

**Ambivalence and Ambiguity:
Motherhood/Femininity and Fatherhood/Masculinity in *Mirror***

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Introduction

Mirror (1975), Andrei Tarkovsky's fifth film, is full of ambivalent feelings, caught between release and restraint. Tarkovsky confesses that he felt released from his childhood memories when he finished making the film (Tarkovsky, 128-29). We can also experience his relief from the nostalgia, which probably has tortured him as a burden. Liberation emerges from this free-flowing narrative, in which he publicly reveals private scenes from his childhood and memorializes them on film forever.

The film begins with a story that evokes a strong feeling of relief. We see a boy, later known as Ignat, watching a TV documentary. In the program, a young man, who looks slightly like both Alexei and Ignat, and perhaps Tarkovsky himself, is hypnotized and cured of stuttering. A middle-aged female doctor, probably his mother's age, confidently announces, "You will speak loudly and clearly, freely and easily, unafraid of your voice and your speech," to her patient, who has just been brought to consciousness. Then he repeats after her powerful pronouncement "I can speak" rather feebly, but without stuttering.

According to Johnson and Petrie, a Russian audience would not miss the need for unfettered expression in her instruction (116). Even if we, as alien audience, do not discover the explicitly hidden message, we do catch the strong feeling of liberation in the scene. It is a kind of miracle that the youth could speak freely just after stuttering so painfully. Following this introductory scene, the film begins to narrate its story "clearly, freely and—it looks—easily," so freely as to make Yermash say, "We have freedom of creativity in cinema, but not to this degree" (Johnson and Petrie, 114). The film so freely flies among the

plural time-frames and generations or the narrator's memories and the real-time incidents that it would be impossible to grasp the situation completely in one viewing. We are immediately involved in and overwhelmed by the sequence of Bachelardian elemental imagery of light, wind, fire, water—they are what come first when we recollect the film. This usually happens to us after watching any Tarkovsky film, but *Mirror* is especially enchanting in this way, mainly during Alexei's dreams and memories. The semi-deserted dacha with white-curtained windows through which the high wind blows, the young mother with her dripping hair standing before the falling plasters of the ceiling, a girl holding her hand over the fire with her blood brightly shown framing her fingers—these unforgettable scenes feel always bright in spite of the somewhat uncanny feelings they evoke.

Then we come to notice that the story of the film is rather depressing. It is about two generations of a family, similar to each other, as reflected in a mirror. It focuses on a mother and a child/children, who are abandoned by the husband and father. The boy in the recollected scenes and protagonist-narrator in the narrative time, Alexei, who was brought up by his mother, who was left by her husband, later leaves his wife and son, and almost loses his relationship with his mother. At the end of the film, he is exhausted by guilty feelings and loses the will to live, and probably dies. He seems to be beaten by his mother and wife—they are played by the same actress and are actually to some degree the same person, as are the pair of boys and the pair of husbands/fathers.

Eternal motherhood

In the scene where a bird, set free by Alexei just before his death, symbolizing his desire for freedom, freely flies into the rural sky, we see below Alexei's father and mother as a young couple. His father-to-be asks his wife, Masha, who is perhaps already pregnant, "Do you want a boy or a girl?" but she does not say anything, but shows a perplexed expression. She smiles with embarrassment and looks over towards the wood beyond which is herself in her sixties or seventies with her small children, and then looks at the camera, then at her husband with an ambiguous expression with tears. It is as if she were expecting her baby

with pleasure, but she can foresee her future as that of an abandoned wife and then a forsaken mother--or an eternal painful motherhood from which she will never be free.

We next see the picture of the “eternal motherhood”: five-year-old Alexei and his younger sister, who both must be images from the present Alexei’s memory, and their old mother who must be at her real age. The old mother seems tired and puzzled. It must a nightmarish situation to find herself very old, with her small children as they were years before. Though it is a strange and funny situation, we could say that her dream comes true, for Alexei’s ex-wife, Natalia, has told him that his mother wanted him to be a child again so that she could take care of and protect him. Eternal motherhood, though beautiful as an idea--and not a few mothers may remain mothers mentally to their children as long as they live--is actually an exhausting and grotesque situation, if you have to take care of your small children in the last days of your life, although they have actually grown up more than twenty years before. The old mother bravely and decisively leads her two children across the field, but she does not look happy.

