Travelling philosophy : from literature to film

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III. The Film

Steven Soderbergh

(1963 – Present)
**Introduction**

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, American director Steven Soderbergh is probably best known for such critically and commercially successful films as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1997), *Traffic* (2000), and *Ocean's Twelve* (2004). With several box office successes under his belt, Soderbergh decided to take a risk of sorts and direct the second filmic adaptation of Lem's *Solaris*. Film critic Kenneth Turan wrote:

Far from a typical studio film in its determination to be elliptical and elusive, the film is an example of sophisticated and challenging filmmaking that stands – despite its noticeable lack of emotional heft – in welcome contrast to the indulgent dead-end experimentation of the director’s previous *Full Frontal* (2002).

However, in the United States, moviegoers thought differently when the film was first released. For Americans, whose cinema is in a state of stagnation where any film that chooses intellect, love or humanity as its subject and therefore bypassing glorified violence, thoughtless sex and gratuitous exposition is generally rejected, *Solaris* was “dreary” (Stoeckel 2002). Although still challenging and complex, Soderbergh’s film (released in the U.S. in the fall of 2002) is a tighter, more focused adaptation than renowned Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1972 version.

In addition to being roughly an hour shorter, Soderbergh’s version is a bit more accessible to mainstream audiences than Tarkovsky’s more conceptual translation. However, despite being somewhat more comprehensible, Soderbergh’s film only grossed 15 million dollars in the U.S., a total far below its production budget of 47 million dollars. The rather obstinate resistance of mainstream audiences can be partly attributed to a complex narrative and its engagement with powerful and complicated questions about the nature of existence that harkens back to Kubrick’s science-fiction masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). In addition to the film’s thematic parallels, the backward tracking shots and the ethereal ballet of space travel in Soderbergh’s version function as visual homage to its more celebrated predecessor.

Besides its rather intricate and theoretical composition, I also attribute a large portion of the tepid box office reception to the manner the film was grossly misrepresented by its own marketing campaign. To explain, although the film does include a romantic dimension, it is not merely the simple love story that it was portrayed to be by its own trailers. In light of this perversion, it is safe to assume that a considerable percentage of the audience showed up expecting to see a love story set in space only to be disenchanted by what is a more philosophical film that happens to have a romantic dimension. Despite this rather unfortunate distortion (typically a

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216 “Solaris Box Office Numbers,” in Box Office Mojo (statistics online) accessed 24 July 2005. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=solaris.htm. More precisely, the domestic gross was $14,973,382, and the overseas gross was $15,029,376 for a worldwide total of $30,002,758.

217 Phil Villarreal, “Solaris,” in *Arizona Daily Star* (12 November 2002). 12E: “Soderbergh, the writer/director who got his start with the offbeat *Sex, Lies and Videotape* in 1989, has proven himself one of Hollywood’s most daring and visionary directors. He’s long drawn comparisons to Stanley Kubrick, and “Solaris” - Soderbergh’s first venture into sci-fi - bolsters the comparison.”

218 This romantic “misrepresentation” is further evidenced by the image on the cover of the newly translated version of Lem’s novel (1970), which can be seen on the novel title page in this study. The novel’s back cover informs us of the front cover’s “Solaris film artwork,” which is a copyrighted (2002 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation) picture of Kelvin (George Clooney) and Rheya (Natascha McElhone) in a rather romantic embrace. As is often the case, a new edition of a novel from which a film has been adapted is issued around the time a film is released. However, the only thing that is “new” is typically the cover art that serves to promote the film.
consequence of studio pressure), the film did enjoy a good deal of critical success based largely on its magnificently crafted mise-en-scene, ethereal soundtrack, and expressive acting, which all center on a rather profound thematic core.

Moral Anthropocentrism and the Place Beyond Morality

The following passages reflect a progression of ideas that leads to the concept of moral anthropocentrism. As the film demonstrates, it is generally the combination of egocentrism and a finite reasoning capacity that influences the principal characters to, at one time or another, act in a morally anthropocentric fashion and disproportionately value human over alien life. This value disparity forms the film’s thematic core and drives the narrative’s articulation of a fabula that confronts the limited, anthropocentric nature of humans and the manner such qualities pertain to the moral complexities involved with the ethical treatment of those life forms presented as alien. Forcing the self into a kind of existential struggle, this confrontation with the alien other challenges the self to improve through the mechanism of choice — existence precedes essence.

This section primarily concentrates on the auditory component of speech, which I use to establish the weight of moral anthropocentrism in the film. In later sections, I address the manner in which both the auditory and visual filmic components flesh out the other relevant aspects of the story and the elements of the fabula that convey a deeper understanding of the film’s treatment of this concept. Taken chronologically as they occurred in the fabula, the following passages begin to display the film’s evolution of morally anthropocentric ideas. The first passage occurs at the beginning of an embedded fabula — presented as an external retroversion of a conversation that occurred outside the scope of the primary fabula — and conveys an exchange at a dinner party between three of the film’s principal characters: Dr. Chris Kelvin, Rheya, and Dr. Gibarian:

Kelvin: The whole, the whole idea of God was dreamed up by man. Gibarian: Silly little animal with a small brain. Even, even the limits that we put on it are human limits. It designs, it creates. It can do this, it can do that. Rheya: No, I am talking about a higher form of intelligence. Gibarian: Uh, no, no, now, hold it. No, you’re talking about something else. You’re talking about the man in a white beard again. You are ascribing human characteristics to something that isn’t human. Now, we are all looking for causes and patterns. Kelvin: Rheya, given all the elements of the known universe, and enough time, our existence is inevitable. It’s no more mysterious than trees or sharks. We’re a mathematical probability and that’s all. Rheya: How do you explain that of all the billions of creatures on this planet we are the only ones who are conscious of our own mortality? Kelvin: You can’t explain that, that doesn’t mean that there’s a God.\(^\text{219}\)

Kelvin flatly asserts his belief that life is a “mathematical probability,” the result of evolutionary processes driven by the arrangement of causality and chance. Kelvin and Gibarian agree that God is merely an abstract idea, or the antecedent for the impersonal pronoun “it.” Gibarian sees the endeavor to personify “it” as a rather juvenile, anthropomorphic attempt to ascribe human characteristics to an abstract idea. In this particular instance, Gibarian’s speech echoes his literary counterpart with regard

\(^\text{219}\) Steven Soderbergh, *Solaris* (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003), 13. The dialogue, while audible, can also be seen using the subtitle feature for a more accurate transcription. The DVD is divided up into 25 chapters and will be referenced accordingly. Subsequent citations are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.
to his caveat against the innately human attempt to understand the alien through anthropomorphic means.

While both texts issue anthropomorphic warnings, the film divides anthropomorphism into two categories. The first category is modeled after the literary warnings against oversimplifying abstractions and unknowns by ascribing human characteristics to them. The second category directs its thematic vigor towards a more positive aspect of anthropomorphism. We typically do not objectify the alien other if we see it as human and, as a result, we tend to apply our moral standards to it. In the conversation, Rhey a appears at odds with both Kelvin and Gibarian in her belief that God is not an abstraction we trivialize anthropomorphically, but rather a more personal higher form of intelligence. To maintain the possibility that human beings may not simply be the empirical results of mathematical probabilities, she asks Kelvin to explain why a human, as a being-for-itself, appears to be the only creature conscious of its own mortality, which he cannot. Here, her question problematizes the origin of self-consciousness in light of Kelvin's relegation of existence to mere statistics. While none of the three deny human existence, it is Rhey a who asks the more difficult question as it relates to the nature of human essence. As the film demonstrates, our essence can be positively modified through anthropomorphic means if, in ascribing humanity to the other, we gain a deeper understanding of our own.

The second passage presents Gibarian who is dead at this point in the fabula. In this scene, Gibarian speaks to Kelvin through a video diary entry that Kelvin watches shortly after he arrives on the film's primary set, which is a space station (or the Station) designed for scientific research that hovers in the outer atmosphere above the mysterious and ethereally beautiful planet known as Solaris:

We take off into the cosmos ready for anything: solitude, hardship, exhaustion, death. We're proud of ourselves. But when you think about it our enthusiasm's a sham. We don't want other worlds. We want mirrors (8).

Here, Gibarian reinforces his original assertion (seen in the dinner conversation) with regard to the anthropomorphic tendencies of humans that can oversimplify the other. To put it differently, humans do not truly desire to discover the external universe, but rather to force our interpretation of external reality through human values and experience. Hence, we see "mirror reflections" of ourselves. As this idea relates to the first passage, Gibarian’s assertion can be interpreted to mean that humans do not aspire to understand an alien concept such as God, but rather to see God as we see ourselves, or to egocentrically make God in our image. Rhey a does not deny this endeavor. Rather, her argument implies that we do this because our consciousness is a kind of Sartrean "no-thing," and since God may also be a kind of no-thing, as in Spirit, our limited

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220 Lem, Solaris (1970), 134. Gibarian states that: "Any attempt to understand the motivation of these occurrences is blocked by our own anthropomorphism."

