

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Solaris : a Soviet science-fiction masterpiece</b>
Author(s)	Lee Atwell
Source	<i>Film Journal International</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Tarkovsky, Andrei (1932-1986), Zawrashje, Iwanowo, Russia, Soviet Union Motion pictures -- Soviet Union
Film Subjects	Solaris, Tarkovsky, Andrei, 1972



from: THE FILM JOURNAL  
Vol. 2, No. 3, issue 6

# SOLARIS:

## A SOVIET SCIENCE-FICTION MASTERPIECE

Lee Atwell

The electric confluence of revolution and poetry sustained in the films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, and Vertov, during those brief, optimistic, and unforgettable few years of the Soviet cinema's glory will undoubtedly never be revived. Yet, traces of their art emerge in occasional flickers of genius that manage to cut through the ponderous prestige of an official cinema: an unending stream of "classic" adaptations of plays, operas, and ballets. Certainly, Kozintzev's Shakespearean films are worthy, often brilliant efforts, yet the sympathetic observer must admit that film as a contemporary art form in the USSR is presently impoverished, just as it has been for the last 25 years, by narrow formal and thematic conception.

In a cultural milieu where the artist is still closely scrutinized for signs of ideological unorthodoxy and strident individualism, it is remarkable that a filmmaker such as Andrei Tarkovski

has managed not only to survive but to create two of the most imposing Soviet films of the last decade. Following his bravura debut with *Ivan's Childhood*, he produced *Andrei Roublev*, a massive, but finely wrought, historical fresco depicting the personal struggles of the great icon painter, set against the painful turmoil of war and its attendant suffering that swept across feudal Russia.

Rather than create simply a biographic tribute, Tarkovski—in the tradition of Eisenstein—treats historic material as the vehicle for expressing his own beliefs and ideas, to develop the eternal and consequently always vital theme of the interrelation of an artist with his time, of the correlation between art and life. Tarkovski devoted three years to this epic work, which bears favorable comparison with the best of Eisenstein and Dovzhenko. Tarkovski himself defines the central subject as the







individual suffering and sacrifice for the sake of an ideal: "The Russian people have always had a moral ideal, and Roublev endeavors to express it in his art. He succeeded in expressing this moral ideal of his epoch, the ideal of love, harmony, unity, and brotherhood."

Lofty sentiments were not sufficient, however, to endear the Russian critical front to this astonishing work as it mercilessly exposes the barbaric atmosphere of 15th century Russia with unprecedented realism, untempered by nobilized sentiments or events, though its concluding color images of the resplendent icons, suggest spiritual transcendence

and rebirth. *Roublev* received limited showing in the Soviet Union, but was not distributed elsewhere for almost five years, though it registered a *succes d'estime* at Cannes in 1969 and appeared in selected European engagements the following year. (It ran for nearly a year at the Vieux-Colombier in Paris and was ecstatically received by the Paris press.)

Tarkovski's ranking in the vanguard of Soviet filmmakers and as an important, creative force in modern cinema is confirmed by his most recent work, *Solaris*, a meditative parable based on the novel of the same title by the Polish

science-fiction writer, Stanislas Lemm, about the nature of scientific investigation and its limitations in coping with the irrational, and incomprehensible developments of cosmic exploration. Significantly, from a political as well as artistic perspective, he has moved from the historic past to a contemporary, if somewhat theoretic subject and has again provoked considerable controversy, not only through the demanding stylistic nuance of the film, but in its direct interrogation of the morality of science and man's position in the universe.

If the ambience is technically ad-

vanced and modern, *Solaris*—astutely referred to as a "Russian answer to 2001," is much less concerned with the aesthetics of technology than the emotional resonances of a scientific, technocratic society, which could be anywhere on earth, as the ambiguous character names and cultural setting indicate. At the same time, its thematic grandeur is classic, characteristic of the Russian novelistic imagination, preoccupied with central human existential dilemmas, the great themes of life, love, and death.

