



Science Fiction Movies: our new mythologies?

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It seems like we can't do without God; or anyway something like him.

'In each of us there is an empty hole in the shape of God', said Pascal. In other words, if we've lost God, there will be this gnawing sense of a gap inside us which we try to fill in all kinds of ways: and none of them quite fit, because nothing but God is big enough.

It is surprising how often science fiction tries to be a Bible-substitute, or something very much like it. Go to Waterstones and look at the paperback Science Fiction (SF) and you'll see lots of overtly religious content (often for a sensationalist purpose of course): Watson's *God's World*; Simak's *Project Pope*; Dick and Zelazny's *Deus Irae*; Harbinson's *Genesis* and *Revelation*; Heinlein's *The Number of the Beast*; Blish's *Black Easter*; Herbert's *The Jesus Incident*; and so on and so on. The blurbs sometimes make the attempt jarringly overt: 'Will startle you into thought-provoking questions about your place in the world' is about par for the course.

It's fairly inevitable. There's an urge inside any writer to reach out to the limits of the available territory, and in the case of SF that territory includes the remotest limits of space, time and cosmology. Thus, much SF tends towards a dramatization of hypotheses about the ultimate realities of the universe; and, in the process, an attempt to discover where transcendence and some sense of the ultimate might be credibly located. And the same is true of the classic SF films, which in the last 25 years have offered a fascinating showcase of the cosmological options

playing in their authors' imaginations. To their audiences, they have offered a selection of dramatized mythologies.

The very first *Star Trek* movie was a great example of one of the last century's most basic myths. This wasn't located in the film's overtly 'religious' content, scenes of Spock's Vulcanian ritual training; these gave us a fanatically logic-oriented cult that, with its adamant denial of the emotions ('patterned logic without overtones of either pain or pleasure'), could never be more than local colour, a 'tourist spirituality' with no real force. Rituals of discipline, obedience and self-denial are way out of tune with our contemporary ethos. The real mythology-content of *Star Trek I* lay rather in its presentation of *technology as transcendence*.

The plot concerned the threat to Earth of a probe, mechanical but capable of independent thought, 'a great entity, a great, living machine', coming from 'a planet of living machines, infinitely complex technology'. There was a reassuring affirmation of the probe's inferiority to man, in spite of its superhuman knowledge, in that it could experience 'no awe ... no delight ... no beauty'. Bu when, towards the end, two of the Enterprise's crew became totally fused with the probe, an event that was the climax of life for one of them at least ('I want this!', he says to Kirk, 'Just as you wanted the Enterprise'), quasi-religious implications emerge. In the absence of a specific concept of 'God', the transcendent takes on an aesthetic nature, as happens in other cultural situations:

Even Spock's eyes were widening – there was breathtaking *beauty* in what was happening. It was becoming all beauty, driving out any feeling of fear they might have had. McCoy was standing transfixed. Kirk became aware that they were also *hearing* beauty – and *feeling* it, too. At the center of the cascading colors, Decker's body was beginning to glow with the same brilliance and there was a look of serenity on his face ... 'Jim ... this is *transcendence!* It was Spock ... The doctor had almost a look of rapture.

The fusion ends by becoming 'too lovely for them to comprehend'; and it is offered (at the close of the book version) as both an answer to Spock's

attempt to understand the place of logic in the universe ('My task on Vulcan is completed'), and also as a future for humanity: 'perhaps also a direction in which some of us may evolve'. What we have here is the elevation of SF's traditional preoccupation with hardware to religious status: ultimate technology brings ultimate fulfilment.

Star Trek II affirmed the same basic theme. As a film it didn't match *Star Wars*, but it deserved real credit for raising the questions of ageing and death that lurked behind the reappearance of the Enterprise's crew years after their TV exploits. What can it mean for Captain Kirk to grow old and shaky? ('I've cheated death, and patted myself on the back for my ingenuity', he grumbles, thereby devaluing his years of TV heroics.) What will it mean for Spock to die?

The film's answer parallels *Star Trek I*, and depends on the Genesis Project, a technological marvel that can create new life on a planet-wide scale (in six minutes rather than six days, complains McCoy). When Spock dies, McCoy utters the eulogy of humanistic orthodoxy: 'He's not dead as long as we remember him.' (That line will acquire unexpected reverberations in the light of *Star Trek III*, but we aren't to know that.) Perhaps there is also a clumsy attempt to pull in some of the content of the Christian tradition when Spock's funeral is accompanied by 'Amazing Grace'. But the real thrust of the film emerges as Kirk discovers something of a rebirth watching the colourful dawning of Genesis: 'I shall have to come back here where life comes out of death', he says, and then in his final line, 'I feel young!' The ongoing progress of technology, we are promised, offers new hope, creation anew, and spiritual uplift in the face of mortality.

