

Elevation and emptiness: the dialogues of *Andrej Rublëv* and *Stalker*

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Abstract

The dialogues of two films by Andrej Tarkovsky, *Andrej Rublëv* and *Stalker*, are analyzed using a network model in which the vertices are the characters and the edges are the dialogic interactions between them. The weight of the edges, understood as the quantity of dialogue that runs along them, is considered as a parameter characterizing the relevance of the characters they connect and their relationships. The analysis shows, in *Andrej Rublëv*, the centrality of the character of Kirill while the protagonist, often relegated to peripheral areas of dialogic networks, appears as a silent witness to events external to him. In *Stalker* the centrality of the figure of the Writer emerges, a character who, more than any other member of the triad of protagonists, undertakes a path of inner growth.

1. The method

If in analyzing Andrej Tarkovsky's work we focus on the cinematographic form, therefore on the more strictly filmic components, we observe the presence of two clearly separated stylistic phases, whose dividing line is located between *Mirror* and *Stalker*¹. This evolution involves, even if less markedly, the narrative component and therefore, of course, the conception of the dialogues. In this article, I will analyze the latter aspect by focusing attention on two films that are particularly representative of each phase: *Andrej Rublëv*, certainly the most demanding and vast work of the first period, and *Stalker*, an intensely absorbed and internalized work, initiator of the second style. The approach that I will follow is part of that sector of the human sciences called digital humanities which, although it has existed for decades, has rarely involved cinematographic texts in its analyses. My starting point will be a study by Franco Moretti² where, focusing the analysis above all on *Hamlet*, a network model is used in which the vertices are the characters and the edges are the dialogic interactions between them. Since a dialogic plot is a diachronic entity (dialogic relationships unfold over time) while a network structure is a synchronic entity (temporal becoming does not appear in it), adopting such a model implies converting entirely the time of the dramatic action into the topological space of dialogic relations. The starting assumption is that a dramaturgical plot is nothing more but a relationship network between the characters and that the structural analysis of the network can tell us a lot about the nature of the work³.

In applying this model to Tarkovsky I introduced two variants. Moretti, in order to better concentrate on the structural characteristics of the network, ignores in his analysis the weight of the edges and the directionality of the dialogues. My first variation consists in taking into account both of these elements; I will therefore question not only between whom the dialogue takes place but also how much dialogue is there and in what direction. Each edge will be weightier the greater the flow of dialogue that passes through it and it will also be a two-way street, since in considering the dialogue between A and B it is different if it is above all A who speaks to B or vice versa. The second variant is a partial reintroduction of the time dimension. Moretti traces the *Hamlet* network with reference to the entire development of the action; I will consider a succession of networks each relating to a single sequence (*Stalker*) or episode (*Rublëv*) of the film. These choices will already be useful to us in *Andrej Rublëv*, but they will be necessary in *Stalker* where for most of the film we

¹ Schillaci F., *Il tempo interiore. L'arte della visione di Andrej Tarkovsky*, Lindau, Turin, 2017.

² Moretti F., *Network theory, plot analysis*, <https://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet2.pdf>, 2011.

³ In this regard Barry Salt notes that «plot always involves time and causality in its relationships between characters.» (personal communication of 22 August 2022). This is true, as it is that the representation of this causal relationship is absent from the model. This is in fact one of the reasons that lead me to say that it tells us «a lot», but not everything and justifies the subsequent considerations about the incompleteness of each model.

have only three characters on the field, the network is a simple, topologically immutable, triangle and what gives it meaning is the change in the weight of the edges with the evolution of diegesis. We can say as a general rule that each network is drawn with reference to a *narrative unit*, defined as a narrative block in which an indissoluble relationship, typically of cause and effect, exists between the parts that make it up. The extent of a narrative unit can vary greatly in films as in dramaturgical works, being able to coincide at times with the entire plot. In the case of *Stalker*, the narrative unit simply coincides with the sequence, defined as a narrative unit or part of it characterized by continuity of time and space.

In the case of *Andrej Rublëv*, the narrative unity almost always coincides with the individual episodes as there is a close causal connection between the events of the sequences that compose them but not between one episode and another. We have only two cases of episodes composed of two narrative units: *The passion according to Andrej* and *The silence*, where there is no causal connection in the first between Andrej's dialogue with Fomà and the following one with Theophanes, in the second between the return of Kirill and the arrival of the Tartars. The scheme of fig. 2 is extended only to the first unit of the episode *The silence*.

In plotting the graphs I will adopt the following notation:



In addition, in the dialogic networks of *Andrej Rublëv*, each edge will be accompanied by a number that indicates the percentage of dialogue relevant to that edge, referring to the total of the episode.

For a better understanding of the method used in the determination of weights let's consider, for example, the dialogue between Theophanes and Kirill in the episode *Theophanes the Greek* (fig. 1). By adopting the single alphabetic character as the unit of measurement for the quantity of dialogue we get that the amount of Kirill's dialogue towards Theophanes is equal to 1850 characters while that of Theophanes towards Kirill is 1539 characters. The totality of the dialogues for the entire episode is equal to 8945 characters. Expressing the two previous data as percentages of the latter we obtain that the dialogue of Kirill towards Theophanes is equal to 20.7% of the total of the episode ($20.7 = 1850 / 8945 * 100$) while that of Theophanes towards Kirill is equal to 17.2 % ($17.2 = 1539 / 8945 * 100$). These are the numbers present on the two directional edges that connect Kirill to Theophanes and constitute their weights. The adoption of characters as a unit of measurement derives from their being elementary particles of language, not bearers of autonomous meaning, which makes them suitable for a model in which the pure quantity of text is to be highlighted, regardless of considerations of meaning.

For this analysis I used the transcription of the dialogues from the Italian edition of the films⁴. We must bear in mind that in the translation of the same text from one language to another the percentages calculated as above vary slightly. The differences between the weights of the edges which I consider significant for the purposes of the analysis are however much greater than these variations (typically of an order of magnitude)⁵.

⁴ Cf. Vigni F., *Andrej Rublëv. Il testo*, Mediateca Regionale Toscana, Florence, 1987 and Tarkovsky A., "Stalker", in *Rassegna sovietica*, year XXXI, nov.-dec. 1980.

⁵ For example, if we consider the English version of the dialogue between Theophanes and Kirill we have 17.1% of dialogue from Theophanes to Kirill and 20.6% from Kirill to Theophanes and therefore, in both cases, 0.1% difference compared to the Italian version while the difference between the weight of the two edges is 3.5%.

However, above all, we must question ourselves precisely about the method itself. In other words: what's the point in asking ourselves "how much" with reference to a literary, dramaturgical or cinematographic dialogic text? Such an approach risks being arid, leading to banal or even misleading outcomes because the quantity of relationships tells us nothing about their quality (saying «I light up of immense» has quite another *qualitative* relevance than saying «I like salad», but not as much *quantitative* importance). A quantitative study of the dialogues in fact presupposes the uniformity of the qualitative significance of the dialogue lines. This, however, is a false problem because in every well-made narrative plot each part has its own unavoidable role in the formation of the overall meaning. Paraphrasing Bresson we can say that in a well-written plot every line of dialogue must be necessary and therefore all are equally relevant.