221 Barnes, "Sartre's Ontology" (1992), 16: "Being-for-Itself is a self-conscious being. If in the introduction to Being and Nothingness one occasionally feels that a disembodied mind is at work, this illusion is quickly dispelled. The for-itself carries a lack of being at its heart due the presence of the nihilating (=nothing making) consciousness that is inseparable from it. A corpse is no longer a for-itself but an in-itself. Frequently, by a sort of metonymy, Sartre uses the two terms, 'consciousness' and 'being-for-itself,' interchangeably..."

222 It is never overtly revealed exactly how long Gibarian had been on the station in the (external) embedded fabula when Kelvin hears his recorded message in the primary fabula; however, judging from the age of his son in the embedded fabula, and contrasting it to the age of his son who appears as a "visitor" in the primary fabula, it is safe to assume that he had been there anywhere from a couple of months to a couple of years.
reason and anthropomorphic tendencies cause us to see God in the same human terms as our consciousness sees our bodies.\(^{223}\)

The third passage presents an exchange between Kelvin and Dr. Gordon (Dr. Sartorius in the novel), who has also been on the Station for an undisclosed, but apparently extended period of time. During her stay, it is implied from her speech that Dr. Gordon has had extensive first-hand experience with the extraordinary phenomena, or the visitors, which she believes are generated by Solaris.\(^{224}\) In the exchange, the two discuss what to do with the visitors, or the walking, talking memory manifestations of the people they once knew back on Earth. In Kelvin’s case, like the novel, his visitor is a recreation of his dead wife Rheya who commits suicide in the embedded fabula, or the narrative then. In the following passage, visitor Rheya represents the antecedent for the pronouns “she” and “her”:

Gordon: Kelvin. It is a mistake to become emotionally engaged 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 your mind. You provide the formula. Kelvin: She’s alive. Gordon: She is not human. Try to understand that if you can understand anything. Kelvin: What about your visitor? The one that you’re so ready to destroy without hesitation. Who is it? What is it? Does it feel? Can it touch? Does it speak? Gordon: We are in a situation that is beyond morality. Hmm? Your wife is dead. Kelvin: How do you know that? How can you be so definitive about a construct that you do not understand? (16).

Gordon’s speech affirms Gibarian’s mirror contention as it pertains to the mysterious appearance of visitor Rheya on board the Station. Gordon argues that Rheya is simply a reflection of Kelvin’s own subconscious mind and, therefore, not a “real” human.

By the time Kelvin utters the speech heard in the third passage, he appears to have somewhat softened his stance heard earlier in the primary fabula. Here, Kelvin echoes the real Rheya’s argument. Rheya contends that our attempts to anthropomorphize God do not negate God’s essential existence, but rather that such attempts are better understood in light of the fact that there are some constructs the human mind may not be able to entirely comprehend. And, as the fabula demonstrates, it is this inherent limitation that should prevent the characters from moral anthropocentrism. Ironically, it is Kelvin’s anthropomorphic tendencies, which cause him to see Rheya as more human, that now position him antithetically to Gordon’s morally anthropocentric assertion that visitor Rheya’s destruction would be an act “beyond morality” simply because she refuses to view Rheya anthropomorphically.

The preceding discussion aimed to establish a progression seen throughout the course of the fabula as it relates to the notion of human egocentrism, its practical manifestation of anthropomorphism, and the manner it problematizes the concept of moral anthropocentrism. In the following analysis of Solaris, I examine the visual and auditory components of the narrative text to better understand a fabula that confronts the practice of moral anthropocentrism within the context of the larger question: Who am I?

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\(^{223}\) Barnes, “Sartre’s Ontology” (1992), 13: “Consciousness and nothingness are dependent on being, but they are not being. Sartre’s ontology is a phenomenological description of the relation of this no-thing, which is consciousness, to the being on which it depends. Being, in Sartre’s view, if we describe it abstractly, is the condition of all revelation.”

\(^{224}\) The character of Dr. Gordon is a black female in the film and the character of Dr. Sartorius is (most likely) a white male in the novel. However, the similarity in the content of their speech (sometimes a verbatim match) and the function of their actions makes them, for all intents and purposes, the same actor.
Kelvin: Triple Narrative Agency

In both literary and filmic texts, Kelvin represents the anti-hero protagonist, character-bound narrator, character-bound focalizer, and actor in the fabula. However, the filmic Kelvin’s capacities as cn, cf, and actor are principally revealed through the auditory and visual features of speech and camera placement respectively.

Similar to his literary counterparts in Clockwork and Fight Club, the literary Kelvin functions as cn. From the beginning of the primary fabula, Kelvin’s capacity as cn is established when he states: “At 19:00 hours, ship’s time, I made my way to the launching bay” (1). In the film, cn Kelvin’s voiceover narration is not a device used as consistently throughout the course of Solaris as it is in both the filmic versions of Clockwork and Fight Club. Rather, while utilized dissimilarly in both cases, voiceover narration is used only once at the beginning and once at the end of the primary fabula. At the beginning, voiceover narration is audible in the form of cf Kelvin’s non-diegethic interior monologue as an act of memory when he recalls the sound of Rheya’s voice and we hear her say: “Chris, what is it? I love you so much. Don’t you love me anymore?” (1). In this instance, it appears that Rheya’s non-diegethic speech is an attributive sign of cf Kelvin’s internal focalization, or a temporary relegation from the external focalization of some anonymous agent that focalizes the primary fabula. Towards the end of the film, the viewer hears the first-level, non-diegetic speech of cn Kelvin who relays the memories of cf Kelvin’s (supposed) return to Earth after his mission to Solaris:

Earth. Even the word sounded strange to me now. Unfamiliar. How long had I been gone? How long had I been back? Did it matter? I tried to find the rhythm of the world where I used to live. I followed the current. I was silent, attentive. I made a conscious effort to smile, nod, stand, and perform the millions of gestures that constitute life on Earth. I studied these gestures until they became reflexes again. But I was haunted by the idea that I remembered her wrong, that somehow I was wrong about everything (24).

This second instance of voiceover narration definitively discloses that it is not some anonymous agent, but rather cn Kelvin who externally focalizes the events. Although Kelvin’s function as cn is not made as recurrently evident as his counterpart in the novel, this example establishes his cn status in the same capacity as his filmic counterparts in both Clockwork and Fight Club. The end of the passage, however, calls into question cn Kelvin’s reliability. This is a significant point because it forces the viewer to consider the veracity of the events seen previously in the fabula, which have all been filtered through Kelvin’s memory, which may or may not be accurate. Unlike the novel, cn Kelvin exhibits a certain awareness of the subjective nature of memory, which paradoxically allows the viewer to grant him a level of objectivity his literary counterpart was denied.

Just as speech in both the novel and film authenticates Kelvin’s function as cn, it also establishes his role as cf. For example, on page 1 of the novel, Kelvin’s position as cf is denoted by the visible, attributive signs of quotation marks:

As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I could see the luminous circle of the solitary dial. A voice echoed in my headphones: “Ready Kelvin?” “Ready, Moddard.” I answered.

In the film, the viewer is able to see that the internally focalizing cf Kelvin’s mouth remains motionless while s/he hears the first-level, non-diegetic speech of cn Kelvin. Conversely, the viewer can hear the second-level, diegetic speech of cf Kelvin whose mouth moves
in coordination with his speech. In addition, camera placement—and the POV shot in particular—functions as an attributive sign that indicates a temporary, hypothetical relegation from cn Kelvin’s external focalization to cf Kelvin’s internal focalization. For example, in chapter eight, cn Kelvin externally focalizes himself (cf Kelvin in the narrative now) wake up from his dream. We then see a POV shot of a blurred figure the internally focalizing cf Kelvin sees standing over him. Here, the attributive signs are indicated by both the subordinate position of the camera in relation to visitor Rheya and her out of focus image like the distorted vision of someone who has just awoken from a dream.

While camera placement functions as an attributive sign in the narrative now, it functions similarly in the narrative then, which is an external retroversion (the beginning of an embedded fabula) shown as a dream sequence. Quite ingeniously, this sequence makes perceptible the hypothetical existence of a “second” externally focalizing Kelvin, whom I will refer to as cn2, in the narrative then. In other words, a cn2 is really a cf in the narrative now who temporarily assumes the role of cn in the narrative then. In this retroversion, the viewer sees the unconscious thoughts of cf Kelvin in the narrative now who temporarily assumes the role of cn in the ensuing dream, or narrative then, when he remembers the first time he met his future wife – Rheya. In this sequence, the experiencing cf Kelvin appears to be externally focalized by the older, experienced version of himself who lies asleep on the Station in the narrative now. The manner in which portions of this sequence are filmed makes the appearance of the externally focalizing cn2 Kelvin’s act of remembering (while asleep in the narrative now) more overt.

