

Outer Space – Frontier or Ultimate Suburb?

by Michael Ventura

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Note, 2008:

Timothy Leary and William Burroughs were in the twilight of their heyday when they breezed through Austin in 1976 with their new proposal for humanity: L5. Through selling shares in a cryogenics corporation they intended to raise funds for the building of a space colony (L5) halfway between the Earth and the Moon, using minerals mined from the Moon. The proposed colony would exist without “interference” (Leary’s word) from the nations of Earth. It would be a utopia in which, free of planetary conflicts, humanity would be perfected. For the Austin Sun this was cover-story material, complete with interviews of both Leary and Burroughs. In the same issue, I commented on the L5 notion as a backdrop for my review of Andrei Tarkovsky’s Solaris.

“The experimental method of science might be said merely to have widened the area of man’s homelessness.”

-- Loren Eiseley, *The Unexpected Universe*

“Space! The Final Frontier!” exhorts William Shatner on every re-run of *Star Trek*, using a phrase that Gene Roddenberry cribbed from John Kennedy. Yet historically the word “frontier” can’t be trusted. It’s been used as bait for the audacious and creative few in any generation who are willing to break new ground. Behind them, always, have been the governors and the merchants, the quantifiers and the analyzers: all those who own, organize, and use.

The L5 dreamers seem to envision everything in their space colonies but the only thing that will be there for sure: a battery of guided missiles.

They will be encouraged to talk and talk and talk, selling the taxpayers on a dream, soft-peddling a NASA with an idealistic image, because NASA needs to attract idealists: historically, idealists have come up with the greatest technological innovations.

Idealists control those innovations for as long as it takes them to explain what they’re doing to their financial backers. With the defeat of Hitler imminent, and the new intelligence reports that, far from being on the brink of an atom bomb, Germany hadn’t even been concentrating on such technology, Einstein and his fellow physicists sent a telegram pleading with the White House to stop American atomic weapons research.

So much for frontiers and idealism.

There will always be some agile hack, incapable of the original idea, but capable enough, once it’s explained to him, to develop it in any direction. He will always do what he’s paid for.

Doubtless the L5 researchers will demand some agreement on paper that the results of their work be used for peaceful purposes. Doubtless they will get it. Historically (that troubling word, that depressing perspective), their political sense will be shallow enough that they won't know they've been outflanked till it's much too late, and all they can do is make some important verbal protest. The White House will get its telegram.

Perhaps, deep down, they know all this, for genius at its root is amoral: its prime directive is to express itself. Historically, again, it has found any excuse to go on with its projects, and has accepted rationalizations on a political level that would seem asinine if subjected to scientific-style scrutiny.

So at worst we'll send the Pentagon into orbit.

But at best, not much more seems envisioned than the most grandiose suburbia of them all, the final move out of this dirty, dangerous, noisy, crowded neighborhood: the slum we've made of Earth. As the original inventors of suburbia assumed that they'd have nice lives and raise good kids, and their kids would go to college and be everything their parents could never be... so the pet dream of the L5ers is that being in space will cause a genetic evolution that will mean a basic benevolent change in man's nature: on a grander scale, with a niftier jargon, it's the same suburban fantasy.

Perhaps a better wisdom would be what you can find on the bathroom wall in most hipster bars from Santa Cruz to Bangor: "Wherever you go, there you are."

But... that handy but oversimplified truth does violence to the secret hope of the mythic journey: that the place you get to will reveal, in some undeniable way, the nature of what you are, and the revelation itself will change you.

Such, at any rate, is the alternative explored by the Russian science-fiction film *Solaris*, directed by Andrei Tarkovski, from a novel by the most popular sci-fi writer in Europe, Stanislaw Lem.

"We don't want other worlds, we want a mirror," says Snouth, the oldest of the three scientists hovering in a space-station about Solaris' great Ocean. "We don't want to explore Space, we want merely to extend Earth's boundaries. Science? Nonsense. In this situation genius and mediocrity are equally helpless."

The *Solaris* situation is this: it's as though after the failed *2001* expedition there were other, successful expeditions. The scientists of *Solaris* have ironed out the technical bugs that plagued *2001*. When Kubrick's spaceman plunged into his psychic Jupiter he and no means left to survive; all that was possible was to succumb. The film ended in a wash of Cosmic Symbols, with the man – whose humanity was never very pronounced – overwhelmed, his identity obliterated.

