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# Solaris: A Look at the Interior

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UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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PROJECT TITLE: Solaris: A Look at the Interior

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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**Solaris**

### **SOLARIS: A LOOK AT THE INTERIOR**

Personalities play a major role in determining whether or not love, forgiveness and second chances are received in the film **Solaris** (Steven Soderbergh, 2002). The 2002 Hollywood version of **Solaris**, a film based on the 1961 novel of the same name by Polish science-fiction writer Stanislaw Lem and the successor of the 1972 Tarkovsky film, features Chris Kelvin (George Clooney) who explores the boundaries of space and human consciousness. Psychologist as protagonist is a common motif in films, for example in both **Vanilla Sky** (Crowe, 2001) and **Spellbound** (Hitchcock, 1945). Having a psychologist play a central role helps establish immediately that the film will examine mysteries of the mind. Because of his “unique situation” with the psychological and those who have been psychologically impacted, Kelvin travels to the spaceship Prometheus which is physically located on the frontier of space and metaphorically located on the frontier of the mind. Both films and the novel deal with the differing reactions to unfamiliar, even unknown phenomena, by persons of sharply different personality types. Kelvin and the other supporting characters are all scientists, but of contrasting psychological makeup. By focusing in on two scientists, Gordon (Viola Davis) and Kelvin, the film establishes an antithesis of intolerant/tolerant, clinical/emotional, closed-minded/open-minded.

The mission of the scientists is to study Solaris from the spaceship Prometheus. Dr. Snow (Jeremy Davies) and Dr. Gordon are the scientists already aboard the

Prometheus when Kelvin arrives. One of the planetary explorers is Gibarian (Ulrich Tukur); he had been sent to study Solaris well over a year before he calls Kelvin asking him to come to Solaris. Gibarian is Kelvin's friend who had committed suicide earlier on the ship in reaction to the strange phenomena, such as the inexplicable materialization of the visitors and the psychological deterioration of the Prometheus's inhabitants, caused by Solaris; Kelvin arrives on the Prometheus forewarned that things have gone awry with Solaris, but is ignorant of Gibarian's demise. Rheyra (Natascha McElhone) is Kelvin's late wife who committed suicide well before the events of the film transpire and it is his memories of that her are the basis for his encounter on the ship. Upon his arrival it is established that Kelvin was sent to Solaris in order to analyze the strange and unfamiliar phenomena evidently caused by Solaris while Dr. Gordon reveals that she "was sent here to assess the economic potential of Solaris, whether or not it was a viable commercial property or possible energy source." Kelvin's background as a psychologist makes him the perfect candidate for this mission. Solaris is a planet-like organism which the scientists are studying.

Both Kelvin's and Gordon's personalities and mission training determine their responses to Solaris and its eerie ability to materialize the unconsciousness. Gordon has a limiting and limited analytical view of the world; sociologist and psychologist Alan Miller labels the type personality type she exhibits as objective-analytic (Miller 150). Kelvin's anti-objective-analytic personality leads him to be more optimistic about and tolerant of new experiences. Therefore, the paradigm they represent establish that persons

able to be more accepting of completely unfamiliar phenomena have a better chance in experiencing the phenomena and the new possibilities in life to which they may lead.

Solaris has the ability to construct a “visitor” from the unconsciousness of the individuals aboard the Prometheus. The visitor is drawn from the person’s memories and manifests in a physical form known as a replicant. These visitors are described in varying levels of detail; only Kelvin’s visitor is fully described. The most bizarre and horrifying aspect of the visitor is its inability to die, which ironically, amplifies Kelvin and his late wife’s signature poem, Dylan Thomas’s “And Death Shall Have No Dominion.” When the visitor Rheya attempts to commit suicide aboard the Prometheus by ingesting liquid oxygen, she is resurrected. Kelvin finds her body and calls for help, but by the time Gordon arrives, Rheya is convulsing and regenerates. Gordon’s horrific disgust is apparent by her statement, “No matter how many times I see this, I never get used to it.” She reveals that she has attempted to kill her visitor using several different methods, but nothing has worked. In Lem’s novel, Kelvin takes a sample of Rheya’s blood and analyzes it.

I dropped some congealed acid on to a coral-tinted pearl. Smoke. The blood turned grey and a dirty foam rose to the surface. Disintegration, decomposition, faster and faster! I turned my back to get another test-tube; when I looked again at the experiment, I nearly dropped the slim glass phial.

Beneath the skin of dirty foam, a dark coral was rising. The blood, destroyed by the acid, was re-creating itself. It was crazy, impossible!  
(104)

Gordon only places stock in phenomena that has been verified by traditional science while Kelvin is able to accept because he believes that there is a hypothesis that will answer the questions raised by Solaris.

