

# AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL FALL: TARKOVSKY'S HUMANIST INTERPRETATION OF LEM'S SOLARIS

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"Do you know yourself?" "As much as anyone."

Andrei Tarkovsky's adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* reveals contention between the two artists. The focus of Lem's novel is the quasi-religious nature of science and its epistemological implications. Tarkovsky reinterprets the story by concentrating on the characters, personalizing Lem's theme by showing how Kris and Hari are affected by an epistemological fall. They become archetypal Adam and Eve, the station a Garden of Eden. Their discovery that the epistemology of science fails is a partaking of the forbidden fruit of knowledge and leads to a fall. Driven from paradise, Hari sacrifices herself in an attempt to atone; Kris seeks redemption through an effort to comprehend his own consciousness. Tarkovsky takes these undercurrents in Lem's novel and gives them center stage, redirecting the focus of *Solaris* from a critique of the epistemology of science to an examination of people who have lost their faith.

*Solaris* is Lem's most recognized work. J. Madison Davis explains the novel's popularity by describing it as a

"depiction of an ongoing conflict between emotion and intellect, with the limitations of each being explored. Those who prefer the metaphysical dimension of science fiction and those who prefer intense emotion can both find much to enjoy in *Solaris*" (22). Davis asserts that *Solaris* is unique in Lem's writing precisely because it offers human interest in addition to philosophy. These human issues attracted Tarkovsky to the novel, and it should be no surprise that he emphasized them in his adaptation. In an interview he explained: "Inner, hidden, human problems, moral problems, always engage me far more than any questions of technology" (Tarkovsky, *Time* 362). In fact, Tarkovsky's ultimate disappointment with the project comes from his failing to focus solely on human issues. He felt "that he had compromised the integrity of his vision by yielding to the demands of the science-fiction genre" (Isaak 6). Lem, on the other hand, resented Tarkovsky's humanizing and insisted that the script be rewritten to conform more closely with the novel (Johnson 100). Some critics of science fiction would sympathize with Lem, "the Polish philosopher-novelist" whose "dialectical complexity" can only be accentuated by "the relatively simplistic religious humanism of the Soviet filmmaker" (Freedman 106n). However, Tarkovsky's adaptation is just as successful as Lem's novel, though the two succeed at different goals: Lem illustrates the shortcomings of the epistemology of science, Tarkovsky portrays the effects those shortcomings have on humans-- Lem creates the world, Tarkovsky peoples it.

The world that Lem creates revolves around epistemological questions. Science is generally accepted as answering those questions and consequently assumes a

quasi-religious role. Lem painstakingly draws out the parallel between science and religion. Contact with alien intelligence, specifically the planet Solaris, is elevated to an unattainable pedestal similar to salvation or heaven. One Solarist, Muntius, calls contact "an ultimate goal," which has "become sanctified. It has become the heaven of eternity" (Lem 181). The men on the station recognize this and Snow sardonically refers to Solarists as "Knights of the Holy Contact" (81). Muntius describes Solaristics as the space era's equivalent of religion: faith disguised as science. Contact, the stated aim of Solaristics, is no less vague and obscure than the communion of the saints, or the second coming of the Messiah. Exploration is a liturgy using the language of methodology; the drudgery of the Solarists is carried out only in the expectation of fulfillment, of an Annunciation . . . (180)

Muntius also suggests that the contact Solarists seek would serve the purpose of revelation-- disclosing the destiny of man. The science of Solaristics fulfills the epistemological role of religion by answering the question Gibarian poses in Kris's dream: "how do you know what you are?" (142). Snow's insistence that man is not really seeking contact highlights this epistemological function of Solaristics: "We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors" (81). Freedman is quick to point out that, while Lem uses Muntius to illustrate the religious analogy to science, he eventually lets the theory be discounted as simplistic (Freedman 99). Even when Muntius concludes that Solaristics has become a religion is discarded, Solaristics functions in the epistemological role of religion. It replaces religion without becoming a religion. This role is important because

Lem's objective is to expose the limitations of science as a positivist epistemological system.