For the three *Solaris* scientists, computers are servile, machines perform precisely. There's no question of survival. So they haven't the luxury of succumbing, when Cosmic Symbols start to put on bodies and walk around their laboratories and climb into the beds.

The planet, you see, is one huge Ocean, and the Ocean is a living brain. It has the power to conjure forth, from their subconscious, the figure from the past with whom they most desire reconciliation. It creates that living being right there in the space-station with them – human, but with extraordinary powers.

Brought back to life for the scientist Kelvin is the woman he loved long ago, who committed suicide. But now she can tear through a steel door to be with him, and when

she tries to commit suicide again by drinking liquid oxygen she only dies for a little while before she is reborn. Snouth, watching her painful rebirth, turns away with a line delivered so laconically it's funny:

"I can't get used to these resurrections."

Snouth's other funny line is when Kelvin insists that this Ocean-created being *is* really his wife: "Kelvin, don't turn a scientific problem into a bedroom farce."

But can that be helped? This is a Jungian Ocean with a Freudian sense of humor. Yet when one can have a physical, human relationship with the embodiment of one's own lost innocence, then one has traveled far beyond the boundaries of anything mapped by psychology.

Solaris will not be as popular as *2001* or *The Man Who Fell to Earth* because it is not as sensational. Though its cinematography is as deliberate and often as beautiful, its special effects do not involve technique: they are special effects of meaning. Special effects of character.

As we watch Kelvin and the Ocean-created woman Hari, as we glimpse the dwarf who runs around the laboratory of another scientist, in both cases we are not seeing two characters, but an extension of a single character. Kelvin's worn despairing face, and Hari's face of freshness and young sorrow, seem complete only when one is looking at the other.

It is a meditative effect, and it proceeds with great slowness on the screen – a much slower pace than any Western film I can think of in a long time. Tarkovski's visual sense is almost more a painter's than a film director's. Slowly, he moves his camera about the untended station, with its blank walls and random rubble – bits of devices here and there on the floor, clutter, unexplained gadgets. Against this backdrop, which would be sterile if it were orderly, he photographs, with the relish of a portrait painter, the incredible faces of these Russian players. We're used to watching American actors and actresses who usually look like they were produced for Salem commercials. The faces of the men and women of *Solaris* are literally etched with their identity – or, to use a less psychological word: their souls.

The total impression is as though we're having the sort of dreams one has in a state of half-sleep.

We hear the rich Russian voices over the often faulty subtitles... we feel the brooding deliberation of the camera's eye, we want to rush it along, we cannot... we even get restless and impatient, wanting the dream to speed itself up. It doesn't. It merely rests for a bit, now and again, in an inexplicable image, as when for some unexplained reason there must be thirty seconds of weightlessness:

Kelvin and Hari are in the station's library. Holding each other, they begin to float, and a lit candelabra floats near them... yet, as in a dream, it doesn't make sense, because some things in the room float while others don't; all the books remain still except one volume, an edition of *Don Quixote* open to that famous engraving by that painter whose name I forget... the entire story, the entire reality, is held suspended... visually and psychically it is a deeply restful moment. One thinks of it later, at the end of this film – if it can be said to have an end – when Kelvin says, "All that remains is to wait. For what? I don't know. Fresh miracles."

It is the sort of film that creates this sort of musing:

There is that insistent legend that Paradise is the magic city we left long ago. Left untended for so long, it must now be in ruins. What would the return to Paradise be now, a return only to ruins, stumbling over the broken pieces of our lost selves... as these scientists are driven to frenzies by their "guests"?

For that is perhaps the ultimate question of any exploration: is our secret wish to seek the new, or to return? It is what Freud asked of the act of sex. Are we trying to discover out there, in Space, what we tried and failed to create here?

The meditative air of *Solaris* leaves room for many such questions, though there are no guided missiles in that space station. Would a healthy culture need to go anywhere, to leave Earth? And if the very reason we're leaving is our collective disease, how can we not take it with us?

I think of what a twelve-year-old Indian boy in Oklahoma told the researcher Robert Coles:

"When the white man landed on the moon, my father cried. He said the day had to come, he knew; but still, he cried. I told him there weren't any Indians on the moon, so stop crying. He said nothing for a long time. Then he said our spirits were there, too – and he was sure Indians were crying up there, and trying to hide, and hoping that soon they'd go back to Earth, the white men, where they make so many people unhappy, and where they don't know what to do next. But my aunt told me, 'The moon is yours to look at and talk to, so don't worry.' And I don't."