

Cinesonic Imagination: The Somatic, the Sonorous, and the Synaesthetic

“Starving the eye will inevitably bring the ear, and therefore the imagination, more into play,” according to acclaimed sound designer Randy Thom. This insight captures a central tenet of this article—the way imagination feasts on absence—and it prompts reflection on whether the imagination synaesthetically translates one sensory modality into another when a sense is “starved,” or when what is visibly present misaligns with what the ear apprehends. Imagination is central to the design and reception of cinematic soundscapes. In addition to audible properties, sound has tactile¹ and intangible qualities that raise further questions: is the cinematic imagination best understood as a cognitive process involving image formation, or does it include embodied, affective dimensions?

While one might expect imagination to provide a natural meeting point for screen studies and philosophy, given that the term itself suggests the fertile union of images and ideas central to both disciplines, Julian Hanich is one of the few philosophers of film to have systematically worked through various facets of the cinematic imagination.² In “Omission, Suggestion, Completion: Film and the Imagination of the

Spectator,” Hanich deftly classifies different forms of ellipsis and imaginative synthesis and details the ways in which sensory perception and imagination interrelate phenomenologically and aesthetically in cinematic experience. While aesthetic philosophers such as Roger Scruton acknowledge that imagination can have a moral character because it plays a role in understanding art and educating the emotions, there is a longstanding suspicion of the relationship between cinema and imagination (41–43). For instance, Scruton claims that spectatorship involves little imaginative effort or reward because, rather than evoking “the thing that is not there,” film realizes its subject for the audience with the presentation of a simulacrum (41). Unconvincingly, Scruton suggests that cinema’s sensory and emotional gratifications prevent imagination from doing its work.³

With Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker* as its case study, this article explores misconceptions about the relationship between imagery and imagination. Focusing on the relatively neglected territory of cinematic soundscapes, I canvas approaches to imagination in cognitive film theory and phenomenology in order to investigate sound design and film spectatorship in relation to philosophical accounts of imagination. In doing so, I aim to counterbalance the tendency to privilege visual images and cognition by considering overlooked aspects of imaginative experience that *Stalker* exemplifies and that screen media elicit, such as affect and synaesthesia. I conclude by considering the implications of technological advances in game-

and Szczepanik’s discussion of the synaesthetic qualities of silent cinema in “Sonic Imagination.”

3. Similarly, as Hanich points out, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno suggest cinema is guilty of “repressing the powers of imagination” because sound film, as an exemplar of consumer culture, is so closely identified with the reality it purports to represent that it *inhibits* imaginative exploration (Horkheimer and Adorno 99–100).

1. Regarding tactile, haptic, and inaudible sounds see Coulthard, “Haptic Aurality”; Kerins, *Beyond Dolby* (29, 36); and Stadler, “Experiential Realism” (453–54).

2. See also Evans’s work on mental imagery and sense perception in “Imagination and the Senses”; Lefebvre’s theory regarding the formation of mental images in “On Memory and Imagination in the Cinema”; McIver Lopes’s analysis of cinematic representation and experience in “Imagination, Illusion and Experience in Film”; Pettersson’s contribution to philosophical aesthetics in “Seeing What Is Not There: Pictorial Experience, Imagination and Non-localization”; Murray Smith’s influential work on self-focused personal or central imagining and impersonal or acentral imagining in *Engaging Characters* and more recently in *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*; my own chapter, “Imagination: Inner Sight and Silent Voices”; Stock’s examination of the kind of imagining and supposition that is called for by fictional narratives in *Only Imagine*;

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play and virtual reality for understanding embodied, imaginative engagement with new media.

