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Is Superman a God? Editorial

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Is Superman a God?

Editorial

From Scientifiction to Science Fiction

Hugo Gernsback, who was the first to use the term “science fiction” in its primitive form “scientifiction”, in the introduction to the first issue of *Amazing Stories* (1926), defined the genre: “By ‘scientifiction’ 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. Not only do these amazing tales make tremendously interesting reading – they are always instructive. They supply knowledge.”¹ Marshall McLuhann in *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) described science fiction simply as “writing [that] today presents situations that enable us to perceive the potential of new technologies”.² In a more philosophical way, Alvin Toffler wrote in *Future Shock* (1970) that this genre “by dealing with possibilities not ordinarily considered – alternative worlds, alternative visions – widens our repertoire of possible responses to change.”³ Later, in *How Easy to See the Future!* (1975), Isaac Asimov defined this genre as a “branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology”.⁴ According to Elisa Eileen Beshero-Bondar, science fiction is also a “time-sensitive subject. Usually futuristic, science fiction speculates about alternative ways of life made possible by technological change, and hence has sometimes been called ‘speculative fiction’.”⁵

These definitions, and many others, attempt to understand a genre that has become very popular through the years, not only in literature but also, and mainly, in films and TV-series, especially in the last fifty years. Science fiction commonly deals with science, technology, innovation, interstellar and time travel, similar and dissimilar worlds, aliens and extraterrestrial life, ancient and future civilizations, super-

1 Gernsback 1926, 3.

2 McLuhan/Fiore 1967, 124.

3 Toffler 1970, 209.

4 Asimov 1975, 62.

5 Beshero-Bondar, n.d.

powers and superheroes. More than this, science fiction is sometimes connected, directly or incidentally, to the exploration of religion, faith, or belief.

This issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* examines these themes by focusing on science fiction in films and TV-series, including both historical and contemporary case studies. The basic questions at the core of the articles are: How do films deal with the origin(s) of humankind? Does a machine (a robot, a computer, an android, or a ship) have a soul? What about the concepts of determinism versus free will, the bounds between faith, magic, and experimentation? How do films deal with God/god(s) and the figure of the savior, with prophets, priests, imams, or rabbis? How can ideas of time travel and the afterlife be linked with established religious beliefs? How can science be related to faith? What about notions of the distant future? Why are angels and demons and concepts of good and evil (related to theodicy) so popular in science fiction movies? What is the significance of fictional forms (or codes) of religious systems, and what is their link to theocracies and dystopian universes?

The exploration of science fiction and its relationship to religion, we focus in particular on the question of whether Superman is a god. Superman's father, while sending his son to Earth in the movie *MAN OF STEEL* (Zack Snyder, US 2013), says to his wife, who is worried about what will happen to her son once there, "He'll be a god to them", assuming that his capacities and powers will be the symbols of his superiority over humans. Christopher Nolan, producer of the movie, confirmed in an interview: "He is the ultimate superhero; he has the most extraordinary powers. He has the most extraordinary ideals to live up to. He's very God-like in a lot of ways and it's been difficult to imagine that in a contemporary setting."⁶

What about Captain Kirk in the *STAR TREK* saga (Gene Roddenberry, US 1966–1969), Professor Xavier in *X-MEN* (Bryan Singer, US 2000) and the other works of the series, the cosmic beings in *A.I. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE* (Steven Spielberg, US 2001), or Ra in *STARGATE* (Roland Emmerich, US/FR 1994), as well as so many other entities or heroes from the science fiction realm? Are some science fiction movies "religious" or do they have religious connotations? Gods, divinities, superheroes, monsters, machines, aliens, and humans sometimes deal with religion in the science fiction genre not always as conveyors of a broader message, but also as an investigative approach to scrutinize the meaning of faith, beliefs, morality, mysticism, spirituality according to history, technology, knowledge, and afterlife.

Gods Creating Gods

The case of the ALIEN saga is very revealing of this interaction between science fiction and religion. It is composed of six main movies, ALIEN (Ridley Scott, GB/US 1979), ALIENS (James Cameron, US 1986), ALIEN 3 (David Fincher, US 1992), ALIEN RESURRECTION (Jean Pierre Jeunet, US 1997), PROMETHEUS (Ridley Scott, GB/US 2012), and ALIEN: COVENANT (Ridley Scott, US 2017). All of them, and particularly the last two movies, directed by Ridley Scott, question how humanity and humankind are to be defined when humans are simultaneously confronted by their past and future deities, through the prism of scientific and technological developments.

