

Director
Andrei Tarkovsky

Cast
Natalya Bondarchuk
Bibi Andersson
Donatas Banionis
Jüri Järvet
Anatoly Solonitsyn

Screenplay
Andrei Tarkovsky, Friedrich Gorenstein
Based on the novel by Stanislaw Lem

Photography
Vadim Yusov

Art Director
Mikhail Romadin

Editor
Ludmila Feganova

Music
Eduard Artemiev, J S Bach

Produced by Mosfilm Studio

Run time: 166 Minutes

Certificate: PG

Russian with English subtitles

USSR 1972

Colour & Black and White

Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1

Tarkovsky.co.uk

 CurzonArtificialEye

 ArtificialEye

#SculptingTime

SOLARIS

Screening as part of Sculpting Time: Andrei Tarkovsky Nationwide Touring Programme



Sculpting the Gaze – Solaris in 2016

Andrei Tarkovsky famously described his filmmaking as 'sculpting in time'[1]. As cinephile video essayist Kogonada reminds us in the excellent 'Auteur in Space', in *Solaris* this sculpture leads us wondering where his meaning might lie: "He [Tarkovsky] will spend five minutes following a man in a ordinary car travelling along the highway and less than two minutes showing his main character travelling through space." [2]

So how do we understand the meaning of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* after it has been sculpted through the perspective of another passage of time: all the way to 2016? Is it the ultimate science-fiction film, an inner space epic of magnificent proportions, or an anachronism that has become pastiche of cinematic futures?[3] Is it not about the future, or space at all and rather, about universality, the past, and memory? Is it, as writer Philip Lopate has beautifully described, about "falling in love with ghosts... the inability of the male to protect the female, the multiple disguises or 'resurrections' of the loved one, the inevitability of repeating past mistakes." [4]

A series of macho face-offs mark its journey to audiences now. Tarkovsky's film is based on Polish author Stanisław Lem's novel of the same name. Lem famously had had little love for Tarkovsky's elliptical version of his novel, resenting his infidelity to the source material (a complaint he later repeated on release of Steven Soderbergh's remake in 2002). Tarkovsky later regretted any fidelity to Lem at all saying: "The rockets and space stations – required by Lem's novel – were interesting to construct; but it seems to me now that the idea of the film would have stood out more vividly and boldly had we managed to dispense with these things altogether." [5]

Deeply embedded in any contemporary cineaste's reception of Tarkovsky's inner space epic is another takedown by Tarkovsky. Namely his criticism of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) "for being too enamored by the spectacle of the genre, for being too exotic, too immaculate" and his explicit disdain for the concept of genre in general and the west's take on science-fiction in particular.[6]

Some decades later, in 2009 when director Lars von Trier made what film publication *Variety* called his “big fat art-film fart”, *Antichrist*, the review from its premiere press screening in Cannes reported catcalls and boos which were particularly loud when the credits revealed a dedication to Tarkovsky.[7]

Reading back in time had the audience of international film critics equated a reverence to Tarkovsky as a sign of the ultimate pretension? Or had Von Trier committed the ultimate sacrilege to a great Soviet martyr who had famously struggled to make the ‘anti-spectacle’, the ‘anti-2001’, the ‘anti-*Antichrist*?’

With all this macho jeering, it might be easy to think there is nothing in *Solaris*, or indeed in Tarkovsky, for the female spectators. At a screening of *Solaris* I once attended, a discussion took place afterwards on the influence of Tarkovsky and him as a ‘filmmaker’s filmmaker’. A question from the audience asked the panel’s thoughts on why Tarkovsky’s was so often cited by male directors as an influence. From Von Trier to Carol Reygadas, Terrence Malick to Alexander Sokurov. Was there something that made the films resonate more meaningfully with men rather than women? It seems fascinating to think about this question now and see if the rise of feminist film theory in the years since the film was produced might have added another dimension to the meanings the film might have today.

In addition to contextualising assumptions and myths around Tarkovsky’s isolation and difficulties with Soviet authorities, Philip Lopate also unpicks our go-to cinematic references when we watch *Solaris* today. Lopate cites Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1956) as a better comparative text than Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. For him, the powerful driver in the film is protagonist Kris’ guilt and grief at his wife Hari’s past suicide. On *Solaris*, these emotions conjure up another Hari, an apparition, seen only through the gaze of Kris’ desperation “to do anything to hold onto [an image of] her, even knowing she isn’t real.”[8]

Lopate’s comparison to *Vertigo* gains special relevance when we realise that the same year *Solaris* was produced (1972), feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey began work on her seminal text ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (later published in 1975), where she explored the idea of the male gaze in cinema, famously unpicking this gaze through her reading of *Vertigo*. [9]

The ideas in Mulvey’s text – now over 40 years old, and expanded on by many wonderful scholars of both sexes over the years – are my guide map when making my way to *Solaris* today. This map shows the landmarks of patriarchal critical acclaim as well trod pathways, and invites me on a less travelled path. The monument to meaning at the end of this pathway is here is Natasha Bondarchuk’s extraordinary performance as Hari: one that has gained some extraordinary resonance when in 2010 Bondarchuk revealed she had an affair with director Tarkovsky during the shoot, and attempted suicide when they split in 1972.

So when you go on the journey to *Solaris*, take this map with you. Make like Tarkovsky and sculpt in time to mould your perspective. Make your way through the multiple gazes on Hari, and Bondarchuck, to see them both for yourself.

By Jemma Desai, founder of I am Dora, Film Programme Manager at British Council and BFI London Film Festival Programmer

[1] Tarkovsky, Andrei: *Sculpting in Time* (1986)

[2] Auteur in Space 2015 - Kogonada <http://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/54abf58f4dd50>

[3] <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/tarkovsky/>

[4] Lopate, Philip: *Inner Space* (2011) <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/239-solaris-inner-space>

[5] Tarkovsky, Andrei: *Sculpting in Time* (1986)

[6] Tarkovsky, Andrei: *Sculpting in Time* (1986)

[7] <http://variety.com/2009/film/markets-festivals/antichrist-1200474819/>

[8] <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/239-solaris-inner-space> (italics author’s own)

[9] Mulvey, Laura (1975) [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/visual_pleasure_and_narrative_cinema\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/visual_pleasure_and_narrative_cinema(1).html)