The Philosophy of the Mind in *Solaris*

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Abstract

Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 science fiction film, Solaris, is a profound philosophical inquiry into the human psyche, memory, and the limits of scientific rationality. This review examines how the film utilizes specific cinematic techniques, including deliberately slow pacing, symbolic mise-en-scène, and its political context within the Soviet "Era of Stagnation", to explore the central conflict between logic and emotion. Focusing on protagonist Kris Kelvin's struggle with a materialized memory of his deceased wife, Hari, the analysis argues that Solaris ultimately privileges the pursuit of emotional truth over objective, rational fact. The film asserts that unresolved personal history and the need for love fundamentally shape identity and drive human choice, culminating in Kelvin's decision to embrace a known illusion for emotional satisfaction. In doing so, Tarkovsky crafts not just a critique of rigid ideology but a timeless reflection on the complex, irrational nature of being human.

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Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), adapted from the eponymous 1961 novel by Stanisław Lem, is a striking departure from what one might expect of a typical science fiction film. Rather than focusing on technological development or space exploration, *Solaris* delves into the complexities of the human mind, particularly how memories and emotions shape human perception and decisions. Set on a space station orbiting the oceanic planet Solaris, the film follows psychologist Kris Kelvin as he is sent to investigate the increasingly erratic behavior of the stationed crew. Once there, he begins to experience the same phenomenon affecting the other crew, the appearance of inexplicable "visitors" and physical manifestations drawn from one's buried memories and emotions. Created by the planet's sentient ocean, these figures force each crew member to confront the painful and unresolved parts of their past. In *Solaris*, Tarkovsky presents a set of deep philosophical queries, asking fundamental questions about memory and identity. This brings us to the central question: *How does Solaris portray humanity's struggle for self-understanding, particularly through the role of the past in shaping future choices?* The film's deliberately slow pacing, symbolic mise-en-scène, and evocative cinematography propel the viewer to consider how the past shapes our choices in the present and future. Additionally, it shows how one's repressed past never strays far from the present, lingering behind a thin veil that is easy to rend asunder.

In 1964, Leonid Brezhnev replaced Nikita Khrushchev as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Under his leadership, by the early 1970s, Soviet society calcified into what was officially termed "mature socialism," an ideological finality of sorts. However, this "finality" also discouraged critical thought and individual expression, ushering in what was later termed the "Era of Stagnation." Although Soviet citizens experienced improved living standards and stability, chronic shortages of consumer goods and governmental inefficiency plagued daily life (Daniels 1998, 47; Shane 1994, 75-98). In this cultural climate, Soviet cinema faced increased ideological oversight, with social realism remaining the only officially approved method of filmmaking. Filmmakers faced strict censorship, with politically sensitive films frequently delayed or banned (Prokhorova 2013, 106-107). Within such restrictive artistic circumstances, *Solaris* emerged as an unusual egress from accepted Soviet filmmaking norms. Rather than reaffirming Soviet ideological certainties, Tarkovsky's film explored uncertainty, personal introspection, and philosophical questioning, embodying the kind of thinking discouraged by the Brezhnev-era administration. As Elena Prokhorova notes in her article "Cinema of Stagnation Late 1960s-1985," Tarkovsky's films had difficult production histories and limited distribution in the Soviet Union, yet their success at international film festivals "ensured state funding of his projects even as they were officially criticized" (Prokhorova 2013, 111). Such a paradox highlights the uneasy space which Tarkovsky occupied, wherein his works resisted ideological goals of the state but were allowed to exist because it elevated Soviet cultural prestige internationally.

Indeed, at the end of the film, Kelvin chooses to remain on Solaris, embracing what he knows to be a mirage created by the ocean over objective reality. Just as Kelvin knowingly embraces an illusion rather than face an unbearable reality, Tarkovsky implicitly parallels this with a society that similarly prefers comfortable ideological narratives over confronting difficult truths. This provocative narrative decision can be interpreted as an implicit critique of Soviet society itself, subtly challenging a culture unwilling, or perhaps even unable, to acknowledge the illusions underpinning its own ideological goals.