A further question is: how compatible is such an approach with Tarkovsky's vision of artistic creativity? Let's go back to *Hamlet* for a moment. In reading Moretti's study I had in mind the approach that Tarkovsky himself had to Shakespearean drama when, after having directed it in the theatre he thought of drawing a film script from it. The structure apparently did not interest him; he was concentrated on one thing only: the existential condition of the protagonist, his very individual interiority («the secret of the character of the Danish prince»⁶) caught in his strident conflict with the outside world; apparently a remote and absolutely irreconcilable approach with Moretti's, but what is the outside world if not the network of relationships that binds Hamlet to the other characters? On the other hand, in his analysis of the topological structure Moretti is clearly guided by a prior close reading of the work without which this structure would be a pure, aseptic game of geometries. So we have two visions that are not opposed but usefully complementary, perhaps both partial but, it must be said: inevitably partial, because every model is. After all, the only analysis of *Hamlet* that is not partial is *Hamlet* itself. Finally, only one thing must be asked to a model, to an analysis method: that it be tenaciously anchored to the work of which it is intended to be an instrument of understanding, that it does not go out of orbit (sometimes it happens) becoming sterile self-referential. Having made the commitment not to fail in this principle, let us now turn our gaze to Tarkovsky.

2. Andrej Rublëv: the parallel paths of Andrej and Kirill

The structure of *Andrej Rublëv*, an imaginary reconstruction of the life of the greatest Russian icon painter, is organized in eight episodes, a prologue and a non-narrative final section. The eight episodes are centered around four key characters: Andrej, Theophanes the Greek, Kirill and the Prince, to which is added, in the last episode, Boriska. All the others, including Daniil, are collateral characters.

I will take as a starting point a question that watching the film has always aroused in me: in the only subjective scene of the episode *The Bell* - the short sequence that follows Boriska's dozing under Andrej's gaze - we see, initially in wide shot, Andrej together with two other monks, Daniil and Kirill, walking in the rain, but, immediately after, of the two it is the only Kirill who appears in close up while gently stroking a crow. Why does Andrej recall Kirill in his own mind when we know that his favorite companion is Daniil? What links Andrej to the apparently degenerate monk? This sequence is before the monologue in which Kirill urges Andrej to go back to painting, and also the one in which Kirill defends Andrej from the Buffoon. Therefore, these facts cannot be the cause that brought him back to Andrej's mind.

Kirill is looming from the beginning as a negative character; just think to the following (anti) parallels:

- Andrej is talented, Kirill is not.

⁶ Tarkovsky A., "Progetto di sceneggiatura e messa in scena di una nuova versione del film *Amleto*", *Close Up*, 1, 1997, p. 21.

- Andrej is humble (when he receives Theophanes' invitation he begs Daniil to go with him even though his friend has not been invited), Kirill aims for personal affirmation (he envies Andrej and asks Theophanes to beg him publicly to be his assistant).
- Andrej is meek (he refuses to paint a *Last Judgment* that aims to strike fear through the image of an avenging God), Kirill does not hesitate to let himself be taken by fury, up to the most violent outcomes (in leaving the convent he kills his dog who ran devoutly after him).

Therefore, there does not seem to be anything good in Kirill, who even appears to be inspired by the figure of Judas (think of the informing that provokes the capture of the Buffoon), so much so that we could see in him the most vehement antithesis of the virtuous, "pure in heart" Andrej. So what justifies this almost nostalgic vision of him?

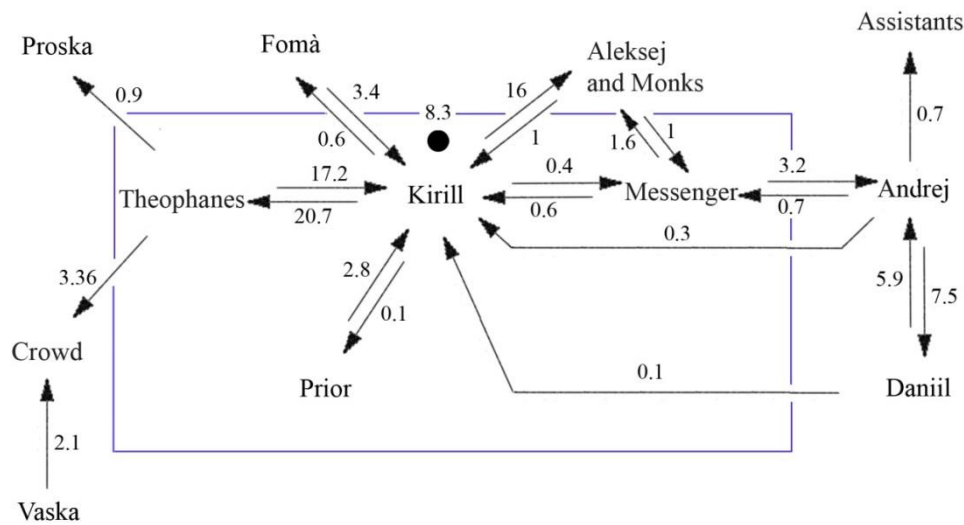


Fig. 1

With this question in mind, we begin to chart our dialogic networks. Kirill plays a dialogically relevant role in three episodes: *Theophanes the Greek*, *The Silence* and *The Bell*⁷. In *Theophanes the Greek* (fig. 1) he is the center of the topological structure, more precisely he is the center of a star structure, which constitutes the main region of the network of this episode. A second region, much more peripheral, is that of Daniil and Andrej with the figure of the Messenger who acts as the main link between the two regions. The Messenger, that is the bearer of the message by which Theophanes summons Andrej to Moscow to fresco the temple of the Annunciation, and excludes Kirill, a choice that will be one of the driving forces behind the story. On Kirill 8 edges converge, while on all the other vertices, including Andrej and Daniil, no more than 4 converge, and the average of his distances⁸ from the other characters is very close to 1 against 1.57 of Andrej, 1.86 by Daniil and Theofanes.

However, these data do not tell us everything. They show us Theophanes as a completely peripheral, almost negligible character, while we know that this is not the case. This happens because Theophanes' dialogic relationships are reduced to only one: the initial one with Kirill, but it is not secondary. The fact that Theophanes chooses Andrej and excludes Kirill, as already mentioned, is crucial in the unfolding of the entire episode and of the entire Kirill story. The relevance of Theophanes and his connection with the central region of the network are therefore realized through the expression, by mean of the Messenger, of a will matured "off screen", outside

⁷ In the episode *The Buffoon* too the role of Kirill is relevant, but not from a dialogical point of view.

⁸ The distance between characters A and B is the number of edges that must be covered to get from A to B.

the dialogic structure. But before that, Theophanes' relevance had already manifested itself through the relevance that his figure has in the exclusive dialogue with Kirill, an importance that the mere existence of a two-way edge that connects them does not allow us to perceive. Let us then consider the consistency of the edges in the various areas of the network. We see that for the most part they are less than 5% weighty of the totality of the dialogues in the episode, therefore very thin. The exceptions are Kirill's inner monologue (8.3%), the Andrej-Daniil dialogue (13.4%), Kirill's invectives against the monks (17%) and above all the broad Kirill-Theofanes dialogue which with his 37.9%⁹ represents the dominant dialogic component of the entire episode. The story is all concentrated in these relationships, and they bring our attention back to Kirill since three out of four concern him.