Perhaps it is not inappropriate to relate this to the climax of *Close Encounters*. Here the elect, drawn together by inner compulsions, scientific breakthroughs and the tales of Eastern mystics, behold at last the spectacular marvel of the alien spaceship on the mountaintop and are borne off through the heavens. Strictly speaking the marvellous here is no more than superior alien technology; but the splendid madness of the faithful that leads them to their beatific vision, the dazzling white light and the general atmosphere of awe in the finale, seem to vindicate the critics who termed the scene 'religious'. Again, the

transcendent here is to be found in advanced technology.

It is not without interest that in *Close Encounters* (as also in the evolution-oriented myth of *2001*), this experience of transcendence comes to man by grace alone, by the unearned, kindly initiative of superior alien beings. And to say that is to be reminded that *Close Encounters* (and still more the original *Battlestar Galactica* where the obviously-named Adamo and his followers set out for Earth to rebuild civilisation) were also vehicles for another best-selling mythology: von Danikenism – the gods are really just spacemen. Yet humankind still needs the transcendent, so these spacemen-gods had better retain something of their 'religious' overtones! But again, if the gods are physical beings, then the basic mythology remains one of advanced physical technology as transcendence.

Going for The Force

But our culture is not unanimously committed to faith in salvation via technology, of course. So there is also SF that dramatises an alternative myth: the transcendence of mysticism. This lends itself more to the wizards and magic powers of sword-and-sorcery fantasies than to mechanically-minded SF; but the dichotomy is not absolute. At the very end of the book version of the SF movie *The Black Hole*, for instance, the heroes pass through into another universe of 'darkness and quiet and peace'. One of them is psychically gifted, and binds them into a unity of thought ('the essences of ourselves') that survives the journey:

Then they were through ... and amazingly, still whole. Kate was Kate; Charlie, Charlie, and Dan Holland still Dan Holland. Even Vincent (their robot) was there. They were themselves ... and yet something strange and new ... a new unified mindthing that was KateCharlieDanVincent also ... content and infinite now as the white hole itself ...

On the beach was a grain of sand. The sand was part of a continent, the continent a component of a world, the world a speck of substance in a sea of infinity. They were part of that world, part of every world, for in passing out the white hole their substance had become dispersed. An atom of Charlie to a nine-world system, a molecule of

Kate to a local cluster of stars, a tiny diffuse section of Holland spread thin over a dozen galaxies. Yet they could still think, for thought does not respect the trifling limitations of time and space. They were still them and this new thing they had become.

Their thoughts spanned infinity, as did their finely spread substance, and they now had an eternity in which to contemplate the universe they had become.

This is great if you fancy spending eternity that way. The book version's closing sentences offer the attainment, through the powers of thought (a gesture to science?) but also of psychic miracle, of the mystics' dream of achieving unity with the universe while yet still retaining individuality (and there's even room for a fusion with a robot).

A mystical myth also permeated the captivating *Star Wars* movies. Not surprisingly, the mystical orientation brought the first films very close to sword-and-sorcery, with a wizard, a captive princess, a black knight and duels with laser-swords. The secret of success here was not hardware but romanticism; the most capable warriors proved to be those who dressed up in black armour, even on a spaceship, or who switched off their spacecraft's gadgetry to 'Trust your feelings, Luke.' The mysticism was that of the 'Force', an invisible psychic aura that could be used to give power for good or evil; 'an energy field and something more ... a nothingness that can accomplish miracles'. Director George Lucas eschewed specific religious references to give his films the widest possible appeal, and to start with it wasn't clear whether he was going to offer an amoral 'Force' as ultimate reality, or whether the categories of good and evil were 'the thing that mattered'. The reassuring, romantic close of the third film to be released, *Return of the Jedi*, with the weak proving mightier than the strong as an army of teddy-bears triumphed over organised totalitarianism (reminiscent of *E.T.*?), and the redemption even of the satanic Darth Vader, seemed on the whole to suggest the latter; though with no real indication of what such categories mean.

