Posthumanism in late Soviet science fiction:


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Introduction

In Russian nineteenth-century literature and poetry it is not uncommon that human characters are direct objects (not only linguistically) of all kinds of feelings, state apparatuses, dressed-up noses, ghosts, bronze statues, and even whole cities. These non-human and non-organic entities, which become acting characters themselves, continued to play a role in the early nineteen hundreds, but a different one. Russian and Soviet modernism was characterized by the “enmeshment of the human body with various forms of techonology”, which transcended the boundaries between human and the non-human machine.\(^1\) Inspired by technological and scientific developments, writers and artists of the Russian avant-garde (first wave) presented visions of the ‘new human’, and filmmakers like Dziga Vertov wanted to advance humanity with the help of his concept of the ‘Kino-Glaz’, which would evolve man “from a bumbling citizen through the poetry of the machine to the perfect electric man.”\(^2\) Despite the blurring boundaries between the human and the non-human in literature, art, and film of this period, human beings were no longer the direct objects of non-humans. The sole aim was to present images of human enhancement through technology.

Today, in the complexity of reality the concept of ‘the human’ is increasingly unconvincing and hollow.\(^3\) Cracks have started to appear in the seemingly clear boundaries

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\(^{1}\) McQuillen, Colleen, and Julia Vaingurt. “Overview of the Contributions.” *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Late Soviet and Post-soviet Russia*, edited by Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt, not yet published, 1.


\(^{3}\) The concept of the human as autonomous subject originates from the European Enlightenment – the beginning of ‘modern’ science. The Western White human as the autonomous center and the measure of all things, and the belief in the possibility of
between the human and the non-human, and the human claim of knowing (and often owning) the Other has become untenable. Artists, writers, filmmakers, and scholars from different theoretical backgrounds have touched upon these ideas since the late nineties of the twentieth century. They are engaged in what has become known as ‘posthumanism’, which “demands a rethinking of the humanist grounds for ethical decision making, particularly around the question of whose lives merit consideration and by whom.” While modernity considered all objects as means for human beings to exploit, scientific discoveries and technological advancement have increasingly shown that, just like in nineteenth-century Russian literature and poetry, non-human and even non-organic objects have their own agenda, interests and agency (the power to affect other entities). And this time it is for real.

A term that is often used to refer to the consequences of human hubris of modernity is the Anthropocene. Although it is not (yet) an official term in geology, different thinkers argue that the Holocene should make way for this new geological epoch marked by the significant influence of human activity on the earth and its ecosystems. Despite naming an entire geological epoch ‘human’, dealing with the Anthropocene calls for posthuman ethics, because it brings to surface new entities we cannot ignore. Entities that are products of the understanding and controlling all surrounding entities has caused unprecedented scientific and technological progress in the previous centuries. However, “a lot of the technologies that we are developing now show us that we are less autonomous than we think.” The concept of the human – a product of the Enlightenment is no longer tenable because of current science and technology, which, paradoxically, is also a product of the Enlightenment. For more see Berger, Lynn. “Tijd om dingen serieus te nemen.” De Correspondent, May 2016. Accessed April 30, 2016. https://decorrespondent.nl/4404/Tijd-om-dingen-serieus-te-nemen/335417923632-34552ed0

4 The ‘Other human’, contrast to the Self, as formulated in phenomenology by a.o. Edmund Husserl, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Edward Saïd, is not only human anymore.

Anthropocene like global warming and nuclear waste affect us in ways beyond human scale in time and space. The familiar toolkit to solve problems of modernity is no longer sufficient, and new ways of thinking and practicing knowledge are needed.

The posthuman and the Anthropocene are omnipresent in literature, art, and popular culture since the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, late Soviet literary and cultural explorations already touched upon the contemporary concept of posthumanism. It is these parallels with present day cultural practice and thought that is the focus of my research, which asks:

How can contemporary posthumanist thought be traced back to science fiction literature and film of the late Soviet period (1960-1980)?

This question is explored in contemporary philosophy, and four cases of late Soviet literary and film science fiction. A genre utmost suitable for exploring these parallels, because it is about the unknown, and alternative worlds, by which it (just as posthuman thought) affords “a new perspective on the nature of ours and ourselves.” With this approach I follow the footsteps of The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Late Soviet and Post-soviet Russia, a collection of essays that will be published in 2017. The Human Reimagined traces

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8 I came across a call for papers from the beginning of 2015 for a publication called The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Late Soviet and Post-soviet Russia. Since it was not published yet I contacted the editors who very kindly provided me with a description of its
posthumanist thought “in the cultural sphere amidst the scientific discoveries and rapid technological advancement of the late Soviet period, as well as in the context of the post-Soviet cyber age.”

My research can be considered both a contribution to the part of The Human Reimagined on the late Soviet period, but also a reevaluation of the conclusions of the contributors.

The first case, the science fiction novel Solaris (1961) by the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem, functioned as a “model for the potentialities of the liberated imagination” for Soviet science fiction writers and filmmakers. With his novel he afforded a critique of human mastery, which makes the novel an ideal case. The second literary case, Roadside Picnic (Piknik na obochine) (1971) by the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, is one of the most famous and critically acclaimed science fiction stories of the late Soviet period. Roadside Picnic’s hybridization of time and space, and entities that exist from their own side fit perfectly within the scope of this thesis. The novels are the basis of two film adaptations by the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky: Solyaris (1972) and Stalker (1979). In his films Tarkovsky shifts the focus to spiritual and psychological consequences of the themes of the novels mentioned above, proposing ways of reflection. The four cases around two narratives comprise a not too extensive range of themes and features to which the main question of this research can be properly evaluated.

Before entering into the cases, the first chapter treats a selection of contemporary thinkers, whose ideas function as a fundamental thread throughout this research. They contents and subsequently put me in contact with authors whose contributions seemed relevant to my research. All contacted authors were willing to share their contribution prior to the publication.

9 McQuillen and Vaingurt: 2.
employ a posthuman ethics and challenge the anthropocentric order, which refers to the cultural and scientific apparatuses that justify humans as ‘masters’ and center point of the universe. Although they use different terms, their posthumanism, ‘new materialism’, ‘object-oriented ontology’ (OOO), or ‘speculative realism’ all function as templates for thinking of and dealing with increasing complexity and incomprehension, brought about by scientific and technological developments.

After this introduction in posthuman thought, the second chapter features a reading of *The Human Reimagined*. Although the contributors partly refer to the same posthuman thinkers, who constitute the theoretical framework for this thesis, and sometimes even make use of the same cases as this research, I believe their conclusions are not satisfactory. It is argued that Western posthuman thought and ethics of the twenty-first century is hard to trace back to the late Soviet Union. However, with the analysis of the four cases in chapter three, this thesis tries to show the striking parallels between posthuman thought, as described in chapter one, and literary- and film production of science fiction in the late Soviet Union.
Chapter 1: The posthuman turn\textsuperscript{11}

In this chapter I provide a short overview of the main ideas of posthuman thought, and how it challenges the anthropocentric order and human mastery. As formulated by different thinkers, the concept of the human – as a product of the tradition of the European Enlightenment – can no longer be maintained because of technological and scientific developments and global economic concerns. With the help of post-colonial theory, feminist thought, race theory, gender theory, disability studies, and embodied cognition theory, which drew attention to different human phenomenologies, these developments have caused the de-centering of the (white, heterosexual, male) human as the measure of all things and the denial of the privilege of a human perspective, which should lead to explorations of how other entities encounter the world.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Pluralization of perspectives}

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, humanism, which formed the cornerstone of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, faced critique from different angles (Nietzsche, Freud, Marx). Since the late 1990s new kinds of critique of humanism emerged, which have become known under different names – OOO, speculative realism, new

\textsuperscript{11} The major part of this chapter is an adaptation of the first chapter of my MA thesis for Art History at the University of Amsterdam, which I wrote simultaneously with this thesis. My research titled \textit{WHO IS THE MASTER? Automata as philosophical models of the posthuman turn} shows how first the Arab-Islamic and later European tradition of making and thinking of automata (mechanisms acting out of their own will) culminates in the posthuman turn. Just like this research, \textit{WHO IS THE MASTER?} required a solid understanding of posthuman thought. Because more than half of this chapter matches the first chapter of my other research I will not be citing myself in neither of them.

\textsuperscript{12} The denial of the privilege of a human perspective is not the denial of the human perspective itself.
materialism, and posthumanism. Although they have different starting points and focus, they all stand in the tradition of Marxism and post-structuralism, question the human/nonhuman relationship, reject the human claim to superiority, and challenge the anthropocentric order, which refers to the cultural, scientific apparatuses that justify humans as masters and center point of the planet. In the rest of this chapter I will refer to a ‘posthuman turn’, which includes the aims of all different schools of thought mentioned above.

A key publication of contemporary scholarship around the posthuman turn is the 1990 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” by the American philosopher Donna Haraway. According to Haraway, “we are cyborgs,”¹³ – a physical composition of human and nonhuman (organic or non-organic) components. With this concept Haraway rejects the strict boundaries between the human and animal, and the human and the machine. Although Haraway does not use the term posthumanism, it is her “Cyborg Manifesto”, which “is credited with critically embracing the ambiguous potential that ‘becoming posthuman’ might bring.”¹⁴

Rosi Braidotti, one of the most prominent theorists of new materialism, sees the posthuman turn as the “de-centering of ‘Man’ the former measure of all things.”¹⁵ According to Braidotti, the debates in mainstream culture treat the posthuman turn as human enhancement through “new age visions of trans-humanism and techno-transcendence”,

thanks to prosthetic technologies in our bodies. However, this is still about confirming humans as masters of the planet and the rightful center point through which to understand reality. The American philosopher Levi Bryant has a very clear and similar conception of the posthuman turn. For Bryant, “a position is posthumanist when it no longer privileges human ways of encountering and evaluating the world, instead attempting to explore how other entities encounter the world.”\(^\text{16}\)

His piece entitled “Thoughts on Posthumanism”, is particularly helpful because it shows the common denominator of different theories on the posthuman turn. It addresses seemingly obvious questions, yet this makes it particularly useful for an introduction into this body of thought. The first misunderstanding that he wants to put aside is that posthumanism is often critiqued in that it is humans that think it, yet this is not problematic, he argues posthumanism is no denial or rejection of the human viewpoint on the world, but rather a “pluralization of perspectives.” Bryant continues: “While posthumanism does not get rid of the human as one way of encountering the world, it does, following a great deal of research in post-colonial theory, feminist thought, race theory, gender theory, disability studies, and embodied cognition theory, complicate our ability to speak univocally and universally about something called the human.”\(^\text{17}\)

Moving beyond humanism with the negation of the separation of the human from the nonhuman (the posthuman turn), it is necessary to take a step back to the fields of research mentioned by Bryant. Consensus of what it means to be human seems to be the first difficulty, since in the tradition of the Enlightenment and its widespread legacy not even all biological humans are human according to the criteria of “[t]he Cartesian subject of the


\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
cogito, the Kantian “community of reasonable beings”, or, in more socio-legal terms, the subject as citizen, rights-holder, property-owner, and so on.”\textsuperscript{18} Although by far not all humans fit these conceptions of ‘being human’, the term is still used as a given. However, critical theories mentioned above brought about the realization that ‘human experience’ consists of “a variety of different phenomenologies […] depending on the embodied experience of sexed beings, our disabilities, our cultural experiences, the technologies to which our bodies are coupled, class, etc.”\textsuperscript{19}

Although this fair criticism is still humanist in that it only deals with a human perspective, it has laid a good foundation for the posthuman turn expanding different human phenomenologies in phenomenologies of entire ecosystems, animals, plants, algorithms, shells, rocks, et cetera, that also have their “ways of apprehending the world.” For Bryant, the aspect of pluralization of perspectives gets overlooked too often when treating the posthuman turn. He stresses that this new tradition of thought is “as much a theory of perspectives as a radicalization of phenomenology, as it is a theory of entities.” Bryant: There is a phenomenology for, not of, every type of entity that exists.” Bryant refers to the American philosopher Graham Harman, whose work on metaphysics led to the development of OOO, to support his argument: Harman claims that “the difference between a Kantian subject and any other object is a difference in degree, not a difference in kind. With this claim, Harman stresses, “just as Kantian subjects structure the world in a particular way such that they never encounter things-as-they-are-in-themselves, the same is true for all other entities as they relate to the world.”\textsuperscript{20}

According to Harman, the autonomous existence of objects should be taken more seriously. This can be established by using his elaboration of Heidegger’s ‘tool-analysis’. For

\textsuperscript{18} Cary Wolve in Braidotti (2013): 1.
\textsuperscript{19} Bryant (2012b).
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
Harman, “[t]he key is that it [tool-analysis] shows us that descriptions of the object as solid material and descriptions of it as functionally useful are derivative.”

