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Utopia 2001: Space Odysseys as Religion

by Ingo Mörth

„After watching the movie „2001“ at the age of thirteen, I read the book and understood the ending in part. Years later I fully understood: The story was all about replacing God with advanced aliens as gods and humanity as gods-in-the-making. It was a secular, technicolor response to the Bible, complete with parallels to Genesis and Revelation, including even a Christ-figure who dies and is „resurrected“ into „godhood“ at the „Second Coming“ of the alien-gods. If no one understands the story, it’s only because of cognitive dissonance. Kubrick was about as explicit as can be. „2001“ isn’t science fiction, it’s about science fiction as religion.“

Joe Schembrie, MBA, President of Astrotug Inc., Bellevue, Washington, answering the question: „What Effect (if any) did Stanley Kubrick’s „2001: A Space Odyssey“ have on you and your space career?“; www.reston.com/nasa/comments/2001.comments.html

Introduction

Like no other work of science fiction and fantasy (SF) the movie and subsequent novel „2001: A Space Odyssey“ (*2001*), the still famous collaboration of science-fiction author Arthur Charles Clarke and movie director Stanley Kubrick, demonstrates the inherent quality of the whole genre as „Utopia with religious meaning“. In this essay I will show that religious functions and patterns are characteristic for utopian thinking in general, and that SF today more than ever represents transcendencies of human existence. Its speculative odysseys in time and (inner and cosmic) space therefore are one of the manifestations of „invisible religion“ (Luckmann 1967), characteristic for modernity.

Many spectators in 1968, when *2001* was released first, described the film as a religious experience, saying that it opened up new doors for them in their spiritual lives (see DeMet 1998/2001). F.e. a letter-writer wrote to Kubrick:

„I would not be at all afraid to state that with *2001* you may have quite possibly saved any number of spiritual and physical lives. For it is within the power of a film such as yours to give people a reason to go on living – to give them the courage to go on living.“ (Agel 1970, 192).

Others used language reminiscent to rebirth concepts, like the person who wrote Kubrick,

„Your movie has given me many moments which I seek out in my life – moments of feeling alive. After your movie one thought kept coming back into my mind. It is one that I have had many times, but which seemed more clear than ever now; how many times must I be born to realize what I am.“ (Agel 1970, 187)

And at one screening of the film in Los Angeles, a young audience member rose to his feet at the film’s conclusion, ran down the aisle and crashed through the screen, all the while shouting, „It’s God! It’s God!“ (Agel 1970, 306).

Of all the SF movies ever made, *2001* stands not only because of its spiritual significance and encrypted religious meaning as the pinnacle of the genre, but also because of its paradigmatic esthetic quality and visual perfection. *2001* took the realm of special effects to an unsurpassed degree of realism, and even today this film is the standard by which many movies are measured. *2001* paid such attention to detail that it has been said a more realistic movie could only be made if it were filmed on location in outer space. After *2001*, aliens in the movies became more realis-

tic-looking and believable. Later science fiction films with extraterrestrials, including *Star Wars* and *E.T.*, owe their existence to it.

Due to this combination of spiritual imagination und audiovisual perfection, *2001* was a superb box-office hit when it premiered in 1968. Hippies would go to the front row of the movie theatre and lie on the floor as its „cosmic light show“ swept over them (Agel 1970, 309). Reaction to this film by the moviegoing masses was extreme: it was either loved or hated by critics and laymen alike. There was no middle ground. The film's popularity has not waned over the years, although it is no longer used for „tripping“. Today, *2001* stands as a triumph of science fiction on the silver screen. Other films have tried to imitate its style and its vision, such as *Planet Of The Apes* and *Silent Running*, but none have come close, as far as I can judge it.

One of the reasons for *2001*'s lasting fascination is the citation of millennial thinking as time horizon for astronaut Dave Bowman's journey to infinity. The film (and book) presents us, as its full title indicates, with a journey which is temporal as well as spatial. The choice of date strikes as one of the most intriguing things about the religious quality of the story. With its connotations of a new start (001), built on past millennia (2000) it recalls many theories of the cyclical nature of universal history, which are strongly rooted in many religious traditions. Like buddhist souls astronaut Dave encounters obstacles on his pilgrimage towards infinity: the most formidable is that monument of its own magnificence, HAL 9000, the computer. But our pilgrim triumphs over that obstacle and finally goes through to, as the words on the screen inform us, „Jupiter - and Beyond - the Infinite“, which means: going out of nature and its limitations. And once out of nature, Dave goes through a prolonged and intense psychedelic experience, in order to be taken out of our world into the other. In Clarke's novel based on the film, we are told that Dave is here going through „some kind of cosmic switching device, routing the traffic of the stars through unimaginable dimensions of space and time.“ The movie itself exposes us to varied and extreme visual and aural phenomena, designed to make it perfectly clear to any observer that what Dave is doing is perning in a gyre, and finally coming through something like God's holy fire:

By the time the extraterrestrial sages get him through, he is an aged man, and we are presented with the most perplexing sequence in the film. We encounter Dave, in a French Provincial room, considerably aged since we last saw him. Moreover, he is not getting any younger, so pretty soon we see him as a tattered coat upon a stick, a mere paltry thing, a dying animal. But we must realize that that does not matter - that, indeed, his soul should clap its hand and sing, and louder sing for every tatter in his mortal dress. For Dave is to have his bodily form changed - and he has it transformed into something new. He has been gathered into eternity, and that is no country for old men. So his bodily form is changed into that of a child. But a god-child: the new god coming in the magnus annus, the Great Year 2001 -- the beginning of the new 2000 year cycle.

Non of the „space odyssey“ sequels by Arthur C. Clarke himself reached the unique impact of *2001*. „*2010: Odyssey Two*“ (1982) was written more as a sequel to the film than to the novel, and tells the story of a Soviet space flight to Jupiter nine years after the original voyage of the Discovery in *2001*. The book was a best seller, but the following movie entitled „*2010: The Year We Make Contact*“ was only moderately successful. Clarke wrote a new sequel, „*2061: Odyssey Three*“, published in December 1987. The novel is structured mainly as an adventure story, and the spiritual and religious elements of the narrative are almost non-existent. Although it achieved bestseller status, *2061* was not as successful as its predecessors were. In March 1997, Arthur C. Clarke came out with „*3001: The Final Odyssey*“, once more a national bestseller.

The book resurrects Frank Poole, one of the astronauts killed by HAL in 2001. He is discovered floating beyond the orbit of Neptune and taken to a tower reaching 20,000 miles up from the Earth's surface where he is revived and gradually introduced to life in the 31st century, which is full of fantastical technological wonders. 3001 is filled with detailed descriptions of a future society where nearly all of mankind's problems have been solved by technology. At one point, the „barbarian“ Poole makes a comment that the human race has deteriorated since his time, to which one of his caretakers replies, „That may be true – in some respects. Perhaps we're physically weaker, but we're healthier and better adjusted than most humans who have ever lived. The Noble Savage was always a myth.“.

While *2001* was a breathtaking extrapolation of one of the basic religious questions: „mankind in the universe“, *3001* has reached one of the basic religious answers: a state of (near-)paradise, constructed as utopian projection into the future like many other specimen of the genre since Thomas Morus' famous first description of an utopian society. Like often, for the audiences the questions of *2001* were more appealing than the answers given in *3001*.

2001 was relaunched in a remastered and restored version at the beginning of this year. The European premiere of this relaunch took place in the Vatican, in the Pope's John Paul II own cinema. The invited audience included Kubrick's widow, Christiane, and his daughter Anya. Vatican officials said that the film was „top of the list“ of films approved by the Pope and his advisers as suitable for viewing by the faithful on the grounds that they promote spiritual or moral values. The Pope's endorsement could come down to interpretation. It is possible that he, with a number of academics, sees the enigmatic gleaming black monoliths in the opening scenes as the work of God, rather than the creation of an alien species. This would change the film's seemingly atheist message - and approve the affinity of science fiction and religion also from an religion's point of view.