Although a thorough exploration of the imaginative horizons of technological change lies beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that *Stalker* has had several sound mixes, its image has been remastered, and its title has been adapted into interactive computer games. *Stalker's* original Mosfilm soundtrack was monophonic, yet as technology has advanced, different sound mixes have been released, including Fox Lorber's 1998 VHS mix, RusCiCo's 2002 5.1 DVD surround track with added music and sound effects, and Criterion Collection's 2017 Blu-ray that offers a 2K digital restoration of the original 35mm film negative along with the original Russian 1.0 LPCM Mono soundscape. While acknowledging that each version occasions imaginative variances and that contemporary cinema technologies, such as Dolby Atmos and low-frequency effects, may produce enhanced spatial and sensory immersion that could augment embodied imaginative experience, this article focuses on the original 1979 version.

Stalker takes the audience away from the monochrome reality of domestic life into a dangerous, restricted area where time and space are distorted, following a hired guide known as Stalker and his clients, a writer and a professor, as they seek to enter a room in the Zone where wishes are granted.⁴ In his book *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky articulates interest in "the interior world of the individual imagination" and how it is "possible to reproduce what a person sees within himself, all his dreams, both sleeping and waking" (71). *Stalker's* evocative soundscape exposes interiority and brings oneiric, ineffable elements to the screen and in this film Tarkovsky achieves far more than a reproduction of "what a person sees within

4. For scholarly criticism of Tarkovsky's films, see Smith's "The Edge of Perception: Sound in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*"; Dunne's edited collection, *Tarkovsky*, with chapters on Russia, religion, and literary, philosophical, and artistic influences; and Johnson and Petrie's *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*.

himself," even if we take sight to be associated with knowledge and reproduction to involve more artistry than mimesis.

Imagination's relation to the production of imagery (seeing with the mind's eye) is founded in philosophical accounts that frame imagination in terms of images that mediate between objects and ideas. One aspect of imagination—*mimesis*—relates to imitation and forging illusions, while the other—*phantasia*—refers to perceiving or being deceived by fantastical images. This view of imagination is hardly favourable, given Plato's allegory of humans imprisoned in a cave of illusions like spectators in a cinema, captivated by a shadow play of images and unable to perceive the real forms on which these representations are based.⁵ This link between imagination, images, and deception carries through René Descartes's suspicions of the evil demon manipulating appearances and more recent perspectives on visual media by Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean Baudrillard, and Gregory Currie in their work on simulation, spectatorship, and the illusory power of images.⁶



The image's lack of truth status has led Kendall Walton to suggest that we "make believe" that cinematic events and characters are real because "imagining aims at the fictional as belief aims at the true. What is true is to be believed; what is fictional is to be

5. See Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in Chapter XXV (vii. 541a-521b) of *The Republic*.

6. See Baudrillard's *The Evil Demon of Images*; Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus"; Currie's *Image and Mind*; and Descartes's "First Meditation."

imagined” (41). Currie argues that we imagine screen events occur without needing to attribute reality status to them because we run our actual beliefs “off-line” and experience imaginative activity that simulates belief (148). In response, Derek Matravers asks, “if we believe the event took place within a fiction,” then “why do we need to imagine it as well?” (195).⁷ Matravers advocates avoiding the term imagination altogether in accounts of film spectatorship, claiming that distinct mental states are not needed to respond to perceptions versus representations. I contend that the focus on belief in these accounts is misplaced and that sensory perception of representations and images often involves imaginative activity.

Imagination’s mediating role between perception, representation, and ideas has preoccupied many thinkers, from Immanuel Kant’s categories of productive, reproductive, and transcendental imagination⁸ to Edward Casey’s work on the phenomenology of imagination.⁹ These theorists detail imagination’s relationship to perceptions of the material world, ranging from the invocation of objects that are not present to the senses to the construction of non-existent possibilities. However, evaluating imagination in relation to the “real” has led to imagination being considered a lower form of cognition than reason. Cognitive film theorist Berys Gaut contends, “a better account of imagination would hold that to imagine something is to entertain it, without asserting it. That is, the imaginer is not committed to the truth of the representational content concerned” (333). For Gaut, the difference lies in “the kind of mental act directed at the representational content” (333). With respect to *Stalker*, Gaut may agree that without *believing* in the existence of a forbidden zone in which time and space do not obey the laws of physics and flowers have no scent, we can still entertain the *conceivability* of such a zone being created by an apocalyptic event. Yet Gaut’s account of imagination, like Walton’s and Cur-

rie’s, remains focused on mental acts and the relationship between what is represented and what is real.

