

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SOLARIS 1972 Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986)

OVERVIEW

Solaris is a Soviet era science fiction art film about a space station orbiting the planet Solaris, and carrying initially three scientists—one commits suicide—and a visitor, the psychologist Kelvin, who has been sent to investigate the value of the decades long Solaris mission. The film, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky was based on a novel (1961) of the same name by the Polish writer, Stanislas Lem, who was an acceptable and admired writer in the eyes of the Soviet literary authorities. (No small issue, in a mid-twentieth century era, when Russia's cultural ideologues held a firm hand on all literary and cinematic production in the nation.)

Lem (1921-2006), who did not especially like Tarkovsky's treatment of his novel, was interested in the interface between humans and the life of the extraterrestrial world. (His interests were philosophical; what are the limits of human understanding?) Tarkovsky, on the other hand, was more interested in the human dimensions of space travel—the intricacies of Kelvin's relation to his wife, the broader effects of space travel on the human condition. For Tarkovsky the element of technology was easily exaggerated in science fiction; a good example of which was Stanley Kubrick's *Space Odyssey* (2001), which Tarkovsky considered a lifeless mechanical production, intended only for amusement, and having nothing to do with history or truth. For Tarkovsky, as for any thinking Russian or American in the mid-twentieth century, space was a forceful new frontier of human consciousness; Sputnik had made its orbit in 1957, Yuri Gagarin had circled the earth in 1961, and America's space program, which was to put a man on the moon in 1969, was rapidly putting its competitive stamp on the space race.

Tarkovsky did what he could to direct his film to the human dimensions of space exploration. The space station itself was created as an outdated living quarter, spacious as an old fashioned house, and fitted out, accordingly, with an old fashioned main frame computer. Little scientific work was being done on the station, which had degenerated into a morbid home away from home for the two surviving space scientists. The director gave the film an historical setting by decorating the space station walls with reproductions of paintings by Rublev and Breughel, by building a Bach Chorale into the background of the cinematic experience, and by opening and closing with deep studies of Kelvin's relation to his dad, on mother earth.

STORY

Earth The film opens on a complex shot of underwater plants waving back and forth verdantly. On all sides, nature is florid, ponds and pools—the spawning grounds for the human on this planet that we live from—and against this scene a midlife psychologist, Kris, is arriving to visit his dad, and to spend the last day before a space flight to evaluate 'the situation' upon the space station monitoring the oceanic planet Solaris. (The film will conclude with the return of Kris to just this spot, where he will kneel before his father, on his home earth, in an act of chastened homage.) Present with Kelvin and his dad on the last day before the journey, is a scientist returnee from Solaris—who was previously dismissed from the post on the suspicion of mental instability. (He had reported, from the space station, having seen an infant four meters tall emerging from the gummy atmosphere embracing the planet Solaris.)

Space Having arrived at the Solaris space station, Kris parks his vehicle and lets himself in by the side door—as if returning to his house after a hard day at the office—and thereby leaves behind the normal or expected rules of the game of psychology. (Remember Kelvin is a professional psychologist.) He enters the long initial corridor, sees no one, and advances into the station, seeing glimpses of persons vanishing

here and there down passageways, but no one to greet him. Eventually he has to stop and knock on the office door of one of the two remaining scientists, Dr. Snout—who seems deeply agitated, and will hardly give Kelvin the time of day. Inquiring about a scientist who was his friend, and formerly a member of the space team, Kelvin receives confirmation that Dr. Gibarian has committed suicide, leaving behind him a video message for Kelvin; a message which soberly warns Kelvin of the implacable dangers involved in staying on the space station.