Kirill is also dominant not only in terms of the total amount of dialogue pertinent to him (71.6% of the total dialogues of the episode) but also in the dominance of the active dialogue (uttered by him) over the passive (addressed to him), respectively 46.3 % and 25.3%, while in the other characters (Theophanes, Andrej, Daniil) these two components are balanced.

Then Kirill leaves the scene and begins his desolate odyssey into the world.

We find him, at the end of it, in the episode *The Silence*, and again we see him occupy a clearly central position in the topological structure, position even more remarkable here for the condition of defeat that Kirill experiences in the episode. Its entire first half, until the arrival of the Tartars (fig. 2), is centered on him. Here too the component of the dialogues concerning him dominates (63.6%), and the active over the passive: 45% and 18.6% respectively. Kirill is even dominant in dialogue with the prior (17% active dialogue versus 9.4% passive) despite his position of total submission and is finally the only one to whom some of the other characters address individually.

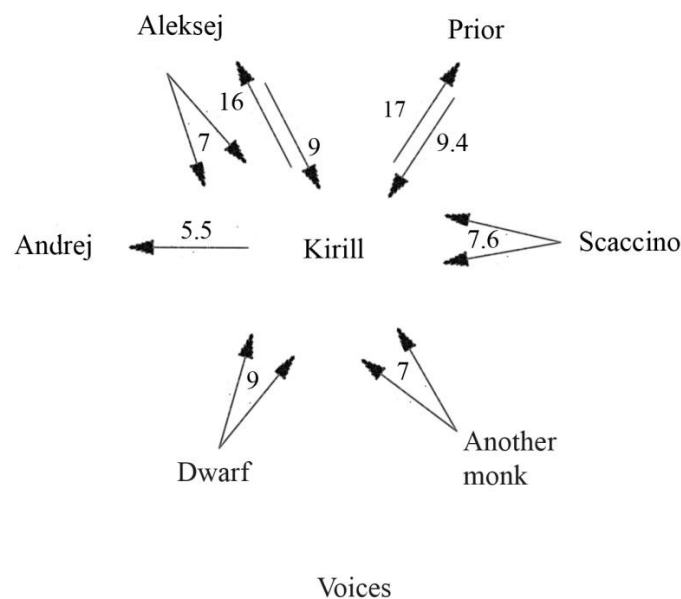


Fig. 2

Kirill reappears in the final episode in two moments: when he defends Andrej from the Buffoon's accusation of having denounced him, and above all with the monologue in which he pushes Andrej to go back to painting. We know that the Boriska enterprise will then convince Andrej, but how can we not think that Kirill's words also worked inside him? Certainly they were in

⁹ These data are the sum of the dialogue's percentages (obtained from fig. 1) in both directions between the characters mentioned. For Kirill and Theophanes $17.2 + 20.7 = 37.9$.

themselves ineffective, and would have remained such without the example of the founding of the bell, but it is Kirill's words that provide Andrej with the right key to draw the consequences from what he sees happening around him.

Let us now consider *The Last Judgment* (fig. 3), certainly one of the most complex episodes of the film. Its ideological fulcrum is Andrej's refusal to use his art to communicate the image of a despotic divinity, who pursues his ends through terror. A long and articulated flashback (the area in the outer red box¹⁰) is set in it, in which Andrej recalls an atrocity which presumably occurred a short time before: the blinding of a group of sculptors perpetrated by the Prince to prevent them from carrying out their work to his brother and rival.

We immediately note that here too the main topological center is a negative character, the Prince¹¹ (the area in the internal blue box), but this time the amount of active dialogue uttered by him (2.7%) is negligible and in particular it is clearly lower than the passive one (11%). This difference reflects the different nature of the two men: Kirill is the bearer of a thought, he is a figure with an ethical depth, albeit contradictory. The Prince, as a pure man of power, has no ethical position to state. The exercise of power, no matter how cruel, is his only purpose, his only thought. Therefore he does not say, he acts. However, he has a decisive role in Andrej's existential story: he is the architect of the bloody episodes that determine his evolution, the builder of the tunnel of darkness that Andrej will have to cross.

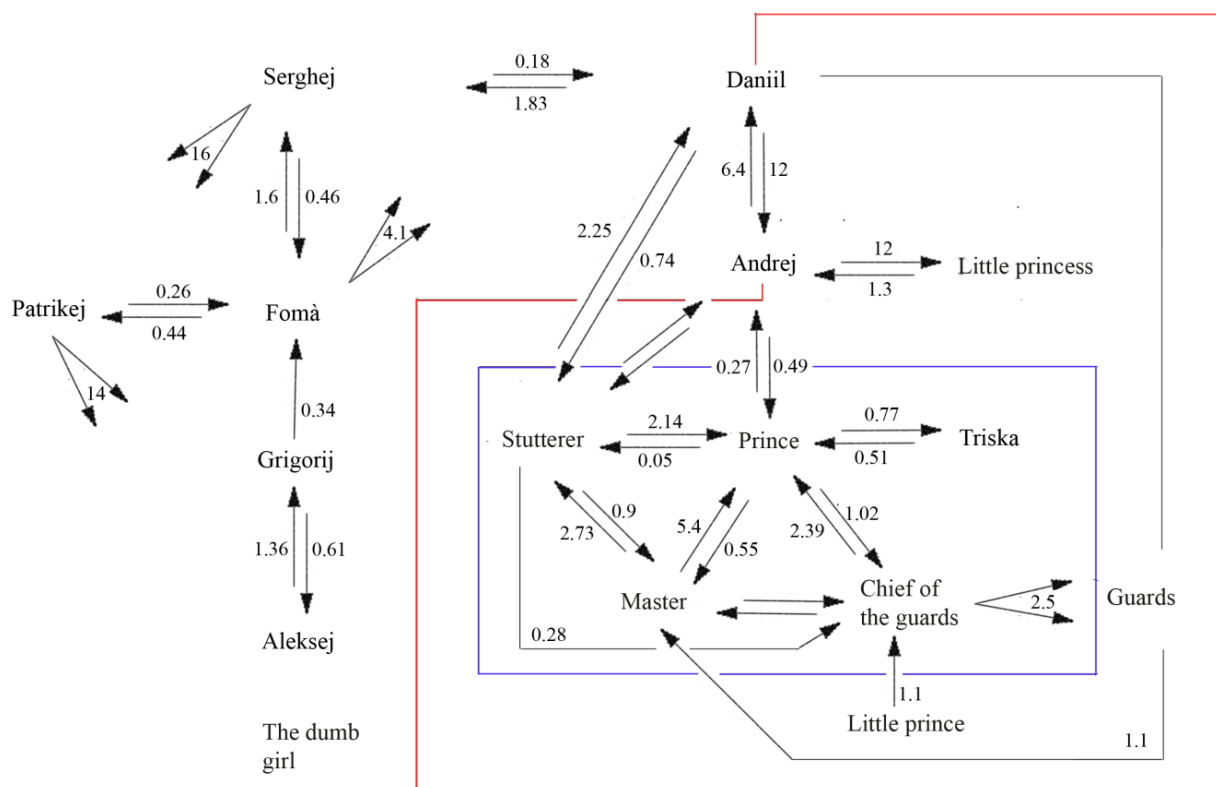


Fig. 3

¹⁰ The characters Andrej and Daniil are on the border of the box as they are present both in the flashback and outside it. In the flashback the young assistant Serghej is also present, but there his dialogic contribution is almost nil; for this reason he is located outside.

