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Science Fiction as Mythology

THOMAS C. and MARILYN SUTTON

SCIENCE FICTION, it has recently been prophesied, will presently be shown to have contrived a "mythology for our times."¹ In fact science fiction has become so fully accepted as a mode of modern myth-making that the 1968 convention of the Modern Language Association devoted an afternoon forum, H. Bruce Franklin presiding, to "Science Fiction: The New Mythology." Despite this recognition, however, there remain a number of questions concerning the relative roles of myth and science in contemporary culture.

We have surely come a long way from the persistent idea, first put forth by Fontenelle in *The Origin of the Fables* (1724), that myth is essentially a primitive science, the imperfect result of a conscious search for causes of observable events.² A century later, despite their progressive contributions in other areas of myth study, both E. B. Tylor and Andrew Lang subscribed to the conception of myth as savage science. In his *Origins of Culture* (1871), Tylor states that "savages have been for untold ages, and still are, living in the myth-making stage of the human mind." He continues to argue that "it was through sheer ignorance and neglect of this direct knowledge how and by what manner of men myths are really made, that their simple philosophy has come to be buried under masses of commentators' rubbish."³ Thirty-five years later, Lang noted that the followers of Tylor seemed unaware that they were only "repeating the notions of the nephew of Corneille."⁴ Yet, indicative of how firmly entrenched the notion of myth as primitive science is, Lang too discusses the role of myth in primitive societies as man's "first faint impulses of the scientific spirit" attempting a solution to the riddle of the world.⁵

¹ Albert B. Friedman, "The Best Turnips on the Creek," *N.Y. Rev. of Books*, March 28, 1968, p. 37.

² See Richard Chase, *The Quest for Myth* (Baton Rouge, 1949), pp. 8-9.

³ (Reprint; New York, 1958), p. 283.

⁴ *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* (London, 1906), II, 339.

⁵ II, 49.

Today if we can no longer characterize myth as prescience, we must ask what precisely is its relationship to science? Can we accept the sophisticated theory of Lévi-Strauss that myth is a mode parallel to science, similar in manner but differing in object? Lévi-Strauss suggests that both myth and science be considered as modes of structuring the universe; in fact, he goes so far as to posit a mathematical logic in the structural formation of myth.⁶ His insistence that myth and science be considered as autonomous and mutually exclusive is a limiting feature even in his contemporary thesis. Since we are treating science fiction as the myth of modern technology, we are thereby committed to rejecting Lévi-Strauss' limitation of parallel autonomy and to posit a definite intersection of the mythopoeic and scientific modes.

Not all science fiction, of course, demonstrates such an intersection. We must recognize that science fiction in its current state encompasses a vast spectrum of works from the cartoons of Captain Video, Buck Rogers, and Flash Gordon, to the apocalyptic visions glimpsed by Arthur C. Clarke in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the full-length novel elaborated from the film of the same title which Clarke had previously written in collaboration with Stanley Kubrick, and by C. S. Lewis in his *Peregrina* trilogy, a classic of science fiction.

Since both myth and science reflect man's irrepressible curiosity about his origins and his destiny, they each can be seen as a particular human means of structuring the universe. Paul Tillich in an essay on "The Religious Symbol" suggests that wherever the objective world is recognized in its relatedness to the unconditioned transcendent, the unity of religion with the desire to understand the world is restored in the mythical symbol.⁷ In this way science becomes myth despite its rational autonomy. Scientists themselves recognize the fact that science has moved from the immediate perception of empirical reality to a stage where the object of research is no longer nature in itself but rather nature as it is exposed to man's questioning.⁸ In other words, contemporary science is conscious of its own symbolization.

Myth and science emphasize different aspects of the universe-structures they erect. Early myth is typically concerned with the study of origins whereas science generally focuses on the study of destiny. It

⁶ "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, 1965), p. 106.

⁷ In *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*, ed. Rollo May (New York, 1960), pp. 87-88.

