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## **Solaris for Lem and Tarkovsky. Novel and film between the impossibility of progress and the abyss of the past**

**ABSTRACT:** *In 1961 the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem realized Solaris, one of his best known and most appreciated works. Describing the encounter with an indecipherable planet-ocean, Lem highlights the impossibility of truly communicating with the Other and brings out the aporias and complexities of positivist thinking. Eleven years later, Andrey Tarkovsky adapts Lem's subject for cinema. In the homonymous movie, though, the Russian director imprints his own peculiar conception of time and history: the Tarkovskian ocean becomes a source of connection with a past seen as the only hold for the present, a crystal in which, however, the actual seems to succumb to the virtual. Lem's peculiar conception of progress is here put in contrast against the personal and humanistic nostalgia of the Russian director. The aim of the text consists in this comparison: two divergent philosophies of time expressed by two authors through their respective work.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Solaris; Tarkovsky; Lem; Time; Science-Fiction.*

### **Introduction**

I definitely did not like Tarkovsky's "Solaris". Tarkovsky and I differed deeply in our perception of the novel. [...] We were like a pair of harnessed horses: each of them pulling the cart in the opposite direction<sup>1</sup>.

This essay dwells exactly on this confrontation: two opposite interpretation of the same story, two divergent views of knowledge, truth, and history. We are talking about the famous and celebrated science-fiction novel Solaris, published for the first time in 1961 and written by the polish author Stanislaw Lem and the

<sup>1</sup> The quote was taken from an interview by Ivan Finotti with Stanislaw Lem, which can be read in the following website: <https://english.lem.pl/home/reading/interviews/folha-de-spaulo>. Last access 27/02/2024.

1972 Cannes winner homonymous movie, third feature film<sup>2</sup> directed by Andrei Tarkovsky and produced by Mosfilm.

The science-fiction is widely regarded as a genre with the gaze firmly turned to the future. Lem's novel, however, is a clear example of how this vision so dear to the science-fiction genre is not without their complications and aporias. Tarkovsky's view is even more peculiar: although set in the future, his gaze, like that of Klee's famous angel portrayed by Benjamin, only stares into the past.

To achieve its goals, the following text is divided in two very distinct units that mirror each other. In the first part, it will review Lem's *Solaris*, in which the writer's philosophy is channelled in a nuanced commentary of his personal view of truth, consciousness, and history. In the second part the essay will explore the importance of the concept of the past in Tarkovsky's version, in which great relevance will be given to Deleuze's famous account of the theory of Henri Bergson: although addressed extensively in different previous analysis<sup>3</sup>, this relationship between the Russian filmmaker and Bergson's thought serves to highlight Tarkovsky's anthropocentric conception of the past, detaching it from a pure humanistic-sentimentalist framework, in a specific attempt to comprehend the movie's enigmatic finale.

Like cinema and reality, the relationship between film adaptation and original text loses its meaning when the former claims to be bound in a mimetic correlation with the latter. The re-presentation of the literary source, as well as the reality imprinted by the camera, is not a copy of the original, but a constitutive act, a new form in which different conceptions of space and time are expressed.

### **Solaris according to Lem: a peculiar critique of positivistic knowledge**

From the very first pages of the novel, the reader is thrown, together with the protagonist of the story, the psychologist Kris Kelvin, into the space station orbiting the planet Solaris, where three scientists should be waiting for him. Kelvin, however, will not find a teeming group dedicated to the study and observation of the planet, but rather a semi-deserted area, in a state of complete decay. The first encounter on the space station confirms the aura of mystery that grips Solaris' orbit: Snaut, one of the three members of team, seems terrified by Kelvin's presence. The scientist's fear is not unjustified: the space station, as Kelvin will soon realize, is populated by figures unrelated to the team of scientists, who roam around undisturbed.

Shortly after this unsettling discovery, the reader stumbles upon another crucial element of Lem's novel: the science of *solaristics*. The enigmatic planet on which the protagonists of the story orbit does not seem so mysterious after all: it has been, in fact, the subject of extensive scientific research for over a century. Despite

<sup>2</sup> In this counting, with did not take into consideration the movies realized by Tarkovsky as a student, as *The Steamroller and the Violin* from 1960.

<sup>3</sup> The literature on this specific topic is, as mentioned, very extensive. We recommend: Reeh-Peters 2021; Kozin 2009; Menard 2012; McSweeney 2006; Totaro 1992; Gudauskas 2020.

numerous efforts, however, these secular studies have failed to find an adequate explanation for the so-called *mimoids*, the peculiar and complex phenomena occurring on the planet's surface.

