

Falmouth University

FLM 130 : Criticism, Analysis and Theory

Choose one film by a director who is often analysed as an auteur. Usually critics and scholars see some repetitive themes and filming techniques as indicative of any director's authorial reputation. These should appear across most of the author's films. Describe and critically assess how your selected film reveals its director's authorship.

Film Analysed : *Solaris* (Tarkovsky, 1972)

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How do we identify a director as an 'auteur'? Since its birth, film has struggled to define itself as art due to its origins as a gimmick and due to it being produced collectively. However, theorists and critics, such as Astruc, Truffaut and Sarris, have argued that film is in fact art because a director's personal views and personal meanings can be imprinted onto film as if he or she were its sole creator – this critical approach to film is known as the 'auteur theory'. The auteur theory has been spoken of for many decades and by many theorists and its criteria has never been changed, only developed. Evidence for the 'auteur theory' can be seen in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* (1972) through his dislike of science-fiction, his mistrust of science and his love of nature.

“Auteur Theory” is usually seen as a critical approach used when a film is identified with its director, and the film production is not seen as a collaboration between a crew of film-makers but a personal creative piece by an author: the director. Further, directors whose films “show a consistency of style and theme” are often referred to as “auteurs” (Buckland 1998: 80).

This idea was spoken of several decades before the term 'auteur' appeared in *Cahiers Du Cinema* in the 1950s, the point cinephiles usually associate as the beginning of “auteur theory”. Regardless of the fact it was not labelled as “auteur perspective/theory” and lacked its later importance, there were several instances from the 1920s onwards where films were reviewed and critiqued for their directorial creativity. For example, Louis Delluc's analyses from 1922-1923 had a clear interest in consistency in directors' styles, citing Griffith, Chaplin and Marcel L'Herbier (Hill 1998: 312). Another example is Paul Rotha, who in the 1930's, used authorial principals to suggest that some directors rise above mass-production and the industrial conditions of film-making to create something unique (Hill 1998: 312).

However, the auteur perspective didn't truly exist until 1948 when Alexandre Astruc

proclaimed his idea of “The Camera-Pen” in “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde – La Camera-Stylo”. This kick-started the auteur perspective which would be embedded into film criticism and analysis in the 1950s by the *Cahiers Du Cinema* critics. Astruc believed that a new form of cinema had arisen in which “the individual artist could express his or her thoughts” (Cook 1985: 119) using a camera the same way a writer uses his pen. In other words, instead of film being passive entertainment we have directors venting their personal views and concerns into their films, however subjective they may be; a personal vision.

Looking at Tarkovsky's film *Solaris*, we can see evidence of Astruc's idea of the director conveying his personal thoughts. Tarkovsky was born within the Soviet Union, which - officially - strived to create a worker's paradise where everyone is equal within society. The official artistic style was Socialist Realism, so something that could be considered “for the individual” and “personal” within art was highly frowned upon. However, regardless of these circumstances, Tarkovsky strived to create films that were personal to him and his views; we can see this in *Solaris*.

Throughout *Solaris*, Tarkovsky shows his distrust for science, mostly through the character Sartorius. He is the most 'scientific' of the three scientists aboard the space-station and he is represented as cold-hearted and untrustworthy. We are first introduced to him not long after Kris arrives aboard the station; Kris goes to Sartorius' quarters – the door is covered up with an opaque dirty curtain and we can hear a diegetic banging and shadows running behind the door, as if a struggle is happening. At first Sartorius refuses to open the door, but Kris' threats force him; however, he slithers through the narrowest gap before slamming the door shut again. Sartorius remains on the right side of the screen throughout their conversation; we can see that his hair is very unkempt and his lab coat is dirty and stained with brown blotches, which could suggest blood, signifying him as dangerous. He speaks to Kris in a curt tone and even rather arrogantly, as if he sees

himself as superior to the psychologist: “you’re obviously over emotional” - Sartorius. He remains with his back against the door as something bangs against it; suddenly the door is pushed open by a dwarf in an dirty operation gown – suggesting that this person is being abused, even dissected – and Sartorius violently grabs him and throws him back in. This negative portrayal of a scientist, and science itself, connotes Tarkovsky's distrust and fear of science.

This is reinforced in the library scene. Sartorius attacks Kris and Snaut – the other scientist left aboard – for abandoning scientific objectivity, which he champions, but his words are undermined by his stressed, jittery performance which climaxes with him breaking his glasses as he fiddles with the nervously, shown in high-angle close-up.