¹¹ Five edges converge on him and his average distance (referring only to the flashback area) is the lowest: 1.37 against 1.62 for Andrej and the Stutterer, 1.75 for the Master and 2.25 for Daniil.

Elsewhere I have noticed that in many of Tarkovsky's films «the protagonist makes a sort of journey, first and foremost interior, along the most remote depths of Hades, but a journey that inevitably ends with a peaceful unraveling of the darkness.»¹² In particular in *Rublëv* «the protagonist had to go down to the depths of horror so that his choices took on an absolute weight, an absolute depth; I mean both of the choice of silence and of the choice, on which the film ends, of getting out of it by going back to painting. If the first had not had such tragic reasons, the second would not have the intensity of meaning it has»¹³. Andrej must resolve the jarring conflict between his soul, which tends towards elevation, and the brutality of the outside world. And finally he resolves it in artistic creativity. With this he has to deal with hell, but with a hell that is outside of him. Kirill too goes through the same tunnel as Andrej; his story, from when he leaves the monastery to when he returns, takes place entirely off stage as befits a little man, but we learn in the moment of his return that it was parallel to that of Andrej. And with one more difficulty: Kirill too has hell within himself and has to deal with it even before to deal with the outside world. His path is thus even more fraught with difficulties and he completes it when, a man without talent, shows Andrej the way with rediscovered humility.

In short, Kirill must make a more difficult journey than Andrej's: he must accept his own creative impotence and reach a humility, a meekness that was unknown to him. His adventure takes place in large part, I said, off stage, as befits an obscure man, but his central and dominant position in the dialogic structures makes him an attractive center of the story. A negative character therefore only in appearance, Kirill, on a deeper reading, may well appear as an alter ego of Andrej.

And Andrej? Even in his case, if we just consider the topological structure of the dialogues, we would arrive, as for Theophanes, at the erroneous and paradoxical conclusion that he is a peripheral character¹⁴. Andrej is actually very often an almost silent witness to events that unfold around him in the outside world. We can say that he is an observing consciousness. However, his being «in the world but not of the world», his being a silent observer does not lead him to indifference or inertia. And so here are the dialogues with Theophanes in *The Passion According to Andrej*, with Daniil in *The Last Judgment* and again with Theophanes in the final of *The Raid*. But here is also the action, in saving the mute girl during the capture of Vladimir (*The Raid*) and then in vain attempt to prevent her being kidnapped by the Tartars (*The Silence*). Its centrality is therefore only partially entrusted to the dialogues. But let's summarize Andrej's path.

In the opening episode, *The Buffoon*, Andrej is an eminently passive subject, only a witness to Kirill's crime that will cause the Buffoon to be arrested. Character still peripheral in *Theophanes the Greek*, where the attention is focused on him only in the private conversation with Daniil (fig. 1) after the arrival of the Messenger (in the whole episode Andrej has only 8.4% of active dialogue and 6% passive dialogue¹⁵), he begins to take on weight only after Kirill leaves the scene, that is in *The Passion According to Andrej*, where he is dominant both in the brief introductory dialogue with Fomà, and, above all, in the long dialogue-disputes with Theophanes¹⁶, that constitutes the heart of the episode, in which the two painters compare their respective visions of humanity, of goodness and evil. Dialogue that culminates in the heartfelt monologue in which Andrej recalls and interprets the passion of Christ.

In the next stage of his journey, *The Feast*, Andrej returns to be a silent witness, this time to the celebration of a pagan feast. Here he comes into contact with a world that was unknown to him, that of harmony with nature and the body, which is part of it. He is then once again a silent witness to

¹² Schillaci F, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

¹³ Schillaci F, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

¹⁴ Let's not forget that this model was designed for application to dramaturgical works, where dialogue is the dominant, if not exclusive, relationship in the plot. In cinema, on the other hand, the extra-dialogical elements of the action often have a much greater relevance.

¹⁵ Quantities not very far from those of Daniil, respectively 6% and 7.5%.

¹⁶ Andrej here has a dominance ratio (ratio between the amount of active dialogue between two characters) of 2.96 towards Fomà and 1.24 towards Theophanes.

the violent repression of that world. And we can interpret this experience as a first step in Andrej's path of spiritual growth, the one in which he learns that the truth is not one, that it is not all on one side¹⁷. And perhaps not by chance the episode of *The Last Judgment* is located immediately after.

Here Andrej further expresses his ethical position towards man, already expounded in *The Passion*, rejecting a repressive attitude in the face of sin and at the same time a vision of devotion reduced to the fulfillment of formal obligations (his reaction to the reading of a biblical passage). Nor is the memory of the atrocity committed by the Prince against the sculptors sufficient to change his positions, although it certainly contributes to cracking them.

The collapse occurs when Andrej is involved in the Vladimir massacre (*The Raid*), and he expresses it in a new, this time imaginary, dialogue with Theophanes in which the sides are reversed. Now it is the old painter who expresses trust in man redemption while Andrej denies it taking a vow of silence and denying himself to art. It is interesting that in both cases Andrej is in a dominant position with respect to Theophanes: in *The Passion* he has 42% of active dialogue (including the monologue) towards Theophanes, against 34% of the latter towards him. In *The Raid* this gap increases to 61.5% of Andrej against 34% of Theophanes¹⁸. In both cases, therefore, Andrej is the barycentric figure while the role of the old Byzantine painter is that of a counterpart, necessary only as it is functional to the expression of Andrej's thought¹⁹.

And from this moment Andrej is silent. During the entire episode *The Silence* he is a loser who drags himself and his life without any trust in men. And he continues to be silent for almost the entire duration of the final episode (*The Bell*) in which more than ever he returns to being an external observer of the world. There are therefore only two moments in which Andrej takes on a strong relevance in the dialogues: in the episode *The Passion* and at the end of *The Raid*. Hence its peripheral position in the dialogic structure and the scarceness of the edges that connect it to the rest of the network.

Even his decisive relationship with Boriska does not belong, if not in the few final lines, to the world of words: Boriska does, Andrej observes his doing. The two large dialogues with Theophanes, the monologue that Kirill addresses to him, are in reality only preparatory moments, they can predispose the soul to enlightenment, but they are not enlightenment; let us not forget that for Tarkovsky verbal language is inadequate to express the truth («Words cannot express what man feels. They are always weak.» says the protagonist of *Mirror* during the phone conversation with the Mother). Theophanes and Kirill are therefore not enough to lead Andrej to the apex of his existential journey. Theophanes is an intellectual who seeks truth through reason, surely closer to Andrej can be considered Kirill, who arrives there through the suffering undergone in contact with the world, but both have a limit: they belong precisely to the powerless world of words.