The final scene seems to show both Alexei’s doom and a kind of revenge or punishment for his repressing mother, because of whom and for whom he seems to die. Only briefly does the bird fly over the space-time into the field of non-time being or eternal childhood, revealing the feeling of relief as the narrative of the film does. But Alexei—even in a shape of a bird--cannot but return to the scene of his childhood.

Even the free-framed narrative itself seems to have ironically emerged from the female doctor’s order in the first scene. She is curing the young man by manipulating him. Her loud, pushy voice almost overwhelms her patient’s feeble repetition—he is only repeating her words—but nonetheless the youth can speak without a stutter. She can be contrasted to the male doctor at Alexei’s deathbed. The doctor is helpless against his patient’s symptoms, and he can only declare that Alexei cannot live anymore: he cannot save his patient or do anything for him.¹ The female doctor is the first of the leading mothers in the film and also belongs to the healing mothers in Tarkovsky’s films; the male doctor is one of the helpless fathers in the film and he also reminds us of those more problematic fathers in his other

films. *Mirror* is unique among them because of its central image of motherhood/femininity and absence of fatherhood/masculinity, and its perpetual ambivalence between them and strange ambiguity in each of them.

Killing a cockerel to protect and/or castrate the son

We have referred to the central theme of motherhood in the film, but there is something extraordinary about it. Masha seems strangely aloof because she will not show affection to her child explicitly, though she is certainly a caring and loving mother. Both Masha and Natalia raise their child(ren) in solitude, and even in hardship and poverty in the case of Masha. Natalia seems more understanding both to Alexei and Ignat and more understandable to the audience than Masha, because she explains her thoughts. Masha is more silent and she remains mysterious: she never says anything about herself and never touches her small children.

Only once does Masha directly show her protecting attitude to young Alexei. She cuts a cockerel's head off for him and looks terribly disgusted and exhausted by the act of slaughter. The scene explains how Masha could be a protective mother, who reluctantly kills a creature lest her son should symbolically lose his innocence in the task. This scene shows us Masha as such a sacrificing and devoted mother that she has made herself miserable and guilty. She already looked sickened after watching the doctor's lovely baby in a luxurious situation and listening to his mother speak to him in babytalk. Then comes the slaughter scene, in which we are convinced that she is more devoted than the superficial and ostentatious mother.

On the other hand, cutting off the head of a cockerel suggests the act of castration. Ironically, Masha who does the violent task in order to protect her son looks a phallic mother for her behavior. When she is asked to do the task, she hesitates until the doctor's wife says, "Maybe ask Alyosha. He's a man, after all." She replies, "No, not Alyosha," and then agrees to do it for herself. Her reply sounds like either she hates to force her son to do it or she denies her son's masculinity. We can see that her attitude moves Alexei towards

the depression leading to his death, which secondly follows after the cockerel episode, though we cannot blame her for it.

Protection of water

Motherhood is often related to water, as is by Bachelard, in Tarkovsky's films (Bachelard, 170-71). The earliest occasion is the repeated image of Ivan's mother in *My Name is Ivan* (1962), who brings a pail of water and wipes sweat from her forehead, and who watches the stars in the well with her son. The mother in *Solaris* (1972) washes Kris's hands with water from a jug in his dream and then he recovers from a fever and his fatal attachment to Hari. Maria in *The Sacrifice* (1986) also washes Alexander's hands, consoles him like his true mother and makes him drink something—some secret remedy or perhaps her mother's milk. They could be all “healing” mothers² who could be compared with the hysteric and childish wives in *The Sacrifice*, or the independent but unhappy woman in *Nostalgia* (1983) or the completely helpless wife of Domenico who cannot save her child and herself in the same film. Those healing mothers are clearly expressed without ambiguity, though they are not in the central position.