One of the peculiarities of the novel is based on Lem's decision to inscribe the story not in the moment of the first encounter with the alien being, the mysterious oceanic organism orbiting between two suns, but at the center of the decadence of the study of the phenomenon itself, at the culmination of the desolating realisation that no real contact could be established even after years of research. This prerogative of the novel allows the author to focus his fervid imagination on describing the evolution of *solaristics*, a branch of science that has been studying the planet Solaris for years.

Therefore, the planet itself seems to be an object that refuses all attempts at examination and classification. The complete failure of *solaristic* science underlines the limits of a scientific process that, once subjected to contact with an entity totally alien to it, collapses into a kind of mythology, leading to the "inevitable projection of the physical definition of the human body onto the universe"<sup>4</sup>. All this cannot but bring to the conclusion that "contact with aliens seems to be impossible and even if it happened, it might not be a real one"<sup>5</sup>. Human knowledge, after all, "is only capable of understanding something which is known to him, something that can be expressed within the framework of categories generated during the ages of cultural development of humanity"<sup>6</sup>.

Lem thus seems to decree an aporia within empiricism: the obligatory blurring of the latter into anthropomorphism, a basic impossibility of knowing the Other properly.

Once in his room, Kelvin finally understands Snaut's obscure fear. Waiting for him, the protagonist finds Hari, his wife, apparently alive and well, despite her suicide on earth a few years earlier. Kelvin realises that the planet is able to materialise elements of the subconscious of the inhabitants within the space station. Horrified by that encounter, the protagonist will try in every way to get rid of his reborn wife, while brutally becoming aware of another problem the scientists have to face: eliminating these *Freudian ghosts*<sup>7</sup> is impossible, since they are made of a subatomic-protein matter different from human ones and will be endlessly regenerated by the planet.

On this regard, too, Lem seems to reiterate a substantial impossibility of mutual understanding between Solaris and the inhabitants of the station: how, in fact, to interpret the appearing of these figures? As a clumsy attempt at communication of the planet or a reasoned torture of the latter towards the scientist? Or again a mere involuntary reflex? It would appear that these mysterious "manifestations of the ocean exhaust themselves in being"<sup>8</sup>.

4 Csicsery-Ronay 1985, 17.

5 Loska 2006, 162.

6 Loska 2006, 162.

7 The terminology is taken from Istvan Csicsery-Ronay 1985, 17.

8 Geier 1992, 194.

The love between Kelvin and the phantom of Hari seems to end up in a sterile attempt of humanisation of an alien figure by the protagonist. As “magnificent” and “touching” as it is, their love story, following Snaut’s warning to Kelvin, is “out of place”<sup>9</sup>. Hari is, in fact, just “a mirror that reflects a part” of Kelvin’s mind. He loves her because she is just a projection of his desires<sup>10</sup>.

It is always Snaut who, in one of the most famous and quoted sentences of the entire novel, further emphasizes Lem’s concept of knowledge through the mirror image:

We are humanitarian and chivalrous; we don’t want to enslave other races, we simply want to bequeath them our values and take over their heritage in exchange. We think of ourselves as the Knights of the Holy Contact. This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors.<sup>11</sup>

The quote would seem to highlight what Jameson calls Lem’s “ultimate message”, namely that any attempt to make “contact with the radically other” implies a desire to look in the mirror to “search for an ideal image of our own world”<sup>12</sup>. A theory in which the point of arrival can only be a theoretical annihilation of the self, “for in order to strip away the anthropomorphism, we must somehow do away with ourselves”<sup>13</sup>.

However, one must not risk dragging Lem’s thought down to a nihilistic drift. Self-describing himself on several occasions as a “sceptic”<sup>14</sup>, the Polish writer has repeatedly emphasised his opposition to solipsistic thinking *tout court*, affirming the “mind-independent reality of external world”<sup>15</sup>. Undoubtedly, *Solaris* hinges on the “category of estrangement, the relationship, that is, between the familiar and the other, between identity and alterity; and it explores the function and limits of cognition itself in coming to terms with this relationship”<sup>16</sup>. The lack of ultimate solutions does not, however, imply the author underlying pessimism; it only emphasizes the awareness of the limitations that human thinking cannot escape.

Describing the encounter with an indecipherable planet-ocean, then, Lem stresses “the schism between the cognitive act and the unconscious subjects, unable to overcome their anthropomorphic limitations”<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, it is the crumbling of the old “Western tradition of the heroic humanistic quest for knowledge” rather than the empiricist’s one: the seemingly purposelessness of the ocean’s activity,

9 Lem 2019, 212.

10 For a feminist reading of Lem’s book, see: Weinstone 1994; de Lima e Silva 2022.

11 Lem 2019, 103.

12 Jameson 2007, 111.

13 Jameson 2007, 111.

14 In his interview with Peter Swirski, Lem put it down clearly: “To tell you the truth, I am skeptical to the highest degree that something like that should ever become possible” (Lem and Swirski 1997, 27).