Andrej regains confidence only thanks to the experience of Boriska, the boy who managed to make a gigantic bell without knowing anything about casting techniques (representation of the purely intuitive nature of artistic creation, an act of enlightenment rather than rational processing of acquired knowledge), It is the contact with the evidence of pure illumination that leads Andrej to the exit of his tunnel, towards the light that from that moment on he will return to shed on his icons. Andrej will return to paint, and the epilogue, in which we finally see his works, but no longer him, tells us that his life from that moment is expressed in a new, higher silence, no longer negation but a sublime state, inherent to that ineffable dimension of spirit which is artistic creation. Andrej therefore returns to saying, not in the opaque redundancy of verbal language but in the high silence of the icon. This is the ultimate goal of his path of spiritual growth, just as the achieved humility is for Kirill.

¹⁷ In the dialogue between Marfa and Andrej the pagan woman is dominant with a ratio of 1.39.

¹⁸ Recall that the percentages refer to the total of the dialogues in each episode.

¹⁹ In an interview following the release of the film, Tarkovsky draws an interesting comparison between the two painters in which he attributes to Rublëv a stature greater than that of Theophanes (Tarkovsky A., "Il mio Rublëv è la speranza di tutto il popolo Russo", *Il Dramma*, 1, 1970, pp. 55-64.

3. *Stalker*: a journey towards the emptiness of the soul

The film that inaugurates Tarkovsky's second style presents a narrative structure that could not be more monolithic: it is the first plot in which he adopts the three narrative units of time, space and action and is the first based largely on the interaction of only three characters isolated from the rest of the world. The core of the topological scheme (the blue box in fig. 4), as already mentioned, is reduced to a triangle and as such does not tell us much. It therefore becomes inevitable to focus attention on the evolution over time of the weight of the edges.

So let's pay attention to the three main characters: the Professor, the Writer and the Stalker, and to the six most relevant sequences, namely:

1. The first dialogue in the bar;
2. arrival in the Zone;
3. the Writer's attempt to reach the Room along the direct route;
4. the stop;
5. a telephone call from the Professor;
6. the dialogue on the threshold of the Room.

In the three graphs of fig. 5 we have in the abscissa the progression of the six sequences and in the ordinate, for each sequence, the percentage of active dialogue belonging to each character referred to the total amount of the dialogues in the sequence itself. We immediately see that the dominance of the Professor (fig. 5c) is almost everywhere clearly inferior to the others; its average value calculated on the six sequences is 21% against an average value of 35% for the Stalker and 39% for the Writer. Furthermore, in the first three sequences, where the dominance of the Stalker prevails, that of the Writer decays and vice versa; that is, they are complementary.