This is accomplished through the use of a shaky, hand-held camera technique that mimics the actions of cn2 Kelvin as if he were in the room. For example, when cf Kelvin enters the restaurant where he meets Rheya, he is shot from behind as if someone is following him. Then, as cf Kelvin walks up to where Rheya sits, the externally focalizing gaze of cn2 Kelvin peers down at her while she peers up, not into the camera, but above the camera at cf Kelvin’s head. Then, the camera, which mimics the unsteady turn of cn2 Kelvin’s head, pans to reveal Gibarian across the restaurant holding his young son (whom the viewer sees later in the primary fabula), and then pans unsteadily back to Rheya who continues to peer above the camera’s gaze into cf Kelvin’s face. Thus, at certain moments within the retroversion, both the camera’s movement and its position in relation to the actors makes the appearance of cn2 Kelvin’s external focalization of events within the anachrony rather apparent.

However, this practice is not wholly consistent throughout the course of the dream sequence. There are shots within the retroversion where the shaky camera movement I previously attributed to the external focalization of cn2 Kelvin in the narrative now coincides with the POV shot ascribed to cf Kelvin in the narrative then. In these instances, the viewer sees examples of double focalization, when the external focalizer looks over the shoulder of the internal cf (Bal 1997: 27). For example, when the filmic subject first cuts to the dream, the viewer sees a POV shot of Rheya who sits opposite cf Kelvin on a train. This part of the sequence, also filmed in a shaky, hand-held fashion to emphasize a particular POV aspect, is slightly different. Here, in an example of the POV / SRS formation, Rheya looks directly into the camera in the first shot, and the reverse shot is that of cf Kelvin who also stares directly into the camera. In this way, the POV / SRS formation hypothetically sutures the viewer’s gaze with the couple’s gaze, which denotes a sense of focalization that resides internally (Silverman 1983: 202). However, also in this sequence, the POV / SRS formation is intermixed with shaky hand-held

225 Similar to her literary counterpart, visitor Rheya is the re-creation of cf Kelvin’s memories. However, unlike the novel, it is not the Ocean of Solaris that appears to be responsible, but rather the planet itself. In fact, there is no evidence that an ocean exists on the planet at all.
movement that hypothetically sutures the viewer's gaze to the external focalization of cn2 Kelvin in the narrative now.

It is the combination of both the SRS / POV formation and the shaky hand-held shots within this sequence that simultaneously sutures the viewer's gaze internally and externally and creates a sense of double focalization. In this case, the editing, camera position, and hand-held filming technique conveys the impression that cn2 Kelvin, at times, peers over the shoulder of the internally focalizing of Kelvin. This permits the viewer to glean a sense of both the separation between of Kelvin in the embedded fabula and cn Kelvin in the primary one and their implicit connection through memory. The separation is necessary to present the events that happened "then" to a younger Kelvin in the embedded fabula, while the connection is essential to reveal the relevance of past events on both cn Kelvin's psyche and events in the primary fabula that are happening in the narrative "now."

**Characterizing the Principals (A Threefold Analysis)**

The filmic characterization of the three principal actors who were at some point human in either the embedded or primary fabulas (or both), while unique and highly complex, is accomplished largely through the soundtrack features of speech and special sound effects, and the mise-en-scene features of actor expression, camera placement, and lighting. The fleshing out of each actor entails more than just a single model of dynamic characterization, but three distinct processes, some of which exhibit their own dynamic qualities. With these processes in mind, this section is primarily dedicated to a threefold, detailed characterization analysis of each principal actor. While such a threefold distinction is a hypothetical division, it is materially anchored to a single, visible actor who provides a common conduit through which the characters' shared experience flows.

As mentioned previously, the characterization of each actor takes on three divergent dimensions. In Kelvin's case, I refer to these dimensions as "post-suicide," "pre-suicide," and "Solaris" Kelvin. With regard to the first two Kelvins, the shared element is the human, or real Rheya's suicide shown in the retroversion seen in chapter twenty. At the beginning of the primary fabula in the narrative now, Rheya has already killed herself. Hence, the viewer sees the post-suicide Kelvin before s/he is introduced to the pre-suicide Kelvin. As the film opens, in a close shot of Kelvin's bedroom window, the viewer sees and hears that it is raining outside a minimally decorated, yet rather stylish apartment. Then, in a series of semi-close shots, we see post-suicide Kelvin who sits hunched over on his bed and exhibits a solemn, disconsolate expression.
The consistent sound of falling rain is also prominent throughout the sequence, which adds a rather portentous feel to the film’s opening and audibly supplements post-suicide Kelvin’s initial characterization as being one who is depressed.

The subsequent series of shots further develops his sense of isolation when the viewer sees a speechless post-suicide Kelvin walk by himself in a crowded street, and sit alone on a crowded train to get to his office where he works as a psychologist. Then, in a rather vacuous conference room lit in high-key, Kelvin leads a group of five people who appear to have suffered a traumatic experience, though the ambiguous content of their dialogue leaves the actual incidents quite vague. In this scene, Kelvin is shot from behind as he faces the five people who sit at a distance in a row directly across from him. Here, the placement of the camera, which is behind Kelvin but in front of the other actors, does not allow the viewer access to Kelvin’s face. Instead, it conveys Kelvin’s detachment and isolation from both his patients and the viewer. A similar arrangement of mise-en-scene can also be observed in Kelvin’s office where he is again shot predominantly from behind. Given limited access to his face, the viewer is once more distanced from the protagonist, a visual device that reasserts his loneliness and separation. On those occasions when the viewer is given access to his face, post-suicide Kelvin’s sense of isolation is maintained by his consistently disconsolate expressions, which are further reinforced by the ambiguous nature of his limited speech delivered in a rather monotone, robotic fashion.

On the other hand, pre-suicide Kelvin is positioned antithetically to his post-suicide counterpart. Revealed through post-suicide Kelvin’s dreams as external retroversions that provide glimpses into the world of the embedded fabula, the first time we see pre-suicide Kelvin is in chapter eight when he sits opposite Rheya on a train full of people. In this first close shot of pre-suicide Kelvin’s face, the viewer sees him smile, if only slightly, which he does several more times not only in this particular retroversion, but also in subsequent dream sequences that convey insight into his life with Rheya. In addition, the delivery of his speech is more animated and of a more personal, intimate nature when (in an attempt to impress Rheya) Kelvin quotes Dylan Thomas’ poem “And death shall have no dominion,” which serves as a subtle, intertextual insight into the film’s transcendent undertones that bubble to the surface in the final third of the film.226

Besides the differences in camera placement, expression, and dialogue delivery, there is also a distinction in lighting. The first retroversion alternates between the post-suicide Kelvin in the primary fabula and the pre-suicide Kelvin in the embedded fabula. Indicating this temporal alternation, the lighting seen in the narrative now is low-key, bluish, and cold, whereas the sets of the narrative then are lit with softer, warmer earth tones.

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226 Dylan Thomas, “And death shall have no dominion” (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2003), 49. The title and refrain of Dylan’s poem implies the transcendent quality of love: “Though lovers be lost love shall not; And death shall have no dominion.”
This vacillation between cool and warm tones is used consistently throughout the rest of the film in coordination with the movement between the narrative now associated with post-suicide Kelvin and the narrative then associated with the pre-suicide Kelvin. Through the stylistic use of the features of mise-en-scene, the characterization of the pre-suicide Kelvin carries a warmer, more intimate quality, while cool lighting adds to the disconnectedness of his post-suicide counterpart.

At the conclusion of the film, post-suicide Kelvin freely chooses to remain on the Station as it is being enveloped by the expanding planet and, consequently, the viewer is confronted with a third character – Solaris Kelvin. The characterization of Solaris Kelvin – a part of the planet itself – is slightly distinct from the two previously discussed. Toward the end of the film, the viewer is confronted with a sequence nearly identical to the one the filmed opened with: a shot of the window, it is again raining, and then shot of Kelvin who appears dejected, his head down, sitting alone on his bed. At this point the viewer is lead to believe post-suicide Kelvin is back on Earth, and that the greater part of the film may have been delivered as a retroversion in the form of an embedded fabula.

However, I argue that this is not the case. Although Kelvin is in the primary fabula, he is in fact not back on Earth, but rather has become a part of Solaris. Here, on Kelvin’s first level, nondiegetic voiceover speech anticipates the view that he was not on the “real” Earth when he states that his home planet has become unfamiliar to him. Since the viewer should be aware (from previous events) that Solaris is able to construct a reality as an artifact of one’s memories, the viewer should also be aware that s/he is seeing the reality of Earth as post-suicide Kelvin remembered it. In other words, Solaris somehow uses post-suicide Kelvin’s memories to assemble the reality that Solaris Kelvin exists within at the conclusion of the primary fabula. Consequently, the mise-en-scene is “nearly” identical to that seen in the beginning of the film until cf Kelvin returns to his apartment after work as he did earlier in the primary fabula. Although the mise-en-scene appears identical in this scene, he is actually shot from the opposite direction in a subtle form of visual anticipation that things are now slightly different.