Utopia and Transcendency

„.... Obstine, je montais vers Dieu pour lui demander la raison des choses ... Mais au sommet de la montagne je ne decouvriris qu'un bloc pesant de granit noir-lequel etait Dieu ... Seigneur, lui dis-je, instruisez-moi ...Mais le bloc de granit ruisselant d'une pluie luisante me demeurait impenetrable ...“

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, from „Citadelle“ (1948)

The literary genre SF, having undergone an extraordinary increase in industrial nations over the last few decades, can be analysed, just like classical utopian, state-oriented novels (cf. Nemella 1984) or „voyages imaginaires“, from Thomas More's „Utopia“ to George Orwell's „1984“, as a comprehensive application of the utopian method, in as far as it:

„takes images from a communal, imaginary world, manipulates, extends and maintains them as a model for further discussion and, from this position of a separate reality, influences the communal imagery in and from reality.“ (Krysmanski 1972, 54).

Utopian imagery, therefore, transcends social reality, although it remains in spite of this - as far as content and range are concerned - related to it and acts upon it (cf. Mannheim 1952, 179). The application of the utopian method thereby establishes SF as a sphere of meaning („Sinnprovinz“, Schütz) of its own, differing from the „life-world as the natural foundation of our Weltanschauung“ in the face of everyday social reality, showing structures of meaning without the empirical boundaries of the life-world, although, on the other hand, staying closely related to it.

SF shares this quality with other spheres of meaning which transcend the life-world, such as the dream or the day-dream, art, and also religion. Religion in particular, consists essentially of a utopian and fantastical element, which, within the scope of the most varying concrete forms of religion, heralds a celestial reality and a higher level of consciousness at the conclusion of history, as well as that of individual life.

I intend to prove that religion and SF are not only comparable by means of the formal aspects of utopia and transcendence, but also that they are joined at the very same roots of the structure of the life-world, as far as content is concerned: at the transgression of the boundaries of knowledge, experience and behavior, and that SF acts upon the life-world of its readership as religion does on its believers. This affinity between SF and religious ideas extends even as far as the development of SF-religions, firmly anchoring the ideas of SF, ritually and pragmatically, into the life-world of their followers. For example, the development of U. F. O. cult groups, which will be dealt with in greater detail later, cannot be adequately explained without a content analysis of the SF genre, as transgressing the respective boundaries of the real and the imaginable.

The inner, content-based relationship of fantasy literature on the one hand, to religious myths on the other, was first brought to recognition within the framework of a depth-psychology approach (cf. Scheidt, 1972). Freud's analysis of the „Unheimlichen“ (The Extraordinary, 1919), makes a particular connection between this element of the fantastic and the regression to a phase relating to the animism of primitive man in the psychological development of the individual, buried deep within the unconscious. C. G. Jung took Freud's perspective one step further, concentrating on the ‚personal‘ unconscious, in an analysis of the ‚collective‘ unconscious and its archetypes. He considered the sphere of the fantastic to be a further expression of a comprehensive mythology of mankind. In accordance with this, Jung saw U. F. O.'s as collective visions, a modern expression of an archetypically created idea (Jung 1958).

Depth-psychology analysis certainly reaches its limits rather quickly in the analysis of SF. SF is not only characterised by the regression to previous experiences and phases of psychic development or to archetypically formed ideas, but also, essentially, to the creative and the speculative transgression of all structurally existent boundaries of the world and of experience. This is worth examining in further detail. The perspective of depth-psychology remains, however, at the centre of these observations: SF and religion, being spheres of meaning different from everyday reality yet still related to it, are more easily explained by basic problems of individual existence. These basic problems can best be dealt with by means of temporal, spatial and social elementary structures (and limits thereof) of the life-world, studied in detail in a phenomenological proto-sociology (Schütz/Luckmann, 1975). These constitute the dimensions of an analysis of the content of SF within a sociology of knowledge, and also of its transformation into a religious, cult-like practice.

SF and Religion as Convergent Spheres of Meaning

„It is he who is unsatisfied who fantasises, not he who is content.“

Sigmund Freud, in: *The Poet and the Fantastic* (1908)

SF establishes, therefore, a fantasy world which literally transgresses the boundaries of everyday existence in the true sense of the word, constructing a world of different structures of meaning, based on the future or an alternative environment, into which the reader enters. This delimitation of the spatial, temporal and social structures of the life-world which are empirically valid, and the exploration of the possible and the imaginable automatically bring SF closer to religious spheres of meaning, which likewise thematise and define another world.

This formal parallelism is, at first place, trivial and seems to cease upon closer examination: a religious system of meaning creates a particular reality *excluding* other structures, which has a quality of absolute certainty for those believers who enter into it. Certainty is, however, principally not envisageable within the literary sphere of SF, whose foundation is the open horizon of the possible. It is this which appears to separate fundamentally SF and religion.

The fact that a world created by an author can principally only exist alongside numerous other worlds (this basic system of SF has been taken up many times as an independent topic: the concept of never-ending parallel universes where every possible world is realised) is, however, an increasingly applicable pre-requisite of religion under conditions of social pluralism. In the same way that the SF reader can select worlds of any kind, one can also select various forms of religious meaning, within or beyond the boundaries of religious tradition. In this way, even religious certainty assumes a provisory quality (P. L. Berger called this the „heretical imperative“, cf. Berger, 1979).

It is therefore no longer possible to uphold the claim for absoluteness of religious knowledge under the conditions of pluralistic competition between systems of meaning and autonomous selection by the individual. The assertion of a certain „different reality“ by a religion or confession exists alongside other equally plausible claims; hence acceptance or rejection of religious truth becomes a phenomenon of individual preference (cf. Luckmann 1967). This is the point where religion and SF converge, too. Religion and SF not only converge because religious institutions have become „secondary institutions of meaning“ (Luckmann) alongside each other and alongside others, but also because the transmission of a Weltanschauung, and thereby of meaning, is dealt with through conscious reflection within SF, underlying all its entertaining, fantastic speculations:

SF as realm of meaning and enlightenment

SF has had to define and legitimise itself like no literary genre before it. The attempts at definition by the SF authors themselves possess a strong, normative quality, furthered by the desire to liberate this genre from the „millstone“ of an inferior reputation. At the same time, a concept of itself and its fundamental ideas are reflected in these definitive ideal concepts of what SF ought to be, thus additionally supporting the theory that the world of SF does indeed converge with religious forms of meaning.

There are two contradictory fundamental concepts within SF which can be described as puristic „hardware“-science-fiction on the one hand, and universalistic fantasy-fiction on the other (cf. Suerbaum 1981, 9). The purists emphasise the criterion of science and set great store by the ab-

solute scientific quality of this form, by extrapolation from scientific concepts of the world. Robert A. Heinlein, himself an „old Master“ of SF writing, defines this as follows:

„A realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method“ (Heinlein 1969, 21).

