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CINEMA
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

2016

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Scientific fiction movies: is there any place for God?!

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Abstract

In scientific fiction movies, we see most of the times, deeply reflections about human nature or condition, and inevitably the post-human (among similar themes). It seems unavoidable that a reflection about what means to be human should also reflect about the spiritual life. Taking this point of view, spirituality presupposes religion, since there is no religion without spirituality. It is also true that there is in scientific fiction movie a constant and sometimes aggressive vision between science and religion leading to long debate that seems to never end. However, can we see a kind of absconditus God on them? Is there any place for God in these movies?! On one hand, if there is, how can we understand the future scenarios such as those in *Avatar* or *Lucy*? On the other hand, if there is not, is it possible that scientific utopia becomes true and there is no need for God?!

Keywords: Science Fiction, Mysticism, God, Human Nature, Post-Human.

A brief introduction about the birth of science fiction.

In recent years, a science fiction wave invaded many of the shelves of bookstores such as movie theatres. In many bookstores we often see a misclassification of those books as if the "fantastic" was the same, and that is very clear when find *The Lord of the Ring* (J. R. R. Tolkien) or *Harry Potter* (J. K. Rowling) as science fiction. So, what can be said about science fiction, what are the main characteristics? First of all we have to say that it begins as a literary genre in the nineteenth century and by definition is to see depicted the impact of science on the individual or in the society. We can also say, that was born of the literature and at a time when the moving image was not yet able to expose its full potential, all fiction was produced based on utopian dreams of scientific progress and hence issues such as travel, time travel, parallel universes, extraterrestrial life, robots and cyborgs, elixirs of immortality or youth, are recurrent in it. Illustrative of what we have just said are the already classic works of Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* or the *Modern Prometheus* (1818) and Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). They are not merely and purely illustrative of science fiction literature; in fact, they illustrate the ability to create and improve, or another being or a society of individuals "healthier", that only scientific progress could provide. A good example can be found in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), based on the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick, which also inspire Steven Spielberg to perform *Minority Report* (2002).

In fact, there are earlier works and although opinions are not consensual as to the classification in science fiction, we can find several examples,

such as Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) who writes a story, *Somnium* (*The Dream*), which describes an inter-planetary trip, or *L'histoire comique des États et empires de la Lune* from Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac (1619-1655) which tells of a travel to the moon and how the "Selenites" see the land. A few years later see Fontenelle, in his book *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) provides the idea that there are other inhabited planets, or extraterrestrial life.¹

Driven by revolutions in astronomy, physics and biology, also Voltaire (1694-1778), retakes in *Micromégas*, the theme of space travel and in the beginning of XIX century, Jules Gabriel Verne (1828-1905), developed even further with his many travels and innovative handsets predictions.

We cannot forget about one of the major names in the early science fiction, Camille Flammarion, that in addition to his novels (in particular *La fin du monde* or *Uranie*) wrote an essay called *La pluralité des mondes habités* (1862) in which seeks to prove the existence of extraterrestrial life but without taking the role of God in the universe,² and by putting man as species of "humanity" among other "humanity species" in the vast universe (what he calls the "collective humanity"). However, this was just a few remarks of what can be understood as science fiction, because the definition is still very problematic (even today as we'll see).

Hugo Gernsback (1884 – 1967) was one of the first in using the term "science fiction", and it is considered by many as "the father of Science Fiction" (SIEGEL, 1988: 5). In his honor, the awards at the "World Science Fiction Convention" were named the Hugo. Gernsback described his vision saying:

by scientification I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story – a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision. (GERNSBACK, 1926: 3)