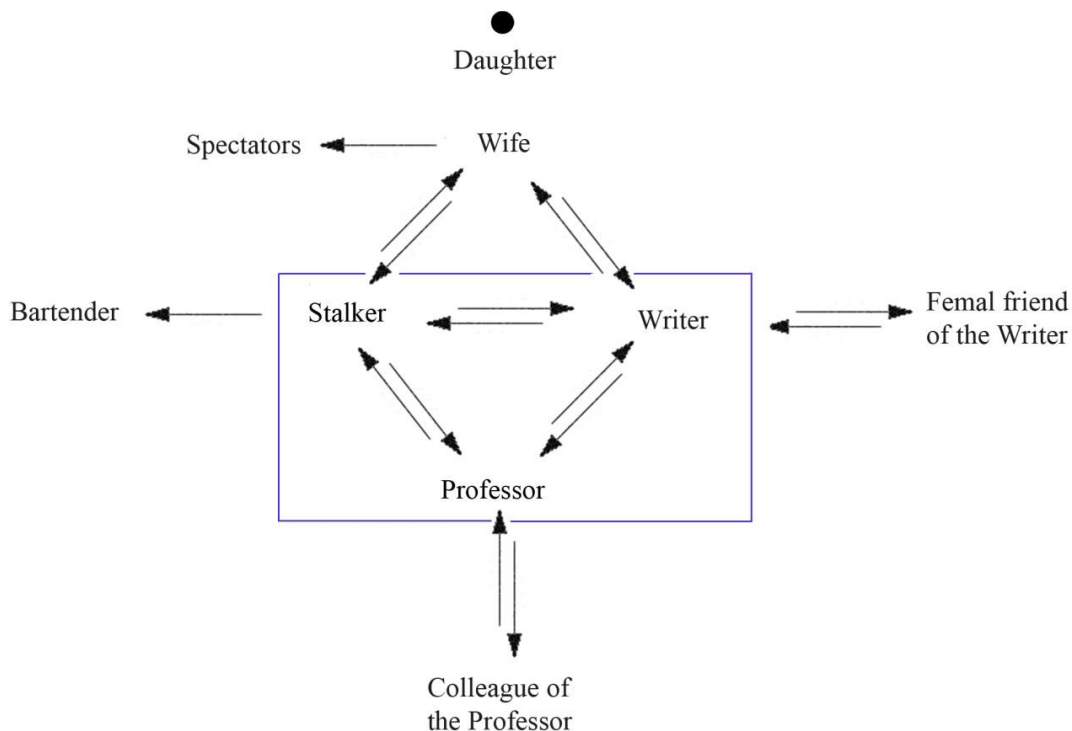


Fig. 4

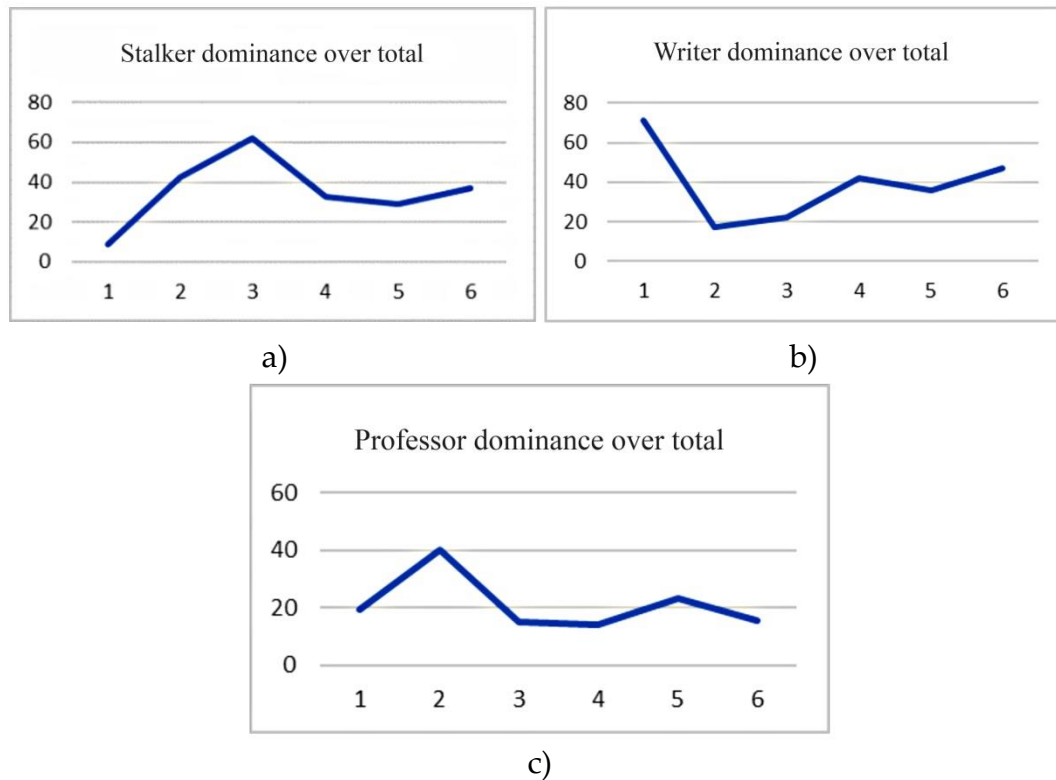


Fig. 5

Let us now consider the dialogues between each pair of characters (fig. 6). The dialogues between the Stalker and the Professor (fig. 6a) start from values between 8% and 12%²⁰, therefore already quite low, and tend to decline further. Indeed the most intensive interaction between them will be a physical fight when, on the threshold of the Room, the Stalker tries to snatch from the Professor the bomb he wants to blow up. Similar trend have the dialogues between the Professor and the Writer (fig. 6b), which start from much higher levels but, with the single exception of the dispute during the stop, tend to decay gradually becoming more and more rarefied. Conversely, the dialogues between the Stalker and the Writer (fig. 6c) start from extremely low values but tend to intensify reaching a peak of 47% in the crucial sequence on the threshold of the Room.

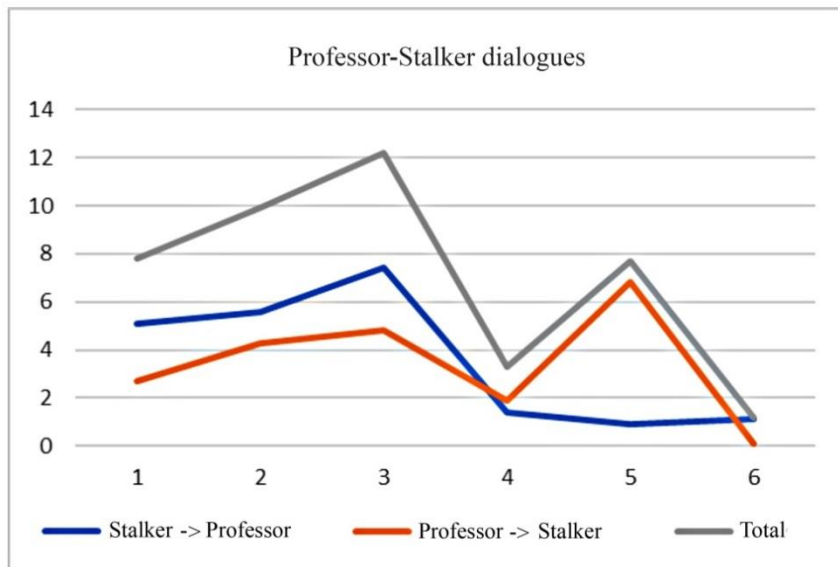
The Professor assumes a significant dominance in sequence 2 only, ie during the dialogue with the Writer²¹ after arriving in the Zone (fig. 6b: 36% of active dialogue against 13% of the Writer). The Stalker has gone away and the Professor tells his story to the Writer, who instead knows nothing about him. It is therefore the Professor who in this initial phase appears as the one who knows, but at the same time his is a knowledge linked only to external facts, the only ones to which reason, the science that he represents here, can give access according to Tarkovsky's vision of it. The Writer, who lacks this knowledge, appears instead as the bearer of a nihilistic attitude, made explicit during the initial dialogue in the bar and even earlier in the one with his friend, an attitude that he will not be able to overcome but which will help him in the end to look deep.

Moreover, the Professor's knowledge is *a priori* knowledge, pre-existing to the immersion in the Zone, and therefore superficial as it is extraneous to the direct experience of life (remember that for Tarkovsky «the Zone is life»²²). And he will add nothing to it during the journey. Already during the dispute that will pit him against the Writer in sequence 4 (the stop), the latter will establish his dominance with 33.5% of active dialogue against 11.3% of the Professor.

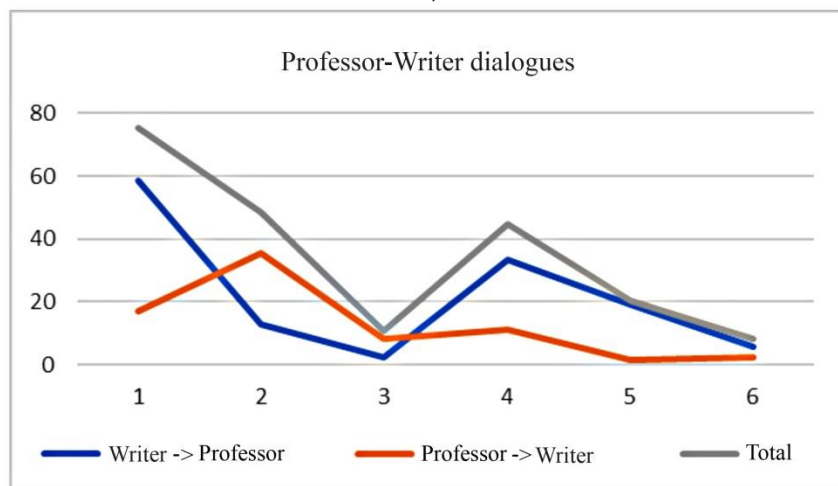
²⁰ Recall that these percentages refer to the total of dialogues in each sequence.

²¹ I do not consider the one of sequence 5 towards the Stalker (fig. 6a) because it relates to a very low percentage (7%).

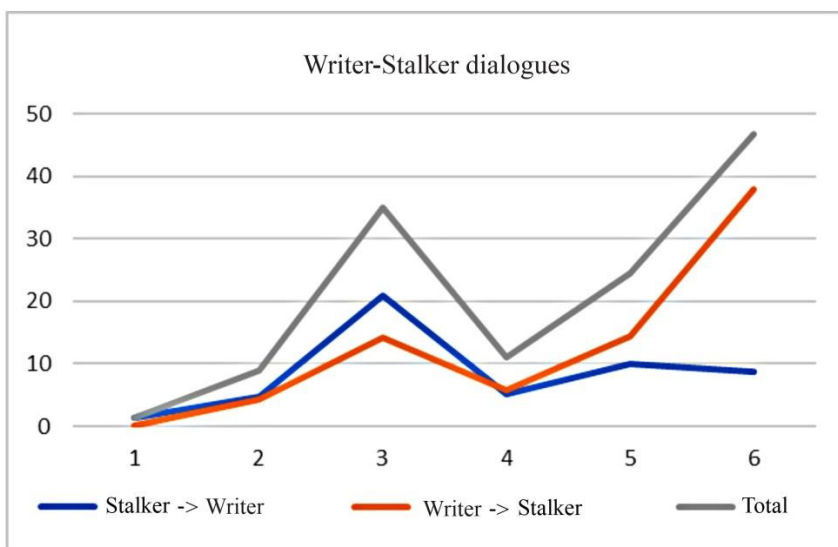
²² Tarkovsky A., *Scolpire il tempo*, Florence, Tarkovsky International Institute, 2016, p. 183.



a)



b)



c)

Fig. 6

The Writer for his part is initially defenseless; he acts in the Zone as he would in a subway station, with lightness and incomprehension, which culminate (sequence 3) in his unrealistic attempt to reach the Room along a direct route. Sequences 2 and 3 are the two moments of negative peak in his dialogic dominance with respect to the total (fig.5b): in the first because he listens, in the second because above all he acts (clumsily), while it is the Stalker who still holds his leading role.