Although such purist, ideal concepts are still published today, it is the universalist point of view - the inclusion of elements of fantasy, wherein the known laws of nature are transcended or rendered invalid - and its connection with a humanistic perspective which has asserted itself. This is to be regarded in relation to the increasing problems with the scientific concepts of the world:

„Science-fiction is the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (Science).“ (Brian W. Aldiss 1973, 8)

In the course of this „search for the definition of man“ SF alters all known elements of man's existence and relates fictitious stories:

„... in which conditions and story-lines are depicted which would not be possible or credibly representable under present conditions since they presuppose changes and developments in science, in technology, in political and social structures, or even in mankind itself.“ (Suerbaum 1981, 107)

There is quite a consensus among purists and universalists that these fictional stories are not only of value as entertainment, but also of informative importance:

„Science-fiction is relevant; it is important; it has something to do with the world; it gives meaning to life; and it enlightens the readers. And it has all these characteristics as no other form of literature has.“ (Isaac Asimov 1973, XI)

This stimulation towards reflection on the part of the reader is achieved when the basic concept of „what would happen if ...“ is carried through all imaginable variants and alternatives as play with models, related to the present. Besides the material changes in this new outline of the world in SF stories, concepts of the world are provided, a particular interpretation of the world, where problems and situations of the life-world and the social world are exemplified in the world of fantasy. For this reason, SF writers often consciously fall back on ancient myths of religious origin.

Meaningful concepts of the world in SF

Faced with the loss of closed concepts of the world in these modern times, many SF writers fall back on such earlier interpretations of the world which are no longer controversial and easily accessible within the general stock of knowledge. The most obvious example thereof being the „hero myth“, along which guidelines many SF stories are constructed, so that the protagonist of the plot determines world history through his actions and thereby solves his problems as a „historically powerful individual“. In most cases the hero is by no means a representative of an elite, but instead in a less important position in which he becomes decisive in the course of world history by some special conditions. „Arena“, a story by Frederic Brown (1947) - which has, in the meantime, become renowned and has been reprinted several times - proves to be a classic example of this tendency:

Bob Carson, pilot of a one-man patrol-ship of Earth's space fleet, is suddenly transported out of this universe upon chancing across an unknown enemy space-fleet, and consequently finds himself, naked, on the surface of an unknown planet with barely tolerable environmental conditions (a direct quotation from the text follows):

„Then he heard the voice. He heard it in his own mind, not in his ears. It came from nowhere and everywhere: „I passed through space and dimensions, and in this particular space and time I came across two peoples, getting ready to go to war. Both peoples would be destroyed and their fellowmen would be reduced to dust. And I say, this must not happen.“

„Who ... what are you?“ Carson didn't actually say it out loud, rather the question evolved in his mind. „You wouldn't understand ... I am ... „, There was a pause, as if the voice were searching for an expression not to be found in Carson's brain. „I am capable of putting an end to this war and of sending the aliens back to their own galaxy. But they would only return, or else your people would follow them there. Solely by remaining forever in this space and time can I stop you from annihilating each other. However, I cannot stay. For this reason I shall intervene now. I shall completely destroy one fleet, without the other losing a single ship. In this way, one of two civilisations will survive. „ „It must be a nightmare“, thought Carson. But he knew that it wasn't.

„The strongest will survive“, continued the voice. „There's nothing I can do about that. From the outer reaches of both fleets I have two individuals, you and the alien. I have read in your mind that battles between chosen representatives in order to solve disagreements between peoples were not unknown in your ancient history. You and your opponent, you both stand and face each other, naked and unarmed, under conditions that neither of you are used to nor find at all pleasant. There is no time limit, since time does not exist here. Whoever survives in the end, his people will be saved. Intelligence and courage will be of more use to you than physical strength. Especially courage, which is tantamount to the instinct of self-preservation.“

Carson eventually wins this ,battle of the leaders', thanks to his own intelligence, the alien space-fleet is destroyed at a stroke, and he finds himself once more aboard his patrol-ship where he simply continues his duties, since no-one would believe his story anyway.“

In this and numerous other SF stories written along the lines of a ‚hero-saves-world-myth‘, concepts of history are implied in which individual action still is important, even crucial, and instigates change. This constitutes an ideal and a form of fiction which exercises an increasingly strong appeal to SF readers in the face of everyday experience of how unmodifiable functionally rational organisational structures are and of how inevitable the course of world-history.

F. Brown's story quoted above, however, goes beyond the simple heroic myth of many other related stories worked around the ‚Superman‘ model. Carson, fighting victoriously for mankind, is like the human race completely under the power of a godlike being, which out of sympathy, as it were helps propagate more quickly the unshakeable law of the universe: the survival of the fittest.

A conception of the world is thereby implied which establishes a cosmic connection between mankind and its history, rationally countering the explicitly religious interpretations of man's position in the universe. Religious systems of meaning outline basically anthropocentric concepts of the world and of history, wherein metaphysical, divine forces are, in their turn, interpreted in their relations (be they positive or negative) to the life-world of mankind. In this respect doubts are being cast principally upon such anthropocentrism. Humanity and its course of history then becomes reduced to a ‚grain of sand in the universe‘, full of different, variously superior, races and entities, which unswervingly pursues its course according to laws partly beyond human comprehension. The concepts of the world described here are, in the final analysis, the philosophical extrapolation from scientific concepts of the world and can be found over and over in the sphere of ‚hard‘ SF literature.

Many SF writers and especially the initially quoted example *2001* draw the same conclusion from these scientific concepts as the sociologist G. Dux: that the movement into this concept of universe signifies the end of anthropomorphic concepts of the world and God for mankind, and also the end of traditional religions (Dux, 1982). Religious concepts and images of God have lost their hold on such a concept of reality in the immensity of the cosmos and in the face of the teleonomy of its structure. But looking at this „new horizon“ creates a new form of religious experience for audience and readers ...

The disenchantment of Religion in SF

In this sense, the „grain of sand“ concept is translated into fiction in that, for example, the confrontation with incomprehensible or superior beings of another galactic race becomes the foundation for religious myths and cults. One variation on this theme are those stories in which human spacemen become gods for inhabitants of other planets or exploit religious ideas on the basis of their superior technology, as in the well-known novel by the Russian brothers A. und B. Strugazki, for example: „It's not Easy Being a God“ (Trudno byt' bogom, 1964) in which Don Rumata and his troops from Earth infiltrate a religious organisation to liberate the inhabitants of a distant planet from a feudal dictatorship.

Another variation are SF stories which explain the development of terrestrial religions as being the result of encounters with „ancient astronauts“, from other galactic cultures or with time-travellers from the future. In M. Moorcock's „Behold the Man“ (1968), for example, Karl Glögger, a failed and neurotic amateur psychologist, has himself taken back by a time-machine to the year 29, in order to be able to witness the death of Christ. However, he ends up in the role of Christ himself and dies as such upon the cross. As far as SF non-fiction works are concerned, the „ancient astronaut“ theory has been published in the millions all over the world: books by Erich von Däniken, or the ex-NASA engineer J. F. Blumrich's „The Spaceship of Ezekiel“, take as their theme exactly the de-mythification aspect of the „grain of sand“ concept of the world.

Even the founding of new religions is treated fictiously along the lines of contact with cultures from other galaxies: In Robert Heinlein's „Stranger in a Strange land“ (1961) Michael Valentine Smith - a human with superhuman powers, brought up by Martians - returns to Earth and establishes a pantheistic religion, the focus of which is in fact a form of sexual freedom. The „Messiah from Mars“ meets his end under a hail of stones at the hands of Orthodox Christian fanatics. It is not only a question of religions and prophets being stripped of their transcendental qualities, but new versions of a genesis without God or supernatural powers are also being created within the realms of SF. The creation of galactic races, planets, solar-systems or complete „pocket universes“ is a recurring version thereof in SF, a particular variant being John Brunner's story „The Windows of Heaven“: after an apocalyptic catastrophe on Earth a strain of bacteria in the spaceship of the sole survivor forms the beginnings of a whole new evolution.

