

REFLECTIONS ON *WHEN THE SUN HITS*

by

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ABSTRACT

When the Sun Hits is a feature length film concerned with the delicate relationship between the individual and the whole. A young man named John has fallen into a state of social paralysis since his father's death. He no longer knows how to relate to others and the world around him. Rather than looking to friends and family for support he closes himself off. After the mysterious disappearance of his mother, John blames himself for her leaving. He tries his best to reconnect with his old life, but finds himself making the same mistakes over and over. When his friend Tracy reaches out to him, he bitterly rejects her and once again finds himself alone. It is then that John puts his old life behind him and sets off to make amends with his mother. John has no idea where his mother might be or if she will accept him. Nonetheless, he reaches into the abyss to see if someone is there, waiting for him. The structure of the film is nonlinear as it deviates from traditional narrative form.

The intent of this thesis is to serve as a post-film reflection that discusses the relation between my views on cinema and the film I made. The paper will shift between the general themes of the narrative and the film theory working behind it all. It will explore the idea of cinema as an extension of the mind and how this is present in the film. By using specific examples from the film this theory of cinema can be fleshed out and an insight into my process may be gleaned.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

REFLECTIONS	1
REFERENCES	8

REFLECTIONS

“For the cinema is essentially the observation of a phenomenon passing through time” (Tarkovsky 67). Over the course of his career Tarkovsky tried to define cinema on his terms and arrive at what he could personally call “essential.” What I’m finding to be more and more essential for myself is the link between cinema and the mind. During the experience of filmmaking and viewing we observe a phenomenon passing through time. While filmmaking we observe the actual object as it appears before our eyes. While viewing a film, the phenomenon appearing before us is that of light on a screen. In both cases it is light that allows us to see. The connection is that cinema is a kind of vision, and regardless of where we are situated we are experiencing the act of seeing. If I imagine the camera lens to be my retina, and the camera body to be my image processing brain, then it follows that at the end of the chain is the mind—me. In my view I see cinema as an extension of the mind. This informs the way I work, but it does not end here. There is a transformation that occurs as the mind is externalized. It levitates on a screen and is made manifest as an edited experience of time. The filmmaker’s mind is synonymous with the film during the process of creation, but as the film is completed and shared with others it becomes its own entity. We therefore have a cinema of the mind as it applies to the process of filmmaking and to its final form where minds meet.

I’ve attempted to make my first feature film *When the Sun Hits* with this idea of cinema as an extension of the mind. What I hope to achieve is the clear presence of the workings of a mind. Often times the images edited together in the film do not build according to narrative necessity but are structured in the sense of a fluid moving mind. The film itself is thinking and working things out. Many shots and compositions are repeated throughout the film as if the film

itself is returning to past stored information—ready to reassess them—rethink them. So we float from memory to memory revisiting old information in a new context because of the change in time. This is how the mind often works; like an inner traveler sifting through old and new images alike. However, these are not concrete thoughts or words. They are experiences as opposed to a coded language. So the phenomena revealed before the viewer is still something fresh that they can make their own. It is the image as it appears before the camera. It hasn't been imbued with some specific meaning but rather constructed by a mind that's intuitively feeling and perceiving its way through in order to reveal relations.

The structure of the film is key to the cinema I've described. It determines whether the story or the mind is in control. The film embraces a tangential nature that gives it a sense of freedom. This helps to separate the film and the story within the film. Over time these tangents become more frequent as they intertwine with the narrative. By the end there is hardly a chronological order to the events of the narrative as they are mixed and shuffled with the events of a surrounding world. The structure of the whole film effectively becomes a process of mental manipulation. In hindsight it can be assumed that the narrative portions of the film are visited because the mind allows it. The process happens slowly but the eventual detachment allows us to float through time and space as only a mind can do.

There are several moments in the film where I allude to the act of seeing. Some of the more subtle gestures are those where I attempt to connect my human subjects with the mind of the film. For example within the first twenty minutes there is a tangential break from the narrative. The camera movements during this tangent are unmotivated by characters and act of their own free will. This continues for a couple minutes as we begin to share in the consciousness

of the film. We wander into a construction sight and peer around a door. Suddenly we cut to a woman walking on the sidewalk as she also peers beyond the door. The moment she turns her head to look we cut back to the previous shot. This is not merely a point of view shot, because it is first established that we are following some other consciousness. What the camera is experiencing and *seeing* so is the woman. Here a connection is made between the human mind and the film's mind, because the mind governing the camera is the same mind that governs human eyes. There are other similar events in the film such as one with the protagonist, John, and a brief glimpse of someone's vision on the bus. In the case of John, the film cuts from an image of smoke and fire to an image of John looking off screen. There is nothing to suggest that the space is shared, so what we get is a juxtaposition between a brief tangent of the film's mind and an image of John seeing. I'd like to think these juxtapositions pose questions rather than give direct answers or meaning. For me, they are more like suggestions or possibilities of what is shared between the images.

The more direct (or at least noticeable) allusions to the act of seeing are accomplished through light-play. That is to say, "the light is the principal subject of the film; that is, when the film is not only made *with* light, but is *about* light" (Wees 184). In the film there are a few cases where we witness nothing but light shining in darkness. These images, while noticeable, are very brief. This is intentionally so, as it shares certain thematic importance with the film. I avoided basking in the light in favor of flirting with it. These moments are fleeting and just out of reach. It is almost as if a subconscious is breaking through the water.