This overview highlights two things that have thus far been neglected in accounts of the cinematic imagination: sound has been ignored by comparison with image, and cognitive acts like hypothesizing have been privileged over the affective and multisensory dimensions of imagination. Imaginative experience is not reducible to mental acts or the formation of mental images; the imagination extends insight and perceptiveness beyond appearances into the realm of affect and ideas and, as Hanich points out, cognitive film studies has yet to explore the experience of “*sensual completion, the acts of imagining the absent.*” Hence, I turn to a phenomenological perspective on sound and imaginative experience to address this gap.



Absence is one of imagination’s invariant features—it is a quality that Jean-Paul Sartre focuses on in his account of nothingness¹⁰ and that Don Ihde writes of in *A Phenomenology of Sound* when he says, “it is to the invisible that listening may attend” (14). As phenomenologist Erez Nir claims, “in imagination the object is present in a *marginal* way and what is directly experienced is the object’s *affective form*, which is an intuitive aspect of the object’s value qualities” (52).¹¹ Consequently, Nir sees imagination as “a presence of experience and an absence of an object” (56), which leads to “*the peculiar ability to have an affective experience of something without its presence*” (57). How, then, does this haunting absence or attentional invocation of presence relate to affective experience in

7. See also Matravers’s chapter on fiction and the imagination in his monograph *Fiction and Narrative* where he expresses skepticism as to how perceiving images might exercise the imagination when watching films: “Why should the imagination be thought constitutive of a visual experience of a representation? The point is pithily stated by Richard Wollheim, who, again, contrasts the two notions, claiming that ‘imagination has no necessary part to play in the perception of what is represented’ ... [D]epictive representations do not involve the imagination simply in virtue of being depictive representations” (148-49).

8. Kant theorises various functions of imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he distinguishes between images and concepts and discusses imagination’s role in synthesising the two (104-05), and in the *Critique of Judgment*, where he examines imagination’s sensory aspects and its generative, productive qualities (94, 182, 243, 314).

9. See Casey’s *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*.

10. See Sartre’s *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* and McGinn’s *Mindsight* (29).

11. Nir rightly critiques accounts of imagination that focus on the truth status “of the imaginative object at the expense of the imaginative experience as a whole” (52).

the acoustic imagination, and what might we learn from *Stalker*?

In *Audio-Vision*, composer and sound theorist Michel Chion discusses the cinesonic imagination, stating: “the question of listening with the ear is inseparable from that of listening with the mind, just as looking is with seeing” (33). This suggests that perception and cognition are entwined, and that we may characterize listening with the mind’s ear and seeing with the mind’s eye as imaginative experiences that extend beyond narrative comprehension, optical visuality, and causal listening into the realm of hapticity, emotion, and mood or atmosphere. Tarkovsky claims:

In itself, accurately recorded sound adds nothing to the image system of cinema, for it still has no aesthetic content. As soon as the sounds of the visible world are removed from it, or that world is filled, for the sake of the image, with extraneous sounds that don’t exist literally, or if the real sounds are distorted so that they no longer correspond with the image—then the film acquires a resonance. (162)

The correspondence of sound with image to which Tarkovsky refers is precisely what phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack interrogates in “When the Ear Dreams.” For Sobchack, the sonic imagination relates to the imaginative qualities of cinematic sound design and is expressed in moments when “sound originates, dominates, and shapes the image, rather than the image dominating and grounding (or anchoring) the sound” (4). Sobchack engages with Chion’s concepts of “acousmatic sound” (Chion 32), which is sound divorced from its visible source, and the practice of “reduced listening,” which “focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning” (Chion 29). Reduced listening could also be termed phenomenological listening; similar to the process of phenomenological reduction, reduced listening disrupts established preconceptions as we attend to the inherent qualities of sound. Chion claims that reduced listening reveals how “the emotional, physical, and aesthetic value of a sound is linked not

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only to the causal explanation we attribute to it but also to its own qualities of timbre and texture, to its own personal vibration” (31).