In the face of the fundamental problem of maintaining the validity of traditional religious concepts within galactic dimensions and the consequent refutability of previously irrefutable religious knowledge, the question of how the position of mankind within a universe without traditional religion can be dealt with remains open. Hence the question regarding a „post-religious world concept“ is posed and answered in SF. The concept of the universe as an endless series of existence forms and knowledge levels within which humanity constitutes a tiny, insignificant element whose end or continued development remains without comprehensible significance implies an indefinite and indirect transcendency, in relation to which every cipher and every „tentative definition“ (Luhmann) proves inappropriate from the beginning. Arthur C. Clarke wrote -

besides *2001* - another outstanding example of this theme. His novel „Childhood’s End“ (1956) - understandably one of the most well-known SF novels of all time - deals with the concepts of absolute transcendency in exemplary fashion. *2001* and its sequels (see above) can be considered as variations of a message already established in this predecessory work:

The spaceships of the „overlords“ appear suddenly above the Earth; it is under their patronage that the final chapter in the history of mankind begins. They put an end to the madness of nuclear armament and create utopian, ideal living conditions on Earth. The ‚Golden Age‘ (the title of the middle and longest chapter of the book) seems to have dawned. For decades no-one actually encounters an „overlord“ face to face, only their spaceships over the cities; then we discover that it is not their first visit to Earth. Karelle, the leader of the overlords presents himself for the first time :

„A tremendous silence hung over the whole world for twenty seconds ... then, the darkness of the large opening seemed to move forward and Karelle stepped into the sunlight. ..Due to the psychology and years of careful preparation by the overlords, only a few people blacked out ... There could be no mistake. The leathery wings, small horns and bushy tail - they were all there. The most terrifying of all legends had come to life from an unknown past ... “ It soon becomes apparent that the „golden age“ is only intended as an intermediate stage and that the overlords are to act as „midwives“ at the birth of a new humanity which is created and then leaves Earth, allowing the old humanity to perish with its planet.

Even the overlords who appear, as it were, as de-mystified gods are - just like man - only a part of the fundament of incomprehensible events in the universe which remain unfathomable at the end. As Karelle explains in a speech typical of this theme in SF:

„We are your guardians, nothing else ... Just as we are superior to you, something else is our superior and uses us for its own purposes. We have never discovered what it is, ... We have received our orders, time and time again, set out to some world or other in the early stages of the civilisation process and shown them the way that we could never follow, the way that you will now follow ... You have called us overlords without realising the irony of this title. We want you to know that there is a superior mind above us, which uses us ... “ „We can tell you very little about the type of change you will undergo ... In a few years’ time, it will all be over and the human race will have divided in two. There is no going back and no future for the world as you know it ... you have given birth to your successors and it is your tragedy that you will never understand them ... In fact, they will have no mind, as you know it ...“

The universe as an absolute transcendency embodied in a superior mind of sheer Hegelian proportions („Weltgeist“), in which no human being can participate by his knowledge - this concept of the world manifests itself most clearly here. In the face of this transcendency, man finds himself thrown back on himself. Kurt Vonnegut - famous not only as a SF writer - deals repeatedly with the problem of how to find some basic meaning with relation to an incomprehensible, indifferent or threatening universe. In his book „Cats Cradle“ (1963), therefore, man himself constitutes the sole imaginable sacred being in this process, which at the end turns out to be religious once more. The founder of this religion, in the novel, Bokonon, describes, however, every religion as a lie; it is his sole duty „to provide the people with better and better lies“. Man as the supreme „holiness“ is, therefore, the best of all formulated religious lies, making a meaningful existence possible for humanity.

The treatment of the cosmic dimensions of human existence in SF, therefore, leads directly to dealing with religion within SF, as shown above. However, even without direct reference to the questions of religious meaning, SF remains linked to those of meaning in general.

SF as transgression of boundaries: life-world, social world, knowledge

„Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enameling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.“

William Butler Yeats, last strophe from „Sailing to Byzantium“ (1928)

The alternative realities constructed by SF writers frequently deal with a world in which empirical boundaries of consciousness, the life-world, society and knowledge are annulled in all structural dimensions (spatial, temporal and social dimensions). As examples of such de-limitation of human existence in SF, I would like to deal with the following points:

- 1) man without boundaries
- 2) fantasy without boundaries
- 3) life without boundaries
- 4) space and time without boundaries.

Man without Boundaries

The annulment of physical, psychic, spatial-temporal and social limits of individual existence forms a major theme of SF, reappearing often as a secondary topic in association with other main themes. The treatment of these central themes takes many forms:

- 1) ‚Supermen‘ appear within a ‚normal‘ human society on the basis of special genes, genetical experiments or through combination with ‚mechanical parts‘ and cybernetic facilities („Cyborgs“) etc., and are physically superior to all other humans („Superman“, the famous comics figure, is the most popular realisation of this theme).
- 2) A continuation of this ‚Superman‘ theme is the genesis of a new race of super-beings, perhaps by dint of a mutation, who possess superior intellectual powers, be it overwhelming intelligence or telepathic and other paranormal powers. One of the most original versions of this idea is E. F. Russell’s novel „Sentinels of Space“ (1953) in which the whole of humanity turns out to be a larva-like intermediate stage of development preceding a form of „cosmic butterfly“ which lives amongst the stars.
- 3) There are also many various versions of the world in SF in which humanity as a whole has already reached a new, superior ‚de-limited‘ form of existence. This is formulated, on the one hand, around the further development of technological facilities, such as when robots take care of all material requirements, rendering work and money obsolete: a world which Isaac Asimov („I, a Robot“, 1950), for example, has succeeded in depicting repeatedly, with the most surprising emphases and variations. Spaceships faster than the speed of light, matter-transference systems, or time-machines turn the universe in its innumerable dimensions into the scene of action for mankind. On the other hand, a form of mankind which has developed completely new intellectual powers is also repeatedly portrayed in SF, to the extent of exerting total control of mind over matter.

- 4) An advanced, extra-terrestrial race is often described, leading a limitless existence, creating and destroying divine worlds, in complete control of mind and body. Nevertheless, these SF stories in which extra-terrestrials are not portrayed as tiny, ugly, aggressive creatures intent on conquering the Earth, or caricatures of human beings, but rather as incarnations of superior, advanced humanity, are mainly in the minority. Individuals who leave Earth behind, or even the whole of humanity, are thereby enabled to share in a higher form of existence through contact between man and these superior races. This constitutes a particularly frequent variant on the way to a new existence: mankind, or at least part of it, takes a great leap forward through its contact with friendly, ethically distinguished, and superior extra-terrestrial cultures.

Finally it should be mentioned that the material subject most frequently dealt with in the general theme of „mankind without boundaries“ is that of old-age, sickness and death, and their invalidation in a state of immortality. These boundaries of the life-world are also a central theme of religious meaning, not least because they may not only be experienced in theoretical reflection, but also from the ‚natural‘ point of view.

Fantasy without Boundaries

A further, directly accessible transcendental experience of man is the delimitation of the worlds or experiences of dream and fantasy, against the „paramount reality“ of the everyday world. This experience of limits between two spheres of meaning forms a particular theme of recent SF. The basis of the experience of reality, and with it that of the life-world, are dealt with by creating a world in which dreams or fantasy images alter reality or in which experiences of reality eventually turn out to be imaginary:

Ursula K. Le Guin’s book „The Lathe of Heaven“ (1971) deals, for example, with a man who needs only to dream of a better world in order to wake up to the realisation that these dreams have become reality. His psychiatrist, trying to bring these dreams under control in an attempt to create an ideal world, acquires himself the ability to dream ‚creatively‘ and then, having been driven insane by this, virtually drags the world into the abyss.

The inhabitants of a cooled planet in G. D. Macdonalds’s novel „Wine of the Dreamer“ (1951) believe that their experiences on another planet, delivered by dream-machines, in which they take possession of the peoples’ minds there and bring about death and destruction, are nothing but mere dreams. It is, indeed, the religious duty of everyone in the massive, isolated building where the 700 „warders“ live to dream. In the end they discover that their dreams have become gruesome reality on these other planets - Earth among them - and that they have forgotten their original task of observing the development of three ancient colonies and of preventing premature space-flight.