In contrast to the other films, the water imagery surrounding Masha is persistent and central in *Mirror*. Masha exclusively and repeatedly appears with water, most commonly in images of tears and rain. Also unlike other films, water imagery is almost always connected with healing for Masha herself, not for her children; the healing or the cleansing function of water is not always complete as it is in the other films.

We will now examine a scene in which rain, tears and the water from the tap are related with Masha's femininity and motherhood. The scene begins with Masha, who is running from the pouring rain into the large building of a printing house. This must be Masha's recollection—for she is the only person who knows the episode—but it also looks like a scene from Alexei's dreams. The scene is in sepia like Alexei's other dreams and it is realistically shown, yet something about it is dreamlike. As the scene progresses, we learn that Masha works as a proofreader and is going to make sure that she has corrected a certain

misprint, which, if not corrected, must doom her to a labor camp or something equally terrible. Assisted by Liza, her colleague and probably close friend, Masha finds that the word has been already corrected (or there was no misprint originally).

Relieved from the terror, with tears and laughter, she is going to take a shower to warm herself. Liza suddenly begins to criticize Masha's attitude to others, comparing her to Maria Timofeyevna, who does not understand her own situation but always expects that anyone will help her with pleasure, probably because Masha has not appreciated other people's help or care, especially hers. Masha looks astonished by the sudden criticism from the very person who seems to have realized an ideal sisterhood with Masha. It is also strange to us that she abruptly becomes so harsh on Masha. Liza also says that Masha has failed in marriage and will make her children miserable because she never admits her faults and always tries to make others be like her. Masha listens to her sudden assault with an unbelieving expression and pouring tears, then without replying, she goes to the shower room. Liza seems apologetic when she follows Masha, but is only rejected by her. Then Liza returns with triumphant and comical dancing steps to the office.

Liza's harshness seems to emerge from her relationship with Masha, which she intends to be not superficial but authentic. Additionally, she tries to show a kind of fatherhood/masculinity which is missing from the printing house. Since the misprint is something obscene which insults Stalin, who must actualize Fatherhood for all the Soviet people, Masha is considered about to do some dangerous mischief and abandons it just in time. Liza is an accessory, sharing the secret with her. When she accuses Masha, Liza herself is in tears, but on the other hand she smokes. Thus she alludes to fire and smoke for the fatherhood, which should be there, but actually is missing. It is understandable if we remember that Liza begins to blame Masha just after a man, who seems to be their boss or the responsible colleague, offers Masha a bottle of vodka—water again, even though it is imaginatively *eau de vie* [water of life], “mixed fire and water, which can almost be lit” (Bachelard, 96). According to Turovskaya, Grinko, who played the man in the scene, is the actor whose image is linked for Tarkovsky with the idea of fatherhood, but he does not

seem to embody it enough in the scene (Turovskaya, 83).

Masha looks more vulnerable than Natalia, who is modern and independent. However, when we remember that Natalia wishes desperately that an angel will appear to her as a messenger bearing Father's orders—we recognize Masha's obstinate independence. Masha does not argue with Liza, whose blame is somehow from the side of fatherhood, nor does she accept defeat. She only retreats into the shower room, which should be the place of motherhood with plenty of water, warmth, cleansing and consolation.³ Her obstinacy is not easy to break.

But Masha cannot be consoled by the element to which she belongs. She tries to cleanse the sadness and vexation as well as warm herself in the shower room, but the warm water does not come from the tap as sufficiently as she, and we, expected. It may be ordinary in those days, but the lack of water seems important. Masha, who has been wet enough with rain and tears—needs another kind of fluidity. The shower could warm and console her hurt ego and restore herself—her motherhood, sexuality and femininity, as when she rinses her hair in Alexei's dream.⁴ But that is denied to her, and she can only have a little water flowing down her body. This scene is one of the sequences of despair and delusion in the film and shows that healing motherhood, which the mother herself most badly needs, is insufficient. Nevertheless, Masha seems to be consoled in proportion to the quantity of water, which is not sufficient, but not absent, either.