15 Livingston 2006, 116

16 Freedman 2000, 162.

17 de Turris 1972, 6. My translation from the original Italian version.

then, must automatically be resolved through a purely human meaning, and the latter “can only be determined negatively”<sup>18</sup>. “If there is any purpose/meaning at all, it lies in the attempt to conquer Solaris, not in Solaris itself”<sup>19</sup>.

Hence, more than the scientific method itself, Lem’s “chief philosophical enemy” is expressed by the positivistic thought, “that is, the dogmatic assumption of an unproblematic and invariably positive adequation between knowing subject and known object”<sup>20</sup>.

Science disguised as positivism, as the early Habermas has underlined, “exhibits a merely contemplative stance toward their respective objects, an attitude that obscures the point that science and knowledge is fundamentally a human enterprise that serves human interests”<sup>21</sup>. In *Knowledge and Interest*, the Frankfurt School philosopher put positivism at “the end of his overview of the theory of knowledge in Western philosophy: ‘in its place emerges the philosophy of science’”<sup>22</sup>. This drastic change with the previous theories – Habermas hinges on the tradition that from Kant arrives to Marx and Marxism – is expressed through the loss of value of the subject. Almost counter-intuitively, then, the positivism of *solaristics* necessarily ends in anthropomorphism precisely because it renounces the idea according to which “the validity of statements could be decided only with reference to a synthesis”<sup>23</sup>: it got rid of the “inquiry into the knowing subject” and instead turned towards a “complex of rules according to which theories are constructed and corroborated”<sup>24</sup>.

Following this reasoning, we arrive to outline Lem’s novel as a peculiar critique of a thought that strives for the immaculate infallibility of scientific observation and, above all, the vision of the latter as a means for the “revelation of the Absolute”<sup>25</sup>. Still according to Habermas, positivistic science is just able to pursue “the naive idea that knowledge describes reality”<sup>26</sup>: the whole *solaristic* is “based on the positive faith that truth exists outside consciousness and must be appropriated by it”<sup>27</sup>. Lem, however, has exactly negated the possibility to “find ultimate truths in the domains in which we look for them. There are no ultimate truths, period”<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, when a methodological system such as *solaristic* encounters a phenomenon that refuses to be inscribed in it, “the meaning of knowledge itself becomes

18 Geier 1992, 194.

19 Geier 1992, 192. From this perspective, besides Jameson’s reference to Foucauldian theories (Jameson 2007), the analogy described by Ann Weinstone between Lem’s analysis and the theories of the thinker Edward Said is undoubtedly effective (Weinstone 1994).

20 Freedman 2000, 162.

21 Bohman and Rehg 2014.

22 Habermas 1972, 67.

23 Habermas 1972, 68.

24 Habermas 1972, 67.

25 Jameson 2007, 111.

26 Habermas 1972, 69.

27 Csicsery-Ronay 1985, 16.

28 Lem and Swirski 1997, 42.

irrational”<sup>29</sup> for the sake of its rigorousness. By forgetting the subject, this type of knowledge cements the latter’s untouchability, thus exerting a moulding power over the object of study.

“The pinnacle of human condition simply does not exist”: a knowledge of this kind is doomed to translate itself into a linear process of persistent accumulation in which the main goal is the total control and incorporation of reality.

### **Lem’s Finale: an optimistic reconciliation or an imperfect truth?**

*I don’t want to have to confess that I’m a Solarist who has never set foot on Solaris!*

With these peremptory words, Kelvin announces to his colleague Snaut his imminent journey on Solaris’ surface. This decision comes after the previous pleonastic attempt to communicate with the ‘ocean’ throughout the transmission of Kelvin’s brainwaves on a stream of X-rays. The experiment, however, served only to inflict on the protagonist a series of almost indescribable visions, through the description of which Lem seems to affirm a synthesis between subject and object:

I exist. And recreated, I in my turn create: a face appears before me that I have never seen until now, at once mysterious and known. I strain to meet its gaze, but I cannot impose any direction on my own, and we discover one another mutually, beyond any effort of will, in an absorbed silence. I have become alive again, and I feel as if there is no limitation on my powers.<sup>30</sup>

The final decision to set foot on the planet’s surface for the first time originates precisely from this dreamlike experience, which seems to have reaffirmed how mutual knowledge only comes through mutual annihilation.