Philip K. Dick, whose main topic of the „the search for reality“ is reflected in the whole of his works, radically takes up the question of dealing with the experience of reality in his well-known novel „Ubik“ (1969). Joe Chip, the protagonist, experiences a confusing world as real, a world which constantly shifts further and further into the past, until he finally realises, all of a sudden, that he has actually been dead for a long time and now merely exists as a brain, frozen in a container, connected up to other brains. The imaginary worlds of these brains are repeatedly superimposed upon each other, creating a strange, fragmented experience of reality. Whether a real world exists at all outside the freezer is also called into question at the end of the novel.

The consequently questionable world and the problematical self have been dealt with at all levels again and again in the SF of the last 30 years. In addition to the examples listed above, which aim at the basis of the experience of reality and of the self, the much more popular version using fantasy worlds must be mentioned here, in which no connection is established with familiar real-

ity, its known history and predictable future, and instead a totally different intact world of fantasy is depicted, requiring no contemplative skill on the part of the reader.

„Sword and Sorcery“: mighty subjects against scientific technology

This kind of escapist fantasy literature in which parallel and alternative worlds based on magical principles are portrayed, has received fresh impetus recently. In these fantasy worlds, often built in series of many volumes (e.g. Philip Jose Farmer's „The World of Tiers“, 5 Volumes, 1965-1977; Robert Howard's „Conan“, 8 volumes, published after his death in the 70's, Lin Carter's „Callisto“, 8 volumes, and „Thorgor“, 3 volumes, 1965-1978), technology plays, in the main, a small part, whereas magic takes the leading roll. Mortals are shipwrecked on strange, barbaric planets, and swords drawn, they fight dragons and other legendary creatures, fall in love with princesses whom they liberate from dark towers, are attacked by all kind of imaginable hordes and mythical figures, such as centaurs, etc., are even enslaved and *still* manage to win their beloveds in the end. Witches and magicians, goblins and pixies, the fund of all Germanic and Greek legends of gods and heroic figures in its entirety - this is the stuff of which these fantasy worlds are made. The term „Sword and Sorcery“ has already been adopted for this genre.

The fantasy world of the Medieval English literature professor at Oxford, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, his pre-historic „Middle-Earth“, became a cult novel for the disillusioned generation of 1968. „Hobbits“, goblins, magicians, trolls and humans are all intrigued in the „Lord of the Rings“ trilogy (1954), a story of epic proportions, which finally results in the inevitable battle between Good and Evil for absolute control of the world. The reader is drawn into this world through an abundance of detail, including a ‚fantasy language‘ and a pseudo-historical element in the epilogue.

Recently, in particular, the attraction of such magic-mythological, fantastical worlds, which emphasize basic „subjective infrastructure“ (cf. Dux) and „universal projection“ (cf. Luckmann) against the techno-scientific, functional and rational concepts of the world of contemporary reality, has been steadily increasing.

Life without Boundaries

It is an entirely vivid and animated universe, lying phylogenetically as well as ontogenetically at the beginning of human concepts of the world, whose further development can be termed as step by step delimitation of this all-enveloping social world (Luckmann, 1970). A thorough reflection on such ‚boundary experience‘ in the social world is to be found in SF. In the formulation of non-human intelligence, be it mortal or extra-terrestrial, there is not one single object of the known world, be it of a physical, technical or biological kind, which does not turn up in SF as an intelligent subject. The following variants can be identified:

- 1) Firstly, extra-terrestrial beings are devised who are able to change their form at will, for example in R. Sheckley's story „Keep your Shape“: Scouts from just such a race are supposed to reconnoitre Earth before an invasion; however, they become so fascinated by the many different forms they can assume, they completely forget their original task. The possibility of changing form is even taken directly from ancient concepts of religious mythology found in many cultures: werewolves and „lionmen“ are also to be found in SF (eg. in Robert Howard's „Almuric“, 1971).
- 2) In the attempt to think through the possibilities of an alternative form of intelligence, some SF writers have furnished various objects - which in the scientific world are „purely physical“ - with subjectivity and partly with thoughts incomprehensible to the human mind:

Fred Hoyle's „The Black Cloud“ (1957) is probably the most well known. In this novel an intelligent, interstellar black cloud (from an astronomic point of view, „dark fog“) positions itself between the Sun and Earth, threatening the latter with death through the cold. Scientists manage to establish contact with the cloud and to prevent the worst. A cloud made up of electrically-charged cybernetic metal fragments consolidates itself against some astronauts from Earth in order to repell them in Stanislaw Lem's „The Unconquerable“ (Niezwyklosci i inne opowiadania, 1964). Communication is no longer a possibility in this case. In „The Star Dwellers“ (1961) by James Blish, human astronauts come across creatures made of pure energy which feed off magnetic fields and the like, and help humanity to victory in battle as their allies. In „Solaris“ - the most famous novel by Stanislaw Lem (1961) – astronauts discover an entire ocean on a distant planet which can create fantastic forms and is supposedly endowed with intelligence, though its secret cannot be fathomed. In his book „Eight Keys to Eden“ (1960) Mark Clifton creates a form of intelligence based on crystalline structures. Olaf Stapledon, the „cosmic philosopher“, takes this idea the furthest, in his novel „The Star Maker“ (1937). In this book planets, planet systems and stars, even entire galaxies are endowed with self-awareness and the capacity for experience and action, and respectively embody various stages of conscious existence in the cosmos. Finally, the whole of the known cosmos constitutes one element among many previous and parallel cosmoses which can all be traced back to the activities of the Star Maker, a universal world-spirit, existing beyond time and space.

- 3) Further basic models in the creation of worlds full of intelligent beings include the development of animal and plant life on Earth to a (usually) dangerous form of existence for mankind. The cause of this is mainly taken to be a form of mutation or genetic manipulation by man. In John Wyndham's „Day of the Triffids“ (1951), for example, mutated, mobile plants attack mankind and worldwide civilisation. A world full of beings capable of thought alongside man is often seen as a „post-Doomsday“ reality, arising from mutations brought about by atomic activity. Examples of this are again John Wyndham's „The Chrysalids - Who does the Earth Belong to?“ (1955) or Sterling E. Lanier's „Hero's Journey“ (1973).
- 4) Furthermore, the entire fauna of the Earth has become a model for strange forms of life on other planets. Countless bug-eyed monsters, so-called Bems, inhabit the worlds of SF. Ant-like and termite-like civilisations, space-molluscs, „thinking“ fish, spider-like creatures, talking plants, galactic vampires and many more plague the brave space-explorers from Earth or, worse still, attempt an invasion of Earth. The entire temporal mythology can be found here - centaurs and dragons, griffins and sphinxes, medusas and sirens.
- 5) Finally, machinery which turns into subjects of conscious behavior and which constitutes, either positively or negatively, as accomplice or as antagonist, part of the social world, is dealt with in the interrelated themes of robots, androids and super-computers of superior intelligence. Isaac Asimov, in his numerous novels and short-stories, outlines a positive symbiosis of man and robot. The other extreme is computers which strive toward world domination, for example in D. F. Jones' „Colossus“ (1966) or in M. Caidin's „The God Machine“ (1968). Besides these, there are also entire robot civilisations, android revolutions and robots from outer space. Super-computers upon which humanity has become dependent due to their organisational capacity, are also occasionally placed at the focal point of religious cults, or the self-awareness of the computer results in it demanding god-like worship from humanity (as in „A Fistful of Digits“, 1968, by Ch. Hodder, for example.)

Inasmuch as in SF the whole universe is once more furnished with life and authoritative subjectivity, the direct, formal, as well as the material affinity between religious meaning and SF is made particularly clear in this attempt to attribute to a natural world of increasingly cosmic proportions a subjective infrastructure.