Entities can’t be described as “their sheer existence as pieces of wood or metal or atoms,” because “[t]hings are so intimately related to their purpose.” With his approach, Harman points to the deficiencies of phenomenology, which is still mainly about human experience because of the forced submission of objects to humans. Establishing a metaphysics for all objects will challenge the anthropocentric order and claims to human mastery.

According to the American feminist theorist Karen Barad, all things or phenomena are “the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies.” One of Barad’s key terms in her theory of “agential realism” is “intra-action,” which can be defined as “the mutual constitution of entangled agency, or the mingling of people and things, and other stuff’s ability to act.” In contrast to interaction where interacting bodies remain independent and exist before they encounter one another, intra-acting bodies (which don’t have to be human or living entities) are co-constitutive: “Individuals materialize through intra-actions and the ability to act emerges from within the relationship, not outside of it.”

According to Barad, agency, therefore, “does not pre-exist separately, but emerges from the relationships in intra-actions.”

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22 Ibid.


25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.
With the help of the concept of intra-action, Barad questions causality, individual agency, and subject-object relationships. Ethics and justice are also the products of intra-action and intra-act on their turn, and are “nothing predetermined but always changing and unfolding.” Intra-action deems boundaries and borders (for example between human and non-human entities) artificial, and assumes interconnectedness instead of power relations. For Barad entities created by science and technology are the products of intra-action in which the human scientist participates. Although they are part of the intra-action, they do not control the outcomes. Barad:

What about the possibility of nonhuman forms of agency? From a humanist perspective the question of nonhuman agency may seem a bit queer, since agency is generally associated with issues of subjectivity and intentionality. However, if agency is understood as an enactment and not something someone has, then it seems not only appropriate but important to consider nonhuman and cyborgian forms of agency as well as human ones. This is perhaps most evident in consideration of fields such as science, where the "subject" matter is often "nonhuman." For as surely as social factors play a role in scientific knowledge construction (they are not the sole determinant - things don't just come out any way we'd like them to be) there is a sense in which “the world kicks back.”

Braidotti argues that “[w]hile conservative, religious social forces today often labour to reinscribe the human within a paradigm of natural law, the concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 10: 2 (1998): 87-128.

27 Barad, Karen. “Getting real: technoscientific practices and the materialization of reality.”
concerns.” She continues that we have reached “the posthuman condition”, which “introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.” According to Braidotti nature (the given) and culture (the constructed) can no longer be considered as opposites. This dualist thought is “currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction”, which, “stresses instead the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter.” In other words, the boundaries between nature and culture are no longer tenable because of the current state of science and technology.

The boundaries between nature and culture are also a major topic in the work of Timothy Morton, who claims that the term nature has never been tenable. In his ecological critique in Ecology Without Nature (2007) and The Ecological Thought (2010), Morton stresses that in order to face the current ecological crisis the distinction between nature (the given) and civilization (the constructed) has to be divested. According to Morton “[e]cological writing keeps insisting that we are "embedded" in nature. Nature is a surrounding medium that sustains our being. Due to the properties of the rhetoric that evokes the idea of a surrounding medium, ecological writing can never properly establish that this is nature and thus provide a compelling and consistent aesthetic basis for the new worldview that is meant to change society.”

Rather than treating ‘nature’ as a means and as something that exists outside of society’s walls, an awareness of interconnectedness should be established. Morton coins the concept ‘mesh’, which refers to the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things,

consisting of “infinite connections and infinitesimal differences.” The mesh has no central point of view, has no definite ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of objects, and permits no distance between entities. Everything is interdependent, but at the same time “[t]hinking interdependence involves thinking difference.”

Morton introduces the term ‘strange stranger’, as unique human and non-human entities that “co-exist with us, including the strange depth of our subjectivities.” Strange strangers can’t be fully understood or defined, nor will they ever encounter or be encountered as (as Bryant argues) “things-as-they-are-in-themselves.” In his article “From modernity to the Anthropocene: ecology and art in the age of asymmetry,” Morton dedicates one sentence to Lem’s novel Solaris. A character from the novel (further not specified by Morton) could function as an example of a human being thinking the ecological thought: In Solaris “a human decides simply to co-exist with a unique being [or strange stranger]: a sentient planet.” The acceptance and realization all entities are strange strangers for each other and that this stranger will always remain strange forces one to acknowledge the impossibility of completely knowing, and, with that, owning the Other.

The category of ‘strange strangers’ is not limited to life forms that exist from their own side. It also includes invisible and untouchable entities, which are nowhere but at the same time everywhere, and just by existing affect everything around them. They standout in such a way that Morton provided them with their own term, and even a whole book:

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Hyperobjects are massively distributed entities in time and space, beyond human scale. The most dramatic example of a hyperobject is global warming. It will probably outlive mankind and all living tissue is affected by it every instant since everything is inside it. In an unprecedented way hyperobjects, like global warming, require new ways of thinking and action that cannot be found in modernity.

This short overview on thoughts of posthuman ethics and theory of new materialism serves as an introduction to ideas that seep into the whole thesis, and function as a frame of reference for the provided theory in the following chapters. The ideas of authors mentioned in this chapter – Braidotti, Bryant, Harman, Barad, and Morton – have challenged dualist thought, the anthropocentric order, and the claim to human mastery. All things affect and encounter the world in their own way; they have agency and their own phenomenology. This pluralization of perspectives is based on unbridgeable difference between interconnected and intra-acting entities, strange strangers, and hyperobjects in the mesh.

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Chapter 2: The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

The volume of essays titled The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia, which will be published in 2017, comprises a broad range of topics, theory, ideas, and politics. As stated in the introduction, there is room for the contributors to The Human Reimagined to “express and interrogate a broad spectrum of attitudes toward posthumanism ranging from caution to celebration.”35 This multi-angled approach of the editors shows how elements of posthumanism are very much present in different shapes and sizes. A reading of a selection of the submitted essays to The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Late Soviet and Post-soviet Russia provides an overview of recent scholarship and theory around posthumanism in the late Soviet Union. In addition to interesting approaches and analysis of the contributors, which could be to my use, their too narrow conception of the posthuman turn functions a stepping stone to my argument in the next chapter.

Posthumanism in Late Soviet Russia

Elena Gomel’s essay “Our Posthuman Past: Subjectivity, History and Utopia in late-Soviet Science Fiction” is a good starting point sketching the context of Soviet ideology and reality. According to Gomel, “Soviet ideology was proudly (and loudly) humanist, opposing itself to the inhumanity of capitalism at every possible opportunity.”36 Although this humanism had been very present from the beginning in Soviet ideology, it was during the Thaw that it was proclaimed the foundation of the USSR:

35 McQuillen and Vaingurt: 2.
From Krushchev’s time, Marx’s definition of humanism as an accomplishment of the humanization of humankind … an abolition of human alienation by gaining full possession of the means of production under communism was declared to be achieved in the Soviet Union and nowhere else.\textsuperscript{37}

With this strong emphasis on humanism, Gomel asks if it is even possible to talk about posthumanism in the Soviet Union. Technological development and scientific discoveries were intended to lead to the enhancement of the ‘new Soviet man’ instead of undermining it. According to Gomel the problem of Soviet humanism lies in this same idea of the new Soviet man, because the goal was ‘better’ and ‘different’ human beings. In order to investigate the paradox of humanism aiming for something beyond human Gomel turns to possible embodiments of the new man in Soviet science fiction. She starts her analysis with the oeuvre of the Strugatsky brothers, after which Gomel zooms in on what she believes to be “one of the best SF novels of the twentieth century:” \textit{Roadside picnic}. She refers to an essay on the novel by Lem, who considers the novel revolutionary (just as his own \textit{Solaris}) because it represents the unhuman (radically Other), which remains beyond comprehension, instead of the inhuman (morally evil), which is normally mirrored in science fiction.\textsuperscript{38}

“[T]aking Soviet science fiction seriously as a posthumanist discourse (rather than reducing it to the binary of dissidence/compliance),” argues Gomel, “can reassess the philosophy and politics of Western posthumanism as well.”\textsuperscript{39} In doing so, Gomel points to the same paradox of humanism aiming for something beyond human in Western posthumanism. While she quotes Braidotti, who believes that “to be posthuman does not

\textsuperscript{37} J. Scherrer in Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Gomel: 59-60.

\textsuperscript{39} Gomel: 56.
mean to be … de-humanized,”⁴⁰ Gomel, nevertheless, considers this an “irresolvable contradiction.”⁴¹ Gomel: “letting go of the human may mean letting go of all human ethics, not just the parts we personally find objectionable.”⁴² Although the posthuman turn described in the previous chapter, is not about letting go of the human (but instead about acknowledging different phenomenologies of other entities), Gomel broaches an interesting case, which is addressed in the next chapter with the analysis of Solaris and Roadside picnic.

Colleen McQuillen, one of the editors of The Human Reimagined, turns to Soviet environmental science fiction and the role that is assigned to the new man in this. In her essay “Environmentalism and the Man of the Future: Discursive Practices in the 1970’s” McQuillen argues “the Soviet mode of ecological thinking has little in common with the western ecocritical and feminist-posthumanist models of bio-egalitarianism in the twenty-first century.”⁴³ For McQuillen, the stories – Pavel Amnuel’s “I’m on Course” (1979) and Viacheslav Rybakov’s “Great Drought” (1979) – don’t broadcast an ecological worldview as advocated by, for example, Timothy Morton. McQuillen: “as examples of human agency and ethical responsibility, they betray a humanist, anthropocentric stance that conflicts with an ecological idea of balance and integration among life forms.”⁴⁴ Interconnectedness of the human and its environment are acknowledged, but the stories place the human and human mastery at the center.

