourless film, as most film had been in its first few decades of existence.

The actual transitions between both films' ordinary and dream worlds are the most distinct from each other. The method by which *Stalker* reveals its colour in comparison to the reveal in *The Wizard of Oz* creates a striking dissimilarity; a contrast between the films' construction of their dream worlds' borders. While *The Wizard of Oz* introduces its colour in a

grandiose, ceremonial fashion, *Stalker's* transition from ordinary world to supernatural plane is slow, expectant, and then abrupt. In *Stalker's* ordinary world, we are inundated with stifling industrial surroundings which suggest that the Zone, as a void and miraculous place, will be free of such structures. However, as the rail car drives away from the ordinary world, in the blurring background even more industrial architecture is visible: brick buildings, metal pipes, railroad tracks, and the distinctly geometrical silhouettes of man-made objects. The imprisonment of the ordinary seems to extend far into the only illogical part of the world. In *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy opens the front door of her colourless house, the film shows not only the exact moment of transition from ordinary world to utopia, but Dorothy's reaction to that transition: Dorothy's front door presents a plainly visible border between ordinary and magical worlds. The point at which the characters in *Stalker* see the world become colourful is unconfirmed. The change may happen for the characters and the audience at the same time, or it may have happened during the elided time of the railcar journey. The entryway is never shown.

The Wizard of Oz's first shot of colour follows Dorothy out her front door, taking on her point of view for a moment before she walks out in front of the camera to experience Oz while the camera remains inside of her house. This shot is comparable to the first two shots of the Zone – first we take the characters' points of view, and then we see them from behind, further along in the landscape. The compositional similarity calls back to the transition between *The Wizard of Oz's* ordinary world and its utopia to contrast Oz with the Zone. The first image of the Zone is beautiful, but immediately interrupted by the dark, leaning skeletons of powerlines still strung across the landscape. A rusted car sits on top of the ridge. When the camera cuts back to see the three men looking out onto the landscape, more wood and metal trash sits in piles along the tracks, taking up more space than the sky. The Stalker says that Porcupine, his teacher, had stamped out the old flower beds so that the only scent is the stink of the river (Tarkovsky, 1979, 40:25), possibly carrying industrial or radioactive pollution. The pale grasses, dotted with white flowers; the trees and the distant river shrouded in ephemeral mist with the cloudy orange of the sun breaking through the blues and greens of the landscape are marred with industrial pollution and the remnants of human existence here. Colour's existence is the only proof yet of the Zone's miraculous nature. Oz is miraculous for its colour (Kalmus claimed that "[a] super-abundance of color is unnatural" (1935, p. 142) a phenomenon which she uses to an artistic advantage in making Oz ultra-bright and saturated), but also for its transformation of the ordinary world – its

allegory for Dorothy's dissatisfactions with her home life is set in an unrecognizable setting. Her magical room is at the end of a yellow-brick road; the Stalker's journey begins at the end of a rusting railroad track.

Colour in *Stalker* is also rather muted, with a minimal colour scheme of greens, blues, browns, and greys. Its dull and hazy nature is more reflective of real-life colour than the vibrant, saturated greens, blues, yellows, and reds of Oz. Colour is more "naturalistic" in *Stalker* because it doesn't rely on being bright and novel to convey its unusualness. In this sense, *Stalker* also draws on audiences' expectations of film colour knowing that they are used to it. The existence of colour itself isn't shocking, as it may be for audiences only used to black-and-white, but it still provides a distinction between the two worlds. This draws on the aforementioned notion that one only notices colour at odd moments; the transition between monochrome and colour is the transition between not noticing and noticing colour. In this sense, much of the Zone's strangeness comes from the perception of those in it. Conversely, the colour in *The Wizard of Oz* is what signifies that it is a strange and unusual land. Even beyond the technical necessity of using brightly-lit sets and contrasting colours for maximum visibility, Oz's colours are especially vivid in comparison to real-life colour. Case in point here is the Yellow Brick Road, which is unusual because it is bright yellow. The Emerald City is also defined by its bright and overwhelming colour; the film keeps you drawn to its colour by continuously pointing it out. The oddness of *Stalker's* Zone comes in large part from the heightened perception of those within it. The miracle is in the eye of the beholder.

The Wizard of Oz puts a great emphasis on the method of returning home (the power to do so coming from the glittering red Ruby Slippers), and uses the return as a final confirmation that Oz, and Dorothy's journey through it, was all a dream to which she cannot return. The transitional shot between Oz and Kansas is of Dorothy's house falling through the sky, reflecting the shots of the flying house that brought Dorothy into the dream in the beginning. This transition also marks the end of colour in the film, locating Dorothy firmly in the real, traditional, monochrome world. The articulation of the dream's borders makes it clear that Oz's "location" is one that cannot be returned to, and reiterates it as a strictly magical place sustained within itself. Dorothy's triumphant return to Kansas is final, and although the lessons she learned in Oz are applicable to her everyday life, the moral of her story is that she cannot live in dreams. Colour,

like a dream, cannot last forever, and as Dorothy understands this, she is happy to leave it within the boundaries of the inexplicable and unsustainable.