Ziegfeld cites an interview in which Lem describes *Solaris* as "a gnosseological drama whose focal point is the tragedy of man's imperfect machinery for gaining knowledge" (51). This sense of tragedy is the motivation for Tarkovsky to perpetuate Lem's portrayal of science as quasi-religious and his emphasis on its epistemological failure. Tarkovsky's goal is to examine the effects that failure has on characters, especially Kris and Hari. Because Lem's tools of narrative and exposition are not available in film, Tarkovsky signifies the connection between religion and science through *mise-en-scene* and set design. For instance, in an early scene Berton recounts his experience on *Solaris* to a committee, which finds his story incredible and considers him unqualified to report because he is uninitiated to the doctrines of Solaristics. In many shots of the scene, Tarkovsky frames Berton with giant portraits on the wall in the background. From the venerable appearance of the men portrayed it can be assumed that they are the patriarchs of Solaristics, the patron saints of the council before which Berton stands. Their confining presence increases the impression that Berton's account amounts to heresy for these orthodox Solarists. Later, when the men on the station meet in the library, we are faced with further visual evidence of the sanctification of science. Tarkovsky has designed the library to look like a church, including candles, what appear to be stained glass windows, and busts of those same saints of Solaristics. In this setting, the characters try to make sense of a *Solaris* that no longer conforms to the dogma of Solaristics. At one point the camera zooms in for a

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close up on Sartorius's broken glasses, which he tries to fix without success. Calling attention to the broken glasses generates symbolic significance for them. As imperfect instruments they represent the frailty of humanity's efforts at perception. Even as Sartorius asserts the creeds of Solaristics, "nature created us to explore nature," his struggle with the inadequate glasses betrays him. Much like the glasses, the epistemology of Solaristics has proven faulty, and its frames can no longer support their lenses.

This failure causes profound disillusionment for adherents to Solaristics and some cannot endure the breaking of their worldview. Gibarian, in the recording he leaves for Kris, states that his suicide "has nothing to do with insanity, it's more to do with conscience." Tarkovsky's persistent suggestion of the religious role of science leads us to interpret Gibarian's reference to conscience as a reference to his loyalty to Solaristics more than to any other moral standard. We must accept Gibarian's statement not as a confession of guilt, but as a confession that he has lost his faith.

For Tarkovsky, the effects of this loss of faith are paramount, and his focus on the characters instead of their epistemology is what separates his Solaris from Lem's. As Tarkovsky focuses on Kris and Hari and the repercussions of their discovering science's shortcoming, he spotlights another analogy to religion. Kris and Hari fill the roles of archetypal Adam and Eve and the station becomes an Eden. The realization of their epistemological system's inadequacy is their Fall. This symbolism is a mere possibility in Lem, but Tarkovsky gives it prominence.

At first, this paradisiacal analogy seems superficial:

the station is a paradise for Kris, where he could live as an innocent with an immortal Eve, but Tarkovsky draws a more complete picture. While the understated fact that Hari (Rheya) is drawn out of Kris's memory does not immediately ring biblical bells in the novel, Tarkovsky portrays Hari's first appearance by slowly zooming in on Kris's head while he sleeps, then panning away to show Hari sitting where no one had been before. This zoom and pan mimics the hand of God, extracting Hari from Kris's memory like Adam's rib. As usual, Tarkovsky avoids direct allegory and instead pursues a motif of paradisiacal imagery. While the short time that Kris and Hari have together can be compared to Eden, it can also be compared to a Millennial return of paradisiacal glory, or the final paradise of heaven since Hari's existence represents the accomplishment of the promised Holy Contact. But paradise is short lived and the contact proves false. As Snow (or Snauth) explains, the eternal and unreachable goal of Solaristics, contact, is really the epistemological goal of self-knowledge (Lem 81). Solaristics falls because it fails to help humanity to understand itself--it fails to give 'mirrors.' Since Hari is not truly human the long-awaited Holy Contact cannot produce the mirror necessary for self-knowledge. While Lem uses this failure to criticize the shortcomings of science, Tarkovsky uses it to examine the experience of humans losing their faith.