Grasping at the beyond is an ever-present theme. Along with the glimpses of direct light there are numerous images of clouds with holes in the film. *When the Sun Hits* often has its gaze

steadily fixed on the eternal. We often stare at cracks and holes in the heavens—sometimes briefly at other times longingly as if hoping for more. The use of long takes is another form of this expression. Not only do they give a sense of heaviness and melancholic atmosphere that matches John’s depression, but they foreground time itself. In the second half of the film there is a series of long takes where a boy paces and waits for his father. We sit and stare absorbing all details and wait for the possibility of a revelation. At the time of writing the script I was reading Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*. What struck me was her acute awareness of the distance between herself and God. “There are people for whom everything is salutary which brings God nearer to them. For me it is everything which keeps him at a distance. Between me and him there is the thickness of the universe—and that of the cross is added to it” (Weil 91). I think this sentiment has informed the narrative and the film itself. God’s presence must remain elusive. It is something that is whispered to the ear and in the peripheral field of vision. According to Hoberman, Tarkovsky called *Andrei Rublev* a “film of the earth”(1). This attention to geography also shares something with Weil and the film. Though space and time is obscured and fragmented, the film is always looking up. We are never above the clouds but tethered to the earth. Though the film explores this space freely it is also aware of the space it does not explore. It is aware of the beyond.

As I mentioned earlier, the brevity of light-play acts as a simultaneous presence and absence. “Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link” (Weil 145). In this sense the film is very much about relations. Even though John is the protagonist the world around him is of equal

importance. By breaking up the narrative I created an equalizer that gives attention to everything that's in front of the camera not just the protagonist. However, the film is more than just this connection between John and his surroundings. It is also about the camera's relation to John and the world around him. As I continue to make films I can see that there is a strong connection between myself, the camera, and the phenomenon in front of it. With each film I make I think this bond becomes stronger. In part I think this is due to my belief that the cinema has certain receptive qualities that make it quite different from the other arts. When a painter paints he or she forces the brush across the canvas to make a line, but the filmmaker must be somewhat amiable to the forces around him or her. The act of filmmaking is the act of receiving light. It is receptive not forceful. Much of the time the camera is probing, but it is also dodging. While shooting I often directed my cinematographer to physically move out of the way of an obstacle if necessary. So it is a kind of give and take. Like a dance, sometimes it takes the lead and other times it does not. However, it is first the act of receiving that informs my decisions to advance the camera. In my cinema the phenomenon appears before the camera from the "downward direction" that Weil speaks of (89). For Tarkovsky this receptivity serves a purpose:

An artistic discovery occurs each time as a new and unique image of the world, a hieroglyphic of absolute truth. It appears as a revelation, as a momentary, passionate wish to grasp intuitively and at a stroke *all* the laws of this world—its beauty and ugliness, its compassion and cruelty, its infinity and its limitations. The artist expresses these things by creating the image, *sui generis* detector of the absolute. Through the image is

sustained an awareness of the infinite: the eternal within the finite, the spiritual within matter, the limitless given form. (37)

I believe Tarkovsky knew that in order to create a “detector” one must listen before one speaks. “The poet has nothing to be proud of: he is not the master of a situation, but a servant” (Takvosky 43). This receptivity is more than just a mechanical function within a specific medium. It is a view of art that can be applied to many disciplines.

For me, *When the Sun Hits* has a very melancholic air about it. An abundance of unfulfilled wishes and broken relations make it seem overly bleak perhaps, but I think that even then there is a spirit of hope. There is always the possibility that what is broken can be mended and what is lost can be found. However, the film must be bleak and hopeless to communicate this. This is why I keep the elements of hope on the fringe. There are only a couple scenes where John and Tracy laugh. They are sparse and all the more valuable. What are repeated are life’s difficulties: the argument, the graveyard and lost loved ones. John’s decision to look for his mother is hard and perhaps pointless, after all he has no leads and no idea what will happen when (if at all) he gets there. However, the film does not wish its difficulties away. It takes them as a challenge:

To accept what is bitter. The acceptance must not be reflected back onto the bitterness so as to diminish it, otherwise the acceptance will be proportionately diminished in force and purity. For the thing to be accepted is that which is bitter in so far as it is bitter; it is that and nothing else. We have to say like Ivan Karamazov that nothing can make up for

a single tear from a single child, and yet to accept all tears and the nameless horrors which are beyond tears. We have to accept these things, not in so far as they bring compensations with them, but in themselves. We have to accept the fact that they exist simply because they do exist. (Weil 80)

All of John's hardships and mistakes hover over him like a cloud as he wanders for most of the film without direction. It is the film that confronts the cloud and notices the hole in it.

Ultimately I hope everyone who views the film has their own unique experience with it. I don't want to spoon-feed specific ideas to the viewer so that he or she may sit back passively. The phenomena that passes through the camera is filtered through me, but hopefully not to the point where there is no work to be done by the viewer. The viewer is the last part of the process, and with him or her the film is fully realized. There are so many things that can be done with a kind of cinema that understands itself as an extension of the mind. I believe *When the Sun Hits* is a starting point for me, as I know there are all kinds of avenues that are waiting to be explored. Here there is a huge amount of untapped potential.

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