In his foreword to *Audio-Vision*, Walter Murch suggests that the “sensory incompleteness” arising when sound and image are not realistically fused “engages the imagination of the viewer” through “the metaphoric use of sound” and that “by choosing carefully what to eliminate, and then reassociating different sounds that seem at first hearing to be somewhat at odds with the accompanying image, the filmmaker can open up a perceptual vacuum into which the mind of the audience must inevitably rush” (xx). Filling the “perceptual vacuum” of “sensory incompleteness” is central to the cinematic imagination. The process by which designers render sounds and audiences interpret them boils down to “translating one order of sensation into another” (Chion 112). When Chion speaks of “‘transliterating’ tactile sensations into auditory sensations,” he is effectively describing cinematic synaesthesia (112). According to Jennifer Barker, synesthesia “is a phenomenon in which a stimulus in one sense modality triggers automatically additional sensory response(s) in a different sense modality” (378). Indeed, when Barker states that “film draws our attention, consciously or otherwise, to something that is both within us and beyond us, both elemental and deeply strange. In other words, synesthesia haunts us from the inside” (375), she could well be describing *Stalker*. It is a film that uses exquisite cinematography and artfully composed sound and music as well as elemental aspects such as water to evoke an imaginative,

multisensory engagement with Stalker's subjectivity and with the Zone itself.

For instance, when Stalker beckons to his weary companions and they speculate that his tone suggests he will start sermonizing, they are resting in a place that seems damp and cold. The sound of running water gives way to aqueous droplets falling into a pool, although no water is visible; suddenly the sonorous splash of something heavy plunging into deep water forms a sound bridge that Sobchack might say "originates, dominates and shapes" the next image. The camera peers down into a dark well and the sound waves of the object dropped into the well are translated into the realm of the visible as rippling, wavering, abstract imagery of light on water, soon accompanied by limpid music and Stalker's disembodied voice. Here acousmatic sound conveys the characters' experiences of touch, temperature, weight, and depth as well as giving access to the voice of Stalker's mind. Sound's rhythmic and tactile qualities elicit the audience's embodied imagination, creating emotive emplacement in the story world. As sound designer Mark Ward argues, "the crafting of a sonic element is focused upon the task of designing affect at both the sensory and narrative levels" (163). Where the sensory and narrative aspects intersect, the affective qualities of the sonic imagination are most illuminating in *Stalker* as sound insidiously manipulates affective responses:

On one hand, sound works on us directly, physiologically (breathing noises in a film can directly affect our own respiration). On the other, sound has an influence on perception ... it interprets the meaning of the image, and makes us see in the image what we would not otherwise see, or would see differently. (Chion 34)

In *Stalker*, this becomes evident in relation to rhythmic sounds dissociated from images during the rail journey into the Zone.

In the rail scene, the diegetic mechanical noise of the draisine clattering rhythmically on the tracks gradually transforms into synthesized music as the protagonists move from monochrome reality toward the verdant but lethal Zone. Music and sound conjoin to express