Tarkovsky's signature use of time, in his slow pacing, lingering shots, and almost meditative rhythm, form the core of *Solaris*'s aesthetic. The film opens with a series of long, unbroken shots of several natural landscapes, such as river grass swaying with a stream's currents, the spring lake sprinkled with duckweed, or the branches of trees within the pale blue backdrop of the sky, all surrounding Kelvin's house. These shots convey a deep sense of calm, grounding one in the tactile, natural, and organic world. Yet, sometime later, this serenity is disrupted by the drive through a sprawling highway, filmed within the urban areas of Tokyo, Japan. Interestingly, filming in Tokyo was done because such an urban environment was considered extremely advanced at that time, and did not exist in the USSR (Kikutake 2007). The long, hypnotic drive through the concrete "forest," initially smooth and bland, grows increasingly dissonant as unexpected cuts into different angles and strange industrial noises build up an eerie sense of unsettlement. The contrast between the natural world and the cold, constructed chaos of the man-made world showcases one of the film's philosophical tensions. This is further emphasized by the space station's decoration with Bruegel's paintings of natural landscapes, reminding the viewer of Earth's beauty within artificial environments. Solaris's ocean can be seen as a form of nature, depicted as a fundamentally alien but responsive entity that humans cannot comprehend or control. This tension between the natural and the artificial is inseparable from Tarkovsky's broader philosophy of cinematic time. For Tarkovsky, time was not merely a technical strategy, but a vehicle for emotional and philosophical truth, which he deemed as "imprinted time," being a way of capturing the passage of consciousness on screen. Despite "each person [expressing] his own time," such time gives the ability of one to understand the "truth" the artist attempts to portray (Johnson and Petrie 2003, 34). The slow pacing thus becomes a way of demanding the viewer's internal engagement with the film's philosophical weight.

In addition, Tarkovsky often uses idiosyncratic mise-en-scène and symbolism to personify emotional states, blurring the lines of the internal psychological world of oneself and the physical world around them. A notable example is the sequence where Kelvin first meets his "visitor," a manifestation of his wife Hari, who had committed suicide a decade prior. The sequence transitions from the initial medium shot, where Kelvin is visibly sweating and emotionally shaken, to a series of long shots where he tricks her into an ejection capsule and launches her into space. The camera lingers in a tight medium shot as he lays on the ground, burnt from the ejection flames (Figure 1). It then cuts to a sustained close-up of his sweaty, bewildered face as he breathes heavily in a chair back in his room, a grim visual metaphor for the attempted repression of his past. Similarly, in the famous zero-gravity sequence, Kelvin and the second instance of Hari float together through a large room, surrounded by paintings, books, and relics of Earth's culture (Figure 2). The characters' bodies drift slowly, tenderly holding each other closely, while Bach's *Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* plays in the background. This moment, effectively suspended in both space and time, visually conveys the emotional disorientation Kelvin experiences: a "loss of grounding." These contrasts between emotional intimacy and physical disorientation are further built upon by the monochrome rendition of scenes where Kelvin falls asleep. Phillip Lopate notes that this notion is "[similar to] Siegel's Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)," a Cold War science fiction film in which "[to] fall asleep is to risk a succubus's visit" (Lopate 2011, 1). Indeed, this alternation between color and monochrome reflects the disparaging nature of sleep, which, rather than relief or rest,

becomes a node of horror and uncertainty. Later in the film, this emotional dissonance becomes physical, in the close-up that transitions into a medium shot of Kelvin staggering down a corridor, supported by both Snaut, one of the station's remaining crew members, and Hari. The framing turns Hari, once an unwanted intrusion, into a literal crutch, highlighting Kelvin's growing dependence on the very illusion he tried to reject. The steady camera movement of the shot suggests that Kelvin is not rescued, but instead fully surrendered to the illusion, insofar as he could only be "rescued" by another. As Johnson and Petrie observe, Tarkovsky was deeply concerned with the idea of "poetic concreteness," where dreamlike or surreal moments retain tactile, *living* texture (Johnson and Petrie 2003, 31). Thus, rather than using special effects for spectacle, Tarkovsky builds images that reflect the metaphysical weight of memory, longing, and inability to reconcile with personal trauma. This principle is evident throughout the scenes discussed above. The zero-gravity sequence, for all its dreamlike weightlessness, never abandons materiality: the paintings, books, and physical tenderness of two bodies holding each other are not abstract symbols but concrete gestures granted the same weight as the emotions they carry. In this way, Tarkovsky renders the boundary between Kelvin's psychological world and his physical surroundings not just blurred, but truly indistinguishable.