In fig. 6c, however, we see how in this last sequence there is still a certain component of dialogue between the Writer and the Stalker in which the dominance of the Stalker is not very pronounced. The Writer's action is in fact preceded by a dialogic contrast between the two in which he stands up to the Stalker, so much so that the latter finally yields, but is also followed, after its failure, by a monologue of the Stalker who, regaining his leadership role, comments on what has happened by a long dissertation on the nature of the Zone.

The Stalker does not address this monologue to the Writer alone but to both travel companions and therefore it is not contemplated in the graphs of fig. 6 which are related only to dialogues in which each character addresses only one of the others. However, it is also important to consider the moments in which each character collectively addresses the others (fig. 7). In this regard, there is a very clear difference between the Stalker and the other two characters: when the Stalker speaks he mainly addresses the other two together; these moments often have a notable importance in the dialogue, oscillating between 20 and 30% of the total (fig.7c), and this is in harmony with his nature as a guide, as a teacher²³, while the Professor and the Writer almost always speak to one or the other of the two interlocutors.

This rule in the case of the Writer is almost devoid of significant exceptions²⁴; on the other hand, there are two relevant moments in which the Professor addresses both travel companions: in the last two sequences, when he progressively reveals his intentions, his claim to become a judge. This makes sense: the Stalker and the Professor are in fact united by the claim to be bearers of absolute truths, centered on Faith for one, on Reason for the other, but which they see as valid for anyone, and therefore deserving of be enunciated before the totality of those present, however small it may be. Not so the Writer: he is an individuality that is opposed to other individualities; even on the threshold of the Room, when he understands its nature and reveals it, his sentences take the form of an individual contrast between him and the Stalker, not a lesson addressed to both present.

Finally, it will be useful to return to the graphs of fig. 6 proposing them again in terms of individual dominance ratios as shown in fig. 8. These graphs are taken from those of fig. 6 by making the ratio between the percentage of active dialogue of character A and that of character B. A ratio $A / B > 1$ indicates dialogic dominance of A over B; On the other hand, B is dominant over A if $A / B < 1$.

In the dialogic relationship between the Stalker and the Writer (fig.8a) the dominance of the former initially increases until it reaches the peak value in sequence 3 in which, as already said, the Writer is still far from understanding the reality that surrounds him. But the parts are inverted more and more clearly in the last three sequences when the three are in the vicinity of the Room and it is the Writer who decodes the events by finding the right interpretation. The Writer's dominance over the Stalker reaches its peak in the crucial sequence at the threshold of the Room, where it is the Stalker who says what the Room *is for him* and those who lead to it, but it is the Writer who says

²³ Note the fact that in fig. 7c the maximum is located in correspondence with sequences 2 and 3, where the leadership role of the Stalker is still solid, the minimum in the next two sequences while on the threshold of the Room there is a partial recovery for his heartfelt attempt to make his companions understand the profound meaning he sees in the Room and in his mission as a guide.

²⁴ We can think of his monologue in the dunes hall as aimed above all at himself, almost an interlude detached from the narrative context of the sequence.

what the Room *is*. And it is he, the disenchanting, and therefore desperate, objective observer of the world, who is closer to the truth than his mystical guide²⁵.

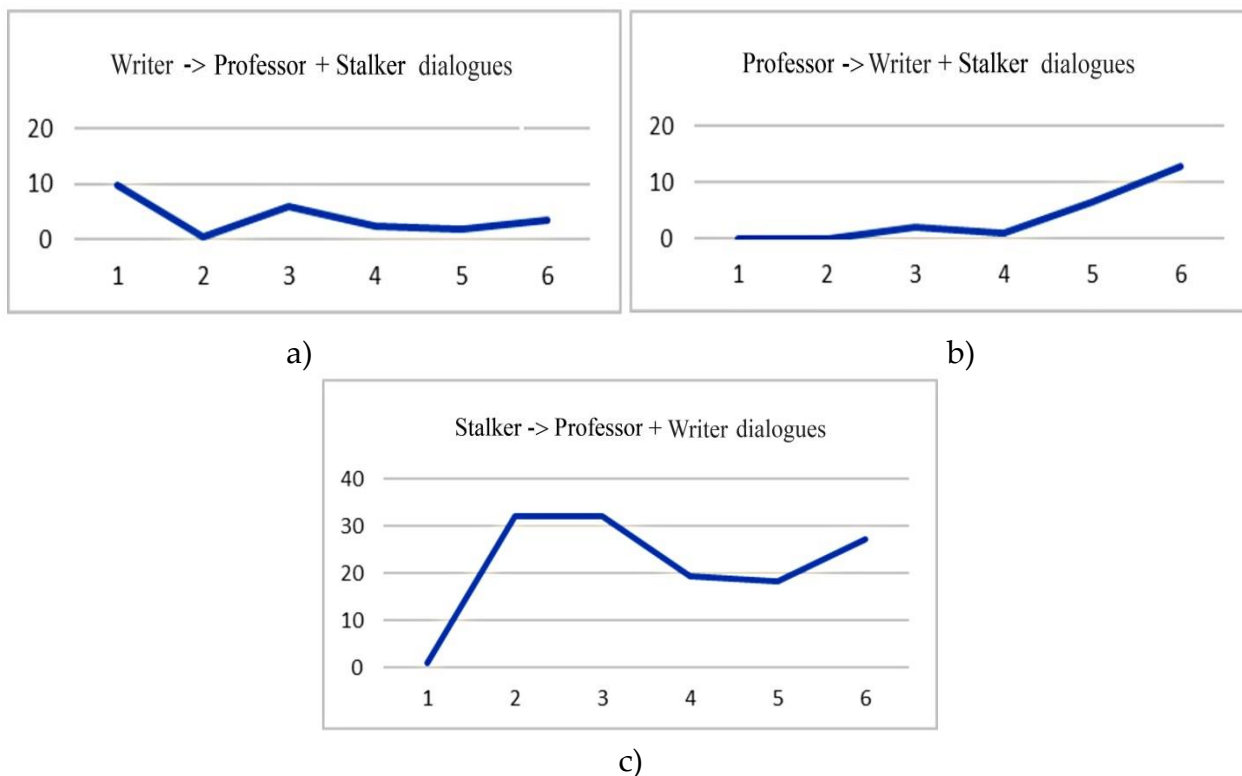


Fig. 7

The trend of the Stalker-Professor dialogic relationship (fig. 8b) is of little significance since it is based entirely on very low percentages of dialogue (fig. 6a). On the other hand, the trend of the Professor-Writer relationship (fig. 8c) is very significant, since it re-proposes, in an even more accentuated form, that of the Stalker-Writer relationship. The Writer is dominant in sequence 1, in which he makes a portrait of himself (completion of the previous dialogue with his female friend), before entering the Zone, but his dominance disappears in the next two sequences where, as we already know, it is the Professor to hold the reins of their relationship, and this is also part of his appearing as the more sensible of the two: he diligently follows the indications of the Stalker, but not because he is closer to him; he simply has method. He rationally recognizes to the Stalker the knowledge of the Zone, he knows that he and only he can lead him to realize his purpose. His apparent common sense, which determines his dominance over the Writer, also belongs in reality to a utilitarian vision of doing, to the world of external actions.