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something increasingly inhuman and unknown, but this is not the case in the adulterated 5.1 remix, where the whole sequence is overdubbed with obtrusive music. It is the subtle elision of distinctions between ambient, organic environmental sounds, mechanical sound effects, and Eduard Artemyev's entrancing underscore that draws into question the nature of the diegetic space that the characters and the audience are entering in the original film. When the railcar stops at the threshold of the Zone, Stalker calls it "the quietest place in the world." As he falls silent, the low static hiss of the original monaural soundtrack gives a sense that the Zone is alive with the crackle of electricity (though this uncanny effect has been expunged from the digitally remastered Blu-ray release). Arguably, it is this encounter with the inhuman and the unknown that enlivens the sonic imagination through the use of off-screen and non-diegetic sound. As the travelers remark on their discomfort in this strange place, the sound of running water leaks into the soundtrack and an unearthly, reverberant howl emanates from deep in the Zone, offering sonic realization of the protagonists' fears about the dangerous space they are about to enter and communicating apprehensiveness to the audience. As Ward claims, "cinema recruits our body's innate capacity for 'feeling into' another's affective state" and "cinematic sound design is an embodied process of experiential knowing" (185-86). The distant howl, the trickle of unseen water, and abstracted sounds of the railcar are unmoored from images on screen. These inexplicable sounds do not produce narrative comprehension, but offer a form of knowledge through the senses and through the evocation of affect, mood, and what Tarkovsky refers to as "emotional tone" (158). Tarkovsky explains crafting emotional tone and atmosphere thus:

Everything will begin to reverberate in response to the dominant note: things, landscape, actors' intonation ... One thing will be echoed by another ... and an atmosphere will come into being ... in *Stalker*, ... the atmosphere that came to exist as a result was more active and emotionally compelling than that of any of the films I had made previously. (194)

The prevalence of sonic metaphors in Tarkovsky's description of atmosphere is noteworthy here, with reverberation, intonation, dominant notes, and echoes intermingling with elements of *mise-en-scène*, such as setting and performance. Similarly, in his article about cinematic moods, film-philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink notes that cinema historian Lotte Eisner "frequently used the term *Stimmung* (meaning

mood, attunement or atmosphere)” in her work; for Eisner, *Stimmung* “evokes a ‘musical condition of the soul’, encompassing both ‘psychical acoustics and the harmony of vibrations” (Sinnerbrink 149).

In 2012, three articles about cinematic mood were published: the aforementioned piece by Sinnerbrink as well as work by Carl Plantinga and John Rhym. These articles brought scholarly attention to the significance of affect and atmosphere in film. All three scholars note that mood is more pervasive, diffuse, and encompassing than focused emotional states and less directly tied to cognition, action, or causation. According to Plantinga, most people “think of the mood of a narrative as its atmosphere, but it is also common to describe the mood of a work as the complex of emotions it seems to express or embody” (456). Plantinga distinguishes the artistic tone and affective character of films from moods that films evoke in spectators (465). In his view, “inducing moods in narrative is a means of directing thought and perception” (467) and “affective character in itself is an important part of [a film’s] aesthetic worth, since such moods are a central component of the phenomenological experience of a narrative” (473). Sinnerbrink suggests mood works through the revelation of *cinematic worlds* (148), arguing that:

...before focusing on character, action and narrative development, we should be attentive to how the particular film-world is aesthetically revealed and how we are affectively attuned to that world, since this is what makes it possible for us to be responsively engaged with what is represented within that world. (155)



The participatory elements of gameplay, the kinetic, adrenalized thrill of moving through the Zone, and the first-person audio-visual perspective afforded by the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. games raise questions about how new technological developments foster imaginative engagement.

Rhym takes a phenomenological approach to the structure of experience and the pervasiveness and sustainability of mood in time, yet his project has an affinity with Sinnerbrink’s because he is also interested in mood “as being constitutively bound up with world disclosure and as an existential condition of the possibilities of ‘affects’ and ‘emotions” (482).

