

# Remade, and not for the better

Solaris, directed by Steven Soderbergh; Far From Heaven, directed by Todd Haynes

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Steven Soderbergh's newest film, *Solaris*, is a science fiction work, based on the 1961 novel by Polish writer Stanislaw Lem and the earlier film version (1972) by Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky.

A therapist, Dr. Chris Kelvin (George Clooney), still distraught by the suicide of his wife some years before, is sent on a mission to a space station orbiting the planet Solaris. A scientist there, a friend of his, has appealed to him to come, without offering any explanation for the apparent urgency. When Kelvin arrives he discovers that the remaining inhabitants of the space station (his friend is dead) are being visited by apparitions. Kelvin's dead wife, Rheya (Natascha McElhone) appears to him, apparently a creation of his own memory of her. Various conflicts ensue, between Kelvin and the other crew members, between Kelvin and the apparition. In the end, he chooses to remain on Solaris with his "wife."

Lem (born 1921) is a gifted and imaginative science fiction writer, but his social outlook was largely shaped by the trauma of Stalinism. Like nearly every other eastern European writer or intellectual of the time, he identified Stalinism with socialism and drew cynical and banal conclusions. The comments are stereotyped and predictable: "Naturally, I never loved totalitarianism and all the ideas of making mankind happy always seemed crazy to me. I tried to expose their absurdity. That is the source of numerous failures of my heroes on the path of attempting to improve the world, which always ended very badly."

A critic writes: "Evolution provided by history is, for Lem, merely a consoling myth: he visualizes the future only to find more proof to support his suspicion that human fate has remained and will remain essentially the same, regardless of all the successes of technology and social progress." (Stanislaw Baranczak in *Contemporary World Writers*, 1993) Such views inevitably color his approach to science and social relations. Lem may not consider himself a religious believer, but then what is the source of this unchanging, implacable human fate?

Tarkovsky reportedly filmed *Solaris* as a response to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which he found cold and sterile. Tarkovsky had little interest in science fiction, and tried to excise that element as much as possible in early versions of the script, encountering Lem's objections. The director had his own preoccupations, a quasi-Christian pantheism. The film has its fascinating and tedious elements, in nearly equal measure.

What is the point of Soderbergh's film? One may well ask.

A significant portion of *Solaris* is taken up by Kelvin's memory of his relationship with his wife, culminating in her taking her own life. In one brief but crucial scene, a dinner party, Rheya defends the notion of a "higher intelligence," a shamefaced expression for God, against her scoffing husband and his friends. Ah, we understand! Rheya is a spiritual person, her husband a cold, rationalistic technocrat. The film will essentially involve the process by which, with the help of the "intelligent planet," Solaris, Kelvin overcomes this rationality and embraces the

unknowable.

The film, like Tom Tykwer's *Heaven*, makes little sense unless one interprets it in mystical terms. There are three human beings alive on Prometheus, the space station. One, Snow (Jeremy Davies) is apparently driven mad by the super-natural occurrences; a second, Gordon (Viola Davis), rejects them completely and returns to Earth. Only Kelvin learns to accept the other-worldly on its own terms, so to speak. He finally grasps, at considerable cost, that there are some things that simply cannot be explained or understood by the intellect ... and so forth.

This acceptance, however, only comes after several initial rejections (like Peter's denials of Christ) and an internal struggle. (Clooney looks noticeably distraught throughout much of the film.) When Rheya first appears, Kelvin cannot believe his eyes. He ends this first reunion by sending his wife's ghost away into space. When a second version of her learns of this, she kills herself again. Given yet another chance, Kelvin makes it right.

Tarkovsky no doubt saw himself pursuing the spiritual in human existence against the soulless, corrupt and morally bankrupt Stalinist leadership. He had a certain "oppositional" basis for his activity, countering the reactionary caste of petty bourgeois bureaucrats, although the weaknesses of *Solaris* and his later films (with the possible exception of *The Mirror*) demonstrate the ultimately untenable and dramatically unconvincing character of that kind of opposition.

To what, however, is Soderbergh opposing himself? Is the chief difficulty in the US at present an overabundance of officially-sanctioned rationality, a vulgar and deadly scientism that is stifling the spiritual instincts? The question hardly needs to be asked in a country where the pseudo-science of "creationism" is taught in many high school classrooms and politicians invoke "family and faith" at every turn.

Whether he means to be or not, Soderbergh is floating with this generally polluted current.

How seriously the filmmaker takes his interest in the ineffable and the unanswerable one does not know. The other constant in the film, and perhaps a more deeply-felt ingredient, is an extraordinary level of self-involvement. The scenes of romance and courtship have their nearly self-parodic element. This is supposed to be love among the urban professionals in the not-so-distant future. Some fantasies apparently die hard. The sequences resemble particularly well-made television commercials for diamond jewelers or luxury automobiles: attractive participants, designer outfits, flashes of skin, rainy nights, warmly-lit rooms.

In any event, the conclusion of *Solaris* has an unpleasant, misanthropic quality. Kelvin chooses to remain with his ghost-wife as they sink into the God-like planet, cutting himself off from the rest of humanity. Whose idea of heaven is this, to be isolated with one other human being for eternity, at the expense of everything and everyone else?