Smoking suggesting fatherhood

Though the male colleague reproves Liza, saying “stop nonsense [sic],” her accusation proves to be true. We do not know why her husband and her son left Masha, but Alexei actually becomes “miserable” as Liza has prophesied, and the reason seems to be mostly his relationship with his mother.

Alexei points out to Natalia that Ignat will be like him if he is raised by his mother as he was. In fact, the lack of fatherhood is explicit throughout the film. We could say fatherhood is shown only as its absence, compared with overly present motherhood. Though

Alexei's father (the same actor) sometimes appears in his dreams, he is actually seen with his children only once, when he returns from the war. When Alexei asks about the year when their father left them, his mother replies that it is 1935, the year when the barn had burned down. Here, missing fatherhood is connected with the first fire scene in the film. In his memory, his mother goes out to see the fire and the children follow. Having been crying until then, she washes her face and hands with the water from a well and sits on its fence. Of course, she actually does it in order to wash out her tears, but she looks as if she hopes to resist the power of fire with that of water. Her behavior is contrasted with that of the small boy who seems enchanted by the fire.

We find her, in the first scene, sitting on the fence smoking, and a few years later, on the way home from the doctor's house, where she has just beheaded the cockerel, smoking, not ostentatiously, but pensively and moderately in either scene. Then her smoking figure transforms into herself in her sixties, when she is also smoking. We do not know why Alexei has lost a good relationship with his mother—as far as we know, their relationship is not apparently bad until then—but we can assume after this evening, after Masha symbolically castrates him, that the negative aspect of their relationship will be coming out. It is ironic that Masha has sacrificed herself to protect him only to destroy their relationship.

Alexei's enchantment with fire will be inherited by Ignat—played by the same boy and actually the same person as are the other pairs of characters in the film, and much more so because they seem to share some recollections. Watching Ignat make a small fire, Natalia admits that no angel will appear to him, though she wishes that an angel would appear as one did to Moses at the burning bush. She does not resist the fire and the fatherhood, which the fire symbolizes, but is sorry for its absence. Natalia is, as the mirrors surrounding her reveal, the double of Masha, and is more helpless and desperate than Masha, though she looks rather tough at first glance. That is in part because Natalia is never protected by water as her original is.

Looking for positive fatherhood

Alexei recalls an incident concerning a shooting instructor and a hand grenade during the war and relates the episode to Ignat. A boy, who is an orphan from Leningrad Blockade, tries the instructor's courage and patience, and finally throws a dummy hand grenade to the ground between them. The instructor covers the grenade with his body and waits for explosion. When he recognizes the truth, he says nothing accusing to the boy for it. He is deprived of the chance to show his courage as representative of positive masculinity/fatherhood and remains a fooled hero because of the dummy grenade—absence of fire. Throughout the film, though, the strongest image of positive fatherhood is explicitly shown in this scene: fearless courage as he sacrifices himself in order to save the boys; patience and generosity in forgiving the boy's challenge. We understand that these qualities are what the true heroes require as shown in the following scene, in which the Russian soldiers march painfully dragging a tank in the deep mud. Simultaneously, the scene seems that of the heroic fathers who would willingly devote themselves to their land and that of the tragedy of the fathers who have been deprived of a chance to show positive heroism.

Following this scene, some newsreel films of the war are inserted: the scenes of bomb explosions and victims, ending with the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb. They are the images of the most evil fire that human beings, especially masculinity, is supposed to have made—at least in Tarkovsky's films. Then we see the Red Guards of China under the Cultural Revolution fanatically applauding Mao while waving the Red Book in their hands, and Russian guards trying to prevent a wave of people from crossing the border. This scene reminds us of what Ignat is asked to read from Pushkin's letter about Russian's unique history and future—instead of the Tartar, they have China with its only great Father Mao. The unbelievably huge crowd seems not only threatening, but even uncanny, as though it were a negative result of a too strong Fatherhood or rather wrong patriarchy.