The interpretation of the firmament as „constellations“ of heavenly subjects in the ancient concepts of the world - a stubbornly persistent interpretation within astrology even today - differen-

tiates itself only in accordance with the state of scientific knowledge from the idea that fixed stars constitute intelligent beings. Nevertheless, in compliance with the ‚grain of sand‘ thesis, the anthropocentricity is withdrawn from this interpretation of the cosmos.

As an expression of its subjective infra-structure, the whole of reality within the religious spheres of meaning is populated by active and empirical subjects, by gods, spectres and demons, by angels and devils, by beings which think and act anthropomorphically in accordance with the universal projection of subjectivity. The same thing happens in most SF fantasy worlds; however, combined with a shift of character manifold possibility takes the place of the certainty of supernatural subjects, allowing the depiction of everything known as an object of world experience as a form of intelligent life, too.

Time and Space without Boundaries

The spatial and temporal structures of the life-world contain a series of boundaries of experience, of action and of knowledge which, in turn, become intrinsic elements of a religious stock of knowledge insofar as it is a conception of a reality in which such boundaries do not exist. In the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, for example, the religious transcendency of time and space is formulated the most consistently. Nirvana exists beyond time and space altogether and cannot be localised temporally or spatially. The transgression of spatial and temporal types of boundaries has already been touched upon in the section „Man without boundaries“. At this point I would like to deal systematically with the many different SF fantasies on the subject of time and space in the light of Schütz' and Luckmann's analyses of the spatio-temporal structure of the life-world. The following aspects are considered:

- 1) The dimensions of spatial experience;
- 2) Extensions of the range and area of influence and manipulation;
- 3) Transgression of subjective time and the boundaries of biography;
- 4) Transgression of social time and the course of history;
- 5) Transcendence of the basic structure of time itself.

Expanding spatial experiences

Space-travel is, without doubt, the most well-known theme of SF, as well as being one of the oldest: even the ancient Greek philosopher Lukianos has his hero Ikaromenippus flying to the moon with eagle and vulture wings (cf. Alpers, et al. 1980, 58). In the attempt to extend such „voyages imaginaires“ across the whole cosmos almost all boundaries of the ‚natural‘, three-dimensional space of the life-world have been transcended. In order to make such ideas as spaceships faster than the speed of light and matter-transferal machines plausible, many authors created a multi-dimensional hyperspace, entered by means of technical aids or psychic powers, to surmount the distances in „normal space“. The conventional orientational dimensions of everyday experience are no longer applicable in this form of hyper-space: left-right, above-below, near-distant, etc., even the time structures cease to be effective. This is generally treated as a problem of navigation whilst the space-ship forms an ‚island of normal space‘. In the main, hyper-space simply constitutes a scene, allowing the construction of a galactic ‚stage‘ for various ‚space operas‘. However, some writers concern themselves with the question of space and world experience in four and more-dimensional space and come to the conclusion that these experi-

ences have to be night-marish and visionary (like Dave Bowman's experiences in *2001*), which is to result in complete disorientation.

In this way, all experiences of the senses are mixed up for Gully Foyle, the hero of A. Bester's „The Star's my Destination“ (1965), as he gets caught, suspended in neutral space whilst „jaunting“, a form of „leap“ towards a known co-ordinate point in „normal space“, using psychic power: optical perceptions and distances register as sensations of taste, loud becomes hot, etc.

Unlimited range and area of influence and manipulation

In their definition of the spatial stratification of the life-world, Schütz and Luckmann (1975, 54f.) differentiate between actual, potential and attainable range, as well as between primary and secondary areas of influence in the world. Both of these have their boundaries: my spatio-temporal position and my senses limit the objects within my present range, and the sum of experiences and stock of knowledge over and above past „worlds of actual range“ simultaneously establish and limit the world in potential range; and social position in a particular time and society with its cultural stock of knowledge limits the world at an attainable range, which is also done by its distance from the ‚here and now‘, from a temporal, spatial and social point of view. The area of direct influence (ie. objects which I can influence), distinguishable within the world of range, is primarily marked out by physical abilities and secondarily by the technological boundaries of a society.

Religious concepts and actions *transcend* everyday individual, as well as social and historical *boundaries of range and areas of influence*. This is exactly what happens in the realities of SF literature, indeed, in many different ways:

- 1) In the same way as the respective state of contemporary communication, transport and manipulation technology depict the margins of range and the areas of influence, the technology of the future actually extends the present spatial boundaries of our society.
- 2) Paranormal abilities expand, as the name suggests, range and area of influence: telepathy, teleportation and telekinesis transgress the boundaries of present range and primary areas of influence and constitute a widespread and popular theme of SF literature. ESP stories (Extra-Sensory-Perception) and psi-novels frequently take up the question of how an individual or group of humans cope with such abilities in a world where the majority of people remain restricted to the ‚normal‘ boundaries of their life-world.
- 3) In relation to the latter, an interesting borderland of the SF treatment of psi-abilities is the concept of taking on an alien psyche and another body (be it temporary or permanent). A telepath who can experience the world (whenever he likes) through the psyche and body of another is no longer bound to the inflexible neutral point of his life-world: to his own body and his own experiences as a system of co-ordinates of existence. This variant, in particular, of the theme has also experienced explicit religious formulations in religious knowledge: for example, the concept of reincarnation or demonical and divine possession.

Beyond the borders of time and biography

An equally traditional theme of SF is the dream of *time-travel*, first committed to print in H. G. Well's „The Time Machine“ (1895). Since then the number of journeys into the future, as well as into the past, by means of technological aids has become legion within this genre. In the main, this necessitates a linear and inevitably progressive „world-time“, the future and past moments of which are accessible as a form of „now“, as an empirical present.

It is in this „absolute“ time in which subjective time, the internal duration of the stream of consciousness, is firmly rooted (cf. Schütz/Luckmann 1975, 62 ff). Sleep constitutes a central transcendental experience of consciousness, through which I can withdraw subjectively from world-time and, at the same time, learn of the progress of this world upon awakening. Hence it is not surprising that the ‚long sleep‘, towards a distant future also presents a frequently adopted form of time-travelling, besides that of the time-machines. Many variations on the theme of ‚the long sleep‘ and waking up in the future, based on the progress of the world and the social changes that have taken place in the meantime, include the „frozen sleep“, for example Robert Heinlein’s „The Door into Summer“ (1957) or Anders Bodelsen’s „Bruno’s Frozen Days“ (Freysepunktet, 1979) or the dilatation of time during space-travel, a certain amount of time requiring merely a fraction of that time. In this way, the everyday connection of world-time and subjective time is suspended and that empirical part of world-time connected to the human life-span is extended. Individual death, the inevitable end of biographical time, is not abandoned but transcended in its temporal certainty in these SF stories.

The time machine, allowing travel forwards or backwards in time, has consequences above and beyond this as regards subjective time: it relieves one, on the one hand, of the necessity of waiting (Schütz/Luckmann 1975, 63). When each and every point in time is easily accessible, the structure of world-time is no longer fixed, but at one’s subjective disposal. The inevitability of biographical time is thereby rendered invalid: a past situation is no longer past and therefore is modifiable inasmuch as experiences not yet experienced at the time of action become accessible. In maintaining the logic of world-time - „first things first“ - a series of time-paradoxes emerge :

A man travels back in time by means of a time-machine and murders his own grandfather before the latter begets his father, thereby rendering his own existence impossible. („Ancestral Voices“ by Nathaniel Schachner, 1933) ... Someone undergoes a sex-change operation, travels back in time, sleeps with himself and begets himself. (R. Heinlein, „All You Zombies“, 1959).