The dominance ratio Professor / Writer breaks down conspicuously, and therefore the Writer recovers his dominance over the Professor, starting from the sequence of the stop. This dominance, only in sequence 6 is diluted, but only because the Writer's attention turns more and more towards the Stalker. Even from the point of view of individual dominance relationships, therefore, the Professor appears, with the advancement of the three in the Zone, more and more a shadow character.

²⁵ Previous events suggest that he is in a sense the Zone's "favorite". «The Zone lets the unhappy through», says the Stalker. And in fact the Writer is not punished by the Zone for his arrogant attempt to reach the Room in violation of Her laws (sequence 3), an episode that will then induce the Stalker to send him forward in the "meat grinder".

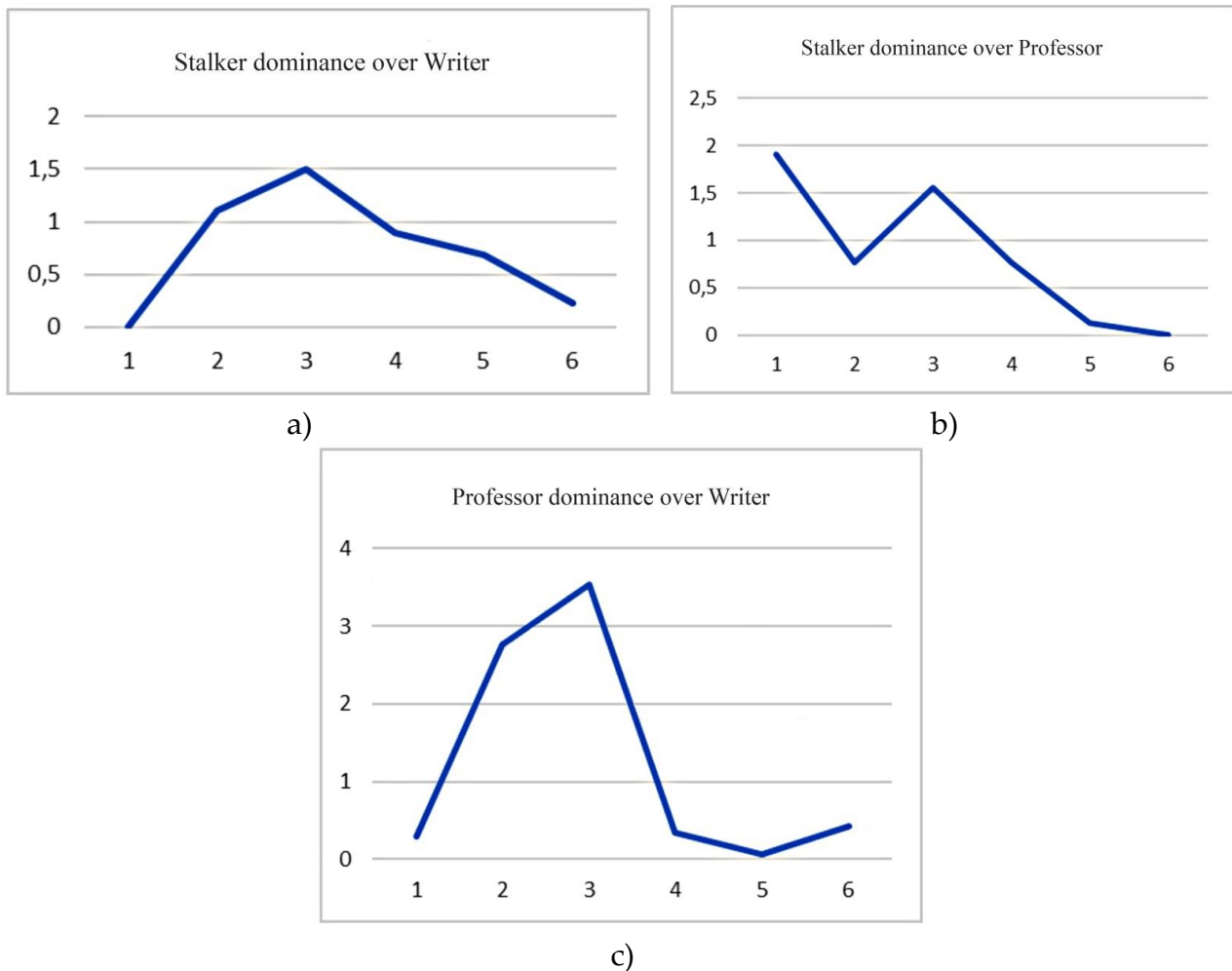


Fig. 8

The whole of these considerations, from which the leading role assumed, in *crescendo*, by the Writer results, can be well connected with what Tarkovsky said:

Everything a director, an author does, in the end he extracts it from himself. If he cares about the people around him, he will especially be interested in those elements that are closest to him, but to consciously place myself in the position of the guide as the character of Stalker never occurred to me, I have no such claims. In a certain sense, the character of the Writer is certainly closer to me, although I could not say even in this case that it fully reflect myself²⁶.

In fact, if we think of the strong autobiography that permeates much of Tarkovsky's work, especially from *Mirror* onwards, we see that the characters most attributable to himself are never those who embody the role of guides, rather the characters who, being in contact with them, make a journey of spiritual growth (in *Rublev* and *Nostalghia* they are those who have the name Andrej, in *Sacrifice* it is Aleksandr, name of the paternal grandfather). In *Stalker*, a work devoid of explicit autobiographical elements, it is significant that who finally fails is he who asks for the fulfillment of a pure act of faith to those who follow him by entering the place where the certainties of reason are lost, and that the path towards the Writer's awareness is not upward but downward. He did not believe in man and in the world before entering the Zone, he believes it even less when he reaches

²⁶ Baglivo D., *Cinema is a mosaic made of time*, Rome, Ciak Studio, 1984.

the threshold of the Room. His cynicism allows him to see in it what the Stalker, impregnated with faith, is blind to: not a tabernacle, but a lens that focuses on the most hidden and unspeakable part of the human psyche. The Room is none other than the *Solaris* Ocean, its fulfilled wishes are none other than the Guests, the cruel miracles that take place in the space station. And the Writer, understanding this, returns to his hopeless reality. In this sense, the author's original idea of making the film the exaltation of a pure act of absolute, irrational faith, seems to have been, in the realization of the screenplay, tempered with the depth assumed by the figure of the Writer.

But *Stalker* does not end up on the threshold of the Room. After the Stalker, on his return home, shouted his «Lord, why have you forsaken me?», there is still someone who has something to say: the Wife, once again simultaneously wife and mother, who, speaking for the first and only time in Tarkovsky's work, directly to the camera, that is to the viewer, forces us to ask ourselves if it isn't she, in the midst of the void that the story of the three men has opened, who is the true guide for Tarkovsky, she who alone knows the Way and in which he can finally recognize himself.

Thanks

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