The opening prelude suggests a biological linkage between man and nature,





a metaphor which gradually establishes itself as a connection between earth and the planet Solaris. A pond, with plant-life gently swaying, opens onto a quiet, poetic, lush country (Russian) landscape, where Chris Calvin, a middle-aged psychologist, contemplates the scene of his childhood prior to his impending journey to investigate a space station near the surface of Solaris. In his father's country cottage, he confers with fellow cosmonauts, including Burton, who has returned from Solaris some years previously. They view a filmed report of Burton's interrogation by a scientific team, who in turn view films he has taken of the "visions" he experienced on the outpost. On earth scientists have hypothesized that the viscous surface of Solaris may actually be a living organism, but the science of Solaristics has run into a dead end for lack of definite, verifiable data, though Burton still insists that what he saw there was real.

Whereas Kubrick's *2001* follows with great fascination the journey of man and his streamlined apparatus on an interstellar mission, *Solaris* presents a metaphoric passage that surprisingly eliminates almost completely scenes of space travel. A futuristic automotive transport is seen moving along an intersecting stretch of freeways and tunnels;

the subjective, moving camera renders a flowing, musical sensation of movement through space, while the images, bathed in aqua tint, become increasingly darker, culminating in a full color shimmering superimposition of nocturnal traffic (astute observers have pointed out the locations as Tokyo). The interlude presents a marked contrast with the bucolic country scenes and its poetic analogue is made clear when Tarkovski cuts directly to a brief shot of distant stars as Chris approaches his destination and his space capsule descends to the orbital space station, hovering near the surface of Solaris. Here, for the first time, there is some of the awesome splendor of Kubrick's film, but only momentarily.

While the intricate, spacious decor of the space station is virtually expressionistic in design—each room and corridor suggesting a different psychological or emotional character—gadgets and machinery never overwhelm the human element nor are they endowed with anthropomorphisms. The atmosphere is at once ominous as Chris investigates the deserted, maze-like chambers and finally encounters only two remaining members of the original team of cosmic explorers: Dr. Snoutt, a scurrilous, short-tempered man, suffering from an unexplained source of psychic stress, who remains sealed off in his laboratory for long periods; and Sartorius, an older scientist whose resignation to loneliness

and placid contemplation is unexpectedly interrupted by the visitor from earth who provokes in him a nervous apprehension. Learning his comrade Gibaryan has recently committed suicide after a period of severe depression, Chris wanders dazed through his disordered living quarters to discover a filmed message—a communique from the dead—that does little to clarify the mystery surrounding the suicide and Sartorius is deliberately evasive in response to Chris' questioning. Thus Tarkovski, like many other modern directors evokes numerous narrative lines for which there are no given solutions.

Amid this labyrinthian observatory, a Cocteauesque "Zone" between life and death, in which unexplained phantoms flit through corridors and compartments, Chris soon learns that the sea of Solaris—the film's central metaphor—is a source of intelligence, as suspected, and like the inexplicable monolith of *2001*, effects all within its immediate proximity. Images and visions, referred to as "visitors"—actually materializations derived from the human brain—appear periodically to haunt the men. Chris remains somewhat skeptical until he begins to experience the reincarnation of Hari, his beautiful young wife who ended her own life on earth, many years previously.

The revival of Chris' love for Hari, an emotion relegated to the museum of memory, is central to Tarkovski's thematic structure. The apparition of Hari, beautifully captured in dream images, moving from aqua tints as Chris prepares for sleep, to golden, transcendent light, evokes profound feelings in Chris. As Hari becomes more and more human, prompted by Chris' attempt to stir memories of her earthly existence, he becomes increasingly distressed by his failure and the knowledge—evidenced by Snoutt—that she is in fact, biologically, "inhuman." Chris plummets her into space in a rocket, but she reappears and twice recovers from fatal accidents; and when he ultimately surrenders to her growing love, she realizes the mental anguish it is causing and departs never to return.