Just like Gomel, McQuillen points to the paradox of Soviet posthumanism as a product of strong humanist ideology. However, McQuillen’s conception of the posthuman

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⁴⁰ Braidotti in Gomel: 62.
⁴¹ Gomel: 62-63
⁴² Gomel: 69.
⁴³ McQuillen, Colleen. “Environmentalism and the Man of the Future.” The Human Reimagined Posthumanism in Late Soviet and Post-soviet Russia, edited by Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt, not yet published, 142-143.
⁴⁴ McQuillen: 162.
turn comes closer to chapter one since it does not implement this paradox into contemporary western posthumanism. Had she not limited herself to the her two environmental science fiction short stories, and had noticed Morton’s brief reference to the ecological thinking done by a human character in Lem’s *Solaris*, McQuillen might have come to the conclusion that Soviet ecological thinking does have a lot in common with the contemporary western ecological thought of the posthuman turn.

In “Deadalus and the Cyborg: Human-Machine Hybridity in Late-Soviet Design” Diana Kurkowsky continues McQuillen’s concerns for humans and their environment. This time the environment consists of the late-Soviet home. The mass housing campaign under Khrushchev and *perestroika byta* (restructuring of everyday life) designed and planned “the material, cultural and moral surroundings of the individual; the aesthetic tastes, intellectual interests, moral requirement of the person; and habits and dispositions were all interwoven as major elements of everyday life.”

In the new Soviet home it was the female inhabitants who functioned “as a kind of human technology”, and they “were to become the vehicles for mass implementation of a rationalist design program.”

Kurkowsky West uses Donna Harraway’s concept of the cyborg – a physical composition of human (organic) and nonhuman (non-organic) components – in order to demonstrate “the socio-technical nexus of humans and nonhumans was very much on the forefront of the designers’ agenda.” The posthuman housewife is a cyborg embedded in her technical environment of the home. This essay shows how the anthropocentrism in the late

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47 Kurkowsky West: 165.
Soviet Union, which McQuillen distracted from her cases and puts the human and human mastery at the center, is comprised of different levels of being human: the male and female human.

The rationalist design program aimed for Soviet women to relate to nonhuman objects and technologies in an interconnected and horizontal way, which is typical of the posthuman turn. However, the designers of this program placed themselves above these new posthuman entities, sustaining the humanist values. The emancipation of these women in the following decades, on its turn, incited the posthuman turn as particularly articulated by Barad and Braidotti, who show the possibility of horizontal interconnectedness of human and nonhuman entities without human mastery.

Trevor Wilson’s article “Nothing but Mammals: Post-Soviet Sexuality after the End of History,” about the liberatory effects of human-animal hybrids in post-Soviet literature seems beyond the scope of this thesis. However, a brief mention of his essay is useful, since he also discusses the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, which was paradoxically blurred by Soviet humanism. Following the argument of the French-Russian thinker Alexandre Kojève Wilson addresses the blurring boundaries of nature and culture, and the human and the animal:

Soviet culture simultaneously sought to conquer “savage life” and to naturalize its industrialization: if the rhetoric surrounding the Five Year Plans attempted to seize upon man’s raw, “natural” spontaneity in an effort to establish an organized social totality, an image of a natural machinality dialectically emerged as a result. According to Kojève, that which estranges man from nature and the animal, namely, his labor, will become reintegrated into the natural world at the end of History. … The Soviet
man was formed at the “critical threshold, at which the difference between animal and human, which is so decisive for our culture, threatens to vanish.”

Wilson and the other authors discussed above, all show how Soviet humanist ideology was striving for something beyond- or post-human, which problematized the rigid borders between human and inhuman (organic or inorganic). According to Gomel, who is skeptical about the posthuman turn, the same paradox applies for contemporary theory around this subject. McQuillen, on the other hand, recognizes the emancipatory potential of the posthuman turn for the conditions that entail the Anthropocene, but she cannot retrieve this thought in late-Soviet ecocritical science fiction. Just like Kurkowsky West, she comes to the conclusion that although “interconnectedness” of the human and its environment was propagated, anthropocentrism and human mastery was left untouched. Kurkowsky West’s intermingling of the human and carefully designed objects for the new Soviet home of the Thaw show that the posthuman character of the perestroika byta was particularly female: it was the female home administrator that became part of the design plan, and vise-versa, the objects became part of extension of the housewife (or cyborg).

Although I work along the same lines as the authors mentioned above, partly refer to the same posthuman thinkers, and sometimes even make use of the same cases as this research, I disagree with their conclusions. The contributors to The Human Reimagined cannot get beyond the question debunked by Bryant: “What is the point of posthumanism if the analysis is still conducted by humans?” As he argues, striving for the posthuman does not mean letting go of the concept of the human, but rather a pluralization of perspectives on

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49 Bryant (2012).
a horizontal level, which does not privilege the human perspective. Filling in the gaps of *The Human Reimagined* with the broadened conception of the posthuman turn discussed in chapter one, the next chapter shows late-Soviet science fiction and film do have a lot in common “with the western ecocritical and feminist-posthumanist models of bio-egalitarianism in the twenty-first century.”

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50 McQuillen: 142-143.
Chapter 3: Analysis

In this comprehensive final chapter, theory of the posthuman turn of chapter one, and the perspectives of the contributors to *The Human Reimagined*, as discussed in chapter two, are measured against four cases: the science fiction novels *Solaris* (1961) and *Roadside picnic* (1971), and the two film adaptations of these novels by the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (*Solyaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979)). Each case comprises a subchapter in which the story will be shortly introduced, and, subsequently, screened for their posthuman theory and ethics.

*Solaris* (1961)

The science fiction novel *Solaris* by the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem was first published in Warsaw in 1961. Although the novel doesn’t classify as late-Soviet, it is a clear product of cultural production in the former socialist space, of which Poland was part. Since the early 1950’s Lem’s science fiction and philosophical writings enjoyed great popularity in the Soviet Union. His writings, including *Solaris*, were translated into Russian and sold millions of copies.\(^{51}\) In addition, his novel was used for two film adaptations by the Soviet filmmakers Boris Nirenburg (*Solyaris* (1968)) and Andrei Tarkovsky (*Solyaris* (1972)), to the second of which I will turn later in this chapter.\(^{52}\) A reading of the novel in this subchapter will refute the argument that a posthuman position is impossible without de-humanization.

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\(^{52}\) Nirenburg’s film adaptation *Solyaris* exists of two parts and was first shown on Soviet television in 1968. It is not addressed in this chapter because it almost completely follows the novel by Lem and shows little artistic freedom. While it does give an idea of the popularity of the novel, an analysis of the film would add little to that of the book.
Synopsis

The story revolves around the psychologist Kris Kelvin, who is sent from Earth to the scientific research station orbiting Solaris, a planet for the biggest part covered with a giant ocean, which seems to be a conscious agent. Kelvin follows the footsteps of numerous scientists who were drawn to this planet during many decades. All their efforts proved to be in vain since the planet and its properties wouldn’t let itself be categorized by earthly (human) science.

Since the scientific discipline of studying Solaris (Solaristcs) disappointedly and frustratingly wasn’t able to produce any sustaining theory or conclusion, pursuits were limited to observing the planet. However, in a last attempt to communicate with extraterrestrial life on Solaris, the three-headed crew bombards the ocean with x-rays a few days prior to the arrival of Kelvin. With the bombardments they try to influence the ocean, and establish a form of contact with it, but what they don’t realize is that the ocean is eradiating them. It is playing back in the astronauts’ minds painful memories of the past in such a vivid way that they begin to not trust anything they think or believe.

Analysis

In the first chapter titled “The Arrival” Kelvin is on his way to Solaris in a capsule called “Prometheus.” With a healthy human confidence, which he and the whole of humanity owe to Prometheus who helped the human develop a technical civilization, Kelvin embarks the space station. Nobody is there to welcome him. He finds one of his colleagues, Dr. Snow,

53 In Greek mythology it was the halfgod Prometheus who believed the human had not been treated fairly by the Gods in their initial allocation of gifts and abilities. He stole fire and gave it to mankind. With this new tool they learned how to cast steel and developed a technical civilization. Prometheus is still associated with science and technology.
wandering around through the station, who tells Kelvin’s teacher and friend Dr. Gibarian committed suicide.\textsuperscript{54} Before looking for his second new colleague, Dr. Sartorius, Kelvin decides to return to his cabin. In the bathroom he finds a box filled with strange objects. A closer look reveals the box contains heavily deformed tools and instruments. Confused he walks to the bookshelf and starts reading \textit{Historia Solaris}. 

The rest of the second chapter “The Solarists” describes the history of Solaristics. During many decades conflicting research results led to the discrediting of computers and scientists, and it was impossible to get a grip on the planet. However, “it had been accepted that the ocean was an organic formation.” Physicists took the Solaris’ sea as “a structure, possibly without life as we conceive it, but capable of performing functional activities – on an astronomic scale, it should be emphasized.” They were dealing with a living rational creature, ungraspable by human rationality. “The first attempts at contact were by means of specially designed electronic apparatus. The ocean itself took an active part in these operations by remodelling the instruments.”\textsuperscript{55} In addition to the deformed tools, some research results were obtained. The scientists studying Solaris discussed the following controversies:

\begin{quote}
[T]hey were confronted with a monstrous entity endowed with reason, a protoplasmic ocean-brain enveloping the entire planet and idling its time away in extravagant theoretical cognitation about the nature of the universe. Our instruments had intercepted minute random fragments of a prodigious and everlasting monologue unfolding in the depths of this colossal brain, which was inevitably beyond our understanding.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{56} Lem (1973): 21-22.
These hypotheses were fiercely criticized by people, who believed the scientists “underestimated the resources of the human mind.” They argued the Solarists had “bowed for the unknown, proclaiming the ancient doctrine … of ignoramus et ignorabimus,” and considered these ideas dangerous mythologizing. Yet they all seemed to agree on the following:

[T]he living ocean was active. Not, it is true, according to human ideas – it did not build cities or bridges, nor did it manufacture flying machines. It did not try to reduce distances, nor was it concerned with the conquest of Space (the ultimate criterion, some people thought, of man’s superiority). But it was engaged in a never-ending process of transformation, an ‘ontological autometamorphosis.’

All the different views and approaches described in Historia Solaris “resurrected one of the most ancient of philosophical problems: the relation between matter and mind, and between mind and consciousness.” It is exactly this philosophical problem – the duality of spirit and matter – which lies at the basis of and is strongly rejected by the posthuman turn. As described in the novel, academia around Solaris had come to a common understanding the ocean has its own agency and agenda, and does exist outside the human mind. This acknowledgement is a huge step forward in comparison to our contemporary scientific world, which only gently begins to realize the ungraspable agency and own phenomenology of earthly phenomena.

57 Ignoramus et ignorabimus, (we do not know and will not know) stands for a position on the limits of scientific knowledge.
59 Ibid.
With the help of Harman’s interpretation of Heidegger’s idea of tool analysis, the tools deformed by the ocean point to the realization of multiple perspectives (in addition to the human perspective). The analysis of the remodelled tools show “that descriptions of the object as solid material and descriptions of it as functionally useful are derivative.”\(^{60}\) Entities can’t be described as “their sheer existence as pieces of wood or metal or atoms,” because “[t]hings are so intimately related to their purpose.”\(^{61}\) Lost its human purpose they are described as “strange objects.” With the remodelled tools the ocean made itself heard for the first time and pointed to the deficiencies of phenomenology, which is still mainly about human experience because of the forced submission of objects to humans.