In order to emphasize Kris and Hari's fall from paradise, Tarkovsky maximizes the drama of Hari's identity crisis. In the scene when Hari regenerates after drinking liquid oxygen, her contortions and the water involved are reminiscent of birth, baptism, and resurrection--all three of which imply new life and awareness. But the awareness

towards which Hari advances is of her own inhumanity. While staring at her hand she gasps, "Is this me? . . . It isn't me. I'm not Hari!" This crisis is foreshadowed in an earlier scene when Kris and Hari stand facing a mirror and Hari asks, "Do you know yourself?" Kris can only respond, "As much as anyone." After her rebirth, Hari realizes she does not know herself. Her recognition of her inhumanity forces Kris to finally accept it also. Together, they learn that the contact Solaristics promised has not produced a mirror, and the epistemology of Solaristics fails with the promise. Realizing this, they lose their faith. They have partaken of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge and are cast out of paradise.

In the realization of Hari's nonhuman nature, her hands are noticeably prominent in the film. The attention given Hari's hands, symbols of humanity, emphasizes the truth about her origins. During the resurrection scene, Hari stares at her hand. Earlier, in the library, Sartorius confronts her about not being human and she conspicuously raises her hand to her forehead in anxiety. This indication of Hari's growing awareness of her otherness creates tension between that otherness and her strikingly human characteristics. In so many ways Hari seems to be human. She emphatically defends herself in the face of Sartorius's attacks: "I'm becoming more human . . . I am human!" This and the pain and fear she feels on behalf of Kris leave us convinced of the humanity of her emotions. Nonetheless, she is a creature of Solaris and the tension between her dual natures drives the drama.

Soon after the confrontation in the library, Tarkovsky adds a scene not present in Lem's *Solaris*. The station and everything in it becomes weightless for thirty seconds.

Kris and Hari embrace while levitating, suggesting the possibility of escape from their predicament. Similarly, the library contains paintings of hot air balloons, the same paintings from the house at the beginning and end of the film. Such images as balloons and levitation are common in Tarkovsky's films where they "connote humankind's innate aspiration to extend itself beyond an earthly footing" (Rogers 287). But, for Kris and Hari, the illusion of escape only lasts thirty seconds before they come back to the reality of their situation: Hari is both human and nonhuman.

If Hari is part-human, she might serve the purpose of Snow's mirror and give humanity self-knowledge. In this way the epistemology of Solaristics could be validated. However, as Snow explained, the mirror that is sought by Solaristics is an idealized one: "We are searching for an ideal image of our own world" (Lem 81). Davis describes this as a "mirror of a subjective reality--a mirror that distorts the real into what it is wished to be" (26). If such is the case then Hari is not the needed mirror. More likely, she is the opposite: a mirror that reflects the hidden shame and darkness of the human soul. An ideal Hari would not commit suicide a second time. Apparently, the Hari the ocean creates is too genuine. The self-knowledge humanity can gain from her is not the self-knowledge humanity wants. From this point of view science fails in its quasi-religious role not because its epistemology is impotent, but because its epistemology reveals a truth that disqualifies all its tenets. This taken into consideration, the result is the same: Kris and Hari are driven from paradise because they lose their innocence.

The two remain on the station, but it is no longer

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Eden. Hari commits suicide in an attempt to atone for the devastating knowledge her existence makes plain. But her sacrifice is less than messianic and does not have power to cleanse Kris of the awareness that science has failed to provide the desired self-knowledge. Kris, who unwittingly pushed the original Hari to suicide, plays Pilate to Hari's Savior when his hands are washed with water shortly before Hari's death. But though he can finally absolve himself of guilt for Hari's suicide, he still suffers from his epistemological fall. Instead of seeking atonement by reestablishing a fallen epistemology, Kris seeks redemption by remaining on the station and searching for a replacement epistemology.