But to avoid *specific* religious references is not to avoid expressing religious content altogether; it merely means that this dimension of the film must

tend towards the abstract and impersonal. No personality is shown to underlie the Force, hence the Force becomes a kind of psychic electricity which is simply *used* by human beings, good and bad. And that appears to match Lucas' own beliefs: 'After having studied comparative religions, it seems that most of the world's religions have a similar concept, namely that there's a force in the world that can be used for good or bad, and that it's up to each of us to make that choice', he has said. Lucas has linked the concept of Force to the new-age mysticism of Castaneda. Certainly Luke's initiation into the ways of the Force, in the Hades-like habitat of quasi-immortal Yoda, has overtones of a mysticism that transcends the verbal in the standard pantheistic manner: 'But tell me why ...' 'No! There is no why!'

The ideas linked with the Force are vague enough to sound not too unlike Christianity, given the film's clear delineation of good and evil; and Lucas has made remarks like 'I believe in God and I believe in good'. But in fact what the *Star Wars* trilogy dramatises is a mythology where 'good' is divorced from any relationship with a personal God, and where spirituality consists in the discipline of learning to use impersonal, paranormal powers. 'Originally the phrase was going to be, "May the life force be with you",' Lucas has remarked. What would C.S. Lewis have said to that? We know the demon Screwtape's opinions: 'The "Life Force" ... may here prove useful ... If once we can produce our perfect work ... the man, not using, but veritably worshipping, what he vaguely calls "Forces" while denying the existence of "spirits" – then the end of the war will be in sight.'

Through a Grid Darkly

These films are indeed only fantasy. On the other hand, the frameworks they dramatisate, with forcefulness and (in the case of *Star Wars* at least) something resembling poetry, are ones through which their 'consumer' may be led in part to interpret the real world. Lucas himself came to believe, during recovery from a car crash, that 'every person has an energy field of his own, which provides him with the momentum to realise his plans', like the 'Force' of his films, and he 'resolved to focus the energy within himself.' The

same framework could be and was adopted by others after the release of *Star Wars*; it was not surprising to find showbiz personalities interviewed in places like *Radio Times* referring to 'the Force' as they described their own successes. Lucas had given them a model for interpreting their experience – and one that seemed an adequate replacement for notions like a personal Providence.

Mythology can imperceptibly become belief. *Close Encounters* was fiction, not documentary, but I was intrigued to see how its release in Cardiff (where I was studying at the time) was followed by UFO reports in the local papers. People were looking at the skies and interpreting what they saw there through the grid presented to them so vividly in the cinema. The myth quietly provided the spectacles for their minds.

'When I developed *Star Wars* I did it as a contemporary fairy tale', says Lucas. 'It's also a psychological tool that children can use to understand the world better and their place in it and how to adjust to that ... Fairy tales, religion, were all designed to teach man the right way to live and give him a moral anchor.' Teach it does, perhaps; and with a powerful medium reinforcing the lesson; but then it's worth taking careful note of the content of the lesson.

An Alternative Messiah

The paranormal Force resurfaced in a blockbuster from the same period that lasted less well, though it was based on a book that had been a huge success: *Dune*. *Dune* was of particular interest in that, from the beginning, it announced its subject to be the coming of a new messiah. (The basic issue in the original book version, said its author, Frank Herbert, was 'how we make messiahs'.) The hero appears, in fulfilment of prophecy, to lead his people in 'the holy war which will cleanse the universe and bring us out of darkness.' His maturing is marked by his proving to know the ways of the desert people without having been taught them, again according to prophecy. He is cast out with his mother into the desert: 'We have entered the time when all will turn against us and seek our lives.' His final triumph is preceded by his taking the 'water of life', which would normally mean death. Then he leads his army out from

something very like a church, with something very like a cross standing over it, to the accompaniment of something very much like hymn-music. He is victorious; 'and his word shall bring death eternal to those who stand against the righteous.' He promises to turn war to peace, hatred to love. And over a desert planet the clouds burst open; rain pours down in unheard of, lifegiving abundance. The New Age is come.

It seems that the Christian tradition has been ransacked for the externals of a new apocalypse. But there is not really a God behind it all. There are a couple of theistic allusions ('May the hand of God be with you'). These are incidental; the hero is not presented as anything like a man of prayer. The terms in which the messiah's real nature is conceived are, clearly, those of a more mystical, occult tradition: he is a master of paranormal powers, and above all of the 'consciousness-expanding' drug known as 'the spice' – a drug that not only functions as a superior narcotic and a path to the paranormal but is also the *sine qua non* of space travel. (Alas for Spock: spice, the final frontier.)