In depicting the final journey into the planet, there are still some hints of the mirroring of experience, for example, when the protagonist describes in deeply earthy terms some of the *mimoids* met on the planet, that apparently look like “baroque sculpture[s]” or “the ruins of an ancient town, a Moroccan city tens of centuries old, convulsed by an earthquake or some other disaster”<sup>31</sup>. However, the true encounter will change Kelvin completely. After “the wave enveloped” Kelvin’s “hand without touching it, so that a thin covering of ‘air’ separated [his] glove inside a cavity”, he certainly “felt somehow changed”<sup>32</sup>. Suddenly, everything is forgiven to the mysterious and somehow well-known planet: Kelvin thus finds himself in a situation of expectation and possibility, waiting for nothing but still hopeful that “that the time of cruel miracles was not past”<sup>33</sup>.

29 Habermas 1972, 69

30 Lem 2019, 246.

31 Lem 2019, 276.

32 Lem 2019, 278.

33 Lem 2019, 280.

These last moments of attempted “interaction with the genuinely alien”<sup>34</sup> apparently suggest an optimistic conclusion to the troubled story: the miracle of a final encounter will always be possible, no matter how cruel it may be. Such an optimistic reading of Lem’s ending, though, would somehow distort the previous analysis, without clarifying the writer’s crucial conception of truth and time.

In one of the first attempts to examine Lem’s novel, the literary critic Darko Suvin introduces, instead, the concept of an “open and dynamic truth”, that perfectly encapsulates the concerns of this text.

This notion of dynamic truth can be traced back to another of the intense dialogues between Kelvin and Snaut, shortly before the former’s departure to the planet’s surface. The topic discussed is the atavistic dilemma regarding the existence of God: at Snaut’s cut-off – “Who still believes nowadays...” -, Kelvin answers back with the idea of an imperfect divinity: “one whose imperfection represents his essential characteristic: a god limited in his omniscience and power, fallible, incapable of foreseeing the consequences of his acts, and creating things that lead to horror”<sup>35</sup>.

As reiterated by Kelvin immediately afterwards, this godly image is not to be understood as a reference to Solaris: rather, it is the truth by Lem himself, an idea of truth that is not self-contained, but that represents an eternity “which measures his unending defeat”<sup>36</sup>.

In his postface to the 1970 edition of Solaris, Suvin commented: “[the novel has] at [its] cognitive core the simple and difficult realization that no closed reference system, however alluring to the weary and poor in spirit, is viable in the age of relativity theory and postcybernetic sciences”<sup>37</sup>. Solaris thus clearly reaffirms the rejection of “both the classical Utopia of the Plato-More type and the whilom fashionable dystopia of the Huxley-Orwell type”, i.e., the anti-dialectical “old antinomy of facile optimism or cynical despair”<sup>38</sup>. Lem’s other enemy, along with positivism, is therefore eschatology and its consequential claim of “final static perfection”<sup>39</sup>.

Just as there is no ultimate truth, so there can be no historical process that aims at the totality and completeness of its present. In this circumstance, then, Lem’s refusal to a positivistic attitude should go hand-in-hand with his rejection of a conception of history that outlines past events as static facts and, consequently, the present as a consolidated act. Lem does not negate historical progress; rather, he certifies the openness of the historical movement.

In his interview with Peter Swirsky, Lem recalls the endless search, the unbridgeable openness of knowledge that lay at the base of his work: “both my fiction and nonfiction suggest that we can indeed travel quite far on the road to

34 Rose 1981, 95.

35 Lem 2019, 270.

36 Lem 2019, 270.

37 Suvin 1982, 220.

38 Suvin 1982, 220.

39 Suvin 1982, 220.

knowledge, but that in place of the questions to which we find answers, others, like flowers, will spring up along the way”<sup>40</sup>.

### **Solaris according to Tarkovsky. An unbridgeable gap between home and the outer space**

You’ve known how love is like a threat:  
when I come back, you’ll wish you were dead.  
The sky shivers in reply, holds a maple like a rose.  
Let it burn hotter – till it almost reaches our eyes.<sup>41</sup>

After the turbulent making of his previous film *Andrei Rublev*, a work centred on the life of the great Russian painter, director Andreij Tarkovsky completed the film adaptation based on Lem’s book in 1972<sup>42</sup>. After “exhausting five-year struggle to get the film released” due to various problems during production and editing, the Russian director opted for a solution that at the time was considered shocking<sup>43</sup>. A high-art director, notoriously distant from the dynamics of commercial production, decided instead to stage a work based on a science fiction novel. This choice, however, should be “understood within the context of Tarkovsky’s ongoing problems with the cinema administration”: sci-fi was seen by the director as “a relatively safe choice, as it was considered a light genre aimed primarily at the youth market, and therefore was not taken so seriously”<sup>44</sup>.

Thus, Tarkovsky decided to make a film that, in his opinion, would leave him immune to further criticism. Lem’s book, however, is decisively reworked by the director, who reinterprets it in a clearly personal, if not even autobiographical key<sup>45</sup>.