The transition back to *Stalker's* ordinary world is much more ambiguous. If the transition from normalcy into dream happens sometime during the railcar journey, we are not given any such distinction on the way back. How the characters make their way home is left unexplained, with the entire journey taking place offscreen. Having all refused to enter the Room and make a wish, their perceptions of the Zone and its abilities have changed, their journey not only being into the Room but into themselves. As they approach the Room, the Zone's colour scheme diminishes more and more, becoming darker and leaving behind greens and blues for drab greys and browns. Already the borders between the Zone and the ordinary world are beginning to blur. The characters express no urgency to return home, sitting on the threshold of the Room in silence, and the time at which they decide to leave is unknown. If shown directly, their departure would have to expose the Zone's borders, but the ambiguity of the Zone's powers and their effects on each of the characters does not fit neatly into the categories of "here" and "there."

As the camera recedes into the Room, empty and dilapidated as the rest of the Zone, it is bathed in yellow light, reducing the colours to brown and replacing the blue and grey shadows. After the colour comes back, the last shot inside the Zone is the shallow water of The Room where the Scientist's discarded bomb sits with two fish swimming around it, somehow still alive in the polluted water which is barely deep enough to cover their dorsal fins. A dark, oily substance floods the water, and when it takes up most of the frame, the film cuts back to the ordinary world where we see, through a window, the Stalker's wife and daughter. The flow of the dark fluid into the water, followed immediately by the return of monochrome, compounds once again the connection between the Zone and the ordinary world. While Natalie Kalmus (1935) may have advocated for the use of dark colours to communicate "night, fear, darkness, crime [...] funerals, mourning" (p. 144), *Stalker* employs dark rust-brown as a lack of colour; the Zone being sucked back into the colourlessness of the world outside. Tarkovsky (1989) stated that "If colour becomes the dominant dramatic element of the shot, it means that the director and cameraman are using a painter's methods to affect the audience" (p. 138), which is almost ironic here considering the watercolour quality of the dark liquid. However, when we consider the hazy nature of colour in the rest of the film, and the immediate shift back to colourlessness after the

last shot of the Zone, the use of dark brown as a tool of montage becomes obvious; its significance comes from its association with *Stalker's* industrial motifs and its use as a bridge between colour and lack thereof.

When Dorothy chooses to return to colourless Kansas, she feels relief in returning to her ordinary world, permanently severed from the unnatural world of Oz: her allegorical adventure has changed her view of life, and now her transformed world can become its natural self again. *Stalker* does not make such a firm distinction. Just as human activity melds with the landscape of the Zone, just as the Zone and a person's essence change each other, the Zone is not entirely contained within its own borders. The Stalker's daughter Monkey, a telekinetic "Zone victim" (Tarkovsky, 1979, 42:56), miraculously lives in colour. Her ability to move things with her mind and her view of the world as an extension of the Zone are because of the Zone's cross-border existence and refusal of the so-called natural laws of the world. *Stalker*, in this way, presents a greater hope than the much more outwardly optimistic *Wizard of Oz* by disproving its own premise that magic can only exist when it is contained to a particular place.

Conclusion

As *The Wizard of Oz* presents a utopic, allegorical, magical world which is separated distinctly from ordinary life, *Stalker* refutes the idea that logic reigns supreme by blending the familiar with the unknowable. The Zone has no visible entry or exit, being signalled mostly by its colour, and its own landscape still bears the marks of the world from which its characters arrive. Oz is a dream, incompatible with the real world and Dorothy's true desires, but the Zone presents an epistemic challenge to the distinction between natural and unnatural. Humans affect the Zone as the Zone affects humans, and through humans it can travel outside of its own borders, allowing colour – unpredictability, unknowability, lack of logic – into a grey and scientific world. As the Stalker's world is presented, it seems inescapable and soulless, devoted mostly to factories and trainyards, drab and smoggy; Dorothy's world is constraining and insular, ruled by adults who refuse to compromise. Colour in *The Wizard of Oz* is oversaturated and vivid, distinctly dreamlike, just as Oz is a dream which can never tangibly escape into the real world. While inside her dream, Dorothy learns that her true desire is to return to nature, logic, and tradition. *Stalker* presents its magic as something more flexible, malleable by the human mind and, most importantly, unconstrained by its imposed borders. The Zone is, like a dream, an

extension of the mind, but unlike Dorothy's dream, the Zone can travel to normality through those who dare to enter it.

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