The suffering brought on by this experience forces Chris to understand a universal truth: that the most vital things in life, whatever form it may assume, cannot always be verified; the cosmos is a vast reflection of the mystery of love, a phenomenon man can



experience but never perfectly understand, and before which science is helpless. Experience equally directs Chris to the sea of Solaris, the enigmatic source of this mental suffering. Sartorius, the film's spokesman for scientific conservatism and tradition, proposes that risk must be minimized if their work is to continue, by beaming lethal rays at the ocean, and sees no validity in Chris' emotional attachment to his "visitor." Chris, however, asserts that science must always be guided by moral principles and that to destroy any living matter simply because man cannot understand it is unethical. In a meditative soliloquy before the sentient surface of the planet, he professes that the ocean is seeking to penetrate the ideas of man and that they must respond by providing it with precise data about mankind in an orderly way, rather than through fragments of dreams.

An encephalographic record of Chris' private thoughts is projected onto the sea of Solaris, calming its turbulence, and suddenly islands begin to surface. With awesome effect, the film's final sequence, a formal variation on the opening prelude, returns to the pond and country landscape; but as Chris observes them, natural processes are reduced to stasis, with only the movement of the man and a dog against the frozen background. But as the camera pulls back to encompass the house where Chris warmly greets his father, then moves further and further back into space, we gradually see this is a materialization on an island in the sea of Solaris. . . .

The spiritual complexity of the vision Tarkovski has derived from Lemm's novel organically unites man with the mysteries of the cosmos, and finds expression in a style that is essentially metaphysical and poetic. The visual continuity is synthetic and organic, emphasizing sustained *mise-en-scène* rather than an analytical shot breakdown, and the use of Panavision ratio is perfectly suited to the stylistic mode. Inevitably, Tarkovski will be criticized for the solemn, slow pacing of the film, though it is quite intentional. Just as Kubrick indicates our experience of time will be radically affected by space travel, Tarkovski retards the movement of the individual shot, the camera and actors, to render a temporal duration that is an

aesthetic equivalent totally removed from our present hectic psycho-perceptual experience. Occasionally there is a sense of *temps-morts* in Chris' prolonged preparation for sleep, fleeting memories of earth, and the haunting moments dwelling on the viscous surface of Solaris. The film's mesmeric, poetic rhythm requires an unaccustomed patience and attention, considering its exceptional length of two and three-quarter hours, but it is arguably an integral and essential part of the director's expression. Music is sparingly but effectively used with the plaintive organ tones of Bach's F Minor Choral Prelude underscoring scenes suggesting ties between earth and outer space, supplemented by amplified percussion, an appropriate "music of the spheres."

Tarkovski's intimate acting ensemble, all experienced in theatre as well as cinema, are superbly attuned to the sustained level of dramatic understatement and introspection. Without possessing any of the physical appeal of a major film star, Donatas Banionis, a Georgian actor, is authoritative and persuasive in the central role of Chris Calvin, while his more impressive interlocuter Sartorius, is memorably etched by the

cragged nobility of Yuri Jarvet, who gave life to Kozintzev's King Lear. In the brief but pungent role of Dr. Snoutt is Anatoly Solonitsyn, the lead in Tarkovski's *Andrei Roublev*; Natalie Bondarchuk, daughter of the actor/director Sergei Bondarchuk not only is strikingly beautiful but projects a tender, ethereal presence as Hari, and her enactment of revivification after a suicide attempt by drinking liquid oxygen, is extraordinarily vivid. With an art that tends to conceal its virtuosity, Tarkovski, with his co-scenarist F. Gorenchstein, and cameraman Vadim Youssov, has invested every detail of the film with the care of a Tolstoi or Cervantes. *Solaris* is at once personal and universal, timeless, and yet the most imaginative subject in modern Soviet cinema. Whether it will be seen by audiences in the West other than those at festivals such as Cannes (where it was awarded the Jury Prize) and San Francisco, seems uncertain. In any event, it remains a major work in the as yet slender and provocative body of Tarkovski's *oeuvre*, and is a testament to his creative daring that refuses to be silenced.