As Skakov has underlined, “the question for truth remains the main philosophical theme for both the filmmaker and the writer”<sup>46</sup>. However, we need to understand what this truth means for both of them: Lem’s goal was, as we have seen, to deny the conception of any positivistic truth, and, along with it, to assert an idea of historical progress based upon a never-ending process, an openness of the present. If the writer wants to emphasise the impossibility of knowledge to overcome the

40 Lem and Swirski 1997, 46.

41 Tarkovsky 2015, 7.

42 Tarkovsky’s movie is not, though, the first adaptation of Lem’s novel. In 1968 the directors Boris Nuremburg and Lidija Isimbaeva came out with a version of *Solaris* realised for the USSR television. For a better overview, see (Belov, n.d.)

43 Johnson and Petrie 2003, 98.

44 Johnson and Petrie 2003, 98.

45 The autobiographical influences can also be seen in the minor rearrangements made by the director to the novel. In both the novel and the movie, Kelvin’s first encounter in the space station is with one of the so-called visitators. Probably an embodiment of the deceased astronaut Gibarian’s subconscious, Lem describes this character as a primordial Venus of Willendorf, meanwhile Tarkovsky decides to hire his thirteen-years-old stepdaughter for the role, re-writing completely the astronaut character.

46 Skakov 2012, 78.

limits imposed by the subject, the search for truth in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* cannot but lay within human conscience and it must be deeply interwoven with past and, therefore, with memory.

These plot tweaks were not appreciated by Lem, who surely did not count himself among the film's admirers. According to the Polish writer, the director did "supplant the tragic conflict inherent in progress with a cyclical, biological idea... not to mention the way [he] reduced the ethical and philosophical conflicts involved to nothing more than the melodrama of a family squabble"<sup>47</sup>.

Notwithstanding the harshness of the writer's judgement, the main mistake to be avoided when analysing Tarkovsky's film is to consider it solely as a cinematic transposition of the novel, and not a work in its own right. Exactly for this reason, it is crucial to hinge over the first segment of the film, which Tarkovsky decided to set on earth, instead of throwing the protagonist immediately in the outer space as Lem.

Underwater vegetation that moves with the flowing ripples of a small pond. Kris Kelvin pensively contemplates them as they move across an unspoilt tundra from which rises a cosy wooden house, the home of the protagonist. Thus begins *Solaris*, with one of the most iconic scenes in the whole Tarkovskian filmography.

From the first sequences, the director introduces his personal idea of the real<sup>48</sup>: the *dacha* or the house, "a traditional, rural vacation home, presented as the core of childhood and contentment, a pastoral ideal compared to the alienating locales where the adult protagonists find themselves"<sup>49</sup>.

The childhood house should not be seen only as an "object for cognition or mastering": on the contrary, Tarkovsky portrays the house as "the container of the primeval, initial state of humankind", harbinger of the "power of memories and conscience"<sup>50</sup>.

From the very beginning of the film, therefore, Tarkovsky seems to want to reiterate his peculiar conception of time, in which everything, necessarily, must pass from the beginning, from the family nest: every subsequent action will, by necessity, have to reckon with this powerful and age-old image, as 'home' "constructed as a site for both memory and desire"<sup>51</sup>. Sunk in a bucolical image, the house becomes even more a visual manifestation of a changeless, always-present past-ness.

The space journey from the earth to *Solaris* is of little significance from a directorial point of view, short and sudden as in the literary version. Instead, its role is occupied by the car journey from the house to the space station, where the take-off to *Solaris* will take place.

A highly contrasted black and white that slowly fades into calm colour supported by eerie electronical music stands in stark opposition to the "tranquil rhythm in

47 Turoskaya 1989, 53.

48 For an interesting comparison between the Bazinian conception of the real and Tarkovsky's one, see Halligan 2006.

49 McFadden 2012, 45.

50 Deltcheva and Vlasov 1997, 549.

51 McFadden 2012, 45.

the shot of the natural landscape” of the initial scene, reflecting on “the film’s thematic conflicts of technology/nature, space/earth”<sup>52</sup>.

The focus of the investigation is not to be found in the clash with another entity, an incomprehensible alien from outer space. On the contrary, the director’s main focus is on the person himself: the detachment of humanity from its maternal and primordial home and its collapse into the cold modernity epitomized by the skyscrapers of early 1970s Tokyo must be seen as the true and turbulent journey.

### **The role of art: a spiritual means to return to the past**

*Solaristic* science is not the focal theme of Tarkovsky’s version. Instead, one of the most incisive points of conflict between the writer and the director turned out to be the importance devoted to the love story between Kelvin and his wife: in the film, the relationship between the couple is certainly more developed than in Lem’s book. However, it would be a mistake to place it – as it happened instead in the later Soderbergh’s remake<sup>53</sup> – at the centre of the Russian director’s interests. Rather, the core of the 1972 adaptation cannot be understood, as pointed out before, without taking into consideration the role of memory and the value of the past for the formation of the individual.