Figure 1: Kelvin on the ground, burning from the flames in the ejection capsule.

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Figure 2: Zero-gravity scene, with Kelvin and Hari floating in midair.

Moreover, Tarkovsky believed that film should not impose direct meaning, but allow open space for reflection and interpretation. He emphasized that films should allow for "poetic logic," where scenes and images should resonate emotionally, rather than pose as uncompromising and unitarily interpreted symbols (Tarkovsky 1986, 34). This philosophy is visible in several scenes in *Solaris* where Tarkovsky dwells on static or near-static images. Some examples include slow pans across classical artworks like *The Hunters in the Snow* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, or extreme close-ups like the zoom into Kelvin's ear near the film's conclusion. These serve as invitations for introspection. The final sequence, in which the camera slowly pulls away from a long shot of Kelvin's house to a God's eye view, revealing that Kelvin is on an island on Solaris rather than Earth, encapsulates the thin line between reality and illusion, and the human desire to find emotional truth even within artificial constructs. Kelvin *chose* to embrace the illusion, fully knowing that it is fake, in order to find emotional resolution of his past. The ambiguity of this ending, with Kelvin neither resolving the situation and returning to Earth as his job entailed, nor catastrophically ending his own life like his colleague, embodies Tarkovsky's belief that direct meaning should not be given in a film. This refusal to explain, to resolve, to characterize, is what sets *Solaris* apart from the ideological clarity expected in typical Soviet cinema. By prioritizing the viewer's emotional experience over direct ideological messaging, *Solaris* is a solid reflection of Tarkovsky's auteur style.

Despite its philosophical depth and artistic ambition, *Solaris* was still very much a product of the Soviet film industry during the Stagnation and was made in a time of censorship and state control. Filmmaking during the Stagnation was tightly regulated by Goskino, the State Committee for Cinematography, which oversaw everything from funding to distribution (Prokhorova 2013, 106-107). Tarkovsky proposed *Solaris* in 1968 after his prior film, *Andrei Rublëv*, "which had been planned and approved during the Thaw, … was placed on the shelf", being deemed unsuitable at its completion in 1966, since "[the initial] period of cultural liberalization had ended" (Bird 2013, 140). Tarkovsky's

decision to adapt Stanisław Lem's novel was partly strategic, as Lem was both popular and critically respected within the Soviet Union, so adapting his material would offer some degree of protection against censorship. Nevertheless, the initial vision Tarkovsky had did not come to fruition, since Goskino rejected the initial script, resulting in him removing several subplots on Earth, such as Kelvin's marriage. Further revisions were demanded to make the film more "realistic," as well as the removal of all references to God and Christianity, but Tarkovsky managed to resist any more major changes and preserve the philosophical ambiguity that makes *Solaris* so distinctive (Tarkovsky 1991, 49-55). Color sequences required Eastman Kodak film stock, which was not widely available in the Soviet Union and had to be specially procured for the shoot (Misek 2012, 162). Additionally, the aforementioned highway sequence was filmed in Tokyo, since the infrastructure there was far more advanced than what existed in the Soviet Union at that time. These practical and political compromises allowed Tarkovsky to remain as a "thorn in the side of the authorities" (Bird 2013, 139), especially as *Solaris* went on to win several international awards, including the Grand Prix Spécial du Jury at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival.

