

**Kenneth Martinez****Solaris**

Written in the context of 1961's communist Poland, *Solaris* is a cleverly engineered philosophical novel that hides behind the pretense of science fiction to deliver stunning social and political commentary. In addition to Stanislaw Lem's novel, Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky produced an award-winning film in 1972 that endeavors to impart its own message. The film and Lem's novel present an intricately woven story about a seemingly sentient alien planet, and the attempts of humans to communicate with it. In comparing the two works, the main difference is the fundamental thematic concern for each artist. Lem explores the philosophy of human existence and direction as a whole; Tarkovsky investigates the importance of interpersonal relationships on an individual scale.

The planet Solaris is completely covered by an enigmatic "ocean" – drawing from the immense repertoire of the human experience has yielded only this imprecise descriptor to describe its most salient physical characteristics. It seems to have qualities that suggest consciousness, and found to have an impossible degree of control over itself and environment, even creating situations dictated by physics to be impossible. Convinced of its sentient qualities, the scientists devote a great deal of effort in understanding the ocean with an ultimate goal of making contact with it, thus creating a branch of science called "Solaristics." However, despite extensive study, Solaris has yet to yield the secrets of its mysteries. The study of Solaris is characterized by often reckless experiments and constantly revised theories. Although a great amount of data has been gathered, it is generally accepted that it does not amount to more than a

useless compilation of quantifications and inconsistent observations. The main goal of the Solarists is to have some sort of meaningful interaction with the being.

The protagonist of the story is Kris Kelvin, a psychologist. He comes to Solaris in order to join the Solarists in their studies, but finds things to be quite amiss at the station. As Kelvin soon discovers, the ocean of Solaris creates humanistic “phi-creatures” that resemble people from one’s own consciousness. The phi-creature is nothing more than collective memories of the person coalesced into a tangible and intelligent being. Each of these new “people” seems to be involved in an unhappy event in the Solarist’s life, usually one in which the person acted shamefully or immorally. In Kelvin’s case, his actions indirectly caused his wife to kill herself, and she is the one that appears for him.

Prompted by these strange occurrences, Kelvin embarks on a quest to understand what is happening on Solaris. He peruses libraries of books and informs the reader with short summaries that fill our gap of knowledge about the planet’s history. So what is happening on Solaris?

As Kelvin reads over histories of Solaristics he divulges a fragment of information that allows us to link Solaris to Lem’s Poland of 1961: “Towards the end of the first quarter-century the early colloid-mechanistic theories had found a distant descendent in the concept of the ‘apsychic ocean,’ a new and almost unanimous orthodoxy which overthrew the view of that entire generation of scientists who believed that their observations were evidence of a conscious will, teleological processes, and activity motivated by some inner need of the ocean” (Lem 164).

The time period referred to draws attention to a major event in Lem’s world: the formation of the Soviet Union. In this context, the imagery and symbolism of the planet,

floating between a red and blue sun becomes a clear reference to the contrast of communism with democracy. The “colloido-mechanistic theories” are Marxist-communist theories, and “apsychic” refers to the suppression of imaginative expressions in the USSR. This, of course, was also often criticized in other anti-soviet novels like Zamyatin’s *We*. The ubiquity of the communist “orthodoxy” is seen by Lem to create an environment in which fundamental facets of human nature, for example a conscious will, are overlooked.

The rationale of Solaristic study and its real life parallel is developed by Snow, one of the other two scientists at the station on Solaris, in a speech to Kelvin on the arduous search for alien life: “We don’t want to conquer the cosmos, just to expand our reach; we don’t want to enslave other beings, but to enlighten. We are humanitarian and chivalrous. We think of ourselves as Knights of the Holy Contact” (Lem 72). What follows is the framework for the author’s overarching thematic objective of depicting a society in need of change:

This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors. We don’t know what to do with other worlds. A single world, our own suffices us; but we can’t accept it for what it is. We are searching for an ideal image of our own world: we go in quest of a planet, of a civilization superior to our own but developed on the basis of a prototype of our primeval past (Lem 72).

Snow’s introspective analysis underscores has correctly foregrounded several unspoken motivations for human space exploration. One, humans are unsatisfied with society; two, they believe in the existence of an ideal model; and three, they feel that whatever fundamental flaws exist can be fixed by this model. This shifts the focus from the discussion of Solaris to what it is really at heart: human society.

The search for the direction of the future follows two distinct schools of thought. Sartorius, the third Solarist at the station, represents the “Soviet” ideology. The Sartorian approach is derived from the aptly named scientist himself. The name Sartorius comes from the Latin word for “tailor.” He seeks to create everything himself, to be the master and orchestrator of the path of human existence. He works according to systematic and scientific approach, recording inputs and outputs with a mechanistic regularity. This ‘apsychic’ probing is mainly concerned with deriving benefits from the ocean. His approach is the dominant one. Its product is the useless catalogue of data, whose total sum of knowledge Kelvin states is “strictly negative.” This scientific scrupulousness is also reflected physically: Snow notes that Sartorius is constantly sharp and clean shaven while everyone else wears beards. This is perhaps also another reference to the beards historically worn in Russia.

Gibarian, the fourth although deceased member of the Solaris team, represents the opposing approach to Solaristic study, the one that Lem himself identifies with. Gibarian, before killing himself, leaves the titles of two books for Kelvin to read. They are meant to guide him to knowledge reached by Gibarian. The first book tells the story of Andre Berton, a pilot who gets lost exploring a surface event on Solaris. The pilot returns shaken but his account of what happened is considered a part of his “clinical history” and not mentioned. The second book is a collection of articles that continue Berton’s story. In one article he details the bizarre formations and figures he saw, but his recollections of the events are dismissed by everyone else as hallucinations. The name of the pilot is a nod to the surrealist Andre Breton. This allusion functions in order to show Kelvin that

on Solaris, there is a possibility that illogical solutions not rooted in science are plausible (Freedman 104).