### **Gordon's inability to adjust**

Gordon's rational nature leads her to attempt to deny the existence of her visitor in large part because it is not readily identifiable in standard scientific terms. Gordon will fight off the unfamiliar and insist on it fitting into a pre-conceived model of how she should experience and react to the world. In a sense, she is boxed in by a narrow, even sterile view of the scientific method. Her objective-analytic personality causes her central concern in life to be "the achievement of a sense of *agency*, a sense of control over oneself and one's immediate environment" (Miller 150). Gordon uses rationalization to maintain an illusion of control over her environment. When Gordon realizes Kelvin is confusing his visitor wife with his deceased wife, she tells him "[s]he is not human. Try to understand that if you can understand anything." She never forgets that the visitors are merely masquerading. All of her scientific knowledge cannot explain the mysteries of the visitors, however, leaving her ill-equipped to cope with the phenomenon Solaris causes.

In Lem's novel Gordon is at a loss to explain what the visitors are. She examines the blood of the visitors and theorizes that they are made up of conglomerations of neutrinos. She finds this very perplexing because "[c]onglomerations of neutrinos are unstable" (Lem 101). And this is the crux of Gordon's confusion and paranoia: how can something that is unstable at the sub-atomic level have a stable physical form? In defiance of all scientific explanations, the visitors do exist. Her crutch of disproving their existence knocked from under her, Gordon resorts to hiding her visitors from everyone, including herself.

Gordon keeps her visitor locked behind closed doors as a method of pretending that she still retains complete control over all her cognitive functions. A theory of the appearance of the visitors is that they are images from one's unconsciousness that Solaris gives a physical form. The American film never visually represents Gordon's visitor while the Russian version portrays her visitor as dwarfish and deformed in body suggesting her extreme repression of emotions has had deforming consequences on her unconsciousness. Tarkovsky may have been inspired to use this visual image from Lem's novel when Kelvin "imagine[s] the scholarly [Gordon] cohabiting with a cretinous dwarf" (Lem 103). Locking her visitor behind a physical door mirrors her keeping the genesis of her visitor locked in the recesses of her unconsciousness. Gordon uses her control over her cognitive functions in order to bifurcate the existence of the visitor separate from her sphere of reality. An example of her cognitive control in the 2002 film is her detach herself dispassionately: "Depression along with bouts of hypomania and primary insomnia, suggestions of agoraphobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, shock, fatigue, denial."

When Gordon is able to sleep she dreams, and during dreaming the unconsciousness is free to surface. Because Gordon is not able to maintain her mental shields during sleep, Solaris is able to see into her unconsciousness and extract an image representing the fears, desires, and secrets Gordon wants to keep hidden. Gordon can ignore the reality that she is unable to keep her unconscious locked up during her sleep by dismissing her dreams and ignoring their symbolism. But Solaris rips away her mental

blinders and confronts her with the reality of her unconsciousness and its contents. Her visitor is a constant visual reminder of her failure to keep her cognitive functions under strict control. Her objective-analytic personality will not allow her to accept a loss of control and causes her to use defense mechanisms to continue the illusion of control. Her developing agoraphobia is one result; every time she is in the presence of others she fears that they will be able to see into her unconsciousness as Solaris did. While she is in her room she is unable to escape her visitor and the mirror of her that it presents. In Lem's novel the three scientists have a videophone conference during which Gordon keeps the lens covered so that no one can see into her room, but for a second the lens slips and Kelvin sees a "bright golden disk sh[ining] out for an instant, then everything went dark. Only then did I realize that this golden disc was a straw hat" (Lem 105). Gordon becomes so distraught about someone having seen into her room that she immediately turns off the videophone. Gordon's determination to keep the content of her unconsciousness private is an effort to maintain cognitive control.

### **Kelvin's tolerant world view**

Kelvin's rational, analytical nature is sacrificed to his desire to experience the new and unknown. Like Gordon, Kelvin has a scientific background and the personality to fit his profession. As a psychologist, Kelvin analyzes the minds of others and offers insight to them on a regular basis. When he boards the Prometheus he immediately begins to try to analyze and heal Snow and Gordon. But his rational, analytical demeanor begins to suffer when Rheyra materializes. Kelvin is unable to separate her physical materialization from the rational thought that she truly does not exist along with his



emotional experience. Logically he knows that this Rheya is neither his wife nor human, but emotionally he cannot distinguish between the two. His analytical nature prompts him to discover why Rheya has returned to him. After his discussions with Gordon, he concludes that Solaris is the originator of Rheya. He realizes Rheya must not be the authentic Rheya because she recalls only things *he* knew earlier. She possesses no individuated memories. Cinematically Soderbergh offers supporting evidence to the theory that she is incapable of generating her own memories because she is not an autonomous being via the scenes of Rheya experiencing flashbacks. During these flashbacks Soderbergh crosscuts between the flashback, a close shot of Rheya staring at Solaris, and Solaris which implies that the source of her memories is Solaris. Rheya never has a memory which is not associated with Solaris. Once Kelvin has rationalized that Rheya's appearance is due to the mysterious workings of Solaris, he begins to question what Solaris wants. Consciously he does not understand Solaris's motivation, but he knows the answer unconsciously. In the middle of the night he wakes up and sees an image in the shadows that he recognizes as the late Gibarian.