Shortly thereafter, there are two more overt visual anticipations that the filmic space in which Solaris Kelvin finds himself in chapter twenty-four is a re-creation of its forerunner seen in chapter one. The mise-en-scene appears in exactly the same manner

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227 Sartre, Being and Nothingness (1956), 481. While Sartre believes that human beings consist of a “freedom which chooses,” he recognizes that: “The decisive argument which is employed by common sense against freedom consists in reminding us of our impotence. Far from being able to modify our situation at our whim, we seem to be unable to change our selves.” Soderbergh, Solaris (2003), 19. It is this notion of impotence that Kelvin struggles to defeat. Kelvin states: “I don’t believe we’re predetermined to relive our past, I believe we can choose to do it differently.”
in the two bookending chapters except for the photograph of Rheya that now hangs on Kelvin’s cabinet door. Furthermore, similar to the scene shown in the beginning of the film, Kelvin again cuts his finger on the seventh stroke while slicing a cucumber, only this time it quickly heals. This seemingly miraculous healing is given meaningful context when, earlier in the film, we saw visitor Rheya (also a creation of the planet) quickly heal from a rather grotesque wound. In light of this prior event, Kelvin’s healing explicitly anticipates the subsequent revelation that he, too, is now a product of Solaris.

From these visual clues, it appears that Solaris Kelvin is a permutation of both the post and pre-suicide Kelvins seen earlier in the film. Besides his miraculous healing ability, the most distinguishable signification of this third Kelvin’s characterization is seen when Kelvin—in a subtle, yet contextually powerful display of emotion—begins to cry as he embraces Rheya and smiles. In effect, the viewer is provided with overt visual entrance into his transformation from the somber, depressed post-suicide Kelvin to the warmer, more animated pre-suicide Kelvin in the form of our third version—Solaris Kelvin. Here, because post-suicide Kelvin freely chose to become part of Solaris when it enveloped the Station (by reaching out and taking the hand of the re-creation of Gibarian’s son), Solaris Kelvin is able to enjoy freedom from the haunting memories of Rheya’s suicide (an act he blamed himself for) because he now remembers things “right.”

Yet, it is unclear whether remembering things right means that Solaris Kelvin (because he is part of it) now has greater access to the truth of past events and has in some way corrected the possibility that he was “wrong about everything,” or that Solaris simply “makes things better” by somehow allowing Solaris Kelvin to forgive himself, a notion Solaris Rheya implies when she states: “Everything we’ve ever done is forgiven” (24).

Although slightly different than that of Kelvin, Rheya’s characterization also takes on three dimensions: “memory” Rheya in the embedded fabula as a product of Kelvin’s memories, “visitor” Rheya on the Station in the primary fabula as a creation of Solaris through its unexplained access of Kelvin’s memories, and “Solaris” Rheya seen briefly at
the end of the film, who exists in the primary fabula as a part of Solaris. In the narrative then, we are introduced to the dynamic memory Rheya who is initially quite lively and seductive when Kelvin first meets her, but then becomes more subdued and forlorn as the embedded fabula progresses and she drifts into an inexplicable depression. For example, when the viewer first sees memory Rheya sitting on the train, she is filmed with a frontal, semi-close shot as she stares into the camera, smiling slightly as she holds a doorknob in her hand. Although left quite ambiguous, the most reasonable interpretation of this shot is that it symbolizes her existence as a sort of “doorway” Kelvin must not only confront, but walk through if he is to free himself from a haunting past.

In the train scene, her direct gaze and the rather intimate camera placement conveys a sense of familiarity, which is simultaneously contrasted with mysterious doorknob. With this juxtaposition in mind, it is important to remember that the source of memory Rheya’s existence lies asleep in the primary fabula. In other words, as an extension of Kelvin’s dream, memory Rheya is merely the physical manifestation of how he remembers her as both familiar and strange, a notion further reinforced in the dream sequence itself. The viewer’s initial sense of familiarity is confirmed when (on subsequent occasions) she is shown smiling and dressed in warm, reddish tones.

As the filmic subject moves the viewer further along in the embedded fabula, dressed in cooler blue tones, memory Rheya mysteriously slips into depression and becomes suicidal.

The dynamic movement of her character is further visually reinforced through the use of both slow and regular motion photography when filming her in the embedded fabula. In addition, in an example of explicit alter-characterization, Gibarian says of her: “She’s a bit tricky, but, um, I guess she’s worthwhile” (9). This bit of speech serves to audibly highlight the dynamic nature of memory Rheya’s characterization in the narrative then as initially vibrant and seductive, but ultimately more aloof, complicated, and suicidal.

Similar to memory Rheya, visitor Rheya is also a product of cf Kelvin’s memories. Like the novel, in Soderbergh’s film – through Solaris’ unexplained access of Kelvin’s
memories – the viewer sees two re-creations of memory Rheya in the primary fabula. Shortly after she appears in his room, post-suicide Kelvin jettisons the first visitor Rheya into space because he has convinced himself that she is not human.

However, in similar fashion, she re-appears the following morning and it is at this point that Kelvin begins to accept her. This acceptance begins to establish Kelvin as a being-for-self, or a self-making agent, and is through his negative relations with his external mental projection of consciousness (visitor Rheya) that the world is revealed and made meaningful.

While both visitor and memory Rheya exhibit a dynamic character and look identical (both played by Natasha McElhone), visitor Rheya is a creation of Solaris. Her dramatic appearance on the Station is ingeniously anticipated when we see her make love with Kelvin in the narrative now, which is intercut with images from the sequence when memory Rheya makes love with Kelvin in the narrative then. Although Kelvin believes both sequences are part of his dream, the sequence from the narrative now is, in fact, actually happening as a functional event in the primary fabula, which is overtly revealed when he wakes to see visitor Rheya (who had just seduced him) still “existing” in the in the narrative now.

Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1956), 629: “By bringing Nothingness (or ‘no-thingness’) into the world, the For-itself can stand out from Being and judge other beings by knowing what it is not. Each for itself is the nihilation of a particular being.”

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228 Although we see two visitor Rheyas in the primary fabula, the characterization of the second is really just the extension of the characterization of the first and not a separate example of characterization altogether. Considering this point, I treat the characterization of the two visitor Rheyas as the characterization of one actor in the primary fabula.

229 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1956), 629: “By bringing Nothingness (or ‘no-thingness’) into the world, the For-itself can stand out from Being and judge other beings by knowing what it is not. Each for itself is the nihilation of a particular being.”
The notion that Solaris has somehow fashioned her from the residue of post-suicide Kelvin's memories is reinforced when she delivers the same monologue he remembers her saying in voiceover at the beginning of the film: "I love you so much. Don't you love me anymore?" (10).

Here, she is shown in a series of semi-close shots, smiling, and wearing a red dress. The content and delivery of visitor Rheya's dialogue, her clothes, her expressions, and the way she is shot in the primary fabula all parallel the way memory Rheya is initially characterized in the beginning of the embedded fabula. Similar to memory Rheya, visitor Rheya's expressions, the delivery of her dialogue, and the manner in which she is filmed conveys the dynamic modification in her personality from a vivacious, seductive woman to one noticeably more depressed.

In both cases, it is worthy to note that Rheya is really a product of Kelvin's memory; only in the narrative now Solaris is somehow accessing his memories to re-create the human version previously seen in the embedded fabula.

Towards the end of the film, Kelvin becomes a part of Solaris and the planet is somehow able to produce a third actor – Solaris Rheya. While still a creation of Solaris through Kelvin's memories, she is possibly a more precisely crafted doppelganger now that Solaris has better access to those memories because Kelvin has chosen to join the strange planet. In chapter twenty-three, akin to memory Rheya's introduction, Solaris Rheya is again shot from straight-on, close-up, and smiling. Although she now wears a blue dress, her appearance is not dramatically different in any way from the initially pleasing Rheya we saw in the previous two versions. Rather, it is the content and delivery of her speech that conveys she is now different, more complete, and seems to possess a kind of "Dylanesque," transcendent insight the other two did not.