Mystery The air of mystery, surrounding the space station, keeps being enhanced by glimpses of figures, some of them former residents of the station, passing through the corridors. (The initial mission of the space station was to evaluate the nature of the planet, Solaris, and of the ocean that it swims in; an ocean ready, it seems, to respond to exploratory probes with rays of its own which have transformative and illusion creating waves built into them.) This puzzle is greatly increased by the appearance, in Kris's sleeping quarters, of his late wife, who had died of suicide. Dr. Sartorius offers an explanation for the recent phenomena of apparitions. He says that the scientists have carried out illegal nuclear attacks on Solaris, and the planet has found its way of taking revenge. We are working on this explanation, when Kelvin's wife, Hari, reappears in his quarters, self-injures and then self-heals.

Explanation Asked for an explanation of this event, Dr. Sartorius says that Hari is born from Kris's memories of her, and that it may be possible to destroy the random visitors to the station, who are nothing but 'neutrino systems.' The Hari copy grows independent, and learns how to exist without Kelvin; at a birthday party in her honor, she learns—she had not known this—that the original Hari had committed suicide. Dr. Sartorius thereupon reminds the Hari image that she is of liquid oxygen. At this the ocean of Solaris begins to rumble and boil, and Kelvin too starts a descent into illness. Sartorius assures Kris that the two scientists have bombarded Solaris planet with brain waves from Kris, with the result that the profusion of 'visitors' to the station should diminish.

Return Kris gives up in exhaustion, at the events that are flooding him; Hari once more disappears, having asked the two remaining scientists to destroy her. Kevin debates whether to remain on the Solaris mission, now that his brain waves have been broadcast to the Solaris planet itself. As we know, he decides to return to earth, where he finds vitality and comfort, and he returns to visit his father, who is the closeness of the earth and nature for him. By an ultimate paradox, however, dad's country home turns out in the end to be located in the Ocean of Solaris.

THEMES

Earth The film opens with a salute to the verdancy of earth life, with its energy and beauty. The ambience of Kris' dad's dacha is charming, simply, florid, surrounded by gentle bodies of water. We are reminded of cuts to the intricacy of natural forms, as Foma inspects them after having been reproached for lying in *Andrei Rublev*. Nature is the wholeness in things, and earth is nature's home.

Extra-terrestrial There is *terra*, earth, and then there is extra-terrestrial, which is 'beyond earth.' That is where the pain and sickness of the present film set in. As in the American film, *Interstellar* (2014) the exploration of space means going into the anti-earth, the anti-mothering. In that space, the rules of the game are inverted. There is no natural support from the earth, and if the ocean moves it is to boil with distress or to generate from it a four meter tall infant.

Love Kris is a loving person, close to his dad, who serves as a stable support for him, and is despite all setbacks hopelessly in love with his dead wife. Pitting his love against the harsh and unfriendly atmosphere of the space station, he finds that, by the film's end in the station, he is exhausted, and succumbing to the same illness as the other occupants. We are relieved when, at film's end, he bends before his father, like the returned prodigal son in Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1669.

Suicide Kris's wife, Hari, has killed herself before Kris undertakes his space trip to the station. Is she dead, though? On his first night, she returns to visit (haunt?) Kris on the station, and her refusal to accept her death, her insistent reappearance, is arguably the chief impediment to Kris' mission, to determine

whether the mission should be discontinued. She is capable of self-healing, with the help of Kris' brain waves, but is Kris capable of healing himself, in outer space?

Anxiety Kris is the center of the anxiety of the film. On his last day on earth, as he is visiting his dad, he is exposed to the fears and dreads that Mr. Berton has acquired on his own earlier trip to the space station. Underlying those dreads, in Kris, is his obvious inability to put behind him the suicide of his wife, Hari. Her reappearance to him on the space station, added to the sequence of minor hallucinations he encounters there, reduces him, at the end of his mission, to just the kind of illness that he, as the 'psychologist,' had been sent to investigate.

CHARACTERS

Kris Kelvin. The psychologist assigned the job of evaluating developments on the Solaris space station. There he reencounters his wife, Hari, who had committed suicide, and who refuses to die. Ultimately, Kris is unable to endure the unnerving life on the space station and must return home to see his father.