Beyond social time and the course of history

In addition to the transgression of biographical time, the concept of time-travel into the past and intervening in the situation of that time opens up the possibility of change in the course of history which, within the realms of world-time, is otherwise impossible. This idea of travelling back into the past in order to change the course of history has become a popular SF theme, especially in recent years, including the box-office hit „Back to the future“, starring Michael J. Fox, and its sequel movies. Usually it is criminals who want to change history for their purposes, or a time-traveller who intervenes somehow, unintentionally, with a profound effect on the course of history. It is usually the task of the „time-police“ to supervise the constancy of history. Isaac Asimov tried to deal with the theory that just such a form of supervision of time, once introduced, would lead to the end of social change and of history itself in his novel „The End of Eternity“ (1955):

Andrew Harlan, time-technician, belongs to that exclusive group of people who control time, in order to eradicate injustice and suffering from the history of humanity through „corrections“ and to ensure an ideal society for eternity. The female time-agent from the distant future, Noys, shows him the consequences of total time control: „We learnt to look at reality and found basic existence ... We also discovered the change which destroyed it ... It was eternity itself ... its mere existence. Every system which allows mankind to shape its own future according to its own judgement, will end in mere seeking for security and indifference ...“ Together with Noys, Harlan destroys the time-control system and opens up the possibility of the further historical development of mankind.

The idea that the course of man's history is dependent on certain events which, should they have taken a different course, would have resulted in a different formulation of history, has led to an abundance of SF stories which try to fathom what kind of course of history and what kind of society there would be if, for example: ... Hitler had won the Second World War (Ph. K. Dick „The Man in the High Castle“, 1963) ... the Spanish armada had defeated the English fleet (Pavane, 1968, by Keith Roberts) ... the South had won the American Civil War (Ward Moore, „Bring the Jubilee“, 1955).

The final conclusion from all this is that every small or great event implies a more or less different course of history and that there are an indefinite number of variations on historical development which repeat themselves as parallel universes at every historically important juncture. All imaginable states of society and history exist, in this way, parallel to each other and can be reached via interim „time-passages“ which lie crosswise to the forward progress of world-time (as in, for example, W. Aldiss' „Report on Probability A“, 1968, or Bob Shaw's „The Two-Timers“, 1968).

Transcendence of time itself

Up until this point, the final boundary, even for the imagination of SF writers, was the linear, unalterable march of world-time, on the basis of which subjective and social consequences are, indeed, surmountable by means of time-travel and parallel worlds. However, there are some SF writers who even supercede this linear, progressive, consistent form of world-time:

- 1) The 'linearity' of world-time is rendered invalid by time-loops in which the same moment, and thereby the identical run of events up to this particular moment, are repeated cyclically.

W. Jeschke, for example, in his „The Tear in the Mountain“ (Der Riß im Berg, 1970) has a man go through his own death over and over again. This reverses the transcendental relation between world-time and subjective time: only one's consciousness registers a linear course of events.

- 2) The progressive quality of world-time becomes invalid when worlds are created in which time runs backwards.

In Philip K. Dick's „Counter-Clock World“ (1967) the dead come back to life and the old become young. In John Brunner's „At the Wrong End of Time“ (1971) an alien race appears which lives against the normal course of time, resulting in their first encounter with humans proving to be their last, which leads to amusing problems of communication.

- 3) Finally, worlds are also created in which speeded-up and slowed-down time structures alternate with each other or where time stands still completely, thereby rendering the consistency of the course of time invalid.

Religious concepts convert the invalidation of the spatial and temporal boundaries imposed within the life-world mainly into divine beings of unlimited abilities or into subjectively, ecstatically attainable „other“ realities of thought and experience. In my opinion, the thorough study of the space and time thematic in SF literature, as analysed in this essay, illustrates again most clearly that the considerate treatment of such boundary-experiences by SF writers is an inner core, as far as content is concerned, showing that religious concepts and SF have the same 'roots' in the life-world of man and its boundaries.

SF fantasies as the basis of religious meaning: certainty instead of possibility

„For thousands of years men have sought the state of complete spiritual freedom from the endless cycle of birth and death, a state of full awareness, memory and ability as a spirit independent of the flesh. ... In Scientology, a state of complete spiritual freedom is attainable. It is called „Operating Thetan.“ The definition of the state of Operating Thetan is „knowing and willing cause over life, thought, matter, energy, space and time.“ ... At the level of Operating Thetan one deals with the individual's own immortality as a spiritual being. One deals with the thetan himself in relationship to eternity; not to the eternity that lies behind him, but to the eternity which lies ahead. ... Contrary to those who teach that man cannot improve and that some seventy years in a body are all one can expect, there are states higher than that of mortal man. The state of OT does exist and people do attain it. ... The reactive mind thoroughly blocks the thetan from regaining and exercising his native powers. But once this block is removed, the person can learn to operate as himself, a spiritual being. ... Some of the miracles of life have been exposed to full view for the first time ever on the OT levels. Not the least of these miracles is knowing immortality and freedom from the cycle of birth and death.“

Original Scientology text of 2001, see: <http://www.auditing.org/13-ot.htm>

Even the normally pronounced difference between religious meaning and SF reading or movie material - non-obligatory possibility instead of obligatory certainty - fades under certain circumstances, particularly when the credibility of SF concepts is socially supported and joins forces with charismatic characters. I would like to consider this more carefully, in conclusion.

Both the reinforcement of religious knowledge by social grouping and setting, on the one hand (thus effecting plausibility and tradition), and its pragmatic connection with everyday experiences and knowledge on the other hand, form the basis of the processes of religious meaning in the life-world which then, along with the semantic reference points of this knowledge, constitute the structural framework of an explicit religion (cf. Mört 1978). I have, above, tried to show that parallels exist between „traditional“ religion and SF as regards formal structure (creation of an alternative, fantastic reality), selfawareness as a form of literature conveying concepts of the world, and the main topics dealt with. At this point I now would like to illustrate that sometimes, under certain circumstances, the visionary world of SF retains those social and pragmatic anchorage points in the life-world which afford it a genuinely religious quality. In the first place, the starting point of this cult-like ,rooting', has been, above all, the SF fanclubs.

In sharp contrast to all other branches of literature the development and extension of the fundamental SF themes was not only shaped by the imagination of the writers and internal developments within this literary genre, but also by an intensive process of discussion between writers and their readership which built up in England and the U.S.A. originally around the numerous SF journals of the between wars years and soon became organised into SF fan clubs, from which even more SF writers emerged (cf. Kyle 1976, 132 f. for detailed information on this subject). This formation as a group of believers has reached a new dimension now in the time of internet. Fans can communicate and thus confirm their world views, feelings and topics worldwide and instantaneously.

The need for entertainment and the search for meaning of the readership poured and still pours into the SF genre by way of such a continuous feed-back process, that it was afforded a social „anchorage“ point which was to become the foundation of a truly religious, cult-like plausibility.

When the realities of the SF writers are taken seriously, every imaginable, fantastic creation is discussed as a possibility. Ideas for the creation of other worlds are developed. Then social and everyday, accessible knowledge, the empirical, social and life-world as a „paramount reality“ is thereby reduced to being merely one of many possibilities of existence. It is the variety of SF concepts of the world resulting from this discussion within SF fan clubs which affords the „Thesis of the Possibility of the „Completely Different““ (Adorno) an everyday plausibility, as it were. These alternatives to the present, projected into the future, take on - even in the „here and now“ - a more than zero probability: there could be intelligent life on Mars after all, time travel could be realised any time, UFO's could land on Earth any time ...

A number of SF religions in the complete sense of the word have arisen from this plausibility of a „everything is possible“ and „everything is possible even now“ mentality, which was established by discussion in SF fanclubs, of which the Church of Scientology and various UFO cults are to be touched upon briefly, by way of example.

