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Cris hefting a perennial Hari around the Solaris spaceship.

# Mystery-Myth, Modern Grail

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Roger Trilling

Solaris  
Ziegfeld

*Solaris* is a film as intellectually difficult as it is beautiful and poetic, and for the same reason: it is based on dialectic, a transcendent logic which unites, like *Last Tango*, objective and subjective, thought and deed.

If Jung succeeded where Levi-Strauss failed, it is because he accepted that ineffable component in those highest of all creations, the myth. It is thus no surprise that director Andrei Tarkovski's *magnum opus* is *Andrei Rublev*, "about" an icon painter. Likewise, all thought on myth must properly be subjective, not merely analytical: perhaps the greatest treatment of myths have been their retellings, thus their subtle transformations.

## From Myth to Plot

The story opens as Cris Kelvin broods at his father's *dacha* over the fate of the Solaris project, a space-station hovering over that planet: a pulsating Ocean. Reports about it have been conflicting, incredible. Lives have been lost. A visiting friend tells of a fellow cosmonaut transformed, in adult proportion, into his long-dead child.

Expediency demands immediate shut-down, but the other side, championed by a Dr. Messenger, identifies further research with accepting the "boundlessness" of human thought...and natural possibility. Cris arrives at the station, a shambles: one of the three scientists has committed suicide after a videotaped message where he tells Cris "I am my own judge." The other two are visited by a dwarf and a child-girl with bells that tinkle as she walks through endless corridors.

The crew warn him that what he will see does not make him mad. That night, as he sleeps, his wife Hari, who had committed suicide ten years earlier over marital difficulties and desertion, enters his bed. Terrified, he dispatches her. The next morning we learn that these phantasms are realizations of suppressed unconscious elements, neutrino systems maintained by the ocean. "Faust's dream, for they are immortal," declares Dr. Snouth.

Hari returns, and gradually, overwhelmed, Cris accepts her. They make love; like an unconscious possession he becomes obsessed with her, soon does nothing but be with her, loving her more and more. She meanwhile becomes increasingly human: she acquires memory, learns to sleep, soon she not only needs his love, she can give her own. Cris eventually declares that "Now you, not she, are the real Hari."

At Snouth's library-room birthday party, attended by all four, Hari, after fulfilling the host's request to read from *Don Quixote* ("...sleep looks like death"), achieves self-consciousness as *conscience* and exclaims to the sneering "pure scientist" Sartorius, "I am a human being! You're very cruel." Cries Cris, "Shame! That's what will save mankind!" Replies Sartorius, half aptly, "Your emotionalism is pure Dostoevsky."

Finally, Snouth begins to speak: "What

man needs is man. Instead he looks into space when he wants to expand Earth to its boundaries. He searches not other worlds, but mirrors."

In a dream that night Cris pictures his mother as a young woman. In an old room, she tenderly wipes the grime from his arm as she shows her inability to accept her son's new lifestyle, his maturity, his wife. When he wakes, Hari is gone. The ostensible reason is that they had bombarded the Ocean with x-rays, electroencephalograms of conscious, daytime thoughts. But Hari has left a message with Snouth: she "could not deceive him," despite "their orders." Stanislaw Lem's book of the same name develops the religious metaphor more strongly than the movie).

### **Between Two Worlds**

Cris's work is done, the "spell" is broken, and he is bidden by the now-unencumbered scientists to return home. A flash. Dissolve to his father's *dacha*, reintroduced by the same swaying pond-grasses. Cris falls to his knees before the old man: *Return of the Prodigal Son*, by Rembrandt. As the camera zooms away, encompassing more and more area from above, we see the little estate surrounded by the vast, swirling grey Ocean.

I am not going to criticize this movie. Some found it talky in places, slow in

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# Solaris

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others. Others didn't. Suffice to say that it is aesthetically perfect (though not as perfect as *Andrei Rublev*): it uses the language of the screen to perfection. The acting is flawless, and Natalya Bondarchuk as Hari and Yuri Jarvet as Snouth are exceptionally affecting. Bach is used very nicely, but then so is Brueghel.

A myth can have many lessons, though, and let me use this space to promote one of them. Hari can symbolize the objectivity of the subjective; her corporealization, that we only come to know the objective subjectively. Likewise, Snouth understands the planet before Sartorius. Snouth is right: all of space is earth's boundary, just as all planets are mirrors: this is the subjectivity of the objective. And the quest of the cosmonauts, specifically of Cris, shows that we come to know the subjective objectively. Where the movie ends is *not* ambiguous: it ends on both planets.

(N.B.: The American release has been cut by almost two hours relative to the original Russian version. This is too absurd to even talk about.) ●