After the elaborate overview of Solaristics, the following chapters are about Kelvin’s contact with the ocean. In the cabin of the diseased Dr. Gibarian, Kelvin finds a detailed description of X-ray bombardment. While he is going through Gibarian’s notes, which describe the experiments were already carried out, he hears footsteps in the hallway coming closer to the door. When ‘it’ tries to enter the cabin, Kelvin barricades the door, after which he hears the footsteps disappear. Kelvin slips some notes and a tape recorder into his pocket and leaves the room. In the corridors he sees “a giant Negress”, who, he will later find out, is Gibarian’s visitor, walking towards him.

Kelvin’s own ‘visitor’ appears in the fifth chapter. Rheya, Kelvin’s lover on whose suicide he still feels guilty after ten years, is sitting on a chair in his room. She doesn’t know what happened to her and how she got aboard the space station. In a desperate attempt to get rid of his ‘hallucination’ Kelvin lures her to go on space flight together. He lets Rheya into the space shuttle first, after which he seals the door and launches his visitor into space.


\(^{61}\) Ibid.
Kelvin returns to Snow, who shares his theory explaining the events on the spaceship. He explains the visitors are the materialization of repressed thoughts. The person thinking it, thinks he will never be confronted with these thoughts in the form of a human being, which is not only visible to himself but also to others. Snow continues:

We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors. We don’t know what to do with 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, from 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 reality is revealed to us – that part of our reality which we would prefer to pass over in silence – then we don’t like it anymore.62

Snow’s account on science shows similarities with theorists advocating the posthuman turn. As he argues, the human projects itself on all other things because they “are only seeking Man,” and, therefore, do not know what to do with other worlds, in which this is not possible. Posthuman theorists argue the same counts for our own world: we don’t know what to do with our own world. As Braidotti argues, we reached the posthuman condition since the “concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns.” With her conception of the posthuman turn as the

“de-centering of ‘Man’ the former measure of all things,” Braidotti shares Snow’s critique of projecting Man on all that is happening on Solaris. Just like necessary rethinking the relationship of the Solarists with the ocean, the posthuman condition “introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.”

In addition, the visitors are a good example of Barad’s concept of intra-action – “the mutual constitution of entangled agency, or the mingling of people and things, and other stuff’s ability to act.” Two intra-acting bodies – Kelvin and the ocean covering Solaris – cause the materialization of both the ocean (the ocean provides the – to humans – unknown elements for the construction of the visitor) and Kelvin (a materialization of his memory, and thus a part of himself). This entity distracted from Kelvin’s memory didn’t exist before encountering Kelvin. And, vise versa, this entity didn’t exist prior to Kelvin’s memory encountering the ocean. These encounters on its turn enacts Rheya’s agency: “Individuals materialize through intra-actions and the ability to act emerges from within the relationship, not outside of it.” Rheya and the other visitors show how the relationship between the Solarists and the ocean enacts agency, which “does not exist separately, but emerges from the relationships in intra-actions.” This process blurs the boundaries between the Solarists (humans) and the ocean (a non-human entity), and shows their interconnectedness, which allows no control from either side. As Barad argues, “things don't just come out any way we'd like them to be.” Reality kicks back.

65 Kerr (2014)
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
Just like the reality on the space station orbiting Solaris, the Enlightened human strongly dislikes and tends to deny what he is detecting on the same instruments that are the product of his belief in science and technology. Things can be studied, but as Morton argues: “the more we know, the less certain and ambiguous things become.” Science and technology have “torn a giant hole in the fabric of our understanding.” Here it is – the first successful attempt of extra-terrestrial contact, which was the result of the X-ray bombardments, but it is not appreciated because it is incomprehensible and not human enough. Although according to Snow, the visitors “in a certain subjective sense are human”, they are, at the same time, monstrous incomprehensible posthuman entities to the Solarists, who try to destroy them without success.

Rheya again appears in his cabin. Although she doesn’t remember Kelvin launched the previous materialization of her (and of himself) into space, she seems more wary. When Kelvin leaves her in the cabin and locks the door behind him she loses her mind, and injures herself while she tries to force the door. When she is calmer, Kelvin sees how the bleeding wounds on her hands heal in only a couple of seconds, and he asks her if he can do a blood test. She agrees. All results confirm Rheya is human except for “the final step, into the heart of the matter, had taken me nowhere.”

The chapter called “The Monsters” describes the different shapes taken by the ocean covering Solaris. Just like anthropocentrism, which is paradoxically at the same time confirmed and denied by the visitors (they are human, but also inhuman/unhuman/posthuman) the geocentrism of Solaristics is also two-sided. The apparitions on the surface of the planet resemble Terran oceans, the Grand Canyon, and even whole towns, but always mutable and in a completely different scale. It shows, as Kelvin

70 Lem (1973): 74.
ponders, “our compulsion to superimpose analogies with what we [as humans] know,” and it looks like the ocean is playing with this human compulsion. The monsters of the ocean referred to in the title of this chapter might as well refer to humans who become monsters in their inability and frustration of having to acknowledge ‘Others’ and reality. Earthly leaders had, at a certain point, demanded “a thermo-nuclear attack on the ocean.” As Kelvin argues, “[s]uch a response would have been more cruelty than revenge, since it would have meant destroying what we did not understand.”

Rheya finds out she isn’t a human being, but an instrument of the ocean covering Solaris. This realization drives her to despair: she leaves Kelvin in the middle of the night and tries to commit suicide with liquid oxygen. Kelvin finds her and she survives against all odds. They start a quarrel. Rheya: “But I heard enough to realize that I am not a human being, only an instrument.” An instrument “to study your reactions – something of that sort.” She knows she is different, “[y]et it seems to me that I think as any human being does .. and I know nothing!”

As Morton writes in his introduction to The Ecological Thought, the posthuman turn is “a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise – and how can we so clearly tell the difference?” It is about the “irreducible uncertainty over what counts as a person. Being a person never means being sure you’re one.” He continues we should “treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas of what counts as people.” Posthuman ethics is “to regard [and treat] beings as people even when they aren’t people.” In his article “From modernity to the Anthropocene: ecology and art in the age of asymmetry” Morton

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74 Lem (1973): 143.
states “humans are confronted with the existence of actual unique entities (living and non-living) that exist from their own side.” As mentioned above, he even dedicates one sentence to the novel *Solaris* as an example of how to relate to these entities: In the novel “a human [Kelvin] decides simply to coexist with a unique being: a sentient planet,” and its “instrument” in the form of his lover. As suggested by Morton, Kelvin seems to follow Morton’s ecological thought:

> You may have been sent to torment me, or to make my life happier, or as an instrument ignorant of its function, used like a microscope with me on the slide. Possibly you are here as a token of friendship, or a subtle punishment, or even as a joke. It could be all of those at once, or – which is more probable – something else completely. If you say that our future depends on the ocean’s intentions, I can’t deny it. I can’t tell the future anymore than you can. I can’t even swear that I shall always love you. After what has happened already, we can expect anything. … It is out of our hands.

Kelvin tells Snow that Rheya knows everything and that he accepts her for what she is. Show doesn’t agree: “You are going around in circles to satisfy the curiosity of a power we don’t understand and can’t control, and she is an aspect, a periodic manifestation of that power.” Their conversation draws Kelvin back from the idea of coexistence and to a certain extent convinces him of the need of human control. However, this idea doesn’t satisfy Kelvin: “Rule

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78 Lem (1973): 145.
them or be ruled by them: that was the only idea in our pathetic minds! What a useless waste...”

In chapter twelve titled “The Dreams” Kelvin and Rheya spent whole days in the library without talking to each other. The atmosphere at the space station was repeated in his dreams, which reflected the “presentiment of impending disaster.” In a dream Kelvin feels he is “the prisoner of an alien matter and my body is clothed in a dead, formless substance – or rather I have no body, I am that alien matter.” His dream continues:

Inert, locked in the alien matter that encloses me, I can neither retreat nor turn away, and still I am being touched, my prison is being probed, and I feel this contact like a hand, and the hand recreates me. Until now, I thought I saw, but had no eyes: now I have eyes! Under the caress of the hesitant fingers, my lips and cheeks emerge from the void, and as the caress goes further I have a face, breath stirs in my chest – I exist. And recreated, I in my turn create: a face appears before me that I have never seen until now, at once mysterious and known.

This dream is interesting because it provides a possible explanation of the events taking place on the space station. Science and technology fell short in understanding what was going on; in the perspective of the posthuman turn it is a dream echoing intra-activity. Kelvin realizes he is that alien matter. He feels like he is being recreated. He emerges from the void. Through the intra-action with the ocean he has come into being. He exists like he didn’t exist before.

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80 Lem (1973): 159.
83 Ibid.
He, on his turn, also creates. He creates the ocean, which didn’t exist as such before, that is—
as a materialization of a memory, which is at the same time mysterious and familiar.

“Victory”, the title of the thirteenth chapter is ambiguous because it is, as always, a
matter of perspective. When Kelvin wakes up he reaches out for Rheya and touches a cold
sheet. He panics and immediately gets up and starts looking for her. He loses his mind and
sinks to the floor. The next moment he is in a cabin with Snow, who tells him Rheya is dead.
At the request of Rheya herself, a new “destabiliser” built by Sartorius annihilated her. His
colleagues also came up with a device that prevents de visitors from coming back. Science
has triumphed once more. Snow wants to cut to the chase and write a report of what
happened to send to Earth. Kelvin is heartbroken and angry, and can’t think straight. Snow
mentions possible new chances of contact with the ocean after which Kelvin snaps: “Contact?
Still contact? Haven’t you had enough of this madhouse? What more do you need? No its out
of the question. Count me out!” Snow: “Why not? … You yourself instinctively treat it [the
ocean] like a human being now, more than ever. You hate it.”

Before returning to Earth, Kelvin wants to set foot on Solaris. He insists on going
alone. He lands his shuttle on an even beach-like surface. Kelvin climbs the cliff next to the
‘beach’, from which he has a wide view. He realizes he has “flown here not to explore the
formation but to acquaint [himself] with the ocean.” He goes closer to the sea and reaches out
his hands to the waves. “[T]he wave hesitated, reconciled, then enveloped my hand without
touching it.” Kelvin: “I sat unseeing, and sank into a universe of inertia, glided down an
irresistible slope and identified myself with the dumb fluid colossus; it was as if I had
forgiven it everything, without the slightest effort of word or thought.” He recognizes the
ocean has agency and its own phenomenology, and he decides to coexist with this entity,
which remains a mystery. Kelvin returns safely to the space station, where he remains with

the awareness that he “knew nothing, and persisted in the faith that the time of cruel miracles was not past.”  