Perhaps the reason the film didn't last was because it was a late-born myth of the ideals of the '60s counter-culture in which the book version had been a huge hit, and these had already failed. The opening invites the viewer to wonder: What is the messiah like? How will the New Age be brought in? And the answers seem to centre on mystical, paranormal power, and 'mind-expanding' drugs. Through these, youth rides to victory over a decaying government of old men. One notices that the victors are young, white, Western types, desert warriors though they may be (the Islamic overtones of Herbert's original book are lost in the movie). Even the victors' weaponry, based on amplified sound, was reminiscent of the West Coast '60s' faith in music as a transformative weapon ('When the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake'). The Blakean figure of the child-as-prophetess towards the end was equally '60s. But Paul Muad'dib's triumph had the same central vacuum that was the downfall of the '60s counter-culture; an army to fight with, but nothing to say.

There is indeed an impressive scene when Paul rides, Wagner-style, to victory, having tamed and saddled the Worm (messiah conquers dragon:

what's going on here?). But for the Christian, questions arise about this movie. Not merely because its baddies were presented (and unnecessarily) in a manner somewhat surprising to find in a film rated PG. Rather, I was left wondering about the prophecy that the substitute messiah would turn war to peace and hatred to love; and about his proclamation that 'all eyes will turn to' his planet. What would they see? 'Peace', 'love', a whole new age – we long for them to be brought in, but how? The film's messiah is a conqueror and a master of the paranormal, but not much more ('Long live the Fighters', is his army's cry). He has no teaching to offer, certainly no inner power to impart. (Despite Herbert's assertion that he has 'set up a messiah' who 'was the kind of person everybody would follow for the right reasons. He was honorable, loyal to his people, trustworthy, everything you could think of that you would admire in a leader.') I came away so aware that the Christ whom Christians worship is so gloriously different; glorious in teaching, in suffering, in empowering, as well as in conquering. *Dune* offered a substitute dream; the man of the Force, the prince of the paranormal, the wish-fulfilment messiah of counter-culture youth revolt – but how one-dimensional he was by comparison. It didn't work; *Dune* should have come out in the '60s, but by the time it was made the Woodstock dreams were over forever. But here we were invited to give our minds to those inadequate dreams of how the transcendent might come; at least for an evening.

Another Way

Technological myths, mystical myths; but secularisation is incomplete, and somebody was bound to make an SF film experimenting with the Christian concept-system.

Interestingly, although its paperback version culminated in a mystical apotheosis, the film of *The Black Hole* ended very differently. 'Christian' references had been scattered around fairly freely. The villain, Reinhardt, was a scientific genius-gone-wrong who 'sure loves to play God'; the spaceship interior where he carried on his games was reminiscent of a stained-glass church window. When one of the 'good guys' mistakenly joined in with Reinhardt's dreams of a journey through the black hole, it was because he saw it

as 'a glorious pilgrimage – straight into what might be the mind of God.' (Reinhardt responded immediately by quoting Genesis 1:2.) Yet to this viewer at least it was astonishing to find that, for the 'good guys', the journey through the black hole meant passing through a tunnel strongly evocative of a cathedral; while for Reinhardt, the black hole turned out to be a fiery, tableau-like limbo filled with the forlorn figures of his robots – indeed he himself was last seen in a strange fusion with Maximilian, the most unpleasant of the robots he had created. The punishment clearly fitted his earlier crimes of turning his crew members into robots. So, in a film where Reinhardt hoped for 'life-forever' through his technological achievements, the black hole seemingly turned out to be a fairly traditional heaven/hell. The Christian universe was being invoked, and depicted, to provide a framework within which megalomaniac egoism could be placed and described.

Disney Productions later came up with *Tron*. *Tron* was the story of Flynn, a designer and champion player of video games, who finds himself inserted into the computer game-world he has created. As he mixes with the 'programs' (which possess their creator's 'spirit' or personality), his unusual powers enable him miraculously to deliver them from the tyranny of a master program that has gone berserk. So far, so standard; but I remember pulling the paperback version off a bookstand and being surprised to find passages like this:

I'm a – well, I'm what you guys call a User.