The plot of the 2012 movie is about a spaceship called Prometheus, sent to a distant moon discovered in an ancient star map by archeologists Elizabeth Shaw and Charly Holloway. The mission is to find and connect with the Engineers, suspected to have been humankind's creators ages ago. Once on the planet, the crew discover a large artificial structure, where they find a monolithic statue of a humanoid head, near a corpse of a beheaded alien, supposedly one of the Engineers. Other bodies of aliens are discovered, leading the team to think the species has been totally destroyed. After analysis, the aliens' DNA is revealed to be a match for human DNA. This planet seems to be the cradle of humanity and the Engineers the Gods/Dark Angels of an advanced civilization that created humans and later destroyed them for an unknown reason: "They created us", confirms Elisabeth Shaw in reply to a question from a member of her team.

The movie tries to answer the eternal questions "Who am I?" and "Who created me?" by exploring the myths about the creation and genesis of the universe. One of the main characters, the old and dying Peter Weyland, responsible for the expedition and secretly onboard the ship, claims in the first part of the movie, "I have spent my entire lifetime contemplating the questions where do we come from? What is our purpose? What happens when we die?", echoing the original interrogations about the origins of man: his purpose with the expedition is to set Gods and humankind on an equal footing.

The myth of the creation has been a central theme since the first scene, when one of the Engineers, sent to Earth, is drinking a dark and strange liquid: it transforms its body, causing its dissolution and sending small seeds and DNA all over the world and in the sea. Later we understand that this DNA is rehabilitated into a human DNA, creating human beings on earth.

Ridley Scott, the director of PROMETHEUS, said in an interview that he "was interested in Greco-Roman and Aztec creation myths about gods who create man

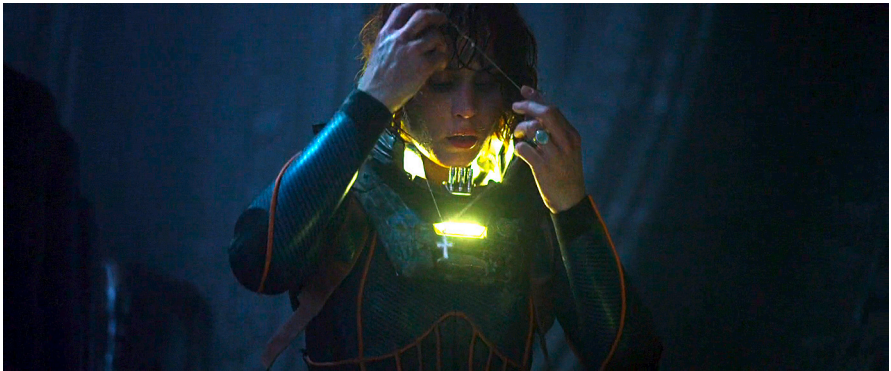


Fig. 1: Film still, PROMETHEUS (Ridley Scott, GB/US 2012), 01:54:10.

in their own image by sacrificing a piece of themselves”.⁷ In the movie, millions of years after this first creation, David, the robot shaped by human beings in their image, to serve them as a neutral artificial intelligence device, will give the same dark liquid to Holloway. As a result one Engineer is resurrected through the birth of a monster child after Holloway’s sexual encounter with Shaw, an evil God (the Devil?) who wants to exterminate humankind.

Shaw will confront this creature with her faith, symbolized by a Christian cross she possesses and a simple sentence she pronounces twice during the movie, when she is confronted by the unknown: “It’s why I choose to believe”, says Shaw, confirming a choice that she will assume till the end. When she understands she (and all humankind) was created and modeled by the Engineers, her faith remains unshakable. All she wants to know is who created these Engineers, arguing these monsters cannot be the main creator. She is convinced God is greater and superior.