For example, in utter disbelief of her reappearance, Solaris Kelvin asks her if he is alive or dead and she replies: "We don't have to think like that anymore. We're together now. Everything we've done is forgiven. Everything" (24). Delivered steadily and confidently, this is an insight she never possessed either as a human in the narrative then, or as a creation of Solaris in the narrative now. Although initially a bit unclear, Solaris Rheya's enlightened state makes more sense when the viewer learns – through an internal retroversion back into the primary fabula – that post-suicide Kelvin decided to become part of the planet. Thus, it stands to reason that at this point in the primary fabula, Solaris now has greater access to Kelvin's subconscious mind and can utilize Solaris Rheya to communicate what he desires to hear – either to comfort or manipulate him for reasons that are never disclosed.
Gibarian’s characterization, similar to the others, is also imaged in a threefold division: “video” Gibarian who exists in the primary fabula before Kelvin leaves for Solaris in the form of a tape-recorded message, “memory” Gibarian in the embedded fabula who exists as a product of Kelvin’s memories, and “Solaris” Gibarian in the primary fabula who (although still a product of memory) exists as a creation of Solaris on the Station. The first time the viewer sees video Gibarian is early in the film in the primary fabula when he mysteriously urges Kelvin, because of his personal “experience,” to come to Solaris and assist with something that has gone awry.\footnote{Soderbergh, Solaris (2003), 2. Although the viewer is unaware at this point in the fabula, it is later revealed that the “experience” Gibarian refers to is twofold: Kelvin’s “experience” with Rheya’s suicide and the fact that he has “experience” as a psychologist.}

At this point in the primary fabula, video Gibarian has been on the Station for an unspecified period of time and has obviously experienced some traumatic event or series of events. Although the content of his speech is left ambiguous from the absence of meaningful context gained from exposure to subsequent events in the primary fabula, the viewer should still sense that something traumatic has occurred. This is visibly reinforced by Gibarian’s disheveled appearance and his slightly erratic behavior, which is typical of someone who is both physically and emotionally drained. Video Gibarian appears tired, his hair is messed-up, and he is filmed with an intense overhead light that gives him a rather washed-out, weary appearance. What is more, the delivery of his speech is slow and labored as he stutters through his monologue. However, since this is the first time he appears in the film, the viewer may simply assume that, regardless of the circumstances, he always looks and acts this way.

The second version, or memory Gibarian, first appears in the narrative then in the form of an external retroversion. It is during the retroversion that the viewer sees memory Gibarian smiling, laughing, and holding his young son. Furthermore, his delivery is stronger, his appearance is neater, and the lighting is softer, which images him in a more comfortable, intimate manner. In view of this contrast, the viewer’s suspicions are confirmed that the traumatic experiences aboard the Station must have adversely affected the seemingly composed, well-spoken memory Gibarian and somehow altered his appearance and personality to create the more disheveled, stuttering video Gibarian seen earlier in the fabula.

Similar to Solaris Rheya’s first appearance on the Station, the third version of Gibarian appears as a blurred, out-of-focus image shot in extreme low-key with a dimmed spotlight above him that eerily illuminates the contours of his face, which notifies us that whoever he is, at least he looks somewhat like the two Gibarians seen previously. Here, the delivery and content of his speech is different from the preceding two versions. Specifically, he speaks more slowly and special sound effects give his voice a deeper, almost eerie quality. Like Solaris Rheya at the end of the film, the content of his speech lets the viewer know that Solaris Gibarian possesses an insight his predecessors did not:

In a clearly existentialist support of human freedom of choice, Solaris Gibarian’s dialogue echoes the insight of his literary forerunner who believed that: “Where there are no men, there can be no motives accessible to men” (134). Just like the novel’s Ocean, Solaris’ status as a non-human helps to maintain its secret identity that – in conjunction with the characters’ limited reasoning capacities and anthropomorphic tendencies – makes any attempt to understand the planet an exercise in futility. Thus, in Sartrean terms, Kelvin is “condemned to freedom” (1956: 485). At this point in the primary fabula, video Gibarian has committed suicide and the assumption is that because he performed the act on the Station just above Solaris, that he has somehow become a part of Solaris. As a result, like Solaris Rheya, it appears that Solaris Gibarian is also an instrument through which Solaris can either communicate with or manipulate cf Kelvin.

Although the third version resembles the previous Gibarians, his veiled appearance and altered voice creates the eerily stylized effect that gives him a rather alien-like quality. He is, however, more than just an alien that appears to be Gibarian. His speech reinforces this notion in that – although Solaris Gibarian utters the words – video Gibarian logically exists as the antecedent for the pronoun “you” in cf Kelvin’s question: “Why did you kill yourself?” Along these lines, he refers to “my” son who is on Earth, and not the re-creation on the Station seen earlier in the film whom we assume drove video Gibarian to kill himself. It is uncertain as to exactly what or who this Solaris Gibarian is, but what is certain is that (through the filmic features) he is imaged distinctly from the two seen earlier.

In each case, the actor’s distinctive threefold characterization brings to the forefront the importance of memory as the link between now and then – present and past. Since it is Kelvin’s memory through which Rheya and Gibarian emerge, it appears their particular characterization confronts him with his own past. It is through his external confrontation (driven by Solaris) with his internal memories that Kelvin is forced to deal with his past so that he may gain a deeper understanding of who he is now. Solaris externalizes Kelvin’s consciousness by physically manifesting his memories in a way that compels him to choose either to do things differently and positively modify his essence or reject the painful memories and suffer the anxiety that results from choosing not to confront his guilty past. In view of these points, when video Gibarian says “we want mirrors” (8), the mirrors he refers to reflect only those things we find best in ourselves. However, and this is the film’s philosophical rub, these reflections can never lead to a higher level of self-consciousness because we cannot transcend that which hinders us if we are never forced to confront it.

Characterizing Solaris

In both literature and film, oftentimes overtly non-human actors undergo the process of characterization (or personification as it often becomes), and this appears to be the case with Solaris. Like the novel, the film cautions against the anthropomorphic attempt to ascribe human characteristics to something that is not human so that it may be anthropocentrically understood. However, my purpose here is not to try and understand Solaris, but rather to demonstrate how the filmic subject itself ascribes human characteristics to the planet despite the film’s tenor of trepidation as it pertains to such pursuits. In light of this focus, the characterization of the film’s one visibly non-human actor, the planet Solaris, is implicitly accomplished largely through editing and the mise-en-scene features of special digital effects, and the soundtrack features of musical score and speech.
When Solaris is first seen at the end of chapter three, it is an effervescent shade of blue with what appear to be bluish-white electrical currents that either move gently over its surface or flare out high above it.\(^{231}\)

In the foreground of this particular sequence, the viewer sees a methodically moving ship (the “Athena”) during the last stages of its commute to the Station from Earth.\(^{232}\) Here, through both medium and establishing shots, the viewer is able to gain wide visual access to the striking arrangement of ship’s motion and the planet’s vivid color. Concurrently, while the diegetic sounds of the ship are inaudible, the viewer hears the ethereal, nondiegetic musical score (the “Solaris” music composed by Cliff Martinez) that audibly reflects Solaris’ cool, sleepy-blue color and the slow, fluid movement of the Athena.\(^{233}\) Although no camera was used to give life to the computer-generated images (CGI) that comprise Solaris, the mise-en-scene is presented as if the filmic subject is still manipulating an externally focalizing, hypothetical narrator. In other words, the CGI’s make it appear as if there is a camera being maneuvered in relation to that which it films, when in fact there is no camera. Since the effect is the same, I will continue to refer to camera placement as a feature of mise-en-scène with regard to the discussion of the film’s CGI work.

\(^{231}\) See also Soderbergh, Solaris (2003), 3. Although Solaris is believed to be a planet and not a star, the “flares” of Solaris are reminiscent of the solar flares that extend tremendous distances from the surface of the Earth’s sun.

\(^{232}\) Kelvin is in the “Athena,” which is a smaller vessel of its mother ship – the “Prometheus.” Both Athena (the goddess of wisdom) and Prometheus (the Titan chained and tortured by Zeus for stealing and giving fire to humans) hail from Greek mythology. Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, Vol. 1 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955), 44-45. Graves notes that Athena (Athena) was the patroness of Athens, which was a major wellspring of Western philosophical thought. This is relevant here because Athena’s weakness was that she, much like the post-suicide Kelvin, is ruled by reason and she is not typically emotional or compassionate. Kerenyi, Prometheus (1991), 3: “Among all the Gods of Greece, it is Prometheus who stands in the most remarkable relation to mankind. He presents a striking resemblance and a striking contrast to the Christian Savior. More than any other Greek god, he intercedes for mankind, makes common cause with men.” The significance of these mythological characters subtly adds to the film’s larger concept with regard to the “illusive” and sometimes “dangerous” nature of wisdom.

\(^{233}\) Soderbergh, Solaris (2003), 3. This particular sequence (the final stages of Kelvin’s voyage from Earth to Solaris) is a rather obvious homage to Kubrick’s 2001. This sequence alludes to the methodical, visibly stunning motion of a ship (making a commute from Earth to the Moon) that floats silently through the vacuum of space with only the nondiegetic sounds of classical music audible toward the beginning of 2001. This is the first of several intertextual references to 2001 occurring throughout Solaris.
The next time the planet is seen in chapter eight, the sequence consists of shots that are intercut between Solaris and post-suicide Kelvin who has fallen asleep. As the filmic subject edits back and forth, the camera repositions itself in relation to each actor. In this way, Solaris' status as an actor in the primary fabula is established as the filmic subject moves the viewer from longer, wider shots of both Solaris and Kelvin to closer, tighter shots of each actor. This inward progression visually signifies the action of Solaris as it advances deeper and deeper into Kelvin's subconscious. This action is further signified both visibly and audibly when we see the planet's electrical activity increase and its color transform as a deep shade of purple begins to weave its way into the once homogenous blue.