Hari. Kris' wife, who has committed suicide, but who returns to him on the space station. She slowly realizes that she is not real, and yet this realization, of the sense in which she cannot die, is agonizing to her.

Dr. Gibarian. The space station scientist who was a long term friend of Kris Kelvin, and who has committed suicide before Kris arrived at the station. He left a post-suicide video message for Kris.

Dr. Snaut. One of the two remaining scientists at the station. Unfriendly to Kris, at the beginning, yet realistic, and in the end useful to Kris by being the one person who tells a straight story of the dysphoria of life on the station.

Dr. Sartorius. The other of the two remaining scientists on the station. It is he who explains to Kris that Hari is made up of his memories of her.

Kris' Dad. An anchor for Kris, a stable point from which and to which the psychologist can return.

KRIS KOLVIN MAIN CHARACTER

Character Kris Kelvin is the psychologist appointed to evaluate conditions aboard the space station established to investigate the oceanic planet Solaris. (We are interestingly unsure who sponsors the station, who pays for it, just what it is intended to study. We are in the world of Tarkovsky's imagination, but also in a pre- modern stage of space exploration.) The Kris we meet at the beginning, visiting his dad, is though a psychologist somewhat naïve about the workings of his own mind, and when he enters the world of the space station he is startled to find the degrees of sickness and improbability that confront him. He is glad to return to earth, to hold his dad by the knees, to see the underwater foliage in the surrounding ponds. He is not free of the drama of his wife's suicide, but he is more thoroughly experienced in dealing with its side effects.

Illustrative moments

Filial. Kris Kelvin is close to his father, whom he passes the day with, before flying to the space station, and upon returning from his mission. The touch of the sensible, wise man is essential to the self-control of this rather disoriented son-psychologist.

Anticipant. Upon first approaching the space station, having parked his vehicle in the air lock side door of the station, Kris opens the mission home front door, like a dad returning home from a day in the suburbs. Kris at once senses the unfriendly atmosphere and the presence of uninvited guests, flitting down hallways. Kris is anticipant, and soon anxious.

Puzzled. Kris is puzzled when his ex wife, who committed suicide, reappears in his sleeping quarters on the space station. He deals with her as though she were still alive, they begin to fall in love with each other, but there is such pain and insecurity in their relation that in the end her death seems stronger than his life.

Loving. Self-harming, then self-healing as Hari continues to be, Kris seems unable to put her away from his life. (Of which in her present form she may simply be a brain wave emanation.) Though he cannot ease her suffering—when at her birthday party she is told that ‘she is not real’—he can for a long time endure her transitory conditions, which may well be the by product, he comes to feel, of his own brain waves.

HARI

Character The wife of Kris Kelvin, who committed suicide, during their marriage, but who returns to Kris on the Polaris space station. She is no longer alive, but is rather—it seems—a byproduct of Chris’ memory and brain waves. A birthday party held in her honor, on the spaceship, provokes one of the scientists to remind Hari that she is not real. Her continuing ‘indestructibility’ however seems to be deep in her status as a creation of memory; she can break through doors, and she can self-harm and self-repair in the twinkling of an eye. Kris still loves her, but can she love him?

Illustrative moments

Appears. On the first night, after his arrival on the space station, Chris receives a visit from his former wife, Hari. She is attractive, and flirtatious, but at the same time brittle; not of normal reactions. She and Kris sleep together, embracing.

Reappears. Hari, whose post-mortem career is as a revenant, returns again after the first night. She gives no explanation, appearing rather as a byproduct of Chris himself—but real enough to make love to. When he leaves her briefly, she panics.

Abilities. Hari has returned, either as a byproduct of Chris’ brainwaves, or as generated by his memory. In either case, she has acquired the capacity to self-harm and self-heal. She can pass instantly into these changes of condition.

Messages. Hari leaves a farewell note, telling Chris she has asked the two doctors to kill her. She is real enough to find intolerable the discovery that she is not real.