At the crux of *Solaris* lies a central contrasting duality: the divide between rationality and emotion, between the scientific mind that seeks to unveil the truth of the universe and the emotional self that yearns for social and personal connection. At the beginning of the film, Kelvin is a rational man, focused on his mission of investigating the Solaris space station. But once aboard the station, this rationality quickly decays, as his meeting with the visitor version of his deceased wife, Hari, propels him to abandon logic for emotional "truth." Despite knowing she is a replica created by Solaris, Kelvin gradually opens himself to love this artificial version of her, in an attempt to fix past mistakes. The planet Solaris, in this vein, acts as a mirror that reveals how some human truths are not discovered through empirical observation and science, but through connection and emotion. Additionally, Tarkovsky juxtaposes this conflict between logic and emotion directly through the two other characters, with Sartorius being the logical and scientific, urging the "annihilation" of the visitors via his created machine, and Snaut being the philosophical, questioning the value of knowledge when disjointed from emotional understanding. The film even states this tension explicitly when Snaut remarks that "When [a] man is happy, the meaning of life and other 'eternal' themes rarely interest him." Similar to *The Matrix* (1999), a film centered on humanity's unknowing existence within a computer-generated simulation, the characters are forced to choose whether to accept a painful truth or remain in a comfortable illusion. In the case of *Solaris*, Kelvin, like Cypher in *The Matrix,* chooses the illusion, not out of ignorance, but because it offers the emotional resolution his rational life could not provide.

Tarkovsky's philosophical queries in *Solaris,* in a sense, are anti-science and emphasize the importance of emotion in human identity. Hari's suicide prior to the events of the film, implied to have been caused in part by Kelvin's emotional coldness and neglect, becomes the emotional wound Solaris attacks most deeply. Hari's presence is haunting because she symbolizes a second chance for Kelvin, a confrontation with a suppressed past that he thought he had buried with his rational mind. His eventual acceptance of Hari, despite knowing she is not real, argues that the authenticity of human emotional experience does not depend on empirical fact. Most notably, in Kelvin's feverish monologue, he rambles about the nature of emotions, love, and humanity, first noting Tolstoy's dilemma of how he couldn't ever love humanity as a whole, as he can only love individuals within humanity. Then, Snaut remarks how,

before this moment, love was unattainable for all of humanity, and through this, Kelvin arrives at the key realization. Love is illogical, inexplicable, and non-transferable, and is a deeply subjective force that defies the rational mind. Because of this, the planet offers Kelvin something no human relationship could: a love that is perfectly responsive to his emotional needs, removing the painful unpredictability of loving another person. The film's final scene reinforces this notion, as Kelvin meets with the illusion of his father on an island of Solaris. While his father had been emotionally distant earlier in the film, this vision embraces him with open arms. At this point, Solaris not only recreated a past memory but also responded to his emotional longing, offering the version of his father he had always needed and wanted. This moment suggests that *being human* does not fully consist of how we reason, but rather in how we feel, remember, and desire. In how we express and perceive emotion. As much as the film critiques the limits of scientific rationality, it elevates emotion as a powerful force, one that shapes who we are more than knowledge or rationality ever could.

As a result, we can generalize that Tarkovsky's *Solaris* presents a profound discussion on humanity's struggle for self-understanding and decision making. It argues that the pursuit of emotional truth often overrides the desire for rational truth. Via the exploration of Kelvin's past, his encounter with Hari, and the choice he made at the end to ultimately remain on Solaris, *Solaris* illustrates how unresolved emotion and the need for love override logic and drive human behavior in ways that rationality cannot explain. Through Kelvin's choice to remain in an illusion that offers emotional resolution rather than return to a reality devoid of it, Tarkovsky asserts that our past is not something to repress or escape, but something that fundamentally shapes our identity and the decisions we make. By prioritizing introspection, philosophical ambiguity, and emotional reflection over any sort of certainty, Tarkovsky crafts not only a solid science fiction film but also an exploration of what it truly means to be human. As the boundaries between the real and the constructed continue to blur, in technology, in relationships, in the stories we tell ourselves, Solaris's questions about the authenticity of emotional experience feel less like philosophy and more like prophecy.

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