⁸ Werner Heisenberg, "The Representations of Nature in Contemporary Physics," in *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*, pp. 230-231.

is precisely because of the fundamentalism of primitive myth that C. Kerényi isolates for study the archetype of the divine child, "the first-born of primeval times, in whom the origin first was."⁹ In his study Kerényi notes that the essential difference between the mode of the philosopher and that of the myth-teller is that the philosopher tries to pierce through the world of appearances in order to say "what really is" while the myth-teller steps back into primordality in order to tell us "what originally was." Underlying this concern with origins in myth seems to be an assumption that if tribal man can trace his beginnings through a narrative, he will simultaneously discover his *raison d'être* and thus be able to formulate a suitable mode of existence. In terms of cultural experience, a body of myth incorporates the essential beliefs of a tribe while ritual expresses the myth-embodied abstractions in concrete form. Through the performance of a particular ritual, a tribal man feels himself in harmony with the spirit pervading his body of myth. Science on the other hand tends to deny or at least ignore the issue of a supranatural purpose for existence and to employ the study of origins as one of numerous means to determine the form of future existence.

Both myth and science attempt to provide an overview of existence by bridging inner reality and outer reality. Here again the direction of the process differs: myth attempts to project inner reality (conscious desires, archetypal patterns) in the metaphor of outer reality, while science aims to illuminate inner reality through the study of outer, empirical forms. A body of myth forms an autonomous universe which stands in metaphoric relation to the actual world. Scientific hypotheses also form a universe, a universe which is not identical to objective reality but representative of man's understanding of it. Thus the question of validation or disproof is irrelevant to myth since the relation of myth to reality is analogical, but it is paramount for science because the worth of a scientific hypothesis is entirely dependent on the accuracy of its relationship to objective reality.

Before the advent of the scientific mode, the only means by which man could relate to his universe was through the mythopoeic mode. His acceptance of the narratives of gods and heroes as the meaning of his world served as an affirmation of intimacy with the most basic and therefore sacral structures of space, of time, of natural occurrence, and of historical event.¹⁰ Prescientific man viewed everything outside himself as "other" and to a large degree unknowable. For him myth served as the

⁹ *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (New York, 1963), pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ Langdon Gilkey, "Modern Myth-Making and the Possibilities of Twentieth-Century Theology," *Theology of Renewal* (Montreal, 1968), I, 286.

vehicle for his relationship with the "other." As the scientific or technological mode developed, man's orientation moved away from universal concepts to a more specialized focus on the individual empirical data. Historically this shift resulted in the sharp distinction between the two modes of thought, with the scientific recognized as the means to knowledge and the mythopoeic disenfranchised and relegated to the role of plaything for poets.

Perhaps we are now in a position to move beyond this convenient dissection of thought, for now that we can view the mythopoeic and the scientific modes in their matured states we can see the sharp distinctions disintegrating. In the field of contemporary theology, we have the example of Rudolph Bultmann, who attempts to apply scientific logic to the myth of Christianity and ends by "re-mythologizing" Christianity in the language of contemporary science rather than de-mythologizing it.¹¹ An example of the reverse process is provided by science fiction in which the scientific mode of thought is intentionally mythologized.

In the words of Fred Saberhagen, a science fiction author and critic, "science fiction gives a chance to impose different coordinate systems upon the human condition and to try to see what will change and what will remain the same."¹² A British scientist and poet, Peter Redgrave, provides in his short story "Mr. Waterman"¹³ an example of conscious imposition of a set of hypothetical time and space coordinates in order to mythologize science. Redgrave's story mythologizes evolution to produce a delightfully ironic narrative. It takes the form of a patient's reporting to his analyst the strange manner in which the creatures in his garden pool emerge during dewy evenings. The starfish couple on the ornamental stone steps and the barnacles brazenly affix themselves to the stems of rose trees. Eventually one such aquatic creature becomes so fully adapted to terrestrial existence that he takes up residence in the man's home and attempts to seduce his host's wife. At this point the analyst sends the patient off with a bit of routine advice and turns to his next client, who reports troubles with a "married, air-breathing woman."