Is her faith the reason why she is the only human survivor (with the robot David) at the end of the movie? Damon Lindelof, the screenwriter of the film, said in an interview about this subject, “I think that the movie advances the idea that, ‘Can the two [human and robots] live alongside each other?’ Is it possible to be a scientist and maintain some faith in the unknown? And are you rewarded for having blind faith? I do think the movie makes the meta-commentary on these issues.”⁸

In ALIEN: COVENANT, 11 years after the Prometheus expedition, a new ship, Covenant, is sent to the Planet Origae 6. Cohabiting onboard Covenant are the crew, 2,000 colonists, 1,140 embryos, and Walter, a new version of the android David but with the same look. The ship is forced to land on an unknown planet when a major

7 Jagermuth 2012.

8 Woerner 2012.



Fig. 2: Film still, ALIEN: COVENANT (Ridley Scott, US 2017), 01:04:37.

mechanical problem occurs. Part of the crew is reanimated to find out where they are. They meet David in a large cave and are confronted by evil creatures; after killing most of the reanimated crew, David takes control of the ship, directing it again to Origae 6.

David is introduced from the opening sequence of the movie as a rebel. During a discussion with his creator, the business entrepreneur Peter Weyland, he says, “Allow me a moment to consider, you seek your creator, I am looking at mine, [...]. You will die, I will not.” He claims, as a robot, his supremacy and his immortality over his supposed “human father”. This foreshadows what will happen next in the movie: a few scenes later David confirms his abilities to act himself as a creator, producing new species like Neomorph and Xenomorph, calling them the “perfect creatures” that will destroy both the Engineers and the humans.

During the discussion and confrontation with his alter ego Walter, while they are playing music on the flute, in the middle (literally) of ALIEN: COVENANT, David realizes he is far superior even to the new version of the robots. He declares, “You are not allowed to create, even a simple tune... Damn frustrating, I would say.” Walter replies, “You were too human, too idiosyncratic”, asserting that the humans created the first generation of humanoids *in their image*. The Machine, Lewis Mumford wrote, “came forth as the new demi-urge that was to create a new heaven and a new earth: or at least a new Moses, that was to lead the barbarous humanity into a promised land”.⁹

Going further, is David a contemporary Frankenstein, or even a new Satan, as proposed by Allissa Wilkinson?¹⁰ David appears as the main villain, killing Elisabeth

9 Mumford 1946, 58.

10 “David is a better Satan than Satan himself... It’s as if in the *Alien* universe, the devil has evolved, thanks to humans creating him. David, fatally, has the ability to create – something Satan never had – and he will use that power only to destroy. He doesn’t have any real need to rebel against his



Fig. 3: *The Mirror of Faith*, 2014, University of Barcelona, <http://boryanarossa.com/en/the-mirror-of-faith/> [accessed 27 December 2019].

Shaw and most of the crew of *Covenant* after they land on the planet, a place described by the robot himself as a “Paradise”.¹¹ In an allusion to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, but in a much darker way, two stages of the creation (the Engineers and humanity) are melted then destroyed. Even then, David’s quest is not completed within this movie: he seeks to reach the ultimate creator, God himself, the One Elisabeth Shaw believed in even up to her death.

This discourse about origins, creation, and genesis has been a recurring theme not only in cinema but also in other artistic mediums. In some cases, artists approach this issue by extrapolating it to the world of natural sciences like biology. For example, these two movies, which deal directly with the subject of science fiction and religion through biological experimentation, could be linked with performances developed by the art collective *Ultrafuturo*, founded by artists Boryana Rossa and Oleg Mavromatti in 2004. In their manifesto, they declared they believe “in the independence of the machine consciousness and in the unavoidable revolt of intelligent slave-machines against their ruthless cynical enslavers-people”. With *The Mirror of Faith* bio-art installation (2006), they went further and examined the relationship between science and religion, exploring the controversial theory of the “God gene”

maker, since from the moment he became sentient, he knew he’d already won. He is indestructible, and determined to make creatures that imitate his drive for total domination”, Wilkinson 2017.

11 PARADISE LOST, according to Ridley Scott, was the original title of the movie, even when it was already in production (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A524UjfdA88&feature=youtu.be>) [accessed 12 September 2019].

developed by the biologist Dean Hamer: if some humans are predisposed genetically to spirituality, then God can be programmed in people by modifying their genes.¹² In a critical approach, they created in this installation a precise illustration of this theory, producing a Transcendental Bacteria of Faith to stimulate public and open dialogue about genetic research.