If literary Hari never even speaks a word to the other inhabitants of the space station, Tarkovsky inserts the simulacrum of Kelvin’s wife in a process of *humanisation* that begins with the viewing of some family films, brought by the protagonist from earth. Old video recordings, that, however, help Hari “to regain memories of her own past, to rediscover her former reality when she was a real person”<sup>54</sup>. A person without memory, after all, as the director himself reminded us, “becomes the prisoner of an illusory existence; falling out of time [s]he is unable to seize his own link with the outside world”<sup>55</sup>. The filmic Hari, re-discovering her memory for the first time, comes to forge her own consciousness.

In the famous scene set in the space station library – terrestrial enclave where relics of various kinds of artefacts can be found -, Hari declares that she considers herself a human being despite her proton nature. Left alone in the library, we find her, cigarette in hand, contemplating *The Hunters in the Snow* by Peter Brueghel the Elder. The landscape of the Flemish painter’s masterpiece, as the camera investigates the painting, overlaps with the family videos shown earlier: through Brueghel’s canvas, the proton-woman, “a subjective perception of the real Hari conjured up from fragments of Chris’ subconscious, [comes] to humanise herself”<sup>56</sup>.

52 Totaro 1992, 25.

53 Peter Swirski took into consideration the two movies and Lem’s novel in *Solaris. Solaris? Solaris!* (Swirski 2006).

54 Skakov 2012, 84.

55 Tarkovsky 1989, 57-58.

56 Skakov 2012, 86.

A glimpse of another painting is visible in *Solaris*, as one of the gadgets that Kelvin brought in the space station: it is the famous *Trinity* by Andrei Rublev. At first sight polar opposites, *Solaris* and Tarkovsky's previous film, share the same peculiar conception of the work of art, which seems to be sublimated in the slow and careful camera panning over Brueghel's painting in *Solaris* and Rublev's famous middle-age icon in the finale of the homonymous film.

Tarkovsky suggests to the viewer that "the indisputably functional role of art lies in the idea of *knowing*", a "man's journey towards what is called 'absolute truth'". What we have just finished to say regarding Lem's novel is, then, essentially overturned. But if Lem eschewed the idea of knowledge as an attempt to conquer an absolute truth, he did so to contrast a scientific approach that promised an essential objectivity. Tarkovsky, on the other hand, does not affirm the universalism of artistic language: if the "cold, positivistic, scientific cognition" wants to represent the world as "the ascent of an unending staircase", artistic knowledge "suggests an endless system of spheres, each one perfect and contained within itself": they "may complement or contradict one another, but in no circumstances can they cancel each other out"<sup>57</sup>.

Each work of art encloses a self-contained *Weltanschauung*, subsequently appropriated by the observer through their own memory, their own 'I', for the discovery of their own truth. The work of art, acting "on man's soul", forms "his spiritual structure"<sup>58</sup>. As Skakov pointed out, "only art is able to resolve the conflict between the present reality of *Solaris* and the distant memory of earth"<sup>59</sup>. It becomes the means through which consciousness and memory create the spirit, through which the past can re-merge.

### **Tarkovsky's finale: Deleuze, the crystal-image and the director's Bergsonism**

The last section of the film concentrates more and more on the humanisation of the Solar Hari through the love shared with Kelvin: the chronic misunderstanding between Lem's Kelvin and the ocean-planet seems here to be solved precisely through sentiment. The high conception of love expressed by Tarkovsky is one of the keys to read *Solaris*. Nevertheless, Tarkovsky's oeuvre cannot be reduced to this framework.

As in the literary version, Kelvin's brain rays are fired at the planet's surface. Unlike Lem's character, though, the dreamlike visions of Tarkovskian Kelvin focus on the wife-mother dichotomy, presumably a prodrome to the later *Mirror*: in both cases, in fact, the figure of the mother and the wife seem to blur to the eyes of the protagonist<sup>60</sup>.

57 Tarkovsky, 1989, 39.

58 Tarkovsky 1989, 41.

59 Skakov 2012, 94.

60 In *Mirror*, Tarkovsky will even use the same actress, Margarita Terekhova, to play both the role of the mother and the wife of the protagonist.

After the dream, Hari's successful suicide takes place. Thanks to the latter's sacrifice, Kelvin is able to come back to earth, free from the yoke of remembrance. The doubt, however, remains: will he really decide to leave the planet?