As the viewer moves further along in the primary fabula, the filmic subject continues to present establishing shots of Solaris, which has maintained its more purplish hue. In chapter fourteen, the filmic subject employs the same intercutting technique used in chapter eight, except the shots now alternate between Solaris and visitor Rheya (instead of Solaris and cf Kelvin). Here, as she stares out the window at the increasingly purplish planet, it appears that Solaris acts to transmit post-suicide Kelvin's memories of the time (presented in an embedded fabula) he learned of memory Rheya's abortion. In both instances, the increased electrical activity, the color change, and the editing between subject-actant (Solaris) and the object of its action (Kelvin and Rheya), are visual metaphors for the action itself, which is the act of accessing Kelvin's memory and the act of transmitting some of those memories to its creation – visitor Rheya.

Although it maintains its secret identity, Solaris' actantial relationships help the viewer recognize Solaris as an actor in the fabula while its changing appearances help to reveal it as a dynamic character in the story. The visual connection made through the stylized editing between Solaris, Kelvin, and Rheya helps form the complex actantial relationships. While maintaining its status as an actant, the planet's functional ambiguity reinforces its mysteriousness as a character because of its secret identity. In other words, like the novel, Solaris' secret identity as an actant is due to its status as a non-human, which problematizes the viewer's attempt to interpret both the visual and audible forms
of characterization because s/he lacks insight into Solaris’ motivation, which is one of the central problems addressed in the film.

An example of this consideration is expressed in chapter seventeen when Kelvin inquires: “What does Solaris want from us?” In response, Solaris Gibarian asks: “Why do you think it has to want something?” In this case, the dialogue highlights the ambiguous nature of Solaris’ function in the actantial relationship. Solaris is a non-human actor and perhaps not directed by any discernable aim. Accordingly, similar to its literary counterpart, the truth-value of Solaris as an actant is rather difficult to discern. Solaris’ status as a non-human actant frees it from teleological presuppositions that its thinking and action is oriented toward an aim.

Although the process of characterization is rather difficult to interpret in this case, there are instances when the process seems clearer because Solaris acts in ways that the viewer will logically construe as human. Character is the effect that occurs when an actor is endowed with distinctive human characteristics. However, Solaris is not a human being, but the characters – and those who view Solaris through their internal focalization – see it as one. Solaris has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics that make psychological and ideological descriptions possible. Character is intuitively the most crucial category of narrative, and also the one most subject to projection and fallacies. The first problem that arises when the viewer attempts to account for the character-effect is that of drawing a clear dividing line between human person and character (Bal 1997: 115).

In chapter twenty-two, it appears that Solaris is reacting to the destruction of its creations. This reaction is made visible in the form of a drastic change in color (from bluish-purple to reddish-orange) and a dramatic expansion in mass. This notion is expressed when “Solaris” Snow states: 234

Well, uh, you know, ever since we used the famous Higgs device Solaris started taking on mass exponentially. Um, you might have noticed how we’re a lot closer to it. Uh, that would be because everything within its gravitational field...
It’s pulling it in.

From Snow’s comments, the viewer logically assumes that Solaris is “taking on mass exponentially” in reaction to Gordon using the Higgs device to eliminate the visitors who can also be seen as the planet’s “children.” After learning this, the Station is enveloped by a now reddish-orange Solaris with more intense and violent electrical currents that flare even higher from its surface. Here, from Solaris Snow’s dialogue and the subsequent shot of the planet itself, the viewer assumes that Solaris is angry and that its color and expansion are indicative of human emotions.

However, there is still an inadequate amount of filmic information to sufficiently describe its function in this case. For example, there is not enough evidence to support the statement that Solaris (subject-actant) desires to (function) destroy the Station (object-actant) because its children were destroyed. Hence, the special effect of the secret actantial structure is magnified by the sequence at the end of the film that begins with a close shot of the reddish-orange Solaris (with its peaking flares) dissolve into a medium shot, then dissolve into a long shot, and then fade to black. Due to Solaris’ secret identity as an actor, and its mysteriousness as a character, the viewer is left asking

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234 Soderbergh, Solaris (2003), 23. “Solaris” Snow is the re-creation of the “real” Snow’s twin brother. Just prior to this passage, Solaris Snow’s “false,” or “lying” identity was revealed when he informed Kelvin and Gordon that when he appeared, the real Snow tried to kill him. So, in defense, Solaris Snow killed the real Snow. Similar to both Solaris Rheya and Gibarian, Solaris Snow seems to possess knowledge of events that their other versions could not. Bal, Narratology (1997), 206: “When an actor appears to be what s/he is not, this identity is a lie.”
two questions: What is Solaris? What does Solaris want? The elusiveness of the answers to these questions does not point solely to the film's failure to present adequate evidence. It also points toward the film's philosophical effect, which, like the novel, is to demonstrate the profound ambiguity that results from attributing human qualities to the other in an attempt to interpret its actions anthropocentrically.

Sequential Ordering

In Solaris, the non-linear sequential ordering of the fabula events revolves around several chronological deviations, or anachronies. The film's embedded fabula is revealed through post-suicide Kelvin's dreams, which are shown as external retroversions of past events he experienced with memory Rheya on Earth. The story's general rhythm is established by the consistent alternation back and forth between the primary fabula (narrative now) and the embedded fabula (narrative then). In the film, there is roughly a 4 to 1 ratio of time spent in the primary and embedded fabulas respectively. I only mention this to indicate that the general rhythm established through the use of consistent anachrony signifies the relative importance of events revealed in the embedded fabula as they relate to those seen in the narrative now.235

While the consistent retroversions establish rhythm, they also provide insight into not only post-suicide Kelvin's, but also visitor Rheya's broken sense of self in a modulation that makes the viewer experience it with them on an emotional level.236 With this point in mind, I explore how editing and the mise-en-scene feature of lighting and the soundtrack features of diegetic speech and background noise signify the particular ordering of events. I also examine the soundtrack, which functions as a stylistic convention that both visually and auditorily separates the fabulas while, at times, auditorily linking them through both non-diegetic (musical score) and diegetic (speech and background noise) sound.

The film begins rather uneventfully in the primary fabula in chapter one as Kelvin sits dejectedly on his bed. Events progress chronologically until chapter eight where, several hours after Kelvin arrives on the Station, he falls asleep in Gibarian's bed. At this point, the viewer begins to hear the ethereal, non-diegetic Solaris music begin to fade in and see several shots that alternate between Kelvin and Solaris. The non-diegetic music anticipates the fact that Solaris is about to interact with Kelvin's subconscious, which is visibly signified by the alternating SRS formation. In this way, the beginning of the first retroversion and its movement into the embedded fabula is also Solaris' act of entering Kelvin's subconscious, which is revealed through the inclusion of shots that now alternate not only between Kelvin and Solaris, but also between Kelvin in the narrative now and events in the narrative then when he first met Rheya. As the filmic subject continues to edit back and forth, the music builds to increase suspense, a point visibly reinforced by the slow-motion photography used to film the beginning episodes seen in the embedded fabula. So, it appears that the viewer is presented with a first glimpse into the

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235 Bal, Narratology (1997), 101. Bal indicates that, in literature, it is possible to determine the amount of pages devoted to a particular episode. There is a filmic equivalent to such a proposal, which is the amount of shots devoted to a particular episode. Both serve to indicate the amount of time covered in the fabula, and such exercises find their relevance in the notion that the amount of time spent covering episodes in the embedded fabula is direct reflection on their importance in the text.

236 Bal, Narratology (1997), 83: "The movement back and forth from present to past to present is the story's basic rhythm. These delicate alternations contribute to the story in a very meaningful way."
narrative then through the use of external analepses that occur outside the time span of the primary fabula.

The primary and embedded fabulas are paradoxically separated and linked through both features of mise-en-scene and soundtrack. In particular, the mise-en-scene features of set design and lighting visually mark the separation between the primary and embedded fabulas. For example, the set of the narrative now (Gibarian’s bedroom on the Station) is constructed mostly with chrome and stainless steel and lit with a cool blue light.

Conversely, the sets of the narrative then (a restaurant, a train car, and Kelvin’s apartment) are built with less angular, earth-toned material and are generally lit in a warm, reddish-gold lighting.

Acoustically, the diegetic hum of the Station’s air conditioning / filtration system in the narrative now is quite distinct from the diegetic noise of dialogue and background conversation in the narrative then.