This mix of self-absorption and facile mysticism is the outlook of countless American petty bourgeois of a certain age and income and degree of complacency. It is not very appetizing or enlightening. Nothing serious can be produced on this basis.

*Far From Heaven*, from Todd Haynes (*Poison, Safe, Velvet Goldmine*) is a superior film, but weak in its own right. It is also a “remake,” of a peculiar type. The work takes its inspiration from the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) in particular.

In Haynes’s film, Cathy Whitaker (Julianne Moore) is the picture of a contented American homemaker in 1957 or so. Living in Hartford, Connecticut, she is married to a sales executive, Frank (Dennis Quaid), and mother to two children. Beneath the surface, however, unhappiness lurks.

Frank, we quickly learn, has homosexual longings. He goes to therapy to “cure” himself. When this fails to take, he has to admit his sexuality to Cathy and himself, thus ending the union. She, meanwhile, obviously unfulfilled in her marriage, has turned to her black gardener, Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert) for friendship and support. Their relations or suspected relations create a scandal in both the white and black communities and eventually Deagan leaves town. Cathy is left on her own in a cold and forbidding climate.

*Far From Heaven* is done with intelligence and care. Haynes has remarkable abilities with actors, camera and set design, as he has demonstrated in the past. But what is he attempting to evoke?

The director has chosen to be inspired by Sirk’s films, but several points need to be made. First, Sirk came to Hollywood as a refugee from Germany, where he had been a director of left-wing theater before Hitler’s rise to power. He found himself saddled with often terrible scripts, in so-called “women’s pictures,” at Universal Studios and did the best he could to make something of them, with a certain degree of success. His films represent, at their strongest, a critique of a materialistic, money-hungry, conformist America, which crushes what is best in people.

As Andrew Sarris has noted, the “essence of Sirkian cinema is the direct confrontation of all material, however fanciful and improbable.” For the purposes of this discussion, we can set aside the question as to whether that was entirely a strength. There are certainly those who make more of Sirk than he merits.

In any event, a filmmaker working in the post-studio film world faces different conditions. He or she is not constrained in the same fashion, although there may be other, less immediately visible constraints. The German director, R.W. Fassbinder, another Sirk admirer, “remade” *All That Heaven Allows* as *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* in 1974. Fassbinder created a story about a middle-aged German woman who falls in love with a younger immigrant man, much to the consternation of her family and friends. It is a film that resonates with the social and moral problems of the day.

Haynes’s approach is quite different. He has chosen to redo Sirk in the latter’s own cinematic language (one thinks of Gus Van Sant’s ill-fated version of *Psycho*). His approach is far too often a smirking one. The characters speak like figures out of 1950s television programs: “Gee whiz, pop” and so forth. In an interview, actress Julianne Moore observes that after the camera stopped rolling during a number of takes, the actors and director would burst into hysterical laughter. What more does one need to know? Neither Sirk nor Fassbinder would ever have shown such contempt for their own creations.

Haynes is a member of Act-Up, the radical gay group, and the work provides a radical’s-eye view of American life. Not all aspects of the film are done in a smirking fashion. Haynes picks and chooses. He brings a certain seriousness to the gay and race questions. And, of course, the predicament of a homosexual or a black-white couple in a provincial American city in the 1950s was a cruel one. That cruelty, however, was bound up with the overall oppressiveness of capitalist society. On that

question, Sirk and Fassbinder were quite clear. Haynes’s work would encourage either self-pity or the striving for privileges by select groups.

After all, the logic of *Far From Heaven* is peculiar. Apparently the only flaw in Cathy and Frank’s married life is his sexual orientation. There do not seem to be any other problems nagging Cathy before Frank’s self-discovery. Was she happy in her life? Are the other, fully heterosexual couples happy? Was America happy? One has the impression Haynes does not care terribly. After all, he picks and chooses the characters to whom he gives human qualities. Cathy, Frank and Raymond have recognizably human features. The rest of the film’s characters are ciphers, caricatures or near-monsters.

It is not clear, for example, why the director has turned the couple’s children into cartoon figures, merely to be laughed at. One suspects one does know, unhappily, why he makes every white citizen of Hartford—a city with a history of civil rights struggles taken up by both blacks and whites—an angry racist. It is one thing to point to the existence of racism as a real factor in American life, it is another to see the entire population consumed by such sentiments. How is the subsequent mass movement for democratic rights to be explained?

One is never clear whether the film is intended as a critique of 1950s life or its reflection in popular culture. The distinction may not matter to Haynes, but that may be precisely part of the problem. *Far From Heaven* leaves American life and society essentially untouched. The film is simply not alive to the enormous social contradictions existing under the surface in the 1950s. Such large objects cannot be detected on Haynes’s radar screen, because of his orientation to “identity politics.” He is straining to see something else entirely. The ironic result is that Haynes, the master ironist, is half-taken in by the image that Hollywood and official society projected of America in the 1950s.

His film works in the opposite direction of the best cinema of the day. While the most astute directors (Welles, Hitchcock, Preminger, Sirk, Minnelli, Ray, Aldrich) were suggesting that all was not well, that a deep anguish and dissatisfaction with postwar conditions existed, in fact, that the promise of the postwar period had not been fulfilled, Haynes now argues that America in the 1950s was *in general* a contented and unified nation, happy in its conformism and racism. The director, one might say, is extremely sensitive to everything but the most critical issues.



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