Lem portrays Kris seeking a replacement without much hope of finding one. He first makes it clear that Kris has given up on the Holy Contact of Solaristics by emphasizing Kris's disgust on learning that Snow and Sartorius still pursue that grail (200). Kris now believes understanding any true other is impossible, a problem Freedman sees as being "the philosophic crux that haunts the entire science of Solaristics" (102). Kris remains on the station seeking contact with his own consciousness. Freedman explains that Kris's quest is "sufficiently worthwhile that [Kris] . . . is willing to devote his life, in several senses, to it," but his only explanation of that quest's worth is that it "possesses essential epistemological dignity" despite the fact that Kris "can expect no reward in the form of onto-theological certainty" (101). On the other hand, Ziegfeld interprets Kris's remaining on the station as an acceptance of the "existential challenge of being open to change. . . . In [Kris's] case, the change is to accept a new posture and a new world in which man is

not supreme and must instead wait expectantly" (60-61). Whatever the case, Lem makes it clear that Kris has little hope for resolution: "I did not know what achievements, what mockery, even what tortures still awaited me. I knew nothing, and I persisted in the faith that the time of cruel miracles was not past" (211). Without a new epistemological system to replace defunct Solaristics, Kris can only believe in an "imperfect god . . . whose passion is not a redemption, who saves nothing, fulfils no purpose--a god who simply is" (204-206). He acquires a sort of anti-epistemology, a conviction that all epistemology is futile or flawed.

Tarkovsky's depiction of Kris's search for redemption is more mystical and brief. As he does with protagonists in other films, Tarkovsky portrays Kris as undergoing a great spiritual journey. Tarkovsky believed "that all of humankind experience a fall from a paradisiacal state into a world, and are then filled with longing for a return to the divine. As fallen mortals we must then follow a quest to overcome the material world and reassert our spiritual selves" (Isaak 2). Green explains that "the quest for paradise that runs through [Tarkovsky's] films . . . lies at the heart of Chris's venture into space in *Solaris*" (Green 6; see also Rogers 286-295 for a discussion of Tarkovsky's quest motif). Both literally and spiritually, *Solaris* is a catalytic voyage, which ends with Kris seeking resolution. As usual, Tarkovsky gives "no clear indication that the protagonists have achieved redemption," but they do discover a treasure at the end of their searching" (Isaak 36). Tarkovsky himself explains that while "outwardly their journey seems to end in fiasco, in fact each of the protagonists acquires something of inestimable value: faith"

(Tarkovsky, *Sculpting* 199).

The actual ending to Tarkovsky's *Solaris* sheds no more light on what Kris gains than this: he has achieved resolution. A mysterious crane shot reveals that the house on Earth to which Kris seems to have returned is actually on Solaris. It is unclear whether this is meant to suggest a new phantasm of the ocean, or symbolize a new heterogeneity of Kris's soul. Tarkovsky is characteristically ambiguous on this point, but his repetition of water imagery from the beginning of the film, including shots of the pond and rain, indicate cleansing for Kris. The fact that this time the rain is on the inside of the house may suggest the depth of spiritual cleansing. Tarkovsky borrows an image from Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* when he shows Kris kneeling and embracing his father--a clear image of atonement. Kris seems either to have acquired faith in a new epistemology, or, as in from Lem, to have rejected the possibility of ever doing so. In any case, Tarkovsky's conclusion to *Solaris* is redemptive, if disquieting. Lem's conclusion is open ended in a different way: he leaves Kris's search unresolved and without hope of finding resolution.

Lem's displeasure with Tarkovsky's screenplay stems from Tarkovsky's preoccupation with the characters of *Solaris*. Lem simply uses the characters to help expound his philosophical criticism of the epistemology of science. For Tarkovsky, the failure of that epistemology serves as an experiment in which the characters' loss of faith can be examined. Both the film and the novel can be interpreted as expositions of the parallel between science and religion, but while Lem focuses on epistemological implications, Tarkovsky extends the parallel to the characters.

He portrays Kris and Hari as an Adam and Eve who partake of forbidden knowledge, becoming aware of the epistemological shortcomings of science and suffering a fall from innocence. Their worldview shattered, Kris and Hari are left to comprehend their existence as best they can. Hari dies in a vain attempt to erase the awareness her presence brought, while Kris seeks a new order. Lem concludes that Kris is fully aware that he will never find a replacement epistemology. Tarkovsky, though unclear whether a new epistemology can be found, concludes that Kris has at least found peace. While the two artists seem to contradict each other, their portrayals are not mutually exclusive: Lem creates the world, Tarkovsky peoples it. Together they show us the problems of science as epistemology and the repercussions those problems have on individuals.

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