As noted earlier in this article, the atmospheric world *Stalker* inhabits and the Zone that he explores extend beyond the diegetic space of the film. In addition to the film and the 1971 novel on which it is based, *Roadside Picnic* (Arkady and Boris Strugatsky), there is a series of free-roaming first-person shooter games adapted from the film and set in the radioactive exclusion zone surrounding the nuclear power station, Chernobyl. Eerily, the first time the audience enters the Zone in the film is focalized from the optical and auditory perspective of *Stalker* himself, exactly as it occurs in the computer games when *Stalker*, the playable character, breaches the secure perimeter of the ecological disaster zone. In both cases, the audience is locked into *Stalker*’s subjectivity, acutely aware of the sound of his footfalls as we move toward an abandoned building. Participants in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (2006) and its companion games¹² have an embodied relationship with the technology of the game console itself and with the military technology used to blast virtual opponents in the game world. As is conventional in such games, this sense of agency augments affective involvement but the impermanence of the player’s death curtails the incentive to imagine the consequences of violence. Yet, in other respects, the games and the film foster overlapping imaginative explorations of the space known as the Zone. The participatory elements of gameplay, the kinetic, adrenalized thrill of moving through the Zone, and the first-person audio-visual perspective

12. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Clear Sky* (GSC Game World, 2008); *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Prip’yat* (GSC Game World, 2009-10).

afforded by the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games raise questions about how new technological developments foster imaginative engagement.

With a virtual reality (VR) 3D driver such as VorpX, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games can be played using VR devices like Oculus Rift and noise-cancelling stereophonic headphones. This technology gives an agentic, immersive experience of the Zone complete with the concussive impact of heavy artillery while the player navigates through the abandoned town of Pripyat and explores real landmarks, such as its rusting Ferris wheel.¹³ As Lisa Coulthard writes, sound has immersive qualities “because hearing is thought to be an intimate, more enveloping sense: sound is felt throughout the body, takes place in the head of the spectator, and is pervasive (we cannot close our ears as we can our eyes)” (“Affect” 54). While Coulthard would characterise the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games as privileging “affective intensity” over imaginative or emotional engagement, perhaps the emotive, enveloping soundscape of VR can engage imagination in novel ways. Angela McArthur and colleagues point out that VR “elicits new possibilities for the treatment of sound in space. Distinct from screen-based practices of filmmaking, diegetic sound-image relations in immersive environments present unique, potent affordances, in which content is at once imaginary, and real” (26). The merging of biological and technological perceptual apparatuses and the experience of presence and motion are augmented in VR and game environments, affording enhanced experiences of emplacement, immersion, and agency compared to cinema. As film scholar and sound designer Damian Candusso details, contemporary film sound practitioners must adapt to new forms of audio spatialisation and headphone delivery when crafting imaginative emplacement in VR environments through 3D sonic experience (1). Further research is needed in this quickly developing field, but throughout this article I have treated variances among imaginative experiences of the Zone in film versions, games, and VR as differences of degree rather than kind in terms of philosophical accounts of imaginative engagement with audiovisual media.

What have we learned from *Stalker* through this analysis of aesthetic emplacement in the acoustic and atmospheric milieu that evokes mood, focuses attention, and guides imagination through the Zone? I

13. Another audiovisual exploration of the Zone, *The Chernobyl VR Project*, uses immersive 3D sound recordings and location images captured by drones and mapped onto 3D shape scans to enable a virtual tour of the forbidden zone thirty years after the nuclear disaster, inviting participants to imagine Soviet life in the 1980s and the devastation caused by nuclear fall-out.

have argued that mood is communicated by cinema’s most immersive elements—the mise-en-scène and the tonal, tactile, enveloping qualities of the evocative, acousmatic soundscape. I have shown that mood is related to place-making and emplacement in the narrative world; similarly, emplacement can be understood as a form of mood-making in the film, games, and VR simulations that are based on the Zone that *Stalker* traverses.¹⁴ In *Stalker*, the enveloping elements of film style establish a mood that focuses the audience’s imagination on salient affective aspects of the characters’ environment and their perceptual and subjective experiences, which are rendered strange, yet hauntingly familiar through the synaesthetic translation of sound and image into affect and felt understanding. To conclude, imaginative activity does not necessarily involve forging mental copies of sensory stimuli. Instead, it works with sensory incompleteness to bridge disjunctures between sound and image and to generate suppositions and affective impressions. This elicitation of imaginative discernment through the evocation, mediation, and translation of sound and image in cinema recruits affective and cognitive activity that far exceeds the production of images.

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