Scientology: salvation by travelling into inner space

The Church of Scientology claims approximately 8 million members worldwide (summing up every participant ever at an audition), critics say it's much less and give it approximately 60.000 currently active members. Scientology was founded by former SF author Lafayette Ronald Hubbard through a publication in the SF journal „Astounding Science Fiction“ in May 1950 (title „Dianetics. A new science of the mind“). Nowadays the Scientology Church reaches across the whole world - mainly in English-speaking areas.

The essential element of Hubbard's doctrine is the belief that so-called „Thetans“ - omnipotent and indestructible creatures - are concealed in each and every human being, upon whose death they simply slip into another body. All experiences from every previous existence are, along with those of the present life, stored in an unconscious form as „engrammes“ in the „reactive spirit“. These engrammes can be made conscious by scientological „auditions“ and thereby erased. Should this succeed then a „clear“ condition can be reached in which one can fully utilize his mental abilities, normally restricted by engrammes. However, in a further extension of this, the god-like Thetan can also achieve self-awareness within any human. In this case, the person then becomes „Operating Thetan“. Indeed, the erasure process for all the engrammes of a present life is not easy and numerous, costly „auditions“ and courses are necessary for this. The level of „Operating Thetan“ has, however, not yet been attained by anyone within the Scientology Church to date.

In this fashion, Scientology affords a genuine religious meaning in the life-world of its followers since, on the basis of ideas developed within the SF branch of literature, concrete behavioural guidelines and techniques are offered, promising the transgression of limitations and life's problems existent in the „here and now“. It has developed a closed system of meaning, the validity of which establishes itself as „certainty“, for its followers, revealing all the transcendental aspects of their life-world and treating them thoroughly and coherently. It is beginning to develop liturgical forms in which fundamental ideas are being ritually consolidated.

U.F.O.-cults: salvation by extraterrestrial space travellers

Whilst Scientology is promising a cosmically unrestricted life by means of god-like Thetans inside each of us, there is also a series of groups and movements, for whom the existence of extra-terrestrial civilisations and their spaceships, visiting or observing the Earth, has become an irrevocable, concrete certainty. In this way, they expect salvation of the whole of mankind, not just of certain individuals, to come from out of the cosmos:

„Why spaceships and their crews from other worlds are visiting our planet; about their revolutionary propulsion power that outmodes all present forms of power on Earth; about their plan to help mankind, and what you can do to help; about life on other Planets, their science, philosophy, government and economic systems; how their advanced knowledge can help to resolve most of our present-day problems on Earth.“

(Introductory text, The Amalgamated Flying Saucer Clubs of America, Inc.,
<http://www.joshuatreevillage.com/201/saucer.htm>)

Cosmic tidings of redemption, however, are only entrusted to chosen individuals who pass them on and consequently become the charismatic focal point of various cults. C. G. Jung has already researched this topic of extra-terrestrial civilisations and their envoys, the UFO's, as a mythical projection of the collective unconscious (1958). He interprets the belief in UFO's as the archetypal expression of fear of the destruction of the world and hope of an imminent collective deliverance. In fact, the number of recorded claims of contact and messages calling for peace increased in the 1950's when the cold war was reaching one of its initial critical points and the world was made aware of the danger of nuclear destruction for the first time.

Congresses have been in existence in the U.S.A. since the 1960's where contact witnesses meet, as well as a collective organisation (the „Amalgamated Flying Saucer Clubs of America, Inc.“, see quotation above), whose president used to stand regularly for candidature at the Presidential elections.

The plausibility of the idea of extra-terrestrial civilisations seeking contact with Earth or even already having enjoyed it to some extend for thousands of years (cf. books by Erich von Däniken), was not only supported by the widespread interest in SF topics and by SF fanclubs' discussions, but also by spiritualistic ideas and groups. Spiritualistic mediums began to make contact more often with extra-terrestrial beings and civilisations as well as with the spiritual world and the dead.

In this way, a complete religious system of meaning emerges around a charismatic contact-person, comprising philosophical interpretations of the history of mankind and of other religions and going as far as rituals and behavioural guidelines for the salvation of the Earth. I would like to illustrate this, at this point, by means of the largest and most organised movement in the UFO cult sphere, the Aetherius Society, which covered the whole of the English-speaking world and was reported to boast around 50,000 members in the late sixties (cf. Evans 1973, 172), and is still active today (see <http://www.aetherius.org>):

„This is not a new religion. ... It is a spiritual path to enlightenment and the cosmic evolution of mankind. Read and evolve. For the first time the connection between the science of Yoga, the theology of all major religions and the mystery of UFOs is explained.“ (Homepage cover text)

The first and only contact person on Earth is George King, who first perceived a 'voice' in March 1954, supposedly electing him to be 'ambassador' of Earth in the interplanetary parliament (Evans, 1973, 171). The representative of this governing body and George King's mentor is called „Master Aetherius“, a member of an extremely advanced civilisation of the planet Venus.

King was apparently chosen as the primary channel of communication on Earth to serve as the connection link between the civilisations of the solar system and the whole cosmos, on the one hand, and humanity on the other, in order to increase their awareness of their cosmic responsibility. Contact with Aetherius and other extra-terrestrials (eg. „Mars, Sector 6“) takes place during meetings where King acts as mouthpiece for all kinds of messages. These messages are also published in a magazine, entitled „Cosmic Voice“. There are many other „Masters“ on Venus, besides Aetherius, among them every founder of the major religions, such as Buddha, Rama-Krishna, even Jesus Christ. The messages delivered via King depict the universe as a battlefield of Good and Evil in the form of antagonistic civilisations, travelling throughout the universe in spaceships and by means of teleportation. Evil forces repeatedly try to destroy Earth and only the continued struggle of the solar system's civilisations against this has prevented this destruction up until now, since the psychic power of Earth's civilisation – the deciding factor - is too weak to afford sufficient resistance.

Nevertheless, the members of the Aetherius Society can assist the Masters of Venus and Mars in their struggle by means of a so-called „spiritual push“. This spiritual push augments universal vital energy - „Prana“ - and strengthens the Earth's powers of resistance. A group of people can produce such a „push“ through meditation and devotions, which has always tipped the balance in the battles over the Earth in favour of the „Powers of Good“. Consequently, members of the Aetherius Society are repeatedly called upon by George King and his successors (King died in 1997) to travel to various places in the world in order to influence decisively this struggle by means of „spiritual pushes“. Without doubt the most spectacular of these activities was „Operation Starlight“ (1959-61), during which George King and his followers climbed sacred mountains all around the world in order to „charge“ them with psychic energy. In the meantime, these mountains have become places of pilgrimage and are repeatedly „recharged“. Further operations included that of „Bluewater“ in which „pranabatteries“ were moved to and fro by ship, and „Operation Sunbeam“ in which the „power of the rising sun“ was put to use worldwide.

Upon the somewhat insecure, but preparatory foundation of SF speculation Georges King has established a cosmic vision of great consistency which includes meaningful elements for the interpretation of the social world and of history, as well as of individual behaviour. The main task becomes the strengthening of the psychic energy of the individual and the collective. This enables followers to cope with the threatening transcendental experience of fear and of not being able to influence the future.

Concluding remark

In conclusion, it can be said that the validity of everyday knowledge and the structures of the life-world are called into question in the form of an entertaining, fantastic speculation and that the attraction and popularity of this genre is based upon the examination of certain transcendental areas of the life-world and of knowledge.

In this way Science-fiction maintains a horizon for all that which is possible and thus preserves the „possibility“, (Luhmann) of other constructions of reality, presented as a limitless world of fantasy. This also sets out the pre-conditions for acknowledging such fantasy worlds as charismatic group experiences, furnished with irrefutable validity and certainty and for pragmatically anchoring this in the life-world of the group members.

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