Exactly on this question, Tarkovsky seems to start the film all over again: the same floating grasses from the beginning appear on the screen, the *dacha* peeps out one more time along with soothing Bach music in the background. Something, however, seems to undermine this idyllic vision of a return to earth: as he leans out of the house window to watch his father, Kelvin notices that a few raindrops are falling from the ceiling, without bothering the elderly parent in the slightest. The music becomes increasingly more restless, and then, in a scene that is strikingly similar to Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, the father appears in the doorway and is instantly grabbed by Kelvin, who is kneeling in front of him. On this image, the camera suddenly hovers in the air, revealing how the garden is in truth an island in the Solar Sea and how the father's house is just another construction on the alien planet.

This mysterious ending cannot but have sown a slew of interpretations and readings among critics. One of the most noteworthy is Paul Johnson's analysis, according to which "the film's enduring importance lies in its subtle exploration of [...] the individual's place in society"<sup>61</sup>. In these terms, the planet would metaphorically embody the imposition of an "external system" upon Kelvin's subjectivity and the latter's contrast with *Solaris* the attempt to express his own individuality. The final act and the protagonist's surrendering to the law of the father stresses out for Johnson how "there is no pristine state of individuality to be attained": we can't escape ideology, the only solution would, thus, be a "reconciliation of human individuality with social conditions most apposite to it"<sup>62</sup>.

However, such interpretation, despite its acumen, lacks an essential analysis of the director's conception of time. Kelvin's final gesture of total submission is indeed to be interpreted as an abandonment to a kind of father's law. The latter, though, should not be limited to a Freudian or Lacanian context<sup>63</sup>, but rather closely linked to the role of the *dacha*. The house as a container, a signifier of a perennial idea of the past, in the presence of which Kelvin decides to abandon himself totally.

Giving this importance to the concept of time in the film, it emerges how much Tarkovsky's theory of the past strongly resembles the philosophy of time of the French thinker Henri Bergson and Deleuze's revisitation of the latter.

In *Bergsonism*, Deleuze re-reads one of the most decisive aspects of Bergsonian thought: the question of the difference between "matter and memory, between pure perception and pure recollection, between the present and the past"<sup>64</sup>. A chronological understanding of time requires an infinite linear process whereby a current moment comes right after a previous one and then ceases to exist once it

61 Johnson 2006, 72-74.

62 Johnson 2006, 72-74.

63 For a careful analysis of the connection between Freud and his conception of Uncanny and *Solaris* see: Daniel McFadden 2012.

64 Deleuze 1991, 55.

is over. Thus, however, one mistakes “being with being-present”<sup>65</sup>. Deleuze, on the other hand, postulates how, for Bergson:

the present is not; rather, it is pure becoming, always outside itself. It is not, but it acts. Its proper element is not being but the active or the useful. The past, on the other hand, has ceased to act or to be useful. But it has not ceased to be. Useless and inactive, impassive, it IS.<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, as resembled by Paola Marrati, Bergson theorises “the pure coexistence of the present and its own past”<sup>67</sup>. Contrary to a chronological interpretation of time, “the present does not withdraw of itself, and the past need not wait to follow it: they are strictly contemporaneous”<sup>68</sup>. The differentiation between the two is not to be found in a chronological order that would distinguish their proper essence, but in “the different modalities of the actual and the virtual: the present is actual, whereas its contemporaneous past is virtual”<sup>69</sup>.

In one of the most incisive passages of his book *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky describes the past in the following terms:

But what exactly is this past? Is it what has passed? And what does “passed” mean for a person when for each of us the past is the bearer of all that is constant in the reality of the present, of each current moment? In a certain sense the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more resilient than the present. The present slips and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in its recollection.<sup>70</sup>

In the epilogue of *Solaris*, Tarkovsky emphasises this contemporaneity, which Marrati’s remarks have already brought to mind. The division between memory and real become indistinguishable: “time and memory merge into each other, they are like two side of a medal”<sup>71</sup>. A substantial coexistence of past and present, virtual and actual<sup>72</sup>.

In this regard, an analogy arises spontaneously between the conclusion of *Solaris* and the finale of another later chapter in Tarkovsky’s filmography, *Nostalghia*<sup>73</sup>. Although no longer set on a planet lost in deep space, the protagonist of *Nostalghia*,

65 Deleuze 1991, 55.

66 Deleuze 1991, 55.

67 Marrati 2012, 73.

68 Marrati 2012, 73.

69 Marrati 2012, 73.

70 Tarkovsky 1989, 58.

71 Tarkovsky 1989, 58.

72 To fully understand the meaning of these two terms, which are fundamental in Bergsonian philosophy and Deleuze’s theory, it may help to introduce a third element, namely the possible. The virtual is indeed opposed to the actual but, unlike the possible, it is real. If the possible comes to identify itself precisely in a merely hypothetical existence, the virtual possesses a reality of its own, it is “a formidable enlargement of the dimension of reality” (Rovatti 2019, 11-12). For a broader analysis, see Guerlac 2017.