Kelvin finds another pamphlet, “regarded more as a curiosity than a true contribution to Solarist literature,” written by an author considered to be one of the “most eccentric,” in which we can find part of the fundamental basis of the novel. Kelvin describes his encounter with the text, which Lem also notes was contributed to the library by Gibarian:

I had read the pamphlet, which was dictated by the urge to understand what lies beyond the grasp of mankind, and aimed in particular against the individual, man, and the human species. In this fifteen-page booklet (his magnum opus!), Grastrom set out to demonstrate that the most abstract achievements of science, the most advanced theories and victories of mathematics represented nothing more than a stumbling, one or two-step progression from our rude, prehistoric, anthropomorphic understanding of the universe around us... Grastrom’s conclusion was that there neither was, nor could be, any question of ‘contact’ between mankind and any nonhuman civilization (Lem 170)

We also find further evidence that Kelvin is an ideal candidate to subscribe to Gibarians, and thus Lem’s view, as he himself has picked up on some of these ideas in the past. His doctoral thesis compared the wavelength of emotions to the ocean. He observes a connection. Beginning with his initial inclination towards this type of thought, Kelvin develops his understanding of Solaris and its link to humanity through texts, his experiences on the planet, and the guidance of Gibarian.

So what is the ocean? It is a mirror. Lem’s Solaris implies two things. One, that self-reflection and correction is necessary, and two, that the scientific approach to structuring humanity is inherently flawed. Science and structure are not tools to forcibly mold society. Instead, lessons learned from morality and humanity are the appropriate

avenues used for correcting flaws. The civilization they had been searching for all along was mankind. Namely, themselves.

The criticism of Sartorius and his scientific approach reinforces the broad theme of science misused and mismanaged. Sartorius' solution to the problem of the phi-creatures is to destroy them, and ultimately, that is what he does. This is a manifestation of science and its failure to address problems either through ignorance or blatant disregard for consequences. He thinks he can "fix" anything with science, but what he is really using it for is to ignore the nagging voice that implores self examination.

In treating the method of approach to solving problems, the complexities of the mimoids highlight an important failure of science. They are infinitely complicated structures that are created and destroyed in the space of heartbeats, yet completely unable to be reconstructed by scientific means, and in fact, science fails to produce adequate descriptions of the phenomena, relying on vague and inconsistent terminology. The ocean, as a mirror of humanity, is creating these mimoids as an expression of the complex nature of humankind. The formulas produced by science that cannot fabricate a definition certainly cannot be used to place artificial limits and restrictions on a society.

What conclusions can be drawn from the novel? Gibarian's reaction, it seems, is one of despair and hopelessness. Ultimately he kills himself because he is unable to bear the moral responsibility that Solaris forced him to accept. Kelvin's response remains to be seen. The last time we see him, he is riding a giant mimoid. In the end, there are no answers. Much like the ocean of Solaris, Lem's novel does not offer answers, only ways of approaching the problem.

Tarkovsky's 1972 film production of the novel seeks to apply a similar philosophy in message but narrower in application. It is a story of self-reflection and redemption for the individual. It is the story of the personal transformation of the scientist Kris Kelvin.

Kelvin begins the story as a cold and rational man of science. However, even with a name taken from the temperature scale, Kelvin comes to embrace love and a moral approach to life. The story is emotionally driven by Kelvin's conflicted relationship with his father and remorseful relationship with the resurrected "phi creature" version of his wife. The reappearance of Kelvin's wife serves a pivotal role in his life, allowing him to ask forgiveness and return to the world of emotions he has shunned in favor of science. In an epiphanic scene at the end of the film, his wife cleans blood off of his hands and we understand that he is finally ready and able to receive forgiveness and start anew. The story concludes with a return to the country residence of his father, and ostensibly the start of a new life, although there is some ambiguity as to whether he actually returns home or remains on Solaris. However, what is significant for Tarkovsky is that Kelvin has reprioritized the importance of personal relationships, found forgiveness, and finally, peace.

One of the most important themes in the movie is the contrast between nature and technology. The inherent difference in media format facilitates transmission of mood and sub-themes through different methods. For example, the film does not explore lengthy historical texts, but rather opts for beautiful classical music that accompanies scenes on earth and jarring electronic music with scenes on Solaris. The film adds a large portion of action that occurs on earth, where all nature scenes are colorful, beautiful, and

mesmerizing. In one scene, an unused automobile is stored in a barn, with the horse receiving far more use. The disregard for technology embodied in the unused automobile is representative of the rejection of the way of life shown in its extreme on Solaris. The station on Solaris is dirty and ugly, and everything is in disarray. The colors are drab, and all technological items are portrayed in a similarly unpleasant manner.

The failures and unpleasantness associated with science show that human constructed systems as a way to ignore human feelings are flawed by its inherently imperfect understanding of humans. The importance of love and forgiveness in the story help to relay the need to take into account the indefinable human element, its emotions, and dreams. Without love, as Kelvin learns, one loses his connection to the compassionate and moral basis of healthy human interaction, risking a structure that fosters hurt and pain. These are the very emotions the characters are forced to confront in themselves.

In conclusion, the Solarists must find the importance of self-investigation and scrutiny through a lens of humanity rather than fixing problems with science. Solaris' phi-creatures are intended as a reflection of human character intended to create an interaction that forces the investigation of the worst moral deficits of human nature. The difference for Stanislaw Lem and Andrei Tarkovsky is that the former prefers to treat a broader social malady, and the latter speaks to the individual as the purveyor of social responsibility.

### Works Cited

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