We can see a relationship analogous to the myth-science dichotomy in the tension between the terms "natural" and "artificial." All that pre-existed human activity is generally considered to be natural. As man progressed, he developed both in self-awareness and tool-making ability. At the early stages of human development the contrast between natural

¹¹ *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans W. Bartsch (New York, 1961), pp. 43-44.

¹² Quoted in *The Year's Best S-F*, ed. Judith Merrill (New York, 1964), p. 34.

¹³ *Paris Review*, XXIX (1963), 162-165.

object and human artifact was marked, largely because of the difficulty of bringing an artifact into existence. Modern technology has facilitated the production of artifacts to such a degree that the distinctions between the two categories are now being erased. Now that man can, in one sense, make man through the "artificial" creation of a unit of "natural" life in a DNA molecule, the terms "natural" and "artificial" have ceased to be antonyms.¹⁴

The mythopoetic mode flourished prior to the advent of empirical science. When man's entire surroundings were unknowable to him empirically, they elicited a response of awe and wonder. The meaning of existence was expressed for primitive man through the fashioning of a totem pole, the recounting of a myth, or even the ritual preparation of food. With the advent of empirical science, however, man came to learn objective facts about his universe. The fact that he could know some aspect of his world removed his sense of reverential awe and replaced it with a confidence that the "other" was in fact knowable. It is only to be expected then that in the contemporary empirical context, a myth to be relevant must reflect human achievements and capacities rather than wonder in the face of a fore-ordained cosmic structure. Once man has become conscious of his position in the historical process, his attention shifts from the contemplation of the eternal structure to the action of the present moment.

The psychological interpretation of these observations is fully discussed by Jung in his fascinating book *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. After considering many contradictory pieces of evidence concerning the material existence of UFOs, Jung suggests, "with all due reserve," that UFOs

are real material phenomena of an unknown nature, presumably coming from outer space, which perhaps have long been visible to mankind, but otherwise have no recognizable connection with the earth or its inhabitants. In recent times, however, and just at the moment when the eyes of mankind are turned towards the heavens, partly on account of their fantasies about possible space-ships, and partly in a figurative sense because their earthly existence feels threatened, unconscious contents have projected themselves on these inexplicable heavenly phenomena and given them a significance they in no way deserve.¹⁵

¹⁴Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York, 1965), p. xix. In his treatment of technology Ellul includes techniques under the category of the "natural," which he seems to define as "any environment able to satisfy man's material needs, if it leaves him free to use it as a means to achieve his individual internally generated ends."

¹⁵(London, 1959), p. 151.

The possible future discovery of unknown physical phenomena as the outward cause of flying saucers would detract nothing from the myth for, typical of all myth, it does not operate as a scientific hypothesis but as a particular instance of the intersection of myth and science that we have posited at the outset of this essay.

Modern myth cannot be simply a representation of contemporary reality; it must resonate on multiple levels. Jung considers the “living myth” of flying saucers as a golden opportunity to see how in a

dark and difficult time for humanity a miraculous tale grows up of an attempted intervention by extra-terrestrial “heavenly” powers—and at this very time when human fantasy is seriously considering the possibility of space travel and of visiting or even invading other planets.¹⁶

The present situation must be viewed in relation to a transcendent order of some description. For early mythopoeic man, this transcendent order was the cosmos with its gods, heroes, planets, and other inexplicable phenomena. In the area of scientific myth, the transcendent referent can no longer be the cosmos, since scientific research has shown that it is empirically knowable and as a consequence it is no longer entirely transcendent. As a referent, modern myth, especially science fiction, replaces the cosmos with the concept of space. Jung claims that it is the belief in this world and the power of man that is thrusting itself forward in the form of symbolic rumor and activating an archetype that has always expressed “order, deliverance, salvation, and wholeness.” The visions of unidentified round shining objects are impressive manifestations of totality, their simple round form portraying the archetype of self which has been shown to play the chief role in uniting apparently irreconcilable opposites and is therefore best suited to compensate the split-mindedness of our age.¹⁷ This archetype, so vital to humanity, has been expressed throughout human history in various forms, but it is characteristic of our time that it should take the form of a technological construction in order to avoid the anachronistic odiousness of a mythological personification.¹⁸

Space represents for science fiction an infinite, unknown extension which lends a grandeur to whatever actions are undertaken in it. Unlike a scientific hypothesis, a science fiction story is not formulated primarily to advance technological knowledge; rather it operates on a visionary,

¹⁶ p. 14.