Just after a series of newsreel films of the war and revolution, Alexei's father returns to his family. Here again, fatherhood is shown in its imperfect form. Hearing his call, Alexei and his sister begin to run toward their father. Father hugs them both to his bosom, which is covered by a military uniform. They do not look at each other. All of them have strangely

nervous expressions in a silence that does not seem to come from too strong a feeling of having missed each other, or from happiness at reunion.⁵ Masha watches them with a slightly sarcastic smile, and the portrait of “A Young Lady with a Juniper” by Leonardo is shown, as if to show the negative side of motherhood/femininity.⁶ The scene is rather strange, for this is the only scene in which Alexei’s father appears in person, but he says nothing to his children and he does not even call his son’s name. He calls only his daughter’s name, and she gets to him first, because Alexei, who has been leading, falls down on the way. A direct and straightforward relationship between a father and a son or heritage from a father to a son seems prohibited to them. Although Masha does not disturb them intentionally, it is as if her “negative” motherhood/femininity is too strong for them.

Poetry reading as the father’s message

The Soviet soldiers who painfully drag a tank through a marsh would look miserable rather than brave, without the poetry reading which accompanies the scene. *Mirror* is characterized for its voice-over poetry recitation by Arseny Tarkovsky, the filmmaker’s father. Arseny, who actually left his family as Alexei’s father does in the film, is naturally considered to bring an image of the lost fatherhood through his poetry into the film. His reading has an important role throughout the film. In the soldiers scene, the poem is about human sacrifice and dignity, which results in the immortality of the soul over generations. It strengthens the honored and even triumphant aspect of the scene, which would be missed without it. The following scenes from the newsreel films which go on without the reading tend to look weird or grotesque.

We firstly hear his poem in voice-over in the scene of Masha, who cries before the scene of the burning barn. She seems to be desperate thinking of her abandonment by her husband, although still charming as a young woman enough for a stranger to try to flirt with her. On the surface of the scene, she is a poor wife abandoned with her two small children to bring up, but our impression changes when we hear the poem. The poem, which is on their first encounters, entitled even “Epiphany,” is a homage to Masha, to her beauty and

unique spirit. It dignifies her solitude and sacrifice, as the reading of a poem over the last scene of *Stalker* (1979) glorifies the stalker's handicapped daughter and redeems her ordeal. The poetry reading which offers Masha what she should have counteracts the misery of the scene.

The reading voice is considered the only positive voice and message from the absent fatherhood. It is generous, brave and affectionate both privately and publicly.

An angel appears to Ignat

Ignat's parents are wrong when they agree that no angel will come to him. A mysterious lady who has appeared to Ignat and asked him to read from Pushkin's letter could be considered an angel bringing a message to Ignat. He is told something about his people, just as Moses was. The lady looks strangely androgynous or somewhat masculine, as an angel is supposed to be.

Instead of the silent (grand)father, the mysterious lady appears to Ignat. Her existence is strange enough, and it is more strange that when the lady and her old maidservant are in the house, Ignat and his grandmother fail to identify each other, as if their privacy does not exist while the "public" figures are in the house. These mysterious figures also wait at Alexei's deathbed in place of his mother and his ex-wife. We do not understand why his family does not stay with him or why the mysterious women know about his conscience. It is also strange that the women seem to admit that Alexei will give up his life for his failed relationship with his mother.

They seem to have come in order to restore to young Ignat the lost fatherhood, ordering him to find the fatherhood required by Russia—another kind of fatherhood than that which could be actualized by Mao or Stalin. The Genesis episode of the angel at the burning bush is paternalistic, and it is ironic that Ignat is told something important by the lady, not his father or any other man. The androgynous-looking lady could be a suggestion of compromised femininity/masculinity and may be the counterpart of the controlling female doctor in the first scene. She does not heal Alexei, but allows him to retreat into death or

stay in eternal childhood. Something eerie surrounds her existence and we cannot say whether her presence is positive or negative.

The mysterious lady disappears leaving a trace of a teacup on the table. Ignat watches the trace rapidly disappear evaporating into the air. This Ariel-like image suggests another connection with an angel and also with water.

