
*Reviewed by Melody Jue*

When you walk into an aquarium, you are usually greeted by signs that welcome you to the “alien” realm of the ocean, with its “extraterrestrial” creatures, like the octopus and nautilus. One of the curious things about the ocean planet Solaris—as imagined by Stanislaw Lem and Andrei Tarkovsky—is that it has no indigenous life forms. In both Lem’s 1961 novel and Tarkovsky’s 1972 film, the planet Solaris is one massive ocean body of transient sculptural formations, perhaps sentient on a scale beyond human comprehension. The planet is at once an environment and a subject, presenting particular challenges for thinking about cinematic perception and the genre of sf.

Mark Bould’s study of Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* is a new contribution to BFI’s Film Classics series that engages with the interrelation of environment and subjectivity. Although the book is organized into three chapters (“Sf, Tarkovsky and Lem,” “Solarises,” and “Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*”), the last chapter on Tarkovsky’s film comprises the majority of the book. Bould carefully recounts the plot of the film, occasionally splicing in forays into production history, literary and cinematic precedents, and full-color film frames. Bould’s *Solaris* is, in many ways, not simply a study of Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*, but an additional remediation of the film and novel that stands on its own. What emerges from Bould’s prudent analysis is an environmental sensibility: that the key to interpreting *Solaris* lies in a cinematic grammar that emerges out of its natural elements.

Early in the study, Bould quotes Tarkovsky’s observation that “film is like a river” in the sense that shots should accumulate, not in isolation, but as the sum of the preceding shots. He dwells on the opening sequence of *Solaris* that begins precisely in the water, of weeds gently floating, and only “reluctantly” settles on the figure of a man, Kris Kelvin, as protagonist. This “moves us from a recorded world being displayed into one in which characters and narrative emerge from its elements” (35). It is these “elements” that guide Bould’s interpretation of the film, noting how the hovering camera angle of the opening sequence implies that Kelvin, too, emerges out of the elements of water, earth, and air. For Bould, the directionality and fluidity of the river suggest a way of interpreting *Solaris* that differs from poststructuralist theories of temporality, where “history is continuity and not a succession of radical ruptures” (65).
Bould’s attention to such an elemental imaginary also renders a new way of thinking about genre. He discusses Tarkovsky’s resistance to the high-tech visual conventions of sf film at length and gives the following definition of genre:

[Genre] might be better understood not as a quality possessed by film, or a pigeonhole into which the film can be slotted, but as a discursive phenomenon, a fluid, continually shape-shifting and ultimately irresolvable product of claims made at different times for different reasons in different contexts by different people with differing degrees of influence. (13)

It would not be a stretch to say that this definition shares much with the planet Solaris itself—also fluid, continually shape-shifting, an enigma discursively shaped by several generations of male scientists. Likening a definition of genre to such an interpretively unstable object creates a healthy distance from genre’s reifying tendencies. Even more interestingly, it moves us beyond thinking of genre as a “lens” or way of seeing, and refreshingly asks us to think of it as a discursive environment or milieu that we might inhabit.

One area that I would have liked to see Bould engage with more extensively is the relationship between Hari and the planet, especially compared with their relationship in Lem’s book. For example, Bould writes that testing simulacrum Hari’s blood for evidence of humanity “reveals that they are able to reconstitute themselves flawlessly” (65). This is not true in Lem’s novel where, as Kelvin examines the blood cells under a microscope, comparing them to a silvery landscape, he realizes that the image of the erythrocyte does have a small flaw; upon increasing the resolution, he sees the cell disappear into nothing. This important contrast gives us a moment to consider the relationship between women’s bodies and landscapes, specifically the feminization of nature that has so long been naturalized and often invisible. If Solaris is caught between the environment and subjectivity, then Hari/Rheya doubly is. Here it would help to engage with Ann Weinstone’s 1994 article “Resisting Monsters: Notes on Solaris,” which attends to Hari/Rheya’s unique ontological position as a simulacrum constructed by the planet Solaris from Kelvin’s memories of his deceased wife—yet with some agency of her own. Given Hari’s repeated suicide attempts and the presence of the floating weeds that begin the film, it may also be worth comparing Hari to Ophelia. Attending in more detail to the interplay between nature and gender would enrich the ways in which Bould shows how Tarkovsky’s Solaris cinematically emerges out of the natural elements.

Bould’s focus on characters and narrative arising out of their elements raises a question: What happens when characters are dislocated and displaced from their originary conditions? In the third chapter of the book, Bould discusses
the ways that “Tarkovsky repeatedly disrupts any secure sense of space” (62) with camerawork that “adds to the discomfort by implying the presence of an unseen watcher” (63). The conclusion of the film offers some sense of closure, however, returning Kelvin to the “element” in which we first saw him: a small house (*dacha*) alongside his father, near water. “The camera continues to rise, climbing away, until it reveals that the *dacha* is on an island in the Solaris ocean” (84). In the end, viewers are displaced as much as Kelvin is. Perhaps we remain, as Bould suggests, within the dream that the ocean dreams, where Earth does not exist.


**Reviewed by Jonathan Goodwin**

These letters to Stanislaw Lem’s primary English translator span from 1972 to 1987. It is clear that they are of great interest to Lem scholars. What might not be immediately obvious, however, is the insight they give into the cultural politics of the Cold War as seen through a prominent Polish intellectual. The Lem scholar may expect and will find revealing commentaries on books written or translated into English during this period, particularly *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (1961), *Golem XIV* (1981), *Provocation* (1984), and *Fiasco* (1986). Others who may not even have an interest in sf would benefit from reading Lem’s analyses of the psychology of totalitarianism, the sociology of literature, and American politics from Nixon to Carter. Kandel’s letters are not included, and it can be difficult to infer much about his end of the conversation. Furthermore, large sections of the letters are omitted. Peter Swirski, a prolific Lem scholar and the editor and translator of the volume, explains that the omissions are repetitive discussions of the applied sociology of publishing (i.e., how Lem could become famous in the United States and sell more books).

I do not doubt Swirski’s judgment of the repetitive character of these omitted passages, but the book is quite slender, and I think that perhaps a few of them could have been included for comparison with Lem’s more abstract ideas about literary sociology. Swirski claims that an unexpurgated volume would be the size of the New York City white pages (2). All the same, it would be useful to know if these letters were going to be deposited in an archive so that interested scholars may consult them.

The first book of Lem’s that Kandel translated (with Christine Rose) was *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (1973, originally published in 1961). In a letter