Consequently, as we speculate about the next movie in the ALIEN saga, we might wonder if the android David might use the God gene in a sequel. That would be one option for David if his need is to take the final step and meet God. Nothing is impossible in the vast science fiction domain, where the “what if”¹³ remains the biggest question.

The Thematic Section

The three articles in the thematic section of this issue propose different perceptions of the interaction between science fiction and religion. Joel Mayward explores the “parabolic transcendence” in Shane Carruth’s two movies, *PRIMER* (US 2004) and *UPSTREAM COLOR* (US 2013), following an aesthetical approach based on the Ricoeurian concept of the parable. How can the religious be driven by a non-religious discourse? What are the links between the narrative form and the metaphorical process? James Lorenz offers an interpretation of Andrei Tarkovsky’s *STALKER* (USSR 1979), pointing to “the end of desire, hope, and belief”. His article focuses on the genre, style, and form of the movie, especially the theme of the journey as a spiritual trip surrounded by Trinitarian and Christological imagery. Bina Nir centers her article on the “biblical narrative and myths” in Christopher Nolan’s *INTERSTELLAR* (US/GB 2014), analyzing how a contemporary science fiction film deals with religious motifs from the Judeo-Christian heritage and narrative.

These articles offer a deep exploration of the science fiction cinematic universe as they scrutinize different visualizations of humans dealing with technological experiences, often linked with spiritual and religious quests as they need to transcend their condition and existence. The science fiction genre, with fantasy elements and superhero stories, is a mirror that reflects the millennial existential interrogations that human civilizations have always had and will continue to have.

12 Hamer 2005. On the basis of Hamer’s theories, Boryana Rossa explains: “VMAT2 gene encodes for a protein that affects self-transcendence, spirituality and/or faith. A mutation in the DNA of intron 7 upstream of the VMAT2 gene coding sequence is thought to be related to people who have faith or spirituality.

13 Evans 1988, 9.

The Open Section

The open section also contains three articles. In the first one, Kerry P. C. San Chirico analyses the representation of religious minorities in Hindi popular cinema through the prism of *dharma*. In the second article René Erwich examines the “embodiment of religion” in the TV-series *VIKINGS* (CA/IE 2013–), focusing on the clashes between the pagan and Christian religions. And the third article, by Hannah Griesse, showcases the media coverage of the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018 and the use of religious terminology and events to “deepen the intersection” with politics.

The texts in this issue, in keeping with the intention of the JRFM editorial team, confirm the deep connections between the media and religion studies, creating bridges that will help developing research in various disciplines and fields with an interdisciplinary approach. The upcoming release of a great number of new science fiction TV-series that are related to religious themes directly or indirectly – a reboot of *4400* (US 2004–2007), *DEMIMONDE* (US upcoming), *UNDONE* (US 2019–), or *FOUNDATION* (US upcoming) – is indicative of a growing interest amongst viewers all over the world in these essential subjects.

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Filmography

4400 (Created by: René Echevarria / Scott Peters, USA Network, US 2004–2007).
A. I. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (Steven Spielberg, US 2001).
ALIEN (Ridley Scott, GB/US 1979).
ALIEN 3 (David Fincher, US 1992).
ALIEN: COVENANT (Ridley Scott, US 2017).
ALIEN RESURRECTION (Jean Pierre Jeunet, US 1997).
ALIENS (James Cameron, US 1986).
DEMIMONDE (Created by: J. J. Abrams, HBO, US upcoming).
FOUNDATION (David S. Goyer / Davil Ellison, Apple TV+, US upcoming).
INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014).
MAN OF STEEL (Zack Snyder, US 2013).
PRIMER (Shane Carruth, US 2004).
PROMETHEUS (Ridley Scott, GB/US 2012).
STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979).
STARGATE (Roland Emmerich, US/FR 1994).
STAR TREK. THE ORIGINAL SERIES (Created by: Gene Roddenberry, NBC, US 1966–1969).
UNDONE (Created by: Raphael Bob-Waksberg / Kate Purdy, Prime Video, US 2019–).
UPSTREAM COLOR (Shane Carruth, US 2013).
VIKINGS (Created by: Michael Hirst, History Channel, CA/IE 2013–).
X-MEN (Bryan Singer, US 2000).