While the aforementioned features separate the two fabulas, there are times when narrative now is audibly linked with narrative then. Not only does the musical score anticipate the act of Solaris “tapping” into Kelvin’s subconscious, but it also audibly links the two fabulas. Specifically, the non-diegetic Solaris music begins in the narrative now, but extends into the events seen in the narrative then and continues through the beginning of the retroversion as shots alternate between the two fabulas. In fact, the non-diegetic music is the only sound that can be heard as the filmic subject edits back
and forth between narrative now and narrative then at the commencement of the retroversion. It is only after the alternating shots have ceased - and the viewer is firmly entrenched into Kelvin’s subconscious dream in the narrative then - that the nondiegetic sounds of the music fades and the diegetic sounds of the narrative then (dialogue and prominent background noise of the other restaurant patrons) fades. So, while editing, lighting, diegetic dialogue and background noise provide the visual and auditory signifiers that distinguish narrative now from narrative then, the nondiegetic musical score audibly signifies the connection between the two worlds. Solaris’ actions are made possible through Kelvin’s subjective subconscious as an act of involuntary memory - a dream.

The middle of the sequence, however, begins to move back toward the narrative now and the filmic subject effectively reverses the viewer’s entrance into the world of the embedded fabula. The filmic subject quickly cuts back to a close shot of Kelvin who continues to lie asleep in the primary fabula while, concurrently, the viewer continues to hear the diegetic sounds of his conversation with Rheya and the conversational background noise of the restaurant grounded in the embedded fabula. Furthermore, briefly back in the primary fabula, the nondiegetic Solaris music subtly begins to fade-in over the continuing diegetic sounds of the narrative then. This portion of the sequence effectively begins to remove the viewer from the embedded fabula as the diegetic sounds of the narrative then overlap with the nondiegetic sounds of the narrative now. As the nondiegetic music continues to build, the viewer again sees shots that alternate from Kelvin and memory Rheya’s first sexual encounter in the narrative then, and Kelvin who opens his eyes in the narrative now only to see the blurred image of a person we assume Solaris has created. The overt revelation of this miraculous creation is audibly anticipated by the intensifying music that climaxes when a powerful chorus of violins is heard at the same time we see visitor Rheya’s face come into focus in the narrative now.

At this point, the filmic subject continues to employ the features of the soundtrack component to gradually move the viewer back toward a more complete existence in the world of the primary fabula. The diegetic sounds of the narrative then fade out until the viewer, once again, only hears the ethereal, nondiegetic musical score as the filmic subject cuts back and forth between pre-suicide Kelvin and memory Rheya’s first sexual encounter in the narrative then, and post-suicide Kelvin and visitor Rheya’s first sexual encounter in the narrative now. Soon thereafter, as the viewer lands firmly back into the primary fabula, the filmic subject ceases to alternate shots between the two fabulas and the nondiegetic music fades out and, finally, the viewer is returned to a sleeping Kelvin with only the diegetic hum of the Station heard in the background. Here, because only the nondiegetic music was audible in both sexual encounters, the effect is to trick the viewer into a belief that post-suicide Kelvin dreamed them both. Consequently, when visitor Rheya reaches over and touches his face in the primary fabula, the effect is typically one of shock for both the viewer and Kelvin who leaps from his bed at the discovery that she physically exists with him in the narrative now.

While the dream sequence seen in chapter eight is the viewer’s first glimpse into the narrative then, it is certainly not the last. In chapter thirteen, the filmic subject again alternates between fabulas. This time, however, it appears that the viewer has entered visitor Rheya’s subconscious (as opposed to Kelvin’s). As she sits and peers out the window at Solaris, the shots alternate between her and the still purplish-blue planet. Yet – unlike the retroversion presented in chapter eight – the viewer does not hear the nondiegetic Solaris music, but only the diegetic hum of the Station. Since she is a creation of Solaris, I speculate that the nondiegetic music that previously signified Solaris’ actions, is absent because the planet is not forced to tap into the mind of a human, but simply transmits memories it had already captured to its creation – visitor Rheya. In this case, rather than the nondiegetic music of Solaris, it is the diegetic hum of the Station
that serves as an audible link between narrative now and the events in the narrative then. There, the viewer learns that memory Rheya is pregnant. The filmic subject then cuts to a semi-close shot of her face in the primary fabula as she reacts to the dramatic events in the embedded one. Here, her reacting facial expressions in the narrative now and the diegetic sounds of the narrative then – which become nondiegetic sounds in the narrative now – both visually and audibly link the two fabulas in a procedure that continues throughout this particular anachrony. As opposed to the retroversion seen in chapter eight when the viewer was immersed in a dream, Solaris has already tapped into Kelvin’s memories and is able simply to transmit them to Rheya. Therefore, unlike before when the nondiegetic music was fully replaced by the diegetic sounds of the narrative then, here, the diegetic sounds of the Station in the narrative now are never fully replaced, but coexist with the diegetic sounds of the narrative then in a kind of limited anachrony where the viewer “never really leaves” the narrative now. I define a limited anachrony as a chronological deviation that never fully removes the viewer from the primary fabula. In this instance, the consistent diegetic sounds audibly trap the viewer on the Station, while editing visually transfers the viewer back and forth between narrative now and narrative then.

The events revealed in the embedded fabula appear to be something only memory Rheya could know. This problematizes the assertion that Solaris simply transmits Kelvin’s memories to her. However, at the end of the film, on Kelvin states: “I was haunted by the idea that I remembered her wrong, that somehow I was wrong about everything” (23). By his own admission, the subjective nature of his memory is explicitly revealed and, therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Solaris is simply transmitting Kelvin’s inaccurate memories to visitor Rheya. Because post-suicide Kelvin was not physically present to see her actions when she found out she was pregnant, it is likely that his memories are a collection of assumptions in an effort to “fill in the gaps” when the reality of the situation may have been quite different. This theory does explain the disconnection visitor Rheya’s feels as a result of her experience as a sentient being in the primary fabula and Kelvin’s memories of her in the embedded fabula. After the retroversion seen in chapter thirteen, Visitor Rheya states:

Rheya: Chris, I’ve got to talk to you. Kelvin: What’s wrong? Rheya: I don’t understand what’s happening. And if I do understand what’s happening then I don’t think I can handle it. Kelvin: What do you mean? Rheya: I mean I’m not the person I remember. Or at least, I’m not sure I am. I mean, I do remember things but, I don’t remember being there. I don’t remember experiencing those things.

Post-suicide Kelvin’s memories tell visitor Rheya that the fact she is the memory Rheya she partly remembers is a result of Solaris’ transmission of Kelvin’s memories. However, the reality of her existence in the narrative now seems antithetical to this notion. Although she is obviously confused, her statements begin to make sense in light of the fact that visitor Rheya in the narrative now did not experience the events in the embedded fabula. Rather, she only receives what Solaris transmits to her through Kelvin’s memories, which are subjective and likely somewhat erroneous because he has most likely filled in the gaps of what he believed to have happened. In the film, more so than the novel, it is the use of external and, in some cases, limited anachronies that reveal events of the past. In this way, these anachronies serve as entrances into the lives of the characters in the embedded fabula, which assist the viewer’s interpretation of events in the primary one.237

237 Bai, Narratology (1997), 90. External retroversions often provide indications about the antecedents, the past of the actors concerned, in so far as that past can be relevant for the interpretation of events.
Filmi cc Spac e an d Implie d Temporal Derivatives

The composition of filmic story space in Soderbergh’s Solaris is conveyed through the mise-en-scene features of camera position, camera movement, set design, and special visual effects. As I will show, it is through the conveyance of filmic space that the general sense of time is made known.

In Solaris, camera position, the feature of mise-en-scene chiefly responsible for the measure of visual entrance into the world of filmic space, is used in three distinct situations: scenes filmed outdoors at existing locations that tend to be filmed with close and semi-close shots; scenes filmed in interior sets that tend to be filmed with medium shots; scenes that exist as special visual effects constructed from CGI’s that combine close, medium, and longer establishing shots. In order to better understand these distinctions, it would be helpful to briefly examine the film’s particular brand of set design.

Shot in widescreen, Solaris is filmed primarily within specially built interior sets designed to express a sense of the near future.238 Due to the rather revealing aspect ratio of widescreen, camera placement becomes an even more vital feature because of its capacity to reveal a large amount of visual information. Because the aspect ratio allows for greater visual entrance, a feature such as set design takes on added importance. On Earth, in both fabulas, we see minimalist, yet stylishly decorated sets that appear familiar, as if they could exist in the present (early twenty-first century). While these interior sets appear familiar, they also contain pieces of technology that appear unfamiliar, or more advanced than present-day machinery. For example, while the design and decoration of post-suicide Kelvin’s apartment appears rather familiar, his television is a thin sheet of clear material with multiple luminescent images that can be viewed from both the front and the back. Although contemporary technology has certainly made great strides in home entertainment (i.e. high definition and plasma televisions), no television yet exists quite like the one seen in chapter two. Since the film’s special effect of the near future is conveyed largely through interior set design and visual effects, it makes sense for the filmic subject to grant greater visual access to these sets through the medium (as opposed to close or semi-close) shots largely atypical of interior sequences in most films.

