

The Other as the mirror of the self in Solaris

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Abstract:

Hence the hyperreal Rheya is what television is to Baudrillard- an image which has replaced and monopolized the real. The copy or hyperreal Rheya as an image has displaced the original Rheya and dominated Kevin's consciousness so he can no longer distinguish between the original and the copy and indeed Kevin falls more deeply for the copy than the original. This also reflects the earlier thesis that we conquer civilisations to find mirrors of ourselves only to become more obsessed with the simulations of ourselves than original man. Hence the image or copy is more compelling and grips and exercises more control over us than the original and we are in the realm of Baudrillard's hyperreal where we can no longer distinguish between image and object or original and simulation. Hence this is what happens when youth are addicted to the internet and videogames- the simulation has replaced reality and we are firmly in the grip of the hyperreal.

Keywords: Lem; Solaris; Hyperreal; Original; Simulacra

The novel Solaris reads like the perfect precursor to Baudrillard's theories on simulation in which the copy or image of the original has effaced the original and there is no longer any possibility of distinguishing between the copy and the original. In the case of Solaris, Kevin is visited by his beautiful ex-wife Rheya only it is an alien reproduction of her from the cosmic ocean Solaris sent as an instrument of interrogation to probe Kevin's conscience. Kevin though fearing this alien simulacra of Rheya initially begins to fall for the copy Rheya and

there is no longer any ability on his part to distinguish between the original Rheya and the copies that the ocean Solaris sends him in order to probe his conscience and consciousness. What begins as a feared encounter between Kevin and an alien Other becomes a means of revisiting an old love whose suicide he had caused through neglect and whom he eventually falls more for. It could be said that the copies of Rheya that the ocean Solaris sends him hold more power over him than the original Rheya whom he had neglected and caused to take her life in his younger days.

“We take off into the cosmos, ready for anything, for solitude, for hardship, for exhaustion, death. Modesty forbids us to say so, but there are times when we think pretty well of ourselves. And yet, if we examine it more closely, our enthusiasm turns out to be all sham. We don't want to conquer the cosmos, we simply want to extend the boundaries of Earth to the frontier of the cosmos. For us, such and such a planet is as arid as the Sahara, another as frozen as the North Pole, yet another as lush as the Amazon basin. We are humanitarian and chivalrous: we don't want to enslave other races, we simply want to bequeath them our values and take over their heritage in exchange. We think of ourselves as the Knights of the Holy contact. This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. A single world, our own, suffices us, but we can't accept it for what it is. We are searching for an ideal image of our own world: we go in quest of a planet, of a civilization superior to our own but developed on the basis of a prototype of our

primeval past. At the same time, there is something inside us which we don't like to face up to, which we try to protect ourselves, but which nevertheless remains, since we don't leave Earth in a state of primal innocence. We arrive here as we are in reality, and when the page is turned and that what is revealed to us- that part of reality which we would rather pass into silence- then we don't like it anymore. (Lem, 1961: 72)

In seeking out alien Others thus, what we wish to see is a reflection of Man which we can appropriate for ourselves, anthropomorphizing other galaxies in terms relative to Earth, but what we are sometimes confronted with is something that not merely mirrors but disturbs us about ourselves in revealing the ugly areas of our own nature, as Solaris projects Rheyra as a memory from his past that he would rather conceal, a wife whose suicide he caused through neglect. Yet while confronted with the darkness of his past Kevin also manages to overcome this darkness and transcend it into love for this alien Other that is a projection from his memory, indeed he eventually loves the alien Rheyra more than the original Rheyra and is forced by his conscience to deal with the ugliness within himself that had driven the original Rheyra to suicide. Baudrillard's thesis that the image or the copy has effaced the real applies here, indeed the copy comes across as more real and intoxicating than the original.

In the *Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard once again reminds us that with the advent of television, as in hyperreality, the subject-object distinction collapses and we are immersed in its reality – “television becomes a control screen” (13). He uses the metaphor of driving to relate our relation to television- no longer controllers of a device, we are now subjected to its control, we become a “computer at the wheel”, not a “drunken demiurge of power” (13). He argues that television creates a space of hyperreality that overtakes reality and hence displaces

metaphysics. Our subjectivities are dissolved- we are no longer ‘subjects of interiority’ (13) in control of television but subjected to the controls of multiple network satellites. Television becomes an intrusive actor in our domestic space- that overtakes our lives from work, consumption, play, social relations and leisure. Baudrillard further explains that the hyperreal displaces the real and renders it useless. Social relationships within the home are destroyed. Reality is ‘minutuarized’- television replaces our desire for human relationships or ideals and renders organic and real bodies and events superfluous (*Ecstasy* 14). The obscene fascinates us, and replaces the organic with the machinic. In this regard, advertising also becomes an omnipresent reality – materializes its ‘obscenity’- monopolizes public life with its exhibition. This is also precisely what television shows are: Simulations and the triumph of the hyperreal and mediated reality. Reality television demonstrates Baudrillard's thesis that the obscene lies in the fact that there is ‘nothing to see’ and that the spectator, rather than desiring difference from others, desires sameness with the subjects that we witness on television. As Baudrillard notes in *Ecstasy of Communication*, all that matters now is to resemble oneself, to find oneself everywhere, multiplied but loyal to one's formula. It is the universe of the fractal subject, dreaming of a formula to reproduce himself to infinity (*Ecstasy of Communication* 41). Consequently, television incarnates our desire for sameness and our fascination with the obscenity or pornography of objective reality. It is the obscenity of the hidden that is suddenly overexposed and visible. In this dissolution of the exterior and the interior, Baudrillard likens the contemporary subject to the schizophrenic – who cannot distinguish between inner and outer and is subject to all the vagaries of the external world (*Ecstasy of Communication* 14). The subject's sense of individuality and distinction from external objects is dissolved. He/she becomes obscene, as is the world. The subject is total prey of hyperreality, a pure screen, a switching center for all networks of influence. For Baudrillard,

both the body and the 'self' (both conform to images) can be divided and commodified, as governed by the capitalist/advertising code (Ecstasy 42). To see the 'self' as a technology possessed by the mediascape, as Baudrillard does, is to become schizophrenic. Baudrillard's subject is therefore, completely de-centred and dominated by the image.

Hence the hyperreal Rheya is what television is to Baudrillard- an image which has replaced and monopolized the real. The copy or hyperreal Rheya as an image has displaced the original Rheya and dominated Kevin's consciousness so he can no longer distinguish between the original and the copy and indeed Kevin falls more deeply for the copy than the original. This also reflects the earlier thesis that we conquer civilisations to find mirrors of ourselves only to become more obsessed with the simulations of ourselves than original man. Hence the image or copy is more compelling and grips and exercises more control over us than the Works cited:

- [1] Baudrillard, Jean. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Semiotext, New York, 1988
- [2] Lem, Stanislaw. *Solaris*. Faber and faber. New York. 1961.

original and we are in the realm of Baudrillard's hyperreal where we can no longer distinguish between image and object or original and simulation. Hence this is what happens when youth are addicted to the internet and videogames- the simulation has replaced reality and we are firmly in the grip of the hyperreal.

Lem's novel while being a speculative love story thus functions as a foreboding of Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and simulation in which the copy or image becomes more compelling and real than the original. In today's virtual society where facebook and twitter are rapidly replacing solid and tangible relationships, this has become very much a reality of modern society- the hyperreal has replaced the real. Kevin's romance with Rheya is thus not merely a speculative romance with an alien Other but a precursor of the current immersion in the world of the hyperreal which has replaced and indeed effaced objective reality.