

An Argument Towards Abstraction. As Outlined By Stanislaw Lem's Solaris

By Brittany Nelson

Roland Barthes describes a photographic image as that which inherently possesses death. Barthes details the interpretation of the image in two terms, the studium and the punctum. I would tell you more, but it is important to know that no one uses these terms or cares to anymore. Stanislaw Lem describes an oceanic planet called Solaris; it is a sentient being and scientists are sent there to establish contact. The events of Solaris unfold as a Barthesian theater. Lem takes the idea of the image as Barthes describes it to its literal and logical conclusion. I will now describe this to you in the second person, whether you would like me to or not.

The inevitable experience of abstraction.
The studium in a vacuum.

You travel to a space station and try to speak with the ocean below. The ocean is an organism. You try your best to communicate. You gargle at the ocean. And the ocean gargles back at you. You cannot

understand it, if there is anything to understand. So you continue to stare at it. The work is not necessarily unpleasant, but it provides you with no answers. The ocean absorbs your thoughts, but does not reflect them back. It can be whatever you like. This is very boring. Progress is the measure of movement. The ocean continues to gargle. Unintelligible, intelligently indecipherable and in possession of all possibility. It is unhinged from linearity and that is only novel for so long. So you decide to shoot a big x-ray at it. An x-ray can show you how something works. You beg for confrontation under the guise of progress. Confrontation often feels like progress. The ocean decides to respond, and it speaks to you in a language you recognize. You find this horrifying.

The referential image
and the uncanny confrontation.

Your dead lover appears on your space ship. Barthes would describe this as a punctum, but you would describe this as a punishment. Or a haunting. A haunting is the idea that someone appears to you outside of the linearity of time. She appears and not just to you. Anyone can see her. An image is something indexical of an instant, but continues to exist outside of that instant. She is an image. She is composed from your memories. You both know she isn't your lover. You are fearful you remembered her wrong. She sleeps in your bed and her sweat is real. She asks you questions in words that comprise your own thoughts, and you answer yourself. The image is death straining for life. A preservation or a failed resurrection, she stiffly dances to your memories.

You decide to shove her in a rocket and you hope that it is over. You cannot separate your experience from the image, the literalness of her form is both a comfort and an insanity. With specificity comes personal confrontation, and you've concluded that this is far too specific. You've decided the gargle, in its refusal to concretize itself, has more interesting politics. You wish to return to the gargling.