73 Gerard Loughlin hinges on Tarkovsky’s theory of time and *Nostalghia* in his essay (Loughlin 2009).

the Russian poet Andrei Gorchakov, must still come to terms with an environment that is totally foreign to him: lost in the landscapes of central Italy, he is carrying out research on the life of a Russian composer.

The last scene shows, in a clear black and white, our protagonist laying on a meadow, looking at the camera. Behind him the wooden *dacha*, in an environment that deeply resembles the garden at the beginning of *Solaris*. And as in *Solaris*, the frame slowly widens, revealing what, in this case, an attentive eye might have scrutinised from a reflection of a puddle in front of Gorchakov: the idealised image of the house is surrounded by a foreign element that reveals its fallacy. Not the magma of the alien planet but, this time, the walls of the ruined church of San Galgano, near Siena.

In both cases, a Deleuzian crystal-image<sup>74</sup> is shaped, “transcend[ing] the boundaries of experience by moving from the ‘virtual’ to the ‘actual’ of Gorchakov’s [and Kelvin’s] life”<sup>75</sup>. The virtuality of the past embodied by the image of the *dacha* is revealed by the intrusion – the co-presence – of the present, which is expressed, paradoxically, by an alien element, namely, the planetary ocean or the walls of an ancient foreign church. Kelvin and Gorchakov are, thus, “suspended between their memories of the past and present reality, unable to complete join either side”<sup>76</sup>.

Tarkovsky’s conception of memory and pastness, however, as correctly underlined by Toymenstev, diverges from Bergson’s for one crucial factor. For the French philosopher, memory acquires a pure ontology “according to which the impersonal past is preserved in itself beyond the limits of our consciousness”<sup>77</sup>. Following Deleuze description: “what Bergson calls “pure recollection” has no psychological existence. This is why it is called virtual, inactive, and unconscious”<sup>78</sup>.

In Tarkovsky, instead, it lives an everlasting anthropocentrism in which time is seen as a “subjective, spiritual category”<sup>79</sup>. Bergson’s ontology of the past is then

74 A crystal-image, following Deleuze’s words, “consists in the indivisible unity of an actual image and its virtual image” (Deleuze 2007, 78). It embodies, then, “the fundamental operation of time”, since time must “split in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that we see in the crystal” (Deleuze 2007, 81). The crystal constitutes the eternal scission of time between actual and virtual, the “the perpetual foundation of time, nonchronological time” (Deleuze 2007, 81).

75 McSweeney 2006, 89.

76 Toymenstev 2022, 57.

77 Toymenstev 2022, 58.

78 Bergsonism 1991, 55. For Deleuze, ‘the Bergsonian revolution’ consists essentially in this: “Bergson’s major theses on time are as follows: the past coexists with the present that it has been; the past is preserved in itself, as past in general (non-chronological); at each moment time splits itself into present and past, present that passes and past which is preserved. Bergsonism has often been reduced to the following idea: duration is subjective and constitutes our internal life. And it is that Bergson had to express himself in this way, at least at the outset. But, increasingly, he came to say something quite different: the only subjectivity is time, non-chronological time grasped in its foundation, and it is we who are internal to time, not the other way round” (Deleuze 2007, 82).

79 Tarkovsky 1989, 58.

overturned: memory for the Russian director endures and partakes the present because “time is a condition for the existence of our ‘I’”<sup>80</sup>.

In this sense, the past manifests itself in the director’s cinema not so much as an absolute ontology, but as the only – and unattainable – truth of the individual: the true Tarkovskian anthropocentrism is thus represented not so much by the liberating love of the Kelvin-Hari couple, but by this deviation from the Bergsonian doctrine of perception.

Kelvin’s gesture of abandonment thus reveals a desire to immerse himself in the amniotic fluid of the past, in a psychological memory that haunts the individual.

While in Lem the question remains deliberately open, is there, as Deleuze wonders, an answer to the encounter with Solaris in Tarkovsky? Is there a reconciliation between “the ocean and thought” that determines “the transparent face of the crystal (the rediscovered woman) and the crystallizable form of the universe (the rediscovered dwelling)?”<sup>81</sup>. That is, can there be an integration in the individual between an actualising present and an enduring, haunting past?

Tarkovsky’s finale seems to underline how a pure nostalgic view would be his final goal, the total abandonment of the past. The actual, however, looms large over the Tarkovskian utopia. A struggle that maybe will be solved only in his last oeuvre, in which the *sacrifice* of the title might be exactly the past behind us, set on fire along with the *dacha* surrounded by the despair of its inhabitants.

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80 Tarkovsky 1989, 57.

81 Deleuze 2007, 89.

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