Or, as Lester del Rey wrote, "even the devoted fan has a hard time trying to explain what science fiction is, and the main reason for that is that "there are no easily delineated limits to science fiction" (DEL REY, 1979: 5), and therefore, to give a full satisfactory definition. Nevertheless, we can point out a few science fiction elements such as other universes or dimensions and travel between them; specific and different social and political systems (pos-scarcity, pos-apocalyptic, dystopian, etc.); different forms of communication that includes wormholes, time travel, teleportation, and others that can be associated with paranormal abilities as mind control, telekinesis or telepathy; scenes in outer space or in other worlds; futuristic time or alternative and parallel timelines; the inclusion of characters such as aliens, mutants, androids, cyborgs (or similar forms of evolution from human species); hi technology like futuristic humanoid computers, special guns with laser or sound waves, teleportation machines and biometric machines,

setting aside this discussion (the problem of a clear definition), one of the major problems in science fiction is the inevitable confrontation with religious beliefs

Religious beliefs vs Science Fiction.

Even there are some religious people who like science fiction movies, even so, there are some moral constraints that not only prevent them from enjoy the movie as prevent them from issuing a critical judgment on something that is known to be just and only a product of human imagination. This means that those people are not criticizing the science fiction movies but they are criticizing the imaginative ability of human beings to create, to invent, to produce new ideas, which seems to be so much more serious and dangerous. So, we may ask: why this (still) happens? It is really easy to understand. Concepts and ideas in science fiction movies are directly main taboo subjects of religion. If you have the idea of a supreme being, creator of heaven and earth, that puts man at the center of the universe, etc., any idea that contradicts this may not be well received. In fact, there are movies that can get more into the realm of fantasy than science fiction end up being placed under the same category. Thus, among the many issues that challenge or question religion are the use characters from other worlds with intelligent life (or use of mythical creatures like elves, fairies and dragons, which would be like instruments of Satan); the claim of evolutionary theories of the interference of intelligent life in the development of mankind; the use of a kind of advanced humanity (and religion) that dispensed religion; the use of powers (over natural or magical) that does not come from God; the spread of points of view anti-Christian or ironic points of view on most of the literature and science fiction films; the use of bio-technological experiences that puts man in the place of God. For a religious person this is the same thing that saying that all forms of fiction are a lie, and as all people should know, lies come from Satan.

If paying more attention, people (especially those religious viewers) would see that man does not cease to be at the center, as the alien – which is almost always a smart and evil creature with pretensions to conquer the earth or enslave humanity –, always get defeated.

To be correct at this point, the superiority of man over nature, it is always the superiority of the North American man who becomes the hero and save mankind; more than the prototype of the successful and fearless man it represents the hegemony of one nation over all others. And we can ignore this point of view and refer another possible vision (a less political one) that, in a way, meets a certain religious perspective, when putting man at the center of the universe: when man overcomes aliens, he is demonstrating that he is the higher animal, the top specie in cosmos.

It is the "dignity", of the man who is claimed in the context of intelligent life. One way to put into question this higher intelligence can be found in the movie (already classic), *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin Schaffner, USA, 1968) where the reverse order of the species is clear or in the comic movie *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Graham Jennings, USA, 2005), in which irony serves as

theme for this "high intelligence", by putting a normal man escaping from the end of world in a space travel.

From this theme often pass to the machine, in particular for a kind of rebellion of the machines that is, when the machine stops working according to its program and becomes autonomous, rebelling against his creator, as in the religious viewpoint it resembles to the man's revolt against god (the creator). However, if the machine is going to his rescue, if it works in an unpredictable way (even maybe against its own program), then the concept of "dignity" becomes very difficult to apply.

So as P. K. Dick says, if "man" and "human being" are terms,

they do not concern neither the origin nor the ontology, but a way of being in the world.

If a mechanical construction interrupts the course of their normal operation to come in our help, then we will recognized in the machine a human character that no analysis of its transistors or circuits could unveil. (DICK, 1998: 82)

Here it is portrayed one of the issues that most intrigued the philosophers since Descartes: the difference between man and animal, and/or the difference between men and machines. The difference it is in the spirit, in the *anima*, in the feeling, as we can see, in one hand, *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (Leonard Nimoy, USA, 1986) and on the other hand, *Terminator Salvation* (McG, USA, 2009). Machines can not feel, and therefore, only a animal capable of feelings can pray to a God.