Conclusion

*Solaris* caused a liberation of imagination for Soviet science fiction writers and filmmakers. It demonstrated “the fragility of man's pretensions to absolute knowledge,” in similar ways to the questioning of human mastery of the posthuman turn. Especially the behavior Kris Kelvin echoes his believe in a pluralization of perspectives and interconnectedness, when he decides to co-exist with entities he knows he will never understand. Kelvin’s posthuman stance does not mean letting go of all human ethics, as argued in *The Human Reimagined*. Although he initially launches Rheya into space, he, later on, unlike his colleagues, does not approve of the torturing of the visitors in the name of ‘beyond human’ science. In contrast to Gomel, who argues that to be truly posthuman, a human “inevitably slides into actions, which from a humanist point of view have to be classified as inhuman or evil,” Kelvin shows instead that to be truly posthuman means treating “many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas of what counts as people.”

*Roadside picnic (1971)*

The brothers Boris (1933-2012), an astrophysicist and computer scientist, and Arkady Strugatsky (1925-1991), a specialist in Japanese literature, formed the perfect team for writing science fiction, which they started to write in 1958. In thirty years they published over thirty novels and short stories, which were well received in the Soviet Union. *Roadside picnic* (1971): 202-204.


Gomel: 63.

*picnic (Piknik na obochine)* was finished at the end of 1971 and published a couple of months later, in 1972, in the literary magazine *Avrora*. Among the few works that were translated into foreign languages, *Roadside picnic* was the most successful. The story about the aftermath of an extra-terrestrial “Visitation” that took place simultaneously on six different locations or “Zones” on Earth, was the basis for the film *Stalker* (1979) by Andrei Tarkovsky.

In the introduction to the novel, the American science fiction and horror writer Theodore Sturgeon (1918-1985) stresses the importance of science fiction “as a field of literature so limitless, so flexible, so able to evoke astonishment and wonder, so free of the boundaries of time and space and that arbitrary fantasy we call reality.”

For Sturgeon, the novel, “by its richly detailed portraiture of an alien culture, affords a new perspective on the nature of ours and ourselves,” which is exactly what theorists of the posthuman turn hope to afford.

**Synopsis**

The story is set on Earth in a time that seems like the present, except that there are six ‘Zones’ created by an alien force visiting Earth, which is referred to as “the Visitation”. Strange and inexplicable things occur inside the Zones. Humans and animals cannot live in it, and are restricted from the area. The Zones are fenced and subject of scientific study. People known as ‘stalkers’ illegally go into the Zone in search for artefacts, some of which have proved useful for human beings, and they sell them for big amounts of money. Their work is extremely dangerous because inside the Zone nothing is like it seems, and the stalkers are subject to continuously changing invisible and unknown forces. If stalkers come out alive and get caught by the authorities they face long imprisonment.

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89 Sturgeon (1977): 5.
The plot revolves around eight years out of the life of Redrick Schuhart (from his 23rd until he is 31), a resident of Harmont, one of the six places where a Zone is located. After a short legal career at the Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures, he turns to fulltime stalking. In between his time in prison he marries, and his wife gives birth to their daughter – Monkey. Even though Redrick is a family man now, he does not stop stalking.

At the end of the story, Redrick carries out a final mission into the Zone in search of the “Golden Ball” – an artefact that fulfils the most intimate wishes of the one who finds it. The road to the Ball is dangerous and deadly, and in the end even requires a human sacrifice; his young stalking companion Arthur. Now the road to the Ball has been cleared, Redrick tries to articulate his deepest desire, but he cannot.

Analysis

The title of the first chapter introduces the main character of the novel: “Redrick Schuhart, Age 23, Bachelor, Laboratory Assistant at the Harmont Branch of the International Institute for Extraterrestrial Cultures [IIEC].” Redrick, or Red, is an experienced stalker, who often goes into the Zone illegally after sunset to bring back objects. In an attempt to change his life for the better he finds a job as a laboratory assistant of the institute researching the alien force that created the Zones. Now he can enter the Zone legally in broad daylight. He assists the Soviet scientist Kirill Panov and convinces him to go into the Zone on an official expedition to try and find a “full empty.”

Red, Kirill, and the second laboratory assistant Tender, go into the Zone in a flying boot. The Zone does not look different from the landscape surrounding it. They enter the part

\[90\] Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 15.

\[91\] Kirill had been studying “empty empties” for a long time without discovering any benefit to mankind. “They’re just two cupper disks the size of a saucer, about a quarter inch thick, with a space of a foot and a half between them.” Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 15.
of town, which was cut off by the Visitation. The detailed description of the abandoned “Plaque Quarter” – a neighbourhood where everyone, who lived here during the Visitation got sick or died – provides a vision of a world without human beings.92 Because Red has years of experience in the Zone, he knows danger lurks around every corner. Red hears something and commands Kirill to stop the boot. After a few seconds the danger has passed. “What was that?” asks Kirill. Red: “The devil knows. It was, and now it’s gone. Thank God. And shut up please, you’re not a human being now, do you understand? You are a machine, my steering wheel.”93 Red has experience with these entities, which cannot be explained or understood by human logic. He has learned to coexist with the phenomena of the Zone, to maximize his chances of survival. He orders Kirill to let go of his humanity because this mind-set could kill them.

As they move forward, Kirill asks: “Are you looking for graviconcentrates?” “I’m looking for what I should be looking for,” answers Red.94 Kirill keeps silent and Red thinks:

“They’re all like that, the eggheads, the most important thing for them is to find a name for things. Until he had come up with a name, he was too pathetic to look at – a real idiot. But now that he had some label like graviconcentrate, he thought that he understood everything and life was a breeze.”95

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93 Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 30.
95 Ibid.
Thinking about the words of Kirill, Red points to a typical characteristic of the European Enlightened human, who tries to unriddle the Other’s mysteries, by naming and knowing it, to subsequently dominating it. Just like in the posthuman turn today, objects in *Roadside picnic* cause the lapse of the concept of the human. By means of new technologies and scientific discoveries the characters in *Roadside picnic* come across entities that refuse to be systemized, which, on its turn redefines the human as systemizer. Red has become aware of it already, and recognizes this typical humanist trait in Kirill.

Kirill, Tender, and Red find the full empty and get out of the Zone alive. In the local pub Red talks about his day to fellow stalkers and other acquaintances. One of them is his friend Gutalin, who is the opposite of a stalker. He buys the raided artefacts or “Satan’s treasures” as he calls them, and returns them to the Zone. Gutalin wants “to go on living as though the Zone were not there. Leave the devil’s things to the devil.”\(^{96}\) However, as Red says, “[y]ou can’t get away from it.”\(^{97}\)

Gutalin is a good example of Braidotti and Morton arguing that religious institutions and governments desperately try to hold on to the concept of the Enlightened human. However, as they point out, interconnected coexistence of the posthuman turn shows distancing yourself from it, by labelling things you do not understand as ‘diabolic’, is impossible. Although the Zone is a closed area, it is present in every aspect of life on Earth in *Roadside picnic*. The agency of the Zone reaches far beyond the fence surrounding it. However, as Morton argues, “it is not impossible that future humans will have built something like spirituality around certain materials,” precisely because they cannot be ignored or completely understood. With this quote Morton is referring to radioactive materials, which can be considered hyperobjects, because of their beyond-human scale and

\(^{96}\) Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 47.

\(^{97}\) Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 50.
time span. Just as hyperobjects, you cannot sweep the Zone and its artifacts under the carpet, and pretend it is not there. Spirituality might be the only way to deal with objects that do not let themselves be fathomed by human beings.

In his theoretical work *Microworlds: Writings on Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1984), Lem’s analysis of *Roadside picnic* can be compared to Morton’s idea of spirituality around hyperobjects. Lem describes *Roadside picnic* as an example of “negative theology, which grapples with the nature of God as totally Other.” According to Gomel, Lem’s “point is not that *Roadside picnic* is a religious allegory but rather that it “transcend[s] the science-fiction tradition” as it attempts to represent the unhuman [radically Other]” instead of the inhuman (morally evil), and with that preserves the mystery. Gomel:

As he does in his own *Solaris*, Lem views the figure of the alien, “the reasonable, yet not human, being” as a stand-in for the mystery of the universe outside the boundaries of human comprehension. He commends the Strugatskys for preserving this mystery rather than succumbing to the reduction of the unhuman to the inhuman, alterity to evil.

Red finds out his companion Kirill, with whom he went on an expedition in the Zone that same day, has died from a heart attack at the research institute. Although it could be a

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99 Gomel: 59-60.
100 Lem in Gomel: 60. Earlier on in her article Gomel distinguishes the unhuman from the inhuman, where the latter refers to the morally evil and the former to the radically Other, something which can’t be judged because it is beyond human comprehension.
101 Ibid.
coincidence, for Red it again confirms the Zone does not stay within its fences. “What’s there to understand? It’s the Zone.”\textsuperscript{102} He goes home downhearted to his girlfriend Guta, who tells him she is pregnant. Although the story goes children of stalkers have a higher risk of mutations, they decide to keep it and get married.

In chapter two “Redrick Schuhart, Age 28, Married, No Permanent Occupation”, Red has returned to fulltime illegal stalking. After an expedition, which almost costs the live of his companion, he goes home to his wife and daughter, who is just like others girls of her age except for her black eyes and body covered with soft fur, which is why they have called her “Monkey.” After stowing away his “swag” (artefacts from the Zone), he goes and see Monkey and hugs “the creature that was crawling all over him and looked into the huge dark eyes that had no whites at all, and cuddled his cheek against the plump little cheek covered with a silky golden fleece.”\textsuperscript{103} The Zone has crept into his own flesh and blood.

Chapter three is about a man, who is assigned to stop the flow of objects coming from the Zone. Richard Noonan thinks his work is constructive, but his boss tears this thought apart when he tells him the flow of Zone artefacts has never been more numerous. He goes to the local café and recognizes the Nobel Prize winner Dr. Valentine Pilman sitting in one of the boots. Pilman is one of the leading scientists studying the Zone. Noonan joins Pilman in his booth, and they proceed in an ontological conversation. Because this conversation is the highlight of this novel form the perspective of the posthuman turn, I quote it for a large part.

\textit{Noonan:} How will all this end?

\textit{Pilman:} What?

\textsuperscript{102} Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 52.
\textsuperscript{103} Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 74.
Noonan: The Visitation. The Zones, the stalkers, the military-industrial complexes – the whole lot. How can it all end?

Pilman: For whom? Be specific.

Noonan: Well, say for our part of the planet.

Pilman: That depends on whether we have luck or not. We now know that in our part of the planet the Visitation left no after effects, for the most part. That does not rule out, of course, the possibility that in pulling all these chestnuts out of the fire, we may pull out something that will make life impossible not only for us, but for the entire planet. That would be bad luck. But, you must admit, such a threat always hovers over mankind.¹⁰⁴

With his question “For whom?” Pilman shows he is able to approach things from not only a human perspective. According to Pilman, the Zone and its artefacts should be dealt with responsibly, not only because it could make life impossible for humans, but for all other things. In trying to simplify the conversation, Noonan asks Pilman what he thinks about the Visitation personally. Pilman warns that this question and his answer fall under the category of what he calls ‘xenology’: “an unnatural mixture of science fiction and formal logic. It’s based on the false premise that human psychology is applicable to extraterrestrial intelligent beings.”¹⁰⁵

Noonan: Why is this false?

Pilman: Because biologists have already been burned trying to use human psychology on animals. Earth animal, as that.