**Kelvin:** What does Solaris want from us?

**Gibarian:** Why do you think it has to want something? This is why you have to leave. If you keep thinking there's a solution, you'll die here.

**Kelvin:** I can't leave her. I'll figure it out.

**Gibarian:** Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you? There are no answers, only choices.

The scene allows Kelvin's unconscious to surface through the image of Gibarian. Kelvin has accepted Rheya into his reality and this blind acceptance causes problems with his rational, analytical nature: how can he believe she is real when he knows rationally that she is merely a mirror consisting of unstable neutrinos? This dichotomy has led to warring between Kelvin's consciousness and unconsciousness. Kelvin resolves his

dilemma by abandoning the rational and analytical part of his nature and allowing the emotional to reign. To experience fully the opportunities Solaris offers without question Kelvin has to allow himself to forgo his professional personality.

Kelvin's willingness to experience the unfamiliar leads him to violate his profession's ethical code. Part of the ethical code psychologists pledge to uphold demands that the psychologist not examine a person to whom they have an close emotional involvement (If they believe they are getting too close emotionally, they are required to stop offering services to that patient and notify another psychologist), sexual relationship, or familial link. Rheya, his late wife, fits into all three of these categories while Rheya the visitor, at first, fits into none. But Kelvin soon violates the ethical code by viewing Rheya the visitor as Rheya his wife. He develops an emotional and sexual attachment to his visitor; at the moment he does this he is ethically obliged to remove himself from Rheya, but he does not. When the first Rheya appears, Kelvin's preconscious reaction is fear. He puts the first Rheya into a space capsule and sends it into orbit, potentially killing her. Of course, causing harm to a patient is a violation of the ethics code. But when the second visitor Rheya appears, Kelvin is unable to prohibit himself from becoming emotionally attached to her. She represents a chance to recapture the love he lost when the real Rheya committed suicide. His selfish desire leads him to cease being a psychologist and begin living as a man devoted to his emotional needs.

Kelvin's emotional attachment will not allow him to distance himself from Rheya. Kelvin realizes his visitor Rheya offers him the unique opportunity of a second chance at love and life with his late wife. He is unable to forgo this opportunity and

distance himself from and view his visitor with an analytical mind. Gordon tries to get him to reestablish his analytical, rational nature as the dominant part of his personality by telling him “it is a mistake to become emotionally involved with one of them. You’re being manipulated. If she were ugly, you wouldn’t want her around. That’s why she’s not ugly. She’s a mirror that reflects part of you mind. You provide the formula.” But Kelvin can only respond with “[s]he’s alive” even though he has already deduced that she is not human. He does not have Gordon’s ability to maintain an analytical demeanor; instead, his emotions eradicate his need for analytical proof. Kelvin realizes that if he asserts his rational, analytical nature, then he will not be able to have a second chance at love and life; so, he chooses to continue his emotional attachment and abolish all else.

Kelvin, unlike Gordon, is willing to be open-minded and not force his observations to fit any preconceived notions or accepted method of inquiry and therefore is much better equipped to experience and react to Solaris. His world model is much more flexible; he does not limit himself to rigidly constructed lines of inquiry. His openness to new experiences allows him to see his visitor in terms beside ‘it’ and see her in other than an analytical light. He accepts his new visitor and includes her into his world model. She becomes Rheyra, his wife and the woman he loves. She represents an opportunity for him to have a second chance at life and love. But Gordon cannot escape her limiting analytical view of the world; this severely limits her ability to experience, or even appreciate, the existence of, phenomena lying outside her prior experience. She thus has to retreat to familiar territory to retain her idea of control over her environment. For

Gordon, her visitor has to be examined and classified. But she is unable to do this; consequently, she seeks to eliminate her visitor from her realm of reality. To this end she invents a destabilizing apparatus and uses it on her visitor. She does not desire a second chance at love and life because they are outside of the realm of the familiar; consequently, she decides to return to Earth, to the familiar. While she may have been able to eliminate the materialization of her unconsciousness, she has not eliminated her unconsciousness. But on Earth she will be able to keep this fact hidden and her unconsciousness locked in the recesses of her mind.

Gordon heads back to Earth and the familiar while Kelvin makes a choice to seek happiness on the unfamiliar Solaris. Kelvin's ability to view events from a perspective outside that dictated by his training as a scientist has enabled him to gain new experiences otherwise unattainable. Gordon's insistence on framing events to match the notions deriving from her training and her acceptance that that should help define her interaction with the world, has proved quite limiting.

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