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Solaris

U.S.S.R., 1972

Director: Andrei Tarkovsky

Cert—A. dist—VPS. p.c—Mosfilm. sc—Andrei Tarkovsky, Friedrich Gorenstein. Based on the novel by Stanislaw Lem. ph—Vadim Yusov. Scope. col—Sovcolor. cd—(not available). a.d—Mikhail Romadin. m—Eduard Artemyev. l.p—Natalya Bondarchuk (*Hari*), Donatas Banionis (*Kris Kelvin*), Yuri Jarvet (*Snauth*), Anatoli Solonitsin (*Sartorius*), Vladislav Dvorjetzki (*Burton*), Nikolai Grinko (*Father*), Sos Sarkissian (*Gibaryan*). 14,850 ft. 165 mins. Subtitles.

Psychologist Kris Kelvin is assigned to investigate the situation on the space station orbiting the remote planet Solaris, and on which only three of the original crew of eighty-five remain; his brief is to choose between evacuating the station and bombarding the planet's oceanic surface with radiation. During his final day on Earth, Kelvin is visited at his father's rural home by Burton, the previous investigator on Solaris, who shows Kelvin a videotape of his confused, provocative conference report on the mission, hints at the extraordinary psychological effects of visiting the planet, and vainly tries to prejudice him against the radiation option. Kelvin arrives on Solaris to discover that his friend Gibaryan, the commander, has committed suicide, leaving the other two crewmen withdrawn and unhelpful. Snauth, the cybernetics expert, has turned to drink, while Sartorius, the biologist, continues experiments in strict privacy. Kelvin soon learns that the planet's secret is its power to concretise figures from the memory or fantasy of humans on its surface: he himself is host to the figure of Hari, his neglected wife who killed herself ten years earlier. He tries at first to rid himself of his 'guest', but is increasingly moved by her total dependence on him. When Sartorius discovers that the 'guests' are composed of neutrinos, and have no true human identity, Kelvin is all the more protective towards Hari. She, however, increasingly acquires 'humanity' and attempts suicide as she realises the impossibility of her very existence. Kelvin has a nervous breakdown. Sartorius decides to beam Kelvin's encephalogram on to the planet's surface, with immediate results: the 'guests' finally disappear, and islands begin to form in the Solaris sea. And Kelvin finds further childhood memories taking tangible shape around him. He reflects on the pointlessness of returning to Earth, and lapses into ever more detailed recreations of his emotional autobiography.

It's no accident that the opening sequences of *Solaris* should recall Dovzhenko, since Tarkovsky is absolutely an artist in the free-thinking Ukrainian tradition, owing little to the mainstream of Soviet culture. First, timeless images of the natural earth, static compositions like landscape painting, details so luscious and precise that they waver between immanence and a Surrealist shock intensity. And then a layer by layer, generation by generation application of humanity to the images, with the characterless 'hero' and his colleague placed diagrammatically between exuberant youth and staid old age. But where Dovzhenko's peasants belonged in their terrain (like Breughel's, another of the film's references), and their births, passions and deaths were integral to the natural cycle, Tarkovsky's city-raised child no longer recognises a horse, and his alienated hero wanders Monica Vitti-like through the compositions, an interloper. The images recur at the end of *Solaris* with Kelvin's recreation of his home as a setting for the burgeoning self-awareness that he should have achieved ten years earlier. But his recreation is imperfect, just as the replica Hari was at first: the landscape is lifeless (frozen?); the detail is shaky (Kelvin projects rain *inside* the house, his transposed memory of a rainstorm when a picnic meal was drenched); and at the time the film ends, his awareness of his own shortcomings has led him no further than his father's lap. These framing scenes are by far Tarkovsky's strongest, embodying his bleak perception of contemporary man in a specific, local context. In the film as a whole, which contains marginally fewer concessions to science fiction prediction than *Alphaville*, he seeks to abstract this perception in order to examine it in the fluid but loaded context of Solaris itself—the planet as brain, a world of philosophy and intellect. Unfortunately, whatever his gifts, Tarkovsky is no philosopher. From the early conversations with Burton, emotionally scarred and prematurely aged by his Solaris experience, the film is at pains to present itself as an intellectual debate. A bust of Socrates appears iconically; Burton expressing his doubts is studiously framed between caged birds and a print of the Montgolfier balloon; and Kelvin attacks him dialectically, saying that science acquires morality only in the hands of men ("Remember Hiroshima!"). On Solaris, Kelvin completes a triad of possible responses to the human predicament: Snauth is the failed existentialist, surviving on vestigial notions of human dignity; Sartorius is the selfless scientist, endlessly exploring the macrocosm; and Kelvin is the retarded idealist who matures into the inward-looking man. Despite the puppet characterisation of the scientists, their edgy first encounters preserve the notion of a debate. Tarkovsky has seemingly defined the issues, given them voices, and created an ambience in which they can co-exist in order to set them loose on one another. But as soon as the Solaris secret is out, and Kelvin yields his steadfast objectivity in the face of the replica Hari, all debate evaporates. Snauth and Sartorius become peripheral figures, eventually receding from sight altogether like the positions they represent; while the film resolves into a series of repetitive scenes in which Kelvin wanders the space station, coming slowly and painfully to a realisation of human and emotional need and arriving at the tragically uttered conclusion that "In showing pity, we lay waste to ourselves". The kindergarten psychology not only informs Kelvin's final reverie (an adult boy being washed by his mother) but also subverts the formal beauty of the closing scene. This development is an extraordinary *volte-face* for Tarkovsky, in that it both betrays the promise of an intellectual exploration of the issues and renders grandiose, cumbersome and ultimately irrelevant the whole mechanics of the science fiction narrative. Even for those who share the director's view of Kelvin as a hero and for whom Natalya Bondarchuk's performance carries emotional conviction, Tarkovsky has weakened his case by investing *Solaris* with a dialectical relationship to *2001*, from which his film can only suffer. His structure echoes Kubrick's ('retarded' prologue, long central exposition, 'rebirth' epilogue); and the twin highlights in Kelvin's movement towards self-awareness—his descent to the space station over Solaris; and his delirious struggle along the corridor, supported by Snauth and Hari (failed resolution and untenable ideal)—have a portentousness that parallels the discoveries of the monoliths. *2001* is arguably totalitarian where *Solaris* is humanist, but where Kubrick is visionary, Tarkovsky is merely reactionary. And at least Kubrick had the courage of his Nietzschean convictions; Tarkovsky is finally insultingly evasive. It's fascinating to imagine another film, truer to the issues raised, with Sartorius as the hero being forced, like an alchemist, to recognise a relationship between his work and himself. But Tarkovsky's actual conclusion is more an auto-destruct mechanism than a resolution, and it leaves the field wide open for a socialist response to Kubrick.

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