¹⁰⁴ Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 112.
Noonan: Forgive me, but that’s an entirely different matter. We’re talking about the psychology of rational beings.

Pilman: Yes. And everything would be fine if we only knew what reason was.

By questioning the category of the human as “[t]he Cartesian subject of the cogito,” and “the Kantian “community of reasonable beings”106, just like Braidotti, Pilman tries to explain Noonan not even all biological humans fall into the human category according to these criteria. If there is no consensus about the meaning of reason, as a common denominator among human beings, labelling unknown extraterrestrial entities of the Visitation as such is thus excluded. Disillusioned by the Nobel Prize winning scientist for not being able to formulate a simple definition of reason, the conversation turns into a philosophical monologue by Pilman. “OK. The hell with reason,”107 says Noonan and he brings the conversation back to the Visitation, and again asks Pilman what he thinks about it.

Pilman: I imagine a picnic

Noonan: What did you say?

Pilman: A picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. A car drives off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out of the car carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios, and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see? Old spark plugs and old filters strewn around. Rags, burnt-out bulbs, and a monkey wrench left behind. And of course, the usual mess – apple cores, candy

wrappers, charred remains of the campfire, cans, bottles, somebody’s handkerchief, somebody’s penknife, torn newspapers, coins, faded flowers picked in another meadow.

Noonan: I see a roadside picnic.\textsuperscript{108}

Pilman’s idea of a roadside picnic is a perfect example of Bryant’s pluralisation of perspectives. For Bryant, “a position is posthumanist when it no longer privileges human ways of encountering and evaluating the world, instead attempting to explore how other entities encounter the world.”\textsuperscript{109} The realization that ‘reasonable’ human experience is not one-sided, (“depending on the embodied experience of sexed beings, our disabilities, our cultural experiences, the technologies to which our bodies are coupled, class, etc,”\textsuperscript{110}) has laid a good foundation for the posthuman turn expanding different human perspectives in phenomenologies of entire ecosystems, animals, plants, and other entities that also have their “ways of apprehending the world.” Granting entities their perspective is just as important as their phenomenology. Bryant: “There is a phenomenology for, not of, every type of entity that exists.” Referring to Harman, Bryant explains, just as humans “structure the world in a particular way such that they never encounter things-as-they-are-in-themselves, the same is true for all other entities as they relate to the world.”\textsuperscript{111} Pilman’s concept of a roadside picnic shows humans, or any other entity will never encounter things-as-they-are-in-themselves, because it is a matter of perspective.

\textsuperscript{108} Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 115.

\textsuperscript{109} Bryant (2012).

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
But do the relics of this roadside picnic on a road in the cosmos provide “something that will alter science, technology, our way of life?” asks Noonan. Pilman strongly dislikes answering such a question because it would “indulge in empty fantasizing.” Pilman: “I would put it this way. There are objects for which we have found uses. We use them, but almost certainly not the way the visitors use them.” In addition to that, Pilman argues, there are a whole lot of objects, for which no application has been found. Man does not understand what they are about or how to use them. However, that the visitors might use ‘their’ objects for different things than human beings is not a problem, according to Pilman. Forms of cooperation or sharing of tools between strange strangers is also encouraged in the posthuman turn. Morton gives an example of Californian crows using cars and roads as a nutcracker: “They harvest walnuts from the trees that line a particular road; they fly up; when a car drives past, they drop the walnuts so precisely that they fall just in front of the oncoming wheels.” As Californian crows encounter the world, a traffic jam is a collection of nutcrackers. For other human objects crows haven’t found a use.

After twenty years of research in the Zone, “we don’t even know a thousandth of what it contains” says Pilman. Every discovery leads to a countless amount of new questions, as is the case with science in general. In both the reality of Roadside picnic, and in the reality of the twenty-first century, things can be studied, but as Morton argues: “the more we know, the less certain and ambiguous things become.” Science and technology have “torn a giant hole in the fabric of our understanding.”

112 Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 118.
113 Ibid.
115 Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 120.
In the last chapter Red and Arthur Burbridge go into the Zone for the last time. They want to find the wish-granting Golden Ball. When they reach their goal after a very though journey, Arthur goes straight for the ball. Red knows Arthur is lost, but does not say anything because Arthur’s death is necessary for him to reach the ball. As Arthur loudly reveals his whishes to the ball – “Happiness for everybody! … Free! … As much as you want! … Everybody come here! … There is enough for everybody! Nobody will leave unsatisfied! … Free! … Happiness! … Free!” – he is lifted into the sky and every bone in his body is twisted by a “meatgrinder.” With this human sacrifice, the way to the ball is free for Red. He walks up to the ball trying to formulate his deepest wish but he cannot think of any other words than Arthur’s: “HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND NO ONE WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED!”

Conclusion

The Strugatsky’s “multiform handling of time and space, the plurality of points of view, the autonomous existence of objects putting man in the background and destroying his total control over the surrounding world,” fit perfectly within the context of the posthuman turn. Red and professor Pilman name the typical characteristics of the Enlightened human, and realize they are untenable. The novel shows there are other ways of apprehending the world by recognizing non-human phenomenologies. Not a single entity, humans included, encounter things-as-they-are-in-themselves, because it is a matter of perspective. A roadside picnic to aliens, is something completely different to human beings. 

Roadside picnic proves McQuillen wrong when she argues anthropocentrism and human mastery was left untouched in science fiction of the late Soviet Union. However,

117 Strugatsky and Strugatsky (1977): 158.
Gomel’s “irresolvable contradiction” between the human and the posthuman, cannot be refuted as easily as in the analysis of Solaris in the previous subchapter. A posthuman stance does not mean letting go of all human ethics, yet Red seems to let go, at least partly, of this at the end of the novel when he sacrifices his companion. In discussing Roadside picnic Gomel argues: “to push into uncharted territory of the unhuman, … he inevitably slides into actions, which from a humanist point of view have to be classified as inhuman or evil.” The inevitability of Red’s action can be debated, not that it was evil. However, Gomel overlooks the fact that the same humanist and anthropocentric point of view has functioned as a blueprint for atrocities committed against colonized peoples, women, and other people who were not considered fully human. This means holding on to a humanist point of view does not exclude evil.

Although Red criticizes the characteristics of the Enlightened human in the rest of the novel, his stance is not posthuman at the end of Roadside picnic. Red’s evil actions arise from humanist greed, and desire for control. The hope of control over his own life, after finding the Golden Ball, proves in vain, because inside the Zone he is not even in control of his own thoughts.

Solyaris (1972)

In 1968, after the refusal of several scripts and the unreleased film Andrei Rublev by Mosfilm, Andrei Tarkovsky decided to make a film adaptation of Solaris. After a less than smooth production of more than three years Solyaris premiered at the 1972 Cannes Film

\[120\] Gomel: 63.

\[121\] Enlightened humanism was contested in post-colonial theory, feminist thought, race theory, gender theory, disability studies, and embodied cognition theory. They first drew attention to different human phenomenologies, and, subsequently, led to explorations of how other entities encounter the world: the posthuman turn.
festival, won the jury prize, and received a Palm d’Or nomination. At home, in the Soviet Union, the film was a big success as well. Although the film was shown in only five cinemas, it sold over ten million tickets.\footnote{Segida, Miroslava and Sergei Zemlianukhin. \textit{Domashniaia sinemateka: Otechestvennoe kino 1918–1996}, Moscow, 1996, Dubl-D.}

Tarkovsky’s film adaptation differs from the book in several ways. The first version of the screenplay took place on Earth for two-thirds of the story, but was rejected by both Lem and Mosfilm. The final adapted screenplay was set in space for the most part, however, Tarkovsky stuck to the idea of commencing and ending the film on Earth.\footnote{Tarkovsky, Andrei. \textit{Collected Screenplays}, edited by William Powell, London: Faber & Faber, 1999, 130.} The analysis of the adapted story and of the set design, explores if, and in what way his version of \textit{Solaris} fits the ideas of the posthuman turn.

\textbf{Synopsis}

Kris Kelvin will be sent to the scientific research station orbiting Solaris, to evaluate whether the station should be closed, since the efforts of many scientists studying Solaris did not generate any scientific result. Before leaving, a returned Solarist called Berton, visits Kelvin who is at his parents’ house. He brought a tape with his testimony of a strange event. Berton testifies to the presence of human like entities on Solaris. He saw an extraordinary large naked baby, when he went on a flight above Solaris’ surface. Just like the scientists conducting the testimony, Kelvin dismisses Berton’s eyewitness account as a hallucination after which Berton feels humiliated and leaves.

Because the story aboard the space station largely follows Lem’s novel, only the discrepancies, I found worthy of noting, are mentioned in this synopsis. When Kelvin finds out his visitor Hari (Rheya in the novel) is destroyed by his fellow scientists Dr. Snaut (Dr. Snow...}
in the novel) and Dr. Sartorius, he tries to decide if he should return to Earth or remain at the space station. The scene abruptly jumps to Kelvin in the same landscape as in the beginning of the film, but now it is winter. After he embraces his father at the house the camera zooms out, revealing they find themselves on an island in the ocean of Solaris.

**Analysis**

Before the analysis of the film, some context of Tarkovsky as a maker is required. Tarkovsky describes his films as part of a “spiritual endeavour, which aspires to make man more perfect.” As Jeremy Mark Robinson argues in *The Sacred Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky*, this spiritual endeavour “does not depict Christ or God, but does reveal a world in which the unknown is not in the next country or the next town but right here, in this building, in this room.” According to Tarkovsky, the divine and infinite “Wholly Other”, which refers to the difference between God and all other things, is present everywhere and in everything, and he sees it as his artistic task as a finite creature to approach this “Wholly Other” in the best possible way. He believes art, and especially cinematography as a form of spiritual contemplation gets closest to the unreachable essence of things. Just as in every object the “Wholly Other” is also part of human beings. To achieve his aim – making man more perfect – Tarkovsky sees it as his “duty to stimulate reflection on what is essentially human and eternal in each individual soul.”

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By applying his world-view and artistic objectives on Lem’s *Solaris*, Tarkovsky shows a world in which the big unknown is on Earth and inside the human being, even though, for the biggest part, the story is set in space. With the over forty minutes long prologue, which follows Kelvin wandering through nature and traveling through the city, and shows him meeting Berton at his parents house, Tarkovsky takes Lem’s story to Earth. The novel hardly talks about Earth, there is only some speculation of what life on Earth will be after return, if they ever return. As mentioned above, the film was initially intended to take place on Earth for two thirds, which shows Tarkovsky shifted the focus from human life in the cosmos to the life of the cosmonaut on Earth. Although he had to adapt the initial screenplay, it still starts and ends with this idea: the impact of outer space upon the human condition on Earth. Being in space confronts Kelvin with the awareness of the proximity of the big unknown on Earth and inside himself. The stable point of reference in the novel – the secure and comprehensible Earth, where man has given itself the role of master, and only the human perspective counts – is released by Tarkovsky.

The anthropocentrism, which is challenged by Lem’s novel and in the posthuman turn, does not stand in the way of Tarkovsky’s goal of making man more perfect; rather, it is informed by it. As Nariman Skakov argues in *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time*, for Tarkovsky, anthropocentrism “is a natural intellectual and spiritual stance for a human being to occupy.” For Skakov it is impossible “to think as outside the human body, and humanity constantly explores the unknown through reference to the already familiar. The connection of a person with his or her natural habitat defines his or her philosophic horizon.” This is, according to Skakov, the reason Tarkovsky added the “spatio-temporal

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129 Ibid.
layer” of Earth to Lem’s story: “Earth is the natural environment in which thinking is grounded for a human being.”