Hope in despair

In Tarkovsky's later films, especially the trilogy—*Stalker*, *Nostalgia*, *The Sacrifice*, the protagonists—they are all men—try to accomplish something for the people around them or the world which they leave behind. It often seems absurd, desperate or funny to the other people, but it is very important from each man's own viewpoint, and through their efforts they can leave something hopeful in the world. In *Stalker*, the protagonist becomes desperate because he cannot help anybody as the guide to the Zone. Only his wife believes him and supports him against the whole world. But in the final scene, we know their handicapped daughter, who is supposed to be cursed by nature for her father's occupation, is truly blessed, through which we also know that the stalker himself and his sterile efforts could be also blessed. In *Nostalgia*, the protagonist dies in a muddy puddle from a heart attack after carrying a candle to the opposite wall—the flame of the candle seems to be from Domenico, who has committed a burning suicide in despair for the world under the peril of nuclear war. In *The Sacrifice*, the theme of father and son is connected with the protagonist's "great achievement." Alexander burns his house—probably with the fire that he gets from the two men in the previous film—as if to make a sacrifice in order to cancel the nuclear war which he believes has begun. The war is not real, and he is carried to the mental asylum, but on the way, he sees his small son water a barren tree, keeping his will. The last three films show the explicit connection of hope in despair, fire and a father—two of the three major characters are fathers.

We cannot find any character actually preceding them in *Mirror*. There is no "father" who tries to leave "hope" in the film. Alexei confesses, as if it were his will, that he "just

wanted to be happy” and that if he dies “everything’ll be all right” for his mother, and begs to be left alone. Does he try to redeem his guilt or only offer excuses for his weakness and selfishness? By his death, is he liberated and taken back to his innocent childhood or is it just an escape? As for these questions, *Mirror* is ambiguous again. But the ambiguity is considered to be a source of the power of *Mirror*. In the last scene in *Solaris*—in which the Solaris Sea is going to overwhelm the small land where Kris’s house sits, we can still feel something illogically positive in the desperate ending. Similarly, *Mirror* has a rich ambiguity between despair and hope. The film ends with small Alexei’s battle cry, which adds something to the film’s ambiguity—does it belong to a happy and fulfilled childhood or does it come from a repressed and frustrated boy? We cannot decide. The logical sequence of *Mirror*, following the contrasting imagery of fire and water, which reflects the conflict between fatherhood/masculinity and motherhood/femininity, has brought us to a rather depressing place. Nevertheless, the feeling of hope remains and the film itself is bright, too bright still, as it was originally entitled.

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Notes

¹ Male doctors in the film cannot cure or satisfy the people around them. The first doctor appears as a tourist, a visitor from another world. He tries to seduce Masha in vain, and leaves never to return. He comes to their place by mistake only to discourage the family who knows the only one that intentionally comes to them is their father. The second doctor does not appear in person. He has not come in time so that Masha abandons getting money for her earrings. He could be the same person as the first doctor.

² There are some differences among them: the most obvious healing mother is Kris's mother, and Maria's behavior is considered her parody. Ivan's repeated dream of his mother and her death strengthens his loss and restlessness rather than his mother's healing.

³ The fact that Liza compared her to Maria Timofeyevna of *The Devils*, who was killed in a fire, may be an additional force driving Masha to retreat to water.

⁴ Bachelard refers to the strong imaginary connection between hair and water especially as "floating tresses, tresses loosened by the floods" (83). As the undine's hair is the instrument of her misdeeds, Masha's dripping hair appears as an image of her sexuality before infant Alexei.

⁵ Alexei in the scene reminds us of Ignat, who is asked if he wants to live with his father: Ignat immediately declines his father's offer, perhaps his answer coming too soon, which reveals his concern for his mother. He behaves to his father not as he likes but as he thinks his mother likes.

⁶ Tarkovsky describes the "charm with a negative sign." "In *Mirror* we needed the portrait in order [...] to juxtapose the portrait with the heroine, to emphasize in her and in the actress, Margarita Terekhova, the same capacity at once to enchant and to repel.... (*Sculpting in Time* 108) .

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