¹⁷ p. 21.

¹⁸ p. 22.

mythopoeic level. We might say that space provides for science fiction the context of *in illo tempore*, the usual location of myth; spatial distancing replaces temporal distancing. It is characteristic of science fiction that it is never set in the present time unless more than one time dimension is operative. This temporal distortion helps to secure a thematic universality, but there is a difference between this strategy and that employed in early myth. For in early myth the teller placed his narration in the realm of "once long ago" to set the action outside the realm of actual possibility, but with science fiction the writer believes that his unusual time dimensions may be scientifically possible.

Both science fiction and myth deal primarily with beings of greater than ordinary power. Early myth presents semidivine beings who exhibit the quality of *mana* in their actions. Their source of power is something beyond the human. Since science fiction is being considered as the myth of technology, it is not surprising to find that man assumes the role of protagonist. His power, rather than being a suprahuman *mana*, is generally associated with superior knowledge, for knowledge is recognized as the motive force behind technological progress. The robot, a common motif in science fiction, being a thinking machine represents the ultimate refinement of technology, and many science fiction myths deal with the variety of relationships possible between the human and machine thinkers. But even this concern with the robot can be seen as humanistic inasmuch as the robot is simply an extension of man's scientifically most sophisticated quality, his power to reason and remember. Isaac Asimov, the father of "robotics" in science fiction, eagerly envisions the day when scientists will design a computer capable of formulating the design of a computer more complex than itself. This moment will mark the beginning of a diverging series in which "not only man-made man is possible, but man-made superman."¹⁹ This notion is not at all repulsive to Asimov; on the contrary, it is the fulfillment of an evolutionary pattern long ago projected in Greek mythology with the overthrow of the god Ouranos by Cronos.

Science fiction is a self-conscious form of myth in which man intentionally mythologizes scientific narrative. It is not infrequent to find themes from earlier mythologies serving as subplots for science fiction stories. Examples are readily afforded by Frank Herbert, who weaves a knowledge of ecology with allusions to Old Testament myths in his novel *Dune* (1965), and James Blish, who blends creation theology with ech-

¹⁹ "And It Will Serve Us Right," *Psychology Today*, II (1969), 64.

oes of demonism in his work *A Case of Conscience* (1958) to produce a myth in which a priest-scientist confronts an alien world of complete perfection and, aware that it is a theological impossibility, is forced to acknowledge it as a demonic creation.

Another excellent example of this technique is Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Star"²⁰ in which mythic material from Christianity furnishes the subplot. Clarke gives the mythology surrounding the star of Bethlehem and the birth of Christ a scientific explanation, proposing that the star was the result of the destruction of a completely idyllic race in a star system whose sun flared as a supernova at its death. Scientifically it is plausible that the star of Bethlehem, if there was one, was a supernova, but Clarke remythologizes extravagantly on this scientific basis. He suggests that God intentionally destroyed an entire people on the exploded star for His greater honor and glory. The underlying irony is made explicit by setting the narrative in Jesuit surroundings and playing on the Jesuit motto *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. In this particular myth, Clarke explodes a fiction concerning the star with scientific fact, and then goes on to mingle religion, psychology, and science to develop a mythopoeic vision. As myth, such a story is certainly much more conscious and literary than early myth, but it is not meant to be the myth of a tribe, rather it is the mythology concocted for the delight of technological man.

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²⁰ Reprinted in *A Century of Science Fiction*, ed. Damon Knight (New York, 1962).