Skakov’s argument that to challenge anthropocentrism, as Lem does in his novel, requires abandoning the familiar ground of Earth and letting go of the human, comes close to “irresolvable contradiction” of the human and the posthuman stance as discussed in The Human Reimagined. However, one does not have to leave Earth in order to challenge anthropocentrism, as is done in the posthuman turn. It is about the acknowledgement that, next to human beings, there are more acting and perceiving entities with their perspectives, whose philosophical horizon is also defined by their environment. The posthuman turn, to repeat Bryant, does not mean the negation of the human; rather, “a position is posthumanist when it no longer privileges human ways of encountering and evaluating the world, instead attempting to explore how other entities encounter the world.”

Although Tarkovsky’s endeavour is clearly religious and anthropocentric, he does, presumably unwillingly, contribute to the contemporary conception of the posthuman turn. By taking Lem’s Story to Earth, he does not only, as Skakov argues, place the human characters in an environment, which defines their philosophic horizon, but also shows the territory of the strange stranger, or, as Tarkovsky would put it, the “Wholly Other” is not necessarily in space. In contrast to Lem, Earth is no longer a stable place of reference, where human mastery is safeguarded. Instead, Tarkovsky shows how the rupture of the concept of the human in space, also sweeps away the ontological ground underneath their feet on Earth.

Earth is not only added as a location where the story takes place. The decoration inside the space station orbiting Solaris, which is much more elaborate than the description in

130 Ibid.
133 Bryant (2012).
Lem’s novel, also shows Earth is very much present in space. The arched corridors of the space station are decorated with plaster busts of Ancient Greek philosophers, and in the big round library one forgets to be in space. It has a very classic library look: dark green furniture lining and the walls are covered with dark wooden panels and bookshelves. The niches are decorated with similar plaster reproductions of great ‘Earthly thinkers’, highlights from art history, a globe, stuffed insects in a frame, antique pistols and canons. There is a reproduction of Andrei Rublev’s famous trinity icon and of paintings by old masters, of which Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c. 1525-1569) is most prominent with his *Tower of Babel* (1563), *The Hunters in the Snow*, and *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (both 1565).

On Snaut’s birthday, Kelvin, Hari, and Sartorius are waiting for him in the library where they prepared a little party. The round table is all set with drinks and candlelight. Snaut arrives drunk an hour and a halve too late. The tense atmosphere doesn’t turn with his arrival, and develops into an impassioned philosophical argument. Sartorius tells Hari she isn’t a human being. The real Hari is death and she is no more than a copy, a matrix. According to a crying Hari this could be the case, however, she assures the three Solarists in the library she feels like a human being. She can feel love. Hari: “I am human!” Sartorius leaves the room and shortly after, Snaut asks Kelvin to accompany him to his cabin, because he is too drunk to walk on his own. Hari is left alone in the library. When Kelvin returns to the library, he joins Hari, whose gaze is fixed on the reproduction of *The Hunters in the Snow*. For over two minutes the camera zooms in on several details of the painting.

In a study on Tarkovsky’s views on cinematography, Sylvian De Bleeckere argues that for Tarkovsky, *Solyaris* and Solaristics function as a metaphor for “the major project of the modern state that developed the space program to prove its claim: the non-existence of
any form of transcendence.”  

For De Bleeckere, this “radical immanence” of the secularism of the modern world, is build “on the foundation of the aggressive murder of any transcendent Being.”  

In Solyaris, Tarkovsky challenges secular immanence, which caused “the death of God”. According to De Bleeckere this is most apparent in the library scene described above. In the space, which comprises art, religion, literature, science, human beings, and Hari – whose presence they cannot explain – the plot amounts to “the dramatic given of the fundamental crisis in the space station Solaris that is at a dead end.” For De Bleeckere, Tarkovsky’s library scene “stages the confrontation of the modern, secular civilization with the limits of its strategic negation of any metaphysical transcendence.” With his film Tarkovsky tries to show the “fundamental or structural limits of humankind.”

Although Tarkovsky’s critique of Enlightenment-thinking stems from a religious worldview, it does cause a reconsideration of what it means to be human. De Bleeckere:

Kelvin’s journey, leaving the unreachable “Alterity” and heading for his earthly home, brings him back to the Realm’s significance to which he has been blind. The scientific, secular man he once was understands now the shortcomings of the oppositional immanence-transcendence scheme. He accepts the unique value of being a human member of the Realm of Earthly Life.

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134 De Bleeckere, Sylvian. ““Beyond” Immanence and Transcendence: Reflectoins in the Mirror of Andrei Tarkovsky’s Andrei Rublev and Solaris.” Currents of Encounter 42 (2011): 481.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
137 De Bleeckere (2011): 482.
Just like Tarkovsky, who tries to overcome the oppositional immananence-transcendence with *Solyaris*, the thinkers of the posthuman turn aim for something similar. The products of radical immanence of the secularism of the modern world (science and technology), with which Enlightened human beings attempted to prove transcendent beings wrong, have now, on its turn caused the transcendence of the human being. Religious transcendence of the “Wholly Other” was challenged by secular immanence during the Enlightenment. The Enlightened human believed the essence of all things would be accessible to human beings through science and technology. Recently, this immanence has had the opposite effect; scientific discoveries and technological advancements have increasingly shown that all sorts of non-human entities have their own agenda, interests, and agency, which deny humans as center point trough which to understand reality. It has caused a “posthuman transcendence” in which has become clear that nor humans nor any other entity will ever encounter things-as-they-are-in-themselves. Next to challenging the anthropocentric order and the claim to human mastery, the posthuman turn also incites (just like Tarkovsky with *Solyaris*) a critique of dualist thought, which separates spirit from matter, culture form nature, and transcendence from immanence.

At the end of the film, Kelvin finds himself in the Russian wetlands surrounding his parents’ house, just as in the opening of the film, only this time it is winter. There is something strange. When he approaches the house he sees his father who doesn’t seem to mention it is raining inside the house. Kelvin falls to his knees and embraces his father. Then the camera zooms out to reveal they are located on an island in the ocean of Solaris. It is unclear if Kelvin has returned to Earth, or that it is the ocean of Solaris that has materialized his memory of home on its surface. It can also be neither of those two, but only a depiction of a dream. Whether it is in space, on Earth, or inside a human being, Kelvin will never understand the “Wholly Other”, and the twentieth-century-audience will never encounter
things-as-they-are-in-themselves. Through Tarkovsky’s “reflection on what is essentially human and eternal in each individual soul,”\textsuperscript{138} one can only come to the conclusion that the essence of man is also unreachable. The next step is the posthuman turn, or as Morton says: “Once we discover the void at our hearts, we can’t remain indifferent to the strange stranger.”\textsuperscript{139}

**Conclusion**

Although Tarkovsky’s work cannot be seen separately from its religious connotations, his adaptation of the story does complement the challenging of anthropocentrism in Lem’s novel, by focusing on another aspect of the posthuman turn. In taking the story to Earth, *Solyaris* shows it is not necessary to leave Earth to experience the limits of humankind. Tarkovsky is mainly focused on the void in understanding, or, as he would put it, the “Wholly Other” inside individual human beings, and thus takes an anthropocentric stance. However, in contrast to Enlightened anthropocentrism, Tarkovsky challenges human mastery. His focus on the human perspective does not mean that his ideas cannot be applied to phenomenologies of non-human entities, just as the opposite – posthumanism excluding the human perspective – is not the case in the posthuman turn. In addition, Tarkovsky’s effort to lift the oppositional immanence-transcendence scheme echoes the posthuman critique of dualist thought.

**Stalker (1979)**

Shortly after the publication of *Roadside Picnic*, Tarkovsky noted in his journal: “I’ve just read the Strugatsky brothers’ science fiction story, *Roadside Picnic*; that would make a

\textsuperscript{138} Tarkovsky (1989): 200.
\textsuperscript{139} Morton (2010): 100.
tremendous screenplay for somebody as well.”¹⁴⁰ Five years later Tarkovsky took on the task himself. After producing ten different screenplays that increasingly deviated from the original story of Roadside picnic, the eleventh was made into the film Stalker.¹⁴¹ The film was released in Moscow in May 1979 and was critically acclaimed in both domestic and foreign press. This to the delight of Tarkovsky, who wrote Stalker “turned out the best of all my films.”¹⁴² As his others films Stalker was informed by Tarkovsky’s spiritual and religious worldview. Yet, the analysis of the story, and audio-visual elements demonstrate how this worldview does not stand in the way of a posthuman reading of Stalker.

Synopsis

Although the final screenplay, written by the Strugatsky brothers, is very different from the novel, the main themes of the story (the Zone, stalking, and the effects of the Visitation on life on Earth) remain in place. The name of the main character based on Redrick Schuhart is unknown. He is referred to as “Stalker.” Before he leaves for the Zone his wife desperately tries to stop him. She claims he destroys her life and that of their sick daughter by continuing his stalking. He ignores her, and goes to the local bar to meet his “clients”, who he will take into the Zone for money.

Two men, Writer and Professor, accompany Stalker into the Zone. Getting around the military blockade surrounding the Zone, the three get on a railway track leading to the center of the Zone. Stalker stresses they should do everything he says, because he has experience

how to evade the incomprehensible and invisible dangers of the Zone. The paths they take irritate his companions, who want to take the shortest road to their goal: the Room, a place where all your wishes come true.

All three have their own reason for wanting to visit Room. Writer is hoping to find inspiration and Professor hopes to set up a scientific research of the Zone, which will earn him a Nobel Prize. Stalker claims his only wish is to help them. Surviving all the pitfalls of the Zone, the three reach Room. Before entering it the professor reveals his true goal: the destruction of Room. He brought a bomb with him to save humanity from its subconscious desires, which could be granted when entering Room. Stalker tries to talk Professor out of it, because with the destruction of Room humanity would lose hope. Writer explains there is no point in expressing his wish; no one can fully understand or recognize his or her deepest wish, and that is why nobody can use Room for their own purposes. Hearing those words Professor realizes going into the Zone is pointless, and he dismantles the bomb. Although they are in front of it, they do not enter Room. They return home. Stalker tells his wife people have lost the faith to be able to enter the Zone, or to live.