No trumpet or drums, no light from on high; just an ordinary-looking program in conscript's armour. They gaped at him. A small part of Yori reasoned that part of the awe surrounding the Users was that they'd always been unseen; they had, for her, always conjured up images of huge, imperious beings, powerful and wise beyond belief, pursuing incomprehensible ends, shaping the System. Flynn did not quite measure up to that.

But he was, undeniably, not just another program; she'd heard of him from *Tron*, and seen him shed his Red aura. She could not hold back all of her awe. 'A User? In our World?'

That is only one of many examples of religious

overtones. The Master Control Program that is taking over the System has followers who believe in its false claims to be a 'deity', possessing 'omniscience and omnipotence'; in contrast, the programs that still resist the MCP are the 'User-Believers': 'Unwilling to give up his commitment to those mystical beings whom all the programs of the System had once served, he'd been sentenced to play on the Game Grid until he died.' The MCP's aim is to 'stamp out faith in the Users.' Elsewhere such a program finds himself described as a 'religious nut' holding on to a 'superstitious and hysterical belief', and is horrified at the refusal of his guards 'to even concede the existence of the Users'. ('If I don't have a User, then – then, who wrote me?') The exclamations 'Oh, my User' and 'Oh, thank the Users' are standard. So, in the world of *Tron*, atheism goes with tyranny, and tyranny is finally overthrown and the world restored by the 'User' Flynn's arrival in the world he created, in what one can only term an incarnation. At the end, to the sounds of "He saved us" ... "So ... he really was a User" ... *Thank you, Flynn!* Yori sent a silent message upward, Flynn literally ascends back up into his own world.

However, the Christian pattern is there to be played with, not simply to be paralleled as a paradigm of deliverance. The obvious suggestion in *Tron* is that our world too might be a 'System' with its own 'User'. It is a suggestion that is underlined by a shot of the city's electrics in the film's closing moments – but then how far can we assume the omnipotence of our own 'User'?

'But,' he said slowly, 'if you're a User, then everything you've done has been part of a plan?'

Flynn chortled, unaware of how much it shocked and alarmed Tron. 'You wish! Man, I haven't had a second to think since I got down here ... Look, you guys know how it is. You just keep doin' what it looks like you're supposed to, even if it seems crazy, and you hope to hell your User knows what's going on.' There was curious satisfaction in having encapsulated the only truth he'd learned in either world.

Tron was still dubious. 'Well, that's how it is for programs, yes, but –'

'I hate to disappoint you, pal,' Flynn interrupted

him, 'but most of the time, that's how it is for Users, too.'

'Stranger and stranger,' Tron mused, wondering where the hierarchies ended.

Moral commitment and faith for the future are both left looking a little rocky if the sovereign User turns out (von Daniken-style) to be merely a spaceman. The problem soon disappears in action, but the film's framework leaves the doubt intact: where *do* the hierarchies end? And (despite Flynn's action, after returning to his own world, of raising 'thanks to the Powers that be'), what of our world's 'User'?

Let's finish by returning to *Star Trek*, and *Star Trek III – The Search for Spock*. The interesting thing about this movie – or one interesting thing – was its huge philosophical turnaround from its predecessor. Spock sacrificed his life for his crewmates at the climax of *Star Trek II* giving a voice to the creed of logical utilitarianism, as indeed one might expect from a Vulcan: 'The interests of the many take precedence over the interests of the few – or the one.' But such a maxim – which, taken coldly, sounds like a proof-text for totalitarianism – wasn't the best note on which to finish. Fortunately, *Star Trek III* was to come, in which Kirk and company turned thieves and deserters from Starfleet to bring what remained of Spock back to Vulcan. The basis for this unexpected villainy was articulated by Kirk at the end: 'The needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many.' But to enable such an attitude to make dramatic sense, *Star Trek III* had to invoke the concept of a 'soul'. It is initially to retrieve the dead Spock's soul that Kirk steals the Enterprise; 'If there's even a chance Spock has an eternal soul ...' is the way he defends the journey to his unsympathetic Starfleet superior; and 'If I hadn't tried I would have lost my soul' is how he describes his own situation. When the makers of *Star Trek III* wanted to affirm the value of the individual over against the primacy of the mass, they had to pull in a Christian-style concept of the soul that survives death; both for Spock, and also as the mainspring of Kirk's deeds.

Many tales of the transcendent, then. But if we must choose the best framework in the entire universe, perhaps the Klingon captain made the right demand to Kirk when he beamed down to

the artificial planet in *Star Trek III: 'Give me Genesis!*