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Stalker (RUSSIAN-W. GERMAN-COLOR)

Moscow, Sept. 17.

Mosfilm Production, Moscow, in coproduction with Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), Wiesbaden-Mainz. Features entire cast. Written, directed, and sets by Andrei Tarkovsky, based on motifs in book, "Picnic on the Road," by the Strugatsky Brothers. Camera (color), Alexander Knayzhinsky; music, Eduard Artemev; assistant director, Larissa Tarkovsky. (Credits taken from the screen.) Reviewed at Novorossiysk Cinema, Moscow, Sept. 17, '79. Running time: 140 MINS.

Cast: Alexander Kaidanovsky (Stalker), Anatoly Solonitsyn (the writer), Nikolai Grinko (the scientist), Alisa Freindlich (Stalker's wife).

Andrei Tarkovsky's "Stalker," far and away the most important film at the Moscow Fest (barring Coppola's "Apocalypse Now," which preemed earlier at Cannes), was unspooled in a crowded, "barred-to-journalists" theatre of the film market with only a couple hundred seats.

Why this "Big Tease" at the Moscow Fest is still a bit of a mystery, particularly since "Stalker" will be aired shortly on West German television (it's a West German coproduction). Pic is two-hours-plus in length and demands viewer's complete attention to catch each and every nuance, but the experience is well worth the time.

Pic fits neatly into the helmer's recent pattern of science-fiction-like pix: "Solaris" (1972) and "Mirror" (1974), and "Stalker" forming a trilogy of sorts. There are also references to "Andrei Rublev" (1968) and "Ivan's Childhood" (1962) that any Tarkovsky fan will instantly recognize. In general, though, his films are deeply rooted in Russian tradition while remaining still highly original. Tarkovsky, in short, in a film poet who specializes in "confessions," meditative discourses on life, existence, suffering, and profound personal experience.

The son of a prominent Russian poet (Arseny Tarkovsky, whose family has long been associated with Moscow intellectual life), Andrei Tarkovsky pegs his films on conversations between central figures, which are usually poetic, abstruse and penetrating.

The "Stalker," to be understandable at all, must be linked to these former pix. There's even a key actor who has appeared in all of Tarkovsky's pix since "Andrei Rublev": Anatoly Solonitsyn, who played the icon painter Rublev, one of the space scientists (Sartorius) in "Solaris," and the man in the forest at the beginning of "Mirror." Solonitsyn thus appears to be an alter ego for Tarkovsky.

In "Stalker" Tarkovsky uses color tinting and sepia-like tones to bring out contrasts as the day breaks or still-life paintings begin to move in gentle rhythms. The soundtrack is esthetically important: an electronic-music composer, Eduard Artemev, has done the music for "Solaris," "Mirror" and "Stalker." (He's also worked for the Mikhalkov brothers on their films.)

"Stalker" begins with the sound of a train passing in the distance. A man (Stalker) rises from a sleepless night in a bleak room containing only a simple bed and table, on which a glass shakes to the rumble of the train. This is a kind of No Man's Land — a corner of the world where a meteor has recently fallen to destroy a lovely landscape. The first impressions, however, are of a dilapidated freight yard and a run-down shack. Stalker has already served a five year sentence for guiding people illegally through a "zone" into the forbidden meteor-area, to a place where wishes can be fulfilled. His wife fears he will

make the same mistake again.

Stalker meets a writer and a scientist in a shack, who want to be guided to that secret place. The trio pass by a police guard (dressed in a futuristic uniform), then enter the zone where mines or the like prevent easy entrance — and come upon the ruins of a destroyed bus, which once tried to bring passengers to the secret place. As the dawn breaks (and the screen is splashed with light color tones), they sit down for a rest and begin to talk.

The scene is like out of Arrabal's "Automobile Graveyard," the conversation reminiscent of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and Pinter's "The Dumb Waiter." Only those without hope, it's hinted, can enter the zone.

The companions grow increasingly restless and irritable as they slowly advance along the route. The writer is secretly carrying a gun and the scientist a bomb, both forbidden by Stalker — who soon realizes that his leadership is being challenged and all may be lost.

The passage around filthy, oil-smeared, stagnating pools and discarded scrap-iron and through cesspool dungeons is like an Orphean descent into hell via an underground canal or sewer system — until the secret room of fulfilled wishes is reached. Each person speaks of his own convictions along the way: the writer of inspiration, the scientist of reason, Stalker of faith. But when the time comes, no one makes, or dares to make, a wish in the forbidden room. All return back to the shack. Another complex film metaphor in Tarkovsky's brilliant, head-spinning career. —Holl.