In contrast to the wider, medium shots used to film interior sets, the filmic subject employs close and semi-close shots to film the outdoor, existent locations on Earth. This technique is first seen at the beginning of the film when Kelvin walks a crowded city street on his way to work. Here, in a semi-close shot, we see Kelvin in the foreground with the bottom three floors of a building and the heads of the other commuters in the background. While the medium shot takes moderate advantage of the wide aspect ratio in relation to the indoor sets, conversely, the close shots employed by the filmic subject are utilized to block visual access to outdoor, existent locations that are not as easily manipulated. In this way, the viewer is granted considerably less visual access to the scene and is more easily manipulated into believing an intended sense of time through the creation and exploitation of a subtler clue such as a sleekly futuristic costume design.

Not only do special visual effects contribute to the look of the interior sets, but they are also responsible for the composition of entire exterior establishing shots. For example, we are confronted by an entire CGI world when we first see the Athena. This sequence begins with a close shot of Solaris, and then the hypothetical camera slowly

238 Kolker, Film, Form, and Culture (1999), 78-79. Cinemascope and other anamorphic processes turned aspect ratio into “widescreen,” or a 1:2.35 aspect ratio. This means that for every 1 inch along the vertical axis, there are 2.35 inches across the horizontal axis of the image. In theaters, Solaris was shown in widescreen.
pulls back to an establishing shot that reveals Athena in the foreground, the station in the mid-ground, and a fuller view of Solaris in the background.

In this case, however, although it is an exterior shot, it is unlike the ones seen on Earth in that it is a CGI and therefore more easily manipulated and controlled. As a result, the filmic subject is at liberty to reveal more space, rather than confine it in order to maintain the viewer's assumption that s/he is seeing a film set in the near future. Whether or not the sets are existent locations, specially built, or CGI's, the filmic subject – through the manipulation of the features of mise-en-scene – effectively conveys a sense of the near future.

Conclusion

To begin this chapter, I presented a series of dialogical passages that established a progression of ideas that led ultimately to moral anthropocentrism, which I defined as the notion that morality should only apply to human, rather than alien, or more non-human forms of life. At the center of this concept is Gordon's belief that visitor Rheya is a mere object, a non-human that exists in a sort of spiritual limbo beyond morality and, consequently, her destruction is justified on these grounds. This ethical decision does not stem from Gordon's denial of Rheya's existence as an object, but rather from her refusal to see her as human. Justifying his actions on similar grounds, Kelvin destroyed the first visitor Rheya. Gordon – who refuses to confront its deeper implications – seems less affected by her conduct. On the other hand, Kelvin soon realized that his actions produced within him a guilty conscience. Only Solaris Gibarian and (eventually) Kelvin realize that the visitors are not merely anthropomorphically projected reflections, but reflections of the unknown world within us that we have failed to understand.

In this way, Solaris (through the visitors) shows them that the first step to a cursory comprehension of the external world is to come to terms with the world through the realization that the external other is the great internal pedagogue. Hence, they will never be able to understand that which is truly alien until they first recognize how their finite, egocentric nature prevents them from realizing that it is the other that allows them to truly see themselves. It is only through his experience with both visitor Rheyas that Kelvin comes to this recognition. This cognitive shift is manifested by his declaration:

239 Soderbergh, Solaris (2003), 16. In reference to visitor Rheya, Gordon tells Kelvin: "She is not human, try to understand that if you can understand anything."
"How can you be so definitive about a construct you do not understand!" (23). Echoing memory Rheya’s comments during the dinner conversation in the embedded fabula, Kelvin realizes that it is our inherent limitations that should prevent us from acting in a morally anthropocentric manner as it relates to the visitor he, unlike Gordon, sees anthropomorphically.

Exemplified by the revealing exchange between Gordon and Kelvin, it is precisely this ethical dilemma that forms the philosophical center around which the features of mise-en-scene and soundtrack are organized. For example, the film is constructed with a non-linear sequential ordering of fabula events that consists of several chronological deviations in the form of external analepses. The story’s general rhythm is established by the consistent alternation back and forth between the primary and the embedded fabula revealed through post-suicide Kelvin’s dreams, which are shown as external retroversions of past events he experienced with memory Rheya on Earth. The chronological transference between past and present forces the viewer, like the principal characters, to confront the nature of her or his own existence. For example, Kelvin’s dreams in the narrative then both problematize and confront the viewer with the end of human existence in the context of memory Rheya’s suicide. Conversely, his experiences in the narrative now problematize and confront the viewer with the beginning of human (and non-human) existence in the first visitor Rheya’s miraculous appearance on the Station. This event compels us to consider the possibility that there is more to existence than we may have originally imagined.

In addition to its deeper thematic function, it is within the movement between the fabulas that the actors are primarily characterized through the soundtrack feature of speech and the mise-en-scene features of actor expression, camera placement, and lighting. Each actor, characterized in three distinct ways, is grounded through their shared experience as they grapple with the nature of their own existence. For this reason, I separated each actor into three discrete characters. For example, I divided Kelvin the actor into the characters of: “post-suicide”, “pre-suicide”, and “Solaris” Kelvin. As all three, Kelvin is forced to confront his own existential definitions and assumptions. At the end of the film, Solaris Kelvin asks Solaris Rheya: “Am I alive or dead?” To which she replies: “We don’t have to think like that anymore.” The transcendent quality of Rheya’s answer implies that Solaris Kelvin has nearly achieved the next stage in the evolution of his self-consciousness. Likewise, Solaris Gibarian also appears to possess a kind of transcendent enlightenment with regard to the nature of existence that the other two versions of himself did not. Gibarian demonstrates this by his urging Kelvin to explore a completely new way of thinking because he knows that Kelvin – at that point in the primary fabula – lacks the capacity to understand the larger forces acting upon him.

It is the film’s one visibly non-human actor, Solaris, that primarily drives Kelvin’s existential confrontation. Signified through editing, special visual effects, and the musical score, Solaris confronts each character with the mysterious nature of existence through the products of their own memories. Although Solaris’ secret identity as an actor keeps its function hidden, it stands to reason that it challenges the characters to achieve a higher level of self-consciousness through the products of their memories. In other words, I argue that the visitors present ethical dilemmas the characters must choose to resolve.

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240 Soderbergh. Solaris (2003), 16. The revealing exchange: “Gordon: Kelvin. It is a mistake to become emotionally engaged 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 your mind. You provide the formula. Kelvin: She’s alive. Gordon: She is not human. Try to understand that if you can understand anything. Kelvin: What about your visitor? The one that you’re so ready to destroy without hesitation. Who is it? What is it? Does it feel? Can it touch? Does it speak? Gordon: We are in a situation that is beyond morality. Hmm? Your wife is dead. Kelvin: How do you know that? How can you be so definitive about a construct that you do not understand!”
and the choices they make determine the measure of positive modification to their essence. What is more, the practical outflow of this modification is the evolution of self-consciousness. In Kelvin’s case, he does not anthropomorphically oversimplify the other, but rather chooses to see humanity in the other and tries to preserve it. Unlike Gordon who resists seeing humanity in Rheya, Kelvin resists objectification when, in answer to her question: “But am I really Rheya?” he states: “I don’t know anymore. All I see is you” (19). It is this release of his former egocentric pretenses that allows him to see the other as human and achieve a kind of understanding self-consciousness by confronting his own culpability in the real Rheya’s suicide. However, it is ultimately his choice of self-sacrifice to remain on the Station as it is being enveloped by Solaris that allows him to transcend to an absolute self-consciousness, which is implied by Solaris Rheya at the end of the film.

In the novel, Kelvin’s realization that internal understanding lies in the other, or visitor Rheya, begins to free him from the cycle of fixed existence. However, his aim to fully understand the other, and therefore himself, is misguided because his finiteness prevents him from doing so. The unresolved tension between the literary Kelvin’s humanistic denial of the supernatural and his existential responsibility based on a limited reasoning capacity is what prevents his functional transcendence. Thus, he ultimately defines himself, and humanity, to being a clock that measures time. On the other hand, the filmic Kelvin does not end up in a state of anxiety because his attempts to fully understand the other is not frustrated by anthropomorphic theorizing. Rather, he transcends into a more absolute self-consciousness by choosing to see humanity in the other, which allows him to avoid the moral anthropocentrism Gordon exhibited. While the literary Kelvin clings to a measure of hope that “the time of cruel miracles was not past,” the film demonstrates Kelvin’s more transcendent absolute self-consciousness that exists in a place where “Everything is forgiven. Everything” (24).

241 Sartre, Being and Nothingness (1956), 625: “Ontology itself can not formulate ethical precepts. It is concerned solely with what is, and we cannot possibly derive imperatives from ontology’s indicatives. It does, however, allow us to catch a glimpse of what sort of ethics will assume its responsibilities when confronted with a human reality in situation.” Barnes E. Barnes, “Key to Special Terminology,” in Being and Nothingness (New York Philosophical Library, 1956), 630: “Since there is no pre-established pattern in human nature, each man makes his essence as he lives.”

242 Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions (1957), 15: “Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.”