Analysis

Stalker, the main character of the film differs greatly from Red in Roadside picnic, on which his character is based. In his article “Vagabond Desire: Aliens, Alienation and Human Regeneration in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky’s Roadside Picnic and Andrey Tarkovsky’s Stalker” John Moore writes: “Rather than the proletarian brawler of Roadside Picnic, the film’s protagonist is cast in the archetypal Russian role of the holy fool, the weak man whose innocence and powerlessness remain his source of strength.”143 Although Stalker is more

contemplative and less blunt than Red, he “still remains a focus for radical vision.”\textsuperscript{144} He believes he finds himself in a society that has become a prison, and seeks refuge in an alternative space, which he calls home – the Zone.\textsuperscript{145} According to Tarkovsky, Stalker is a person “possessed of inner freedom”, which he tries to share with other people when entering the Zone.\textsuperscript{146}

The “holy fool” guides Writer and Professor through the Zone. Not only because he knows the way; he also guides them spiritually.\textsuperscript{147} The easiest way to the wish-granting Room is not the shortest, and wandering through the Zone Stalker recites poetry, quotes passages from the Bible, and talks about other visitors to the Zone in an almost biblical sense. Agitated by not going to their goal in a straight line, Writer and Professor desperately try to understand the environment in which they are located. They ask Stalker all sorts of questions, which he is unable to answer. In his chapter on \textit{Stalker}, Skakov argues that the lengthy quotation of the Book of Revelation of the New Testament in combination with the poetry recitation, the unanswered questions, and the performed cinematography in the Zone, all try to prevent “consummation” by the spectator. Skakov: “They leave gaps in the viewer’s perception and, at the same time, they pass on ‘hope’, to use Tarkovsky’s vocabulary. The suspension of direct knowledge is the key to Revelation, and it also becomes the ultimate aesthetic strategy of the sequence.”\textsuperscript{148}

Tarkovsky’s tactic of suspension of direct knowledge, is also reflected in his views of the Zone. Similar to the ocean of Solaris, the Zone “is the miraculous and ultimate \textit{other}

\textsuperscript{144} Moore (1999): 132.
\textsuperscript{145} Moore (1991): 132-133. Stalker’s stance is often interpreted as Tarkovsky critiquing the “limited space of the Soviet domain.” Although this is a just, and even obvious claim, this interpretation will prove too narrow in the rest of this subchapter.
\textsuperscript{146} Tarkovsky in Moore (1999): 131.
\textsuperscript{147} Skakov (2012): 147.
\textsuperscript{148} Skakov (2012): 153.
topos which modifies itself according to the inner state of the characters.”\textsuperscript{149} Just as in \textit{Solyaris}, Tarkovsky shows you do not have to leave Earth to encounter this “\textit{other} topos”. Tarkovsky: “[The Zone] is simply a place where we live. I just want to say that we don’t know the world in which we live, though we naively think that we have studied it completely.”\textsuperscript{150} The fact that the director does not pay any attention to the Visitation, or engage in speculation about the alien force, which created the Zone, confirms \textit{Stalker} is about the strangeness of the human condition on Earth, and not about extraterrestrial strangers. The suspension or impossibility of direct knowledge enacted by the screenplay and the cinematography is a clear critique on the Enlightened human.

After bypassing the indefinable obstacles of the Zone, the three reach the complex in which the Room is located. They cross tunnels and waterfalls, and end up in a big space filled with sand piles. The Writer crosses to the other side without consulting the Stalker, and ends up in the ‘meat grinder’. After miraculously surviving this normally deadly phenomenon, all three of them have now made it to the Room. Professor reveals he has come to the Room to destroy it to prevent it from falling into the hands of someone evil. When he realizes the Room is also sentient, and that the Room does not fulfill the wishes expressed by the visitors, only their unconscious desires, he renounces his plan. Stalker: “Here will come true that which reflects the essence of your true nature, it is within you, it governs you, yet you are ignorant of it.”\textsuperscript{151} Writer and Professor refuse to enter the Room. They are too afraid because they do not know their deepest desires, and fear the unknown essence of their true nature. The three stay in the antechamber and never enter the Room.

Stalker, Writer, and Professor have returned to “the real world” and are shown sitting in the café where they met before going into the Zone. Stalker’s wife and his daughter

\textsuperscript{149} Skakov (2012): 146.
\textsuperscript{150} Tarkovsky in Skakov (2012): 155.
\textsuperscript{151} Fragment from \textit{Stalker} in Moore (1999): 135.
Monkey stop by at the café, and he goes home with them. Before going to sleep, the exhausted Stalker complains about his companions of that day: “And they still call themselves the intelligentsia; writers and scientists. … They don’t believe in anything. Their capacity of faith has atrophied for lack of use.”\(^{152}\) The Enlightened human, like Writer or Professor, who thinks he knows and has studied everything, has lost his faith and openness towards everything that does not fit his constructed reality. These words expressed by Stalker, just like the suspension of knowledge incited by the bible quotations, poetry and cinematography, are a critique of the faithlessness of the Enlightened human. Tobias Pontara, in his article “Beethoven Overcome: Romantic and Existentialist Utopia in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*”, argues the same critique can be deducted from Tarkovsky’s choice of music. To demonstrate the director’s intentions he analyzes “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s Ninth Sympony, which is heard in the last scene of *Stalker*.\(^{153}\)

Monkey is sitting behind the kitchen table reading a book. She stops reading, lays her cheek on the table and looks at a glasses standing on the other side of the table. The glasses start to move and the one closest to the edge falls on the ground without breaking. The camera slowly zooms in on Monkey’s face. The room is shaking and filled with the noise of a speeding train in combination with Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy”. The train and the music slowly fade away and the film ends with a close-up of Monkey’ face. Pontara reads the combination of the “Ode to Joy”, which is “deeply imbued with history of symbolism and ideology,” and the sound of the train as “a powerful symbol for the scientific revolutions, the political projects, and the ideological struggles of modern history.”\(^{154}\) The coupling of these “signifiers of triumph” with the magical images of Monkey telekinesis, makes them appear “unfamiliar,

\(^{152}\) Fragment from *Stalker* in Moore (1999): 132.


strange elusive; transformed into echoes of a pointless project already over.”\textsuperscript{155} Pontara: “What is apparently real – our scientific progresses, our grand political and ideological projects, the perceived teleology of human history, in short, the meanings of our jointly constructed “life world” – becomes unreal.”\textsuperscript{156} With this last scene Tarkovsky thus expresses a huge critique on modern civilization: in the music and the train “we can hear a faint and fading echo of the restless striving of humanity as it tries to make sense of, conquer, and colonize the universe without as well as the universe within.”\textsuperscript{157}

As discussed above, it is not only the last scene or Monkey that incites this interpretation of \textit{Stalker}; rather, it confirms it. The director himself mentions it when he states, in accordance with his protagonist Stalker, that “we don’t know the world in which we live,” although we claim we do. Similarly, the quotations from the Bible, the recited poetry and Stalker’s preaching character also point to what is wrong in society. Stalker expresses it as well when he tells his wife about the skeptic attitudes of Writer and Professor, and their refusal to enter the Room.

The critique of modern civilization, which is very present in \textit{Stalker}, is shared by thinkers of the posthuman turn in which the claim of knowing things-as-they-are-in-themselves (colonizing the universe within), which often leads to owning these things (colonization of the universe without), has proved untenable. According to Pontara, “the subtle change in perspective” proposed by Tarkovsky in \textit{Stalker} “makes a rather specific claim about how we should live in and relate to the world.”\textsuperscript{158} Monkey as an entity “firmly outside of civilization”\textsuperscript{159} and not fitting the “human category”, but, at the same time, part of

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} Pontara (2011): 307.
\textsuperscript{158} Pontara (2011): 314.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
this civilization, enacts a pluralization of perspectives, as seen in both critical studies and posthuman theory. By means of Monkey, Tarkovsky shows how “civilization is overcome from inside the world” (because she simultaneously belongs and does not belong to it).\textsuperscript{160} Acknowledging that the Wholly Other and the human being share the same world, or even the same body, and the awareness that human knowledge is limited, should lead to inner freedom according to Tarkovsky. Thinkers of the posthuman turn also hope to overcome civilization from inside, but not only from the human perspective. Acknowledging that all entities (which are all interconnected, but at the same time will always remain strange strangers to each other) have their own way of experiencing, opens up new ways of thinking, “about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.”\textsuperscript{161}

Conclusion

All visual, textual, and sonic elements of Stalker cause a suspension of direct knowledge. With this tactic Tarkovsky incites a critique of the Enlightened human, who has no faith and rejects all entities that do not fit his constructed reality in which he claims to know everything. Tarkovsky’s opinion of modern society, which can be deducted from Stalker, is similar to critique expressed in the posthuman turn: both point to the un-tenability of the Enlightened human in the face of the complexity of reality. Both Tarkovsky and theorists of the posthuman turn engage in new ways of thinking of how to relate to the world, and challenge human mastery. Just as the analysis of Solyaris has shown, the fact that Tarkovsky’s ideas are informed by his anthropocentric stance and religious worldview does not impede a posthuman reading of Stalker.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{161} Braidotti (2013): 1-3.
Conclusion

The contributors to *The Human Reimagined* deem it impossible to speak of posthumanism in the late Soviet Union, since it was strong Soviet humanist, and, therefore, anthropocentric ideology that was striving for something beyond- or posthuman. However, chapter one has shown the posthuman turn, which challenges dualist thought, the anthropocentric order, and the claim to human mastery, is also a product of ‘the Enlightened human’ striving for beyond-human-things in science and technology. In addition, posthuman theory derives from post-colonial theory, feminist thought, race theory, gender theory, disability studies, and embodied cognition theory, which all first drew attention to different human phenomenologies. They challenged the rigid ‘human perspective’, which led to explorations of how other entities affect and encounter the world. In contrast to the argument of the contributors to *The Human Reimagined*, the posthuman turn does not exclude all human ethics, nor does it negate the human perspective; rather, it comprises a pluralization of perspectives.

This broadened conception of posthumanism requires a reevaluation of conclusions drawn by the contributors to *The Human Reimagined*. Kelvin’s posthuman stance in *Solaris* does not let go of all human ethics, as argued by Gomel in her essay. Instead, Kelvin shows that to be truly posthuman means treating “many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas of what counts as people.” Contrary to claims by McQuillen, *Roadside picnic* showed anthropocentrism and human mastery was not left untouched in science fiction of the late Soviet Union. Rather, the novel shows there are other ways of apprehending the world by recognizing the agency and phenomenology of non-human entities. In short, although the

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contributors to the *The Human Reimagined* consider it impossible, these two literary cases have shown how the posthuman turn can be traced back to the late Soviet Union.

Although the religious and anthropocentric worldview of Tarkovsky cannot be disregarded in the analysis of the film adaptations of *Solaris* and *Roadside picnic*, they do question the concept of the Enlightened human and human mastery. By shifting the focus to Earth, *Solyaris* shows the limits of humankind are closer to home. By questioning the human condition in a place that was considered solid ground – Earth, Tarkovsky’s films afford a new perspective of ourselves, and our environment. With his tactic of suspension of direct knowledge, which is apparent in *Stalker*, Tarkovsky repeats his critique of the faithless Enlightened human. Although informed by religion, his argument shows the un-tenability of the Enlightened human in the face of the complexity of reality, just as the posthuman turn. In short, the fact that Tarkovsky’s ideas are informed by his anthropocentric stance and religious worldview does not impede a posthuman reading of *Solyaris* and *Stalker*.

Becoming posthuman does not mean letting go of all human ethics. Rather, the posthuman turn is about a pluralisation of perspectives, which does not mean a negation of the human perspective. *Solaris, Roadside picnic, Solyaris,* and *Stalker*, all contain certain elements of the emancipatory potential of this broadened conception of the posthuman turn. Although their makers were informed by different worldviews, in all four cases the concept of the human and human mastery are challenged by the unsolved and unsolvable mystery of non-human agency.
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