Is there any place for God?!

It seems to be certain among film critics that science fiction is a world where God was abolished, or at best, that God has lost the status of being omnipotent and omnipresent. But is it really unshakable that position, that is, is it really safe to say that God is really out of science fiction?! Or on the contrary, that God is present in his absence?! For instance, references to God may be surreptitiously present without being the main theme of the film. Or it can be the case that a small modification or rather an adaptation (of the book to film) can change the meaning of a work, and in this case, can determine the existence or the non existence of God. Take *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubric, USA/UK, 1968). Despite being written by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubric, there is a tiny difference in relation to the "black monolith"; in reality, this difference seems to be assumed by both. (cf. GELMIS, 1970: 302).

In the movie we see Dr. Floyd announcing the discovery of the monolith at a conference during which it is said that this discovery should remain hidden from public opinion because its disclosure would lead to social and political upheavals, but in the book it is said that life, philosophy and human values (which it can be understood that these values are based on the existence of a supreme or divine being) would be transformed by this discovery (once that will prove the existence of other life forms). That is, while Arthur C. Clarke give us in the book clear explanations about the mysterious monolith and about the star gate, Stanley Kubrick decided to

make an enigmatic film which concentrates the dialogue in the essential words without giving much explanations. However, there is in the film some sort of transcendence but its not as we could expect the figure recognized culturally as God, but instead most closely resembles the absolute spirit of Hegel. So, what is the place for God or for religion in the science fiction movies?

One possible and simple answer is that there is no place, since they are opposites themes. This position is well known between critics and fans of science fiction movies (as we saw at the beginning of this text), but that does mean they are correct. In fact, the other possible answer says that they can be present in the same film, since we often see several references to God or faith, whether is an invasion of aliens or a crusade against an asteroid threatening Earth. Some authors like Georg Pal, call this a Christian Science Fiction. For instance in the film *When Worlds Collide* (Rudolf Maté, USA, 1951) opens with a biblical quote (in fact it's the only book that the spectator can read among other titles of books that are taken to the trip to planet Bellus) and ends with another quote of the bible.

In a way, the film *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, USA, 1998), recreates the same theme. Although the title is a clear reference of the great biblical tragedy, the plot is very simple: after discovering that an asteroid (the size of Texas) is going to impact Earth, NASA recruits a team of deep core drillers to save the planet, by placing a bomb at the earth of the asteroid. So, what is the point? It's clear that there is no religious approach in the film (as theme), but there are several references to God, namely, when people are "watching" the developments of the team in the asteroid.

One of the movies that can be understood as hard science fiction and at the same time having the omnipresence of God is *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 2005). If we pay attention we see at the beginning of the film, through the narrator's voice, that he's telling us about the dominion over Earth from human beings and then explains how humans were unaware of the "intellectually superior beings" that were making plans to occupy Earth. The closing narration reveals that the aliens were immune to man's machines, but were not immune to the microbes present on Earth, that is, to the smaller creatures of God (that is his wisdom put down on Earth).

We must make a brief parenthesis to say that there are one essential thing that can not go unnoticed: that aliens seem to have been created in the image and likeness of Western man, and therefore as monotheistic creatures (when they have a "religion").

The movie *Contact* (Robert Zemeckis, USA, 1997), adapted from Carl Sagan's Novel with the same title, tells the story of Dr. Eleanor "Ellie" Arroway (Jodie Foster) who works for the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) program at the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico; she listens to radio transmissions hoping to find signals sent by extraterrestrial life. After four years, she finds a signal repeating a sequence of prime numbers, apparently sent from the star system Vega. Putting aside the plot, we see that the film shows in many instances the existing differences between thoughts of religion and science. Note that the film does not give a "face" to aliens

but shows its presence, as if to remember that not only we need to see to believe, like as in religious faith. Maybe we can go further and say that the film shows that the choice between science and religion has no reason to exist, since both are rooted in faith.