Sartorius is a direct representation of Tarkovsky's concerns about science as we are made to dislike, distrust and ultimately pity Sartorius; the source novel represents him quite positively. Tarkovsky's negative representation of science in a science-fiction genre enforces Astruc's idea of authorship. The director uses film, as a language, to portray his personal views and beliefs; he achieves this because cinema is “a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language”(Alexandre Astruc qtd. in Monaco 2000: 409)

Astruc's “*La Camera Stylo*” was more focused on a doctrine of function than form (Monaco 2000: 410), however in the early 1950's the critics of *Cahiers Du Cinema* extended Astruc's idea, focusing more on film form and practice, and the filmography of an auteur. In 1951 Bazin, one of the critics, wrote his article “De la Politique des Auteurs”, where he argued that the main desire of the Cahiers group was to find the Shakespeares and the Rembrandts of film (Staples 1966-67: 3), championing film as art instead of mass-produced entertainment. Francois Truffaut, another critic from “Cahiers du Cinema”, took it further, launching an attack on what he called 'traditional cinema' in his 1954 essay “Une certaine tendance du cinema francais”. He thought that French films throughout the 1940s

and 1950s were too studio-based and too star, budget and script driven – these films' successes depended completely on the quality of the script (Buckland 1998: 85). This is where the idea of auteur vs. metteur-en-scene comes from; an auteur is a director who imprints their views into their work cinematically, regardless of the script (and whether they wrote it or not) whereas a metteur-en-scene is simply a film-maker who mechanically puts a script onto film (Buckland 1998: 87). Truffaut thought that it was impossible for the 'Tradition of Quality' and 'cinema of auteurs' to peacefully co-exist (Staples 1966-67: 2), meaning that film was either art or entertainment, not both.

We can see evidence of what Truffaut meant in *Solaris*: Tarkovsky refused to obey the Government's intentions and avoided making *Solaris* genre-based propaganda. *Solaris* was supposed to be the Soviet Union's response to Kubrick's heavyweight sci-fi *2001 : A Space Odyssey* (1968) on the cultural battlefield of the Cold War (Hyman 1976: 54) – however Tarkovsky disregarded science-fiction conventions and official expectations regardless of the film's context and also rejected much of the original sci-fi novel, underlining his dislike of the genre. Johnson and Petrie say that Tarkovsky had a distaste for 'hard' science-fiction (1994: 100) and even Tarkovsky himself said, “My decision to film does not denote any affection for the sci-fi genre ” (qtd. in Turovskaya 1989: 59). This is most obvious in the film's mise-en-scene. Once Kris arrives at Solaris space station he is greeted by banks of broken electronic equipment that spark violently - Kris pulls a lead out to avoid a fire. He then enters the main circular corridor of the station, only to find rubbish and bits of broken and abandoned machinery littering the floor, not the shiny, clean, ground-breaking design we as an audience would expect from the genre. The futuristic décor looks used and broken, as if this expensive, cutting-edge technology is completely worthless.

Two of the biggest conventions of science-fiction are spaceships and scientific activity – however, in *Solaris* we have hardly either. We only once see the exterior of the

space-station, which looks like a toy against the backdrop of Solaris itself, which completely dominates it; we also never see starry backdrops outside its windows. Crucially, Kris' space journey lasts less than a minute and is represented by a close-up of his helmeted face spinning slowly while zooming in and out; conversely, Berton's car journey -a montage of long duration shots (a medium shot of the back of the driver's head, a close-up of his face and shots of Tokyo traffic through the car window) lasts almost five minutes and is accompanied by an 'otherworldly' electronic soundscape. Tarkovsky himself stated that he wanted to film the space journey "the way they film a tram stopping in an ordinary film" ; he did not see why an audience needed to be faced with something technologically outlandish at the expense of the human element (qtd. in Turovskaya 1989: 59). Due to all these elements, we have no sense that 'space' as a location is important – it is simply a way to isolate these characters for the film's purposes.

This point is reinforced by the mise-en-scene of the library, a central location within the film. Instead of it being high-tech, as in the book, it is an old carpeted and wood panelled library filled with cultural artefacts (leather-bound books, 16th century paintings and old brass instruments).

Tarkovsky went against what was expected of him by various bodies, he even condensed a list in his diaries of what he was told to change and refused (19. 94: 49-50). He kept to his own vision, making his work 'art' regardless of the political pressure he was under, keeping to the criteria that Astruc and Truffaut created for the 'auteur'.

In 1962, Andrew Sarris translated and transformed "La politique des auteurs" into the "auteur theory" in his essay "Notes on the auteur theory" in *Film Culture*, and "turned it into a critical method of evaluating films" (Cook 1985: 114). Sarris kept the original criteria of the 'auteur' that Astruc and Truffaut created. However for his book *The American Cinema : Directors and Directions 1928-1968* he focused more on what Bazin said about

an auteur's theme or style passing from one film to the next; in his brief summary of “La Politique des auteurs” he said:

The *Politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next (qtd. in Monaco 2000: 410)

Sarris believed that to christen someone as an 'auteur' you had to look at his or her body of films, instead of the film as individual. For his book, Sarris watched 6000 films by 200 directors and looked for what each film by each director had in common, be it theme or technique, to determine whether a director is a strong or weak auteur (Buckland 1998: 89). Having said that, he still believed that an auteur critic should be concerned with the uniqueness and details of each film, regardless of the fact that they were looking at a whole body of the director's films (Buckland 1998: 89); one film could make a director an auteur but it would be his past and future films that could make him be seen as a 'strong auteur'.

Tarkovsky had several re-occurring themes within his work, as we can see in his films *Solaris*, *Stalker* (1979) and *Mirror* (1974); one of them being the positive representation of nature. The beginning of *Solaris* is set on Earth, a section Tarkovsky added himself that never existed in the book and which lasts almost forty minutes. The very first shots in the film are long duration shots of weeds in the river – then we cut to a shot of a thriving pond, then a close-up of Kris' leg, then we pan up his body, which is surrounded by greenery, seeing him at peace in the nature around him. All these shots of the lake and the trees seem over-saturated and are accompanied by enhanced diegetic sounds of birds chirping, water running and the rustling of leaves and trees. There is no dialogue, no character or narrative development; just long duration shots of nature and Kris revelling in it for the first couple of minutes. This is also the case for the 'Zone' in *Stalker*, where the Stalker rolls in the over-grown green landscape around him in bliss, as does the doctor in *Mirror*, who falls off a fence into a garden, only to laugh happily and

comment how plants feel and think more compared to humans. Further along in *Solaris*, it begins to rain and everyone flees indoors, but Kris makes a point of looking up at the rain and slowly sitting down in a chair, embracing the weather. This is the only time that Kris actually looks happy in the film; most of the time, even with Hari, he does not show his feelings – so the fact that nature can bring his more human-side out suggests that he is only at home with nature and that its beauty can effect even those who seem emotionless. We must note that his family home has plenty of land, surrounded by forests and lakes, and has a stable and horse. The house, just like the library, feels old and is filled with cultural artefacts such as a head-bust and paintings ; it is of wood with many plants and pet birds inside.

Throughout these three films, when there are sequences of nature, the editing is often very slow paced – as if we were being made to stop and think, like the Doctor says in *Mirror*. Tarkovsky often spoke about the 'infinite', which meant that we should contemplate our spirituality and life itself, and his love of nature and his portrayal of it throughout his films could be seen as a representation of the infinite.

Against all these arguments for auteurism there have been a number of theorists who have argued against it due to film's collaborative nature. V.F Perkins argued that:

film-making involves many separate personalities, distinct and sometimes conflicting intentions, varying abilities and imperfect control. A movie cannot be fully and uniquely one man's creation (1993: 158).

Auteur critics acknowledged this fact, but, as stated by Buckland (1998: 82), and by Jeff Menne (1976: 36): an auteur must make all major decisions within film-making – such as cinematography, input into pre-production and post-production processes. Although Perkins has a valid argument, it is never truly applied to other collaborative arts such as theatre, music and even art. Taking Shakespeare for an example – in general, most would consider him an artist (an 'auteur') due to his plays, however most fail to mention actors,

costume and make-up artists and stage designers. Some may argue that without Shakespeare's writing there would be no play, however it swings both ways – without the actors and crew there would also be no performance. The same theory applies to film: without the director there would be no film, but without the cinematographer, the script writer, the actors and so forth there would be no film. So why is it that only film is attacked for its “auteurism” instead of all the other arts? Perkin states himself that film is seen as low-brow and hasn't established itself as 'art' precisely because so much film is so popular, and there is an in-built prejudice in critics against anything popular (1993: 161-162). Bazin himself harbours a similar feeling in his 1957 article where he says that the 'politique des auteur' has an “essential critical truth which the cinema needs more than all the other arts” (qtd. in Staples 1966-67: 5).

In conclusion, Tarkovsky's style and themes in *Solaris*, and in *Stalker* and *Mirror*, fit the criteria of what auteur theorists and critics consider makes a true auteur. His personal concerns over science are portrayed through the negativity of the core scientist and his actions. Tarkovsky also disregarded what the government wanted, which was a genre-based prestige film, to follow his own vision and create 'art' instead of propaganda. Furthermore, he also shows his underlying love for nature throughout his body of work. In Astruc's, the *Cahiers* group's and Sarris' eyes, Tarkovsky is clearly an auteur.

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