One of the movies in which religion appears especially by the presence of divinities is *Immortel - ad vitam* (Bilal, France, 2004). The plot is simple: a floating pyramid appears in the Manhattan sky, city inhabited by robots, aliens and humans, real or synthetic. Horus, god headed, which has only seven days to preserve his immortality, leaves the pyramid and goes in search of a host body, which will serve to impregnate a mutant and to survive through descent. Although the fictional genre can slip into the fantasy, it doesn't cease to be a science fiction movie in which the deity is present; it is thus a film merging the two dimensions with no apparent conflict.

In the *Zero Theorem* (Terry Gilliam, UK, 2013), the story is centered on Qohen Leth (Waltz), a reclusive computer genius working on a formula to determine whether it holds any meaning. Qohen constantly waits for a phone call, hoping that it might bring him happiness or an answer he seeks (maybe a phone call from God?) but he will learn that the Zero Theorem aims to prove life is meaningless through the big crunch theory (that's why reaches 100% means to get into nothingness or as it happens to Qohen to be sucked into a black hole).

In a different direction, we see man trying to be God, that is, playing God's paper, like in *Transcendence* (Wally Pfister, USA, 2014). In few words: Dr. Will Caster (Johnny Depp) is a scientist who researches the nature of sentience, including artificial intelligence. He and his team work to create a sentient computer; he predicts that such a computer will create a technological singularity or in his words "Transcendence." An anti-technology terrorist group "Revolutionary Independence from Technology" (R.I.F.T.) shoots Will with a polonium-laced bullet and carries out a series of synchronized attacks on A.I. laboratories across the country. Will is given no more than a month to live. In desperation, his wife Evelyn (Rebecca Hall), comes up with a plan to upload Will's consciousness into the quantum computer that the project has developed. Will's consciousness survives his body's death in this technological form and requests to be connected to the Internet to grow in capability and knowledge. This is one of the movies that can lead to serious questions about post-humanism, artificial intelligence and mind, or in a manner of speak, in philosophy of mind problems. But the point here is the desire of man to become more than human, to become omnipresent and omniscient (as a God can be).

In *Avatar* (James Cameron, USA, 2009) its possible to feel the spirit of pantheism in Na'vi people of Pandora. The film takes place 22 century, when humans are colonizing Pandora, a lush habitable moon of a gas giant in the Alpha Centauri star system, especially in order to obtain the mineral "unobtainium". However, this exploration threatens the existence of a local tribe called Na'vi, a humanoid species indigenous to Pandora. So the Avatar title refers to a genetically engineered Na'vi body with the mind of a remotely located human that is used to interact with the natives of Pandora. We can see in this

by its absence – what we can say to the phenomenon of faith. So the place of God in science fiction movies it's the same place that it takes in everyday life: a form of existence given as transcendence in everyday immanence that only those who believe can see. Maybe God can be the most perfect fantasy created by the human mind, or maybe the human mind is the result of God's creation, which allows in the final analysis doubt about his place in the universe.

Endnotes

¹ Fontenelle divides his book into six *soirées* in which the first concerns that the earth rotates on itself and around the sun; the second, that the moon is a land inhabited; third and fourth that there are other inhabited planets; fifth, that the stars are suns that illuminate other planets; and sixth, which are confirmed by the above new thoughts.

² Flammarion believed that in addition to the existence of other beings (also described as humanity) also believed that knowledge would suffer a revolution with its discovery: "terrestrial humanity is not the only family of the Creator: the beginning and the end of the Earth are not the beginning and the end of the world; in a word, the great principles that we believe are absolute are only relative, a new philosophy, great and sublime, rises itself on the modern understanding of the universe". (FLAMMARION, 1877: 3)

³ (FLAMMARION, 1877: 323)

⁴ The first version of *Hard to Be a God* is a German one: *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*, a joint Russian -Germany science fiction directed by Peter Fleischmann released in 1989, based on the novel of the same name by